

INTERNATIONAL BIBLE LESSONS.

FIRST QUARTER—STUDIES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT.

B. C. 445. LESSON III.—THE MISSION OF NEHEMIAH; or, A Zealous Spirit. January 19.

EXPLANATORY.

Verses 1. Month Nisan. Called in earlier Scripture Abib, the first month of the Jewish year, corresponding to parts of March and April. Artaxerxes the king. He was the first of this name in the Persian annals, and was called Longimanus or "the long-handed," a title which may have referred either to his personal appearance or to the extent of his dominions, the largest of any land on earth. He succeeded his father Xerxes, though a younger son, by assassinating one older brother during the absence of another, and then usurping the throne. He was weak and irresolute, though friendly to the Jews, and, on the whole, just in his rule, which was one of the longest among the Persian kings. Took up the wine. Fulfilling the duty of cup-bearer, which was Nehemiah's office at the court. He had charge of the king's wines, attended him nearly all the time, and filled his cup, first pouring a little wine into his own hand and tasting it, to guard the monarch against poison. His office was held in high estimation, as it gave frequent access to the presence of the king. Had not been beforetime said. Literally, "I was not accustomed to be said." Perhaps from the cheerfulness of his disposition, but more likely because the etiquette of the Persian court required all in the presence of royalty to look happy. 1. "Those who serve kings must suit their manners to the royal will." 2. "Our King desires not only that we should recommend his service by happy faces, but that we should enjoy it with happy hearts."

2, 3. Why is thy countenance sad? Four months of mourning and fasting had worn upon the cup-bearer's countenance, and the king noticed his lagged looks. 3. "In spite of our wills our inmost thoughts and feelings are stamped upon our faces." Character writes its tell-tale lines on every brow. 4. "If a heathen king felt sympathy for his servant's sorrow, how much more a loving father!" 5. "Let not masters despise their servants' griefs, but try to make them easy."

—M. Henry. Sore afraid. Dreading lest the wrath of the mighty king, on whose will his position and life depended, might be excited by his infraction of the court-customs. Let the king live. The common form of saluting an Oriental monarch. The place of my father's sepulchres. This would indicate that Nehemiah came of royal as well as Jewish blood, since only the descendants of David were buried within the walls of Jerusalem. Dilettante. Though ninety years had now passed since the return of the exiles, Jerusalem was still thinly inhabited. The temple was restored, and the daily sacrifice was maintained, but the city was un-walled, defenseless, and exposed to the contempt of its foes. 6. "If Nehemiah felt such interest in a distant city, which he had never seen, how fervent should be our zeal for Zion, the Church of Christ!"

4, 5. Make request. Literally, "On what account this thou art asking?" The king perceives that his cup-bearer's words hold a request in reserve, and his impulse is to grant it. 7. "See how much for good or evil result may depend upon the momentary mood of one man!" 9. "See, too, how God directs the hearts of kings to aid his cause." Artaxerxes was unconscious that his will at that instant was one link in the great chain of the world's salvation. So I prayed. A momentary, silent prayer that he might so shape his request as to find favor. 9. "He that would prevail with men must first learn how to prevail with God."—Terry. 10. "We can pray in secret while surrounded by witnesses, and in the midst of the most pressing duties." 11. "Let us bring temporal as well as spiritual needs and perplexities to the mercy-seat, and talk with God concerning every thing."

5, 6. That thou wouldst send me. The opportune moment, watched for during four months, had now arrived, and he instantly steps in with his request. 12. "Success consists in tact to know opportunities, and courage to seize them." Notice in this request, 1. Its boldness in risking the displeasure of a king. 2. Its carefulness and wisdom in expression. 3. Its precision and directness. 4. Its unselfishness in asking nothing but toil and trouble for himself. 5. Its submission to the will of his master. 13. "As Nehemiah came to the king, so let us come to the King of kings." That I may build it. His prayer was not for ease, but for a chance to do hard work for God, in the face of idleness around and opposition without. 14. "Let our aspirations be to do for others, rather than to en-

joy for ourselves." The queen also. The principal wife of the king, whose name according to Otesias, was Danaopia. Her presence may have been mentioned as being unusual, or, more likely, because her influence was favorable to Nehemiah's request. For how long. The king valued his faithful servant too highly to consent to his long absence from the court. 15. "It is well when one makes his services valuable and his presence desirable to others." Set him a time. His leave of absence was probably extended afterward, for in chapter 5, 14, we read that Nehemiah was appointed governor, and remained twelve years at Jerusalem.

7, 8. Governor. The term here used is almost the same word with pasha, which is still the title of a sub-ordinate ruler of a province. Beyond the river. That is, on the western side of the Euphrates. In the past these officials had been unfriendly to the Jews, and had interposed many obstacles to the rebuilding of the temple. Nehemiah wisely obtains the sanction of an authority so high as to silence all their opposition, and even compel their assistance. Convey me over. Each ruler was to provide conveyance through his own jurisdiction, and forward him on his way. His route of travel was to the Euphrates river, by which he would travel up the stream probably to Tiphshah, seven hundred miles, thence four hundred miles through the province of Syria to Jerusalem. The king's forest. Probably a park or inclosed garden, located in Palestine perhaps at Mount Lebanon, and set apart for royal uses; though it may refer to all the forest land of the province, as being under the special charge of an officer to prevent their destruction. Trees have always been highly valued and carefully preserved in the East. Palace which appertained to the house. A palace or castle connected with the temple; by some supposed to be the royal dwelling of Solomon, by others the fortress adjoining the temple, afterward known as the tower Antonia. The house that I shall enter into. Various interpretations as referring either to Nehemiah's own residence, or to the temple itself, which might need some repair, as seventy years had passed since the dedication.

GOLDEN TEXT: The God of heaven he will prosper us; therefore we his servants will arise and build. Neh. 2, 20.

DOCTRINAL SUGGESTION: Answer to prayer. The next lesson is Neh. 4, 7-18.

The human mind needs the kindling of a great faith, an inspiring love and worship, to set its spiritual mechanism at work. Give it motive power and it will overcome temptation and achieve seemingly impossible results. Christ does not begin at the dry but at the faith end. The events of to-day make us look forward to what will happen to-morrow; those of yesterday carry our views into another world.

Bishop Taylor beautifully remarks "Prayer is the key to open the day, and the bolt to shut the night. But as the clouds drop the early dew and the evening dew upon the grass, yet it would not spring and grow green by that constant and double falling of the dew, unless some great shower at certain seasons did supply the rest; so the customary devotion of prayer twice a day is the falling of the early and latter dew. But if you will increase and flourish in works of grace empty the great clouds sometimes, and let them fall in a full shower of prayer. Choose out seasons when prayer shall overflow like Jordan in time of harvest."

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