

The General Assembly has sent us questions in order to elicit answers which will give information concerning the fruits borne by the members of our various congregations. I am asked to give you, in substance, the answers that have been sent me. Some are very indefinite and convey little information, and I am sorry to say that from certain congregations of the Presbytery, of which I know little or nothing, I have received no answers to the questions sent by the General Assembly.

In reply to the question, "Is there any evidence of an increasing sense of the supreme importance of the claims of religion?" the majority of sessions call attention to the fact that the services of God's house are regularly attended, or that the attendance is encouraging, or much improved; while others see no improvement, or complain that one of the services is well attended, while the other is almost deserted. In reference to family worship, the general impression is that our people sadly neglect it, and that is a source of spiritual death.

Very few ministers are able to say that their people take a decided stand against the prevailing forms of vice; some are condemned, while others are left untouched because they have become fashionable. Intemperance, though on the decrease in several quarters, is not opposed as one of the most devilish foes of all that is good, pure and holy. In many quarters Christians do not shine as bright lights, although others are glad to report general consistency.

When asked if much help is given by Church members by way of visitation of the sick, assistance in prayer-meeting or Sunday school, and in the care of the spiritual interests of the congregation generally, sessions are almost unanimous in giving a negative reply. Those who can say that they receive aid, add that it is very little and not at all what it should be. All seem to shrink from this duty, and leave all the work to the pastor. Some are glad to notice prosperity and have reason to believe that the cause of Christ is making inroads on the world around; they report interesting cases of conversion. Others think they are not losing ground; others seem to know little about it, while others again are saddened because of the spirit of levity and worldliness, which prevails among a large number, and which clearly indicates that souls do not understand the importance of eternal life. The general impression left on the mind by reading the various reports is this one. Hundreds of souls have never understood that they cannot go to heaven unless they are born again, and live the life consequent to the new birth.

From the reports we are led to conclude that our people have a fair acquaintance with the Word of God and the Catechism, especially among the young people, but know very little about the government of the Church. They are Presbyterians by accident—or providentially, if you prefer—rather than from principle. Some complain that our people care more for light and trashy reading than for the Bible and solid literature; "a tendency for low concerts and clown performances is shewn above one for those that would ennoble and elevate." Mothers are not careful of their young daughters, and allow them to mingle with all sorts of young men, much to their peril.

Information is sought concerning the liberality of our people, which, as a rule, is a pretty good test of Christian life. Almost all agree in saying that much more could and should be done, and those ministers whose congregations report liberal contributions are the first to say that their people are only beginning to understand their duty in this direction. Still, almost all report favourably. Some congregations have given a third more than last year, others have increased, but it is generally thought that the heads of families alone contribute, and not the young people; while one minister reports that special efforts are put forth to teach each child the duty of systematic giving on each Sabbath day. Efforts put forth to wipe off heavy debts bid fair to be crowned with success.

The answers to the question, "What are the prevailing sins you have to contend with?" are varied, but at the same time the same sins are lamented in the majority of our congregations. To wit: intemperance, and in view of its fearful ravages and unpardonable unwillingness on the part of elders and Church members to abandon absolutely the use of intoxicants in the shape of wine, beer, etc.; Sabbath-breaking, in the shape of labour on railroads and in post-offices; also social visits and calls on Sabbath evenings instead of attendance on Church ordinances. Some

deplore the sin of unchastity in quarters where it would not be so much as suspected, and a very light regard for the sanctity of marriage relations. Evil talking and useless gossip well nigh ruin many a Church. Dishonesty in commercial transactions is also deplored. The influence of popery is blighting in several quarters, making our people weak and timorous, unfaithful to their own beliefs, Protestants and Christians in name only, but not in deed. And finally, worldliness, indifference to true, holy and deep-seated piety, and a conformity of the Church to the world is given, and with just reason, as the greatest sin of which God's Church is guilty and which results in spiritual deadness.

On the whole, the reports, though encouraging in many respects, lead to the conclusion that there still exists a great deal of spiritual death in the churches within our bounds. We have reason to take courage, but we also have reason to humble ourselves and pray for a richer outpouring of the Holy Ghost.

SABBATH SCHOOL TEACHER.

INTERNATIONAL LESSONS.

LESSON XXXVII

Sep. 11. } IDOLATRY PUNISHED { Ex. xxxii. 1881. } 26-35.

GOLDEN TEXT.—"Little children keep yourselves from idols. Amen."—1 John v. 21.

HOME READINGS.

M. Ex. xxiv. 1-18. Moses Called into the Mountain.
T. Ex. xxv. 1-40. The Ark, etc.
W. Ex. xxvi. 1-37. The Tabernacle, etc.
Th. Ex. xxvii. 1-21. Altar of Burnt-offering.
F. Ex. xxviii. 1-43. Aaron Set Apart.
S. Ex. xxxi. 1-18. Observance of the Sabbath.
Sab. Ex. xxxii. 1-35. The Golden Calf.

HELPS TO STUDY.

At the close of our last lesson we left the Israelites standing awestruck and submissive before the "mount of God." They had heard the law; they quaked before the lightnings and the thunders and the smoking mountain; and they said, "All that the Lord hath said unto us will we do." That is where we find them.

Where do we find them now? But a few days at most a week or two—had elapsed, and we find these professed worshippers and servants of the true God deliberately entering upon the practice of that detestable idolatry which they had become so familiar in Egypt—bowing down before "graven images," the work of their own hands. It is not necessary to suppose that they intentionally and deliberately turned away from the true God, whose voice they had so lately heard and whom they had solemnly promised to serve and worship; their sin was that they attempted to worship God in a way which He had forbidden, for He had said, "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image," etc.

And what is to be said of Aaron, who, in the absence of Moses, yielded so readily to the clamour of the people on this occasion, and made for them, or caused to be made for them, "a golden calf." Aaron was but human—he failed; so did even Moses afterwards (Num. xx. 10-12). Aaron temporized; he was afraid that he could not keep the people together if he did not yield to their wishes.

When Moses returned from his forty days' stay in the mount and found the people singing and dancing around their idol, he was filled with indignation—so much so that on the first impulse he destroyed the two tables of stone which he had received from God and on which the ten commandments were engraved. The idol was destroyed—burnt in the fire (probably it was made partly of wood, and partly of gold), ground to powder, and scattered upon the water of which the people drank.

Our lesson gives an account of the vigorous measures which Moses adopted to suppress this rebellion and bring the people back to their allegiance. It may be introduced under the following heads: (1) Idolaters Slain, (2) Intercession Made, (3) Justice Declared, (4) Idolaters Plagued.

I. IDOLATERS SLAIN.—Vers. 26-29. We may well be astounded at the severity of the punishment inflicted, but we can neither deny its justice nor question its wisdom. Moses was not the prime mover in the matter, for he refers to God as his authority for the command. We must remember that Jehovah was not only the God of the Israelites but their king—their civil governor; as such they had rebelled against Him, and as such He uses severity to bring them back into subjection.

Who is on the Lord's side? This question suggests to the "S. S. Times" some very pertinent considerations regarding the time that now is. "That is the test question to-day," it says, "as it has been always. Not, Who is on the popular side? not, Who is on the pleasant side? not, Who is on the money-making side? not, Who is on the conservative side? not, Who is on the progressive side? but, Who is on the Lord's side? That question has its place and its force in the Church as well as in the outside world. One must be willing to have his Christian brethren call him an 'old fogy' when he stands firm, or a 'heretic' when he accepts new light at the call of God; he must consent to be sneered at as 'strait-laced' because of his views on questions of morals, or to be looked at askance as 'dangerously lax' because of his recognition of the law of love in judging the practices of others; he must incur the danger of open hostility or of silent ostracism, if he would prove himself squarely on the Lord's side in times of church

division and of ethical discussions. But that question comes with greatest power to those who have not yet formally decided on which side they are, in the great struggle of the universe. If the Lord Jesus were to speak out of heaven this hour, and say, 'All those who are ready to be on My side at every risk and at every cost, will step to the right of the line I now point out: those who remain on the other side, I must count as against Me,' what would be your course? Would you step over that line and shew yourself on the Lord's side? If you would, why don't you do it now? That is just the decision you are called to at this time."

And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together unto him. "These," says Dr. Talbot W. Chambers, "were not yet set apart as they afterwards were to sacred service. They were influenced partly by attachment to Moses, who belonged to their tribe, but doubtless still more by a spirit of penitence and holy resolution, indicating a sort of natural fitness for the position they subsequently held as 'an Israel within an Israel,' representing the ideal life of the people."

There fell of the people that day about three thousand men. "But the idolatry and the rebellion," says the "National S. S. Teacher," "would soon have destroyed the entire multitude. It has been said: 'The sickly sentimentality which fits up handsome cells for prisoners, feeds them bountifully, and lets them off easily, was not known under the theocracy. God made very quick work with rebellion and mutiny.' It was a case similar to mutiny on a ship, or revolt in an army on the eve of battle. They were in the wilderness, surrounded on every hand by enemies; they had just been led out of bondage in the most marvellous way; all their wants were supplied directly from the hand of God; their sin was very great, and, unless punished in the most signal manner, it would have been impossible for Moses longer to have held them under authority, or to have led them into the land of promise. This is thoroughly sustained by their subsequent history."

II. INTERCESSION MADE.—Vers. 30-32. Before going to plead with God, Moses endeavours to impress the minds of the people with the heinousness of the offence which they had committed.

Ye have sinned a great sin. Their sin was not the sin of the heathen, who know not God, and who worship false gods. It was not the first commandment they had broken—at least not directly—but the second. Their sin was the sin of the Romanist and the so-called Ritualist of modern times who attempt to worship God in a way which is not of His appointment, or which He has positively forbidden. And it was, and is, "a great sin." From this and many other passages in the Bible it would seem as if God regarded his sin as even more insulting and more dishonouring to Him than is the sin of those who deliberately turn away from Him to worship false gods.

If Thou wilt forgive their sin—and if not, blot me, I pray Thee, out of Thy book. These words form part of the prayer of Moses in behalf of the guilty Israelites. "There is all the difference in the world," says Mr. H. Clay Trumbull, "between sharing another's sin and sharing the consequences of another's sin. The one is always base; the other may be truly noble. A man may oppose with all his power the wrong course of his partner, or his brother, or his child, or his father, and then when the blow falls on the guilty one he may quietly share in the punishment without attempting to screen himself at the other's cost, or he may permit it all to come on himself, unjustly, rather than expose the one he loves by asserting his own freedom from complicity with the wrong. Never does Moses appear in a grander and a more admirable light than while thus pleading tenderly with God to spare these sinful people, or to let him die with them. So long as God's honour was at stake, Moses could stand out against his own brother to the death. With God's honour vindicated Moses was ready to die for any one of that sinful people whom he led. The truest devotion to another will never consent to do wrong for the loved one; but it will be ready to suffer wrong to the uttermost for that object of affection."

III. JUSTICE DECLARED.—Vers. 33, 34. The reply of God to Moses' prayer is, Whosoever hath sinned against Me, him will I blot out of My book. On this passage the "Westminster Teacher" says: "His petition was granted in part—in part withheld. The practical request which his ardent affection for the people had prompted him to utter was pronounced inadmissible. Only the transgressors should have their names blotted from the book of the living, not those who had remained faithful.—Ezek. xviii. 20. Moses was to continue the work which he had begun, conducting the people forward to the land of promise."

IV. IDOLATERS PLAUGUED.—Ver. 35. In the last verse of our lesson we are told that the Lord plagued the people because they made the calf. We copy another practical application from the "S. S. Times": "Forgiveness does not do away with all the earthly consequences of the sin forgiven. The unconditional pardon of a murderer would neither bring back his victim to life nor take from him all cause of regret and suffering as a result of his crime. Transgression always injures a man. He will in some way feel its sad consequences so long as he lives. Nothing could be more foolish than for us to suppose that we could do a wrong and be forgiven for it, and that would be the end of it. It wouldn't be the end of it. The sin itself, the guilt of the sin, God would put an end to, would put out of sight and thought forever, by His act of forgiveness; but the earthly consequences of that sin must continue so long as earth continues. And God must give a child of his new treatment and a new training because of his every new experience in sin. The man who has been found guilty of crime must not wonder that he is distrusted long after he has served out his term of legal punishment. Nor can a man expect to be as strong, as sensitive, or as spotless, at the point of his former failures in integrity, as if he had never yielded to temptation just there. If we consent to yield to sin, we have got to suffer because of our sinning—to suffer here in the flesh even when we are forgiven of God for our transgression. Sin is a terrible thing—even in view of its gracious forgiveness."