

## II. The People's Penitence, 5-9.

V. 5. *The people . . . believed God.* They accepted as true what He had said by His prophet, and believed in His power to carry out His threat, and also in His mercy and willingness to forgive the penitent. *Proclaimed a fast*; an act of humiliation before God, of confession of sin, and of supplication. *Put on sackcloth*; a sack-like garment made of a coarse, dark goat's hair cloth, irritating to the skin: worn in the East as a sign of abasement before God, and of mourning. *Greatest . . . least*; all classes alike.

Vs. 6, 7. *The tidings reached the king* (Rev. Ver.); of the great movement among his people and its cause. *Covered him with sackcloth*; like his subjects. *Sat in ashes*; a symbol of extreme mourning (see Job 2:8). To leave his throne for an ash heap was a sign of humility wonderful in a sovereign noted for his splendor and power. *He made proclamation* (Rev. Ver.) . . . *neither man nor beast . . . taste any thing.* The fast was formally approved by the king. It was an utter fast: even the beasts must share the heavy and weary load of human suffering. To the old Hebrew, the beasts shared man's life and fortunes (compare Isa. 11:6-9).

Vs. 8, 9. *Cry mightily unto God* (Rev. Ver.). The cry would be that God would forgive and spare Nineveh. *Turn . . . from . . . evil.* It was always assumed in the prophetic message, that doom might be averted by repentance. *Who knoweth*, etc. (Rev. Ver.). The doubt is not whether God will forgive those who truly repent, but whether repentance is genuine and sincere.

## III. The Lord's Compassion, 10.

*God saw*; quick to observe the first signs of good in the people whose wickedness had been so great. *God repented . . . did it not.*

God does not change His mind. The very purpose of His threatening the Ninevites was to bring them to repentance, that He might forgive them and withdraw His decree of doom. (Compare Jer. 18:7-10.)

### Light from the East

**FASTING**—In the East a fast means total abstinence from food and drink. A day's fast means abstinence from sunrise till sunset; in the evening the fast is broken by a meal. When a fast lasts longer than a single day we are to think of men abstaining each day till sundown and after that eating and drinking just as the Moslems do during the whole (fast) month of Ramadan.

Whatever its origin fasting was a religious exercise that made it possible for men to come near to God. Moses received the law after a fast of forty days on Mount Sinai. Daniel's visions came after a long fast. Fasting was especially prominent among mourning customs. As death opens up the channels by which men's kindness and good-will flow to mourners, so fasting came to have a special religious significance. Fasting as a form of suffering was fitted to stir the divine pity. The most general use of fasting therefore was to give a special appeal to prayer. God was the more likely to be affected and to hearken when He looked on the suffering and humiliation of the suppliant. It is this aspect of fasting that is set forward in post-exilic times. Men came to speak of fasting as a "humbling of oneself before God." They did this in time of national or private calamity, or when the burden of pain lay heavy on them. The great Hebrew fast that survives till the present is the Day of Atonement. For 24 hours the Jews neither eat nor drink and they afflict their souls in the divine presence.

## THE GEOGRAPHY LESSON

[SEE SKETCH MAP, LESSON VII.]

Our map of Mesopotamia on page 535 marks off an outlook for us at Nineveh, beside the Tigris river. We are to stand at the point of the V and face nearly southward. All those flat-topped hills were artificially piled-up, long, long centuries ago, to give commanding sites for splendid palaces, temples and royal treasures of the Assyrians.

The very hill on which we are standing is one of those that used to support palaces of ancient warrior monarchs whose exploits we have read in our own Hebrew Bibles—Shalmaneser, Sargon, Sennacherib, Esarhaddon. High walls encompassed this particular mound, turning it into a sort of elevated fortress which could be defended by soldiers on