

The Christian Messenger.

Bible Lessons for 1877.

STUDIES ABOUT THE KINGDOM OF ISRAEL.

SUNDAY, April 1st, 1877.—The Oil Increased.—2 Kings vi. 1-7.

COMMIT TO MEMORY. Vs. 1-7.

GOLDEN TEXT.—"And God is able to make all grace abound toward you."—2 Cor. ix. 8.

DAILY READINGS.—Monday, 2 Kings iv. 1-7. Tuesday, vs. 1; Leviticus xxv. 35-55. Wednesday, Matt. xviii. 21-35. Thursday, vs. 4; Luke viii. 41-56. Friday, vs. 1; Psalm xxvii. Saturday, vs. 6; James i. Sunday, vs. 6; 2 Cor. xii. 1-10.

ANALYSIS.—I. Poverty proclaimed. Vs. 1. II. Poverty enriched. Vs. 2-6. III. Instructions. Vs. 7.

QUESTIONS.—How long does Elisha's ministry from this time continue? What was the character of his deeds? Who were the sons of the prophets? How do those belonging to Judah differ from those belonging to Israel?

Vs. 1. What kind of miracles have we in this chapter? By what law could her children be taken by another as servants? How was a debtor's power of pledging his own service of that of his family limited? Could a Jew enslave another Jew absolutely? Why would a prophet be the more likely to be in want with Ahab and Jezebel recently on the throne? To whom is sorrow most safely told?

Vs. 2. Why did Elisha ask the widow "what was in her house"? As far as we have any material substance, ought it not to go for the payment of debts? Is it in any sense to a really good man a shame or disgrace to be poor? Is it to a really good man a shame or a disgrace to be rich? Where is there shame as between poverty and riches?

Vs. 4. Why was it right to keep the people from the sight of the miracle in working if they saw it when once wrought?

Vs. 6. When did the multiplying of the oil cease? Does God give his grace in excess of the capacity of the recipient?

Vs. 7. Why did not this woman trust her unaided reason in disposing of her oil before consulting with Elisha? Would business men as often err if they consulted the word of God? Are they not likely to err without it? Why should men care first for their debts before they do for their abundance? Where would Elisha's counsel be applicable in these days?

I. The Ministry of Elisha. The ministry of Elisha, now opening before us, continues from the present date for nearly threescore years (B. C. 896-838). "His deeds were not of wild terror, but of gracious, soothing, homely beneficence, bound up with the ordinary tenor of human life. At his home in Carmel he is the oracle and support of the neighborhood." He predicts plenty instead of famine. 2 Kings vi. 18-20; vii. 1. He sweetens Jericho's bitter spring. He multiplies oil for the widow. He restores to workmen their axe heads. 2 Kings vi. 5-7. He saves from deadly herbs. 2 Kings iv. 38-44. He brings the child of his benefactress to life. 2 Kings iv. 27-37. He dies in great old age, and "is not rapt away like Elijah, but buried with a splendid funeral." See Josephus, Ant., IX., 8, 56. He was not Elijah, but Elisha; not a John the Baptist, nor a Luther, but a Melancthon, and, better still, like Christ—the gentle, beneficent, "holy man of God, who passeth by us continually." 2 Kings iv. 9.

II. The Sons of the Prophets.—(Vs. 1). In Judah the sons of the prophets are mostly in a scattered and isolated condition, but in Israel they have a compact organization, in which the most distinguished prophets stand forth as spiritual teachers and rulers, having numerous pupils, or "sons," under their inspection or control. This prophetic body, like the priests in Judah, acted as a counterpoise to the prevalent idolatry, which was far more deeply rooted and widely spread in Israel than in the southern kingdom.

EXPOSITION.—Verse 1.—Now a certain woman, etc. See chapters iv.-vii, and a part of viii. She was in distress, extreme, and intolerable. "Unto Elisha," most naturally, as the head of that fraternity to which her husband belonged, and no doubt also induced by her knowledge of his sympathetic nature, and his disposition in any practicable way to furnish assistance or relief to the troubled. That she expected any interposition of miraculous

power in her behalf does not appear. Thy servant, my husband. Two relations of the deceased, the first that to Elisha, for servant here, is not a term of mere politeness, but designates the man's relation as one of "the sons of the prophets" to Elisha as their head. This relation justifies and grounds in part the plea to him. Dead. A solemn stern fact. Thou knowest thy servant, etc. Introducing a fact as to his character which specially appealed to Elisha, as "a man of God." She says, "thou knowest"; not obliged therefore, to take her word, which might be suspected of being too favorable, because of her affection and sorrow. The creditor is come to take unto him my two sons to be bondmen. This is the last argument, the chief and climax. The case was really urgent and distressing, since to loss of husband, loss of both sons was so impending. The Mosaic law allowed (not originated) this kind of sale, even of Hebrews (Lev. xxv. 39-46), which yet was so hedged in with merciful provisions as hardly to constitute slavery. A breaking up of the family, and if the year of jubilee was not near at hand, a permanent separation.

Verse 2.—What shall I do, etc. A question showing sympathy—not blaming her for her husband's lack of providence. Even if he had been at fault she should not be charged with it, and even if she had been at fault in lack of economy, this was not the time to remind her of it. So he only feels his way to a plan of relief, seeking in this her help. A good example and lesson for us. What hast thou in thine house? We cannot but note how in this, as so often, if not always, in other miracles that which already possessed is made the basis of further gifts. Large mercies are but smaller ones expanded. It is the same grace and the same God, in the small and in the large alike, and that whether it has come to us through the sweat of the brow or by the word of power working for us a miracle without our working. Thine handmaid, etc. "Not anything." So near nothing, absolutely, that we almost wonder that she thought to speak of the oil. Very little—but, as it proved, enough.

Verse 3.—Go borrow thee vessels abroad of all thy neighbors. "Vessels," a general term, of any and all sizes and shapes. "All" is here still more emphatic, assuring her that she could not possibly find and get too many. Borrow not a few. Those for whom the miracle is wrought are called to co-operate, and so show faith and obedience—teaching us also to obey God, and work with him if we wish for those gracious blessings that can come only from him.

Verse 4.—Thou shalt shut the door, etc. God was wont to make his miracles open and public when they were meant for the public, otherwise they would not and could not have served their purpose; but publicity for its own sake, in the way of ostentation, was never sought, but rather avoided. See as examples of this, Luke viii. 51-54; John vii. 3, 4; Acts x. 41. Compare viii. 4; John ix. 30. She and her sons were the persons immediately interested, and in their presence alone was it wrought, not even the prophet being present. His agency seems to have been confined exclusively to giving the orders, and predicting the event. Pour into all the vessels. Implying that all should be filled, and no failure. Thou shalt set aside, etc. Understood by her as of course intended, that she should cause each to be thus set aside, that is, by her sons. See xiii. 19.

Verse 5.—So she went, etc. No sign of doubt; in no point lack of obedience, cheerfully, fully, perfectly obedient. She poured. Continuously as the vessels were brought by her sons. So much outflow from a flask so small! God's grace.

Verse 6.—When the vessels were full. All and each full, and altogether full. Every one. How particular the account. Showing the exactness of agreement between God's promise and his fulfilment. Every word of God has its meaning, and will stand in all its meaning. The large faith had its large blessing.

Verse 7.—Then she came, etc. Thankful to him, and to God through him, and yet not knowing what next. Hence his words. Go sell, etc. "Oil was far more extensively used among the ancient Hebrews than in our northern climate." "The numerous olive plantations in Palestine made olive oil one of the chief and one of the most lucrative products of the country. It supplied an article of extensive and profitable traffic with the Tyrians (Ezek. xxvii. 17), and presents of the finest sorts of olive oil were deemed suitable for kings."—Kittó.

—Baptist Teacher.

SUNDAY, April 8th, 1877.—The Shunamite's Son.—2 Kings iv. 25-37.

Select Serial.

DORA'S BOY.

BY MRS. ELLEN ROSS.

CHAP. V.—THE DARKNESS DREPPENS.

A month passed by and Dora Haldane was still lodging at the house of Mrs. Barish, the keeper of the provision shop.

During that month she had suffered much in the way of privation and exposure; but Mrs. Barish knew little of this, for she had regularly received her three shillings a-week in advance on the very day she expected it.

Mrs. Haldane had done sewing for her, for which she was but ill-paid; and she had managed to get a little sewing from other persons, and to go out to do a day's ironing now and then. All this time the autumn days were shortening, and getting greyer and colder, and the November fogs and cold wind were pitilessly setting in. Mrs. Haldane could not manage to make any substantial additions to her own and her boy's scanty stock of clothing, and they suffered much in consequence, the mother especially. Sometimes the struggle with life seemed to be becoming desperate, and she prayed more fervently and frequently for her boy, that he might be provided for and blessed after her death.

She said not much to the lad on this painful subject: she tried to cast all her care about him upon God, and she had faith to believe that He would care for the orphan child.

She had not yet been able to come upon any trace of her mother; but even this did not disturb her faith. 'It will serve the same purpose for Hughie to find her, as, no doubt, he will do some day,' she said to herself; and to the boy said, 'When you find grandmother, Hughie, try all you can to make her happy. When I last saw her, years ago, she was anything but happy: she needed love in her heart; she needed to know God and trust in Him, as we have learned to do in our sorrow and trouble. Try to comfort her, dearie, when you find her, and tell her some of the sweet things that you and I have talked about together. You must tell her, too, how I longed to see her, and tried to find her; and if she frets that we did not meet each other, tell her not to fret, Hughie, but to meet me at last in heaven. We shall be a happy family when we all get together there.'

'What am I to do when you're gone, mother?' the boy asked, now that she spoke so decidedly of leaving him; and a feeling of dismay crept into his heart as he put the question.

'Pray to God, my dear boy, and trust in Him: He will provide for you and bless you, don't be afraid. Only be careful to do always what is right, and you will be sure to find friends to be kind to you. Be honest, truthful, strictly upright; and if you have to suffer for well-doing, as people sometimes have to do for a time, Hughie, still do well, do always what is right, my dear boy. These things I have told you many a time before to-day, and I know you will remember them: I believe, too, that you will try to do them.'

'Yes, mother,' he replied, absently. He was thinking, with a certain degree of comfort, of her assurance that God would be sure to provide for and bless him, although at the same time the small gleam of comfort revealed how dark and great was the cloud that would envelop him in his precious mother's absence.

Mrs. Haldane daily suffered more and more, but so uncomplainingly that, though her looks betrayed that she was ill, Mrs. Barish thought no more about her condition than to remark to herself now and then, as her lodgers passed in and out, that Mrs. Haldane looked a very delicate and weakly woman.

And owing to her silence about her condition Hughie did not think that she was worse than usual. Only, after a time, he was somewhat surprised to see that she grew listless and unconcerned about everything. She made but small effort to get work, and on one or two occasions meal-times came without her having anything to satisfy her boy's hunger. For herself, the sense of hunger was now a thing of the past: she was to hunger no more. At these times, when she encountered her boy's wistful, speechless request for food, she bade him stay in while she went on an

errand; and she presently returned with broken bread and meat which she set before him.

One Saturday afternoon they sat shivering up in their little bedroom. Mrs. Barish allowed them to have hot water from her fire, and to make use of her kitchen within certain limits; but she seldom invited them to come and sit beside her fire for an hour or two.

November was fast drawing to a close, and though the weather had been exceptionally mild for the time of the year, still now the winter was making its approach decidedly felt.

On this particular Saturday, frost was in the air, and in their fireless, bare room Dora and her boy were painfully aware of the fact. She sat on a chair put against the wall so that she could lean her head upon it for support. Her thin shawl was closely wrapped around her, and her eyes were closed. Hughie kept very quiet not to disturb her: he thought she was asleep, and as she had casually mentioned that morning that she had slept scarcely at all during the night, he thought she needed rest now, and he was glad to see her getting it.

He took out his few precious marbles, the only things in the way of toys that he possessed, and rolled them quietly about the small piece of carpet that was placed beside their bed. By-and-by he grew tired of this, and the light was fast fading, so he sat still waiting for his mother to awaken. Presently it grew so dim that the grey gleam from the square of skylight scarcely revealed his mother's white face. He felt greatly relieved when she presently roused herself with a deep sigh.

She seemed bewildered for a few moments, leaning forwards with her hands on her knees. The she said softly, 'Hughie, Hughie!'

He was beside her in a moment, and she took both his cold hands, and held them tightly. 'You are very cold, my poor pet,' she said, and she herself shivered as she spoke. After a pause, she added, 'We haven't anything for tea, love, and nothing for to-morrow. We must go out. You remember I paid Mrs. Barish three shillings on Wednesday; well, that pays our lodging up to next Wednesday; but it has left me very short of money for food this week, as I've had so little work. So we will go out, Hughie, and see what we can pick up for to-night and to-morrow. It's very cold; but I don't think it's colder out than it is here; and it's cheery to me to see the places lighted up, especially on a Saturday night.'

'Yes, let us go out, mother,' said the boy eagerly.

Mrs. Haldane involuntarily shivered again. 'Ah, I had such a cozy dream just now,' she said. 'I thought I was at home with mother once more, and we were sitting together at tea in her little parlour, feeling quite loving towards each other; and there was a delightful fire, and—' She stopped short, suddenly realizing how cruel it was to draw this picture before her cold and hungry boy, in that dark and comfortless garret. She drew him impulsively towards her, folded her arms tightly around him, and kissed him again and again on his broad white forehead, as if she would pour out her soul in comforting him, if she could. Then she said tenderly, as she took his hand, 'Come, my darling, we will go out once more.'

CHAP. VI.—STREET-SINGING.

Down the dark, narrow staircase they went, and out into the street, walking as fast as Mrs. Haldane's strength would permit, but far too slowly to keep themselves warm.

The streets were all alive with sauntering working people with baskets on their arms, looking with interest at every shop and stall they passed, on their buying expeditions. These were the early purchasers, and they did not make nearly such an array and a commotion as the later purchasers would do by-and-by, when the din would be loud and boisterous, the flaring gas-jets far more numerous, and the streets almost impassable from shouting costermongers and their noisy customers. Mrs. Haldane and her boy walked on, she listlessly observing things on the way, and he hungrily looking at the tempting wares in the windows and stalls, for his dinner that day had been but scanty.

Sometimes she saw nothing that she looked at, for her mind was absorbed in the one thought of getting him food,

and she was praying for direction to do so. If possible, she would refrain to the last from begging before him, fearing that the spectacle might have a demoralizing influence upon him.

In turning the corner of a street they presently came upon a most miserable group of street-singers, a destitute family of six ill-clad little ones with 'father and mother,' who had probably hired the wretched children for the evening at so much per head.

They were making a hideous, whining noise in the usual drawing style of street ballad-singers, and the doleful ditty they were singing was of a character that touched more than one pitiful heart amongst the poor working-folk who stopped to listen to them, so half-pennies and pennies tinkled into the old can which the youngest child held out imploringly to the listeners.

Dora Haldane looked at them, and heard their song with shrinking. She quickened her steps a little to get quicker out of the noise of them; then she stopped short all of a sudden, as if a thought had struck her. 'Yes, that will do,' she said aloud, though speaking to herself.

'What will do, mother?' asked Hughie curiously.

'I'm going to sing a song, love, to get you some bread,' she said. 'Perhaps some kind people will give us pennies as they did to those poor singers yonder. It's the only thing I can do to-night, Hughie, and I'll try.'

She turned out of the bustling thoroughfare into a street which, though busy, was much quieter. There were no stalls in it; but there were small shops of all kinds, provision shops, butchers', old-clothes shops, and several bird shops.

Mrs. Haldane slackened her steps, and tried to summon courage to go out in the road and begin her song. For a time she failed to get up the necessary courage, but the thought of her poor boy nerved her, and she said cheerfully, 'What shall I sing, Hughie?'

'Sing "There is a happy land far, far away,"' he said. 'I always like that one.'

'You do, I know, love. But I doubt whether these people will,' she said, 'however, we will see.'

Without more delay she then stepped out into the road, and began in the sweetest, softest tone to sing that favourite hymn of childhood. The tone was indeed too soft for the open air, and was not heard far beyond where she stood; but she had no strength to sing louder.

A few people paused on their way to listen to her, and before the second verse was finished a poor young widow with a little girl by her side gave her a penny. Dora smiled as she took it, and thought of the widow's gift to the treasury, the 'two mites' which was all her living. Before the song was ended, a little thin girl came up and timidly offered Hughie a halfpenny; then she stepped back and leaned against one of the shops to hear it to the end.

At the same moment a big burly man appeared at the door of that shop and stood there to listen. He had a pleasant face, rather florid in complexion, a short beard of iron grey, and a fringe of hair of the same colour round the back part of his bald head, which was as shining and almost as red as a tomato. His small grey eyes seemed always ready to twinkle with fun, and the general expression of his face was satirical; it would have been cynical rather, had he been less kindly and genial in disposition.

He was attracted to his door by the sound of Dora's sweet voice, and also (though for the world he would not have confessed it) by the simple hymn she was singing. He had not heard it sung for many, many years; and now the unexpected sound of it turned back long dreary pages of his history, and showed him the picture of a young mother singing that little hymn to her baby for a lullaby,—a picture that had once been a part of his life, but was now merely a fading memory.

His grey eyes twinkled for a moment, but not with fun; there was an unwonted dimness in them which he would fain have attributed to his spectacles, as he drew them off and rubbed them with his coat-tails.

In a few minutes Dora resumed her singing. This time she sang—

'I remember, I remember
The house where I was born,
The little window where the sun
Came peeping in at morn.'