

* The Sunday School *

BIBLE LESSON

Abridged from Peloubeta's Notes.

Fourth Quarter.

PUBLIC READING OF THE SCRIPTURES.

Lesson VIII. November 19. Neh. 8: 1-12.

Read Nehemiah 8 and Luke 4: 16-22.

Commit Verses 1-3.

GOLDEN TEXT.

The ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law, Neh. 8: 3.

EXPLANATORY.

SUBJECT: A GREAT MEETING FOR BIBLE STUDY.

I. THE CIRCUMSTANCES.—The section of Nehemiah embracing chaps. 8-10 differs from the opening and from the closing chapters in that here Nehemiah is spoken of in the third person, while in the rest of the book he himself writes in the first person. In the prayer (chap. 9) and the covenant (chap. 10) the first person plural is used. "It was a series of events of the greatest importance. Nehemiah's design was to renew and enlarge the reforms which Ezra had begun thirteen years before. Chaps. 8-10 are an account of transactions running through twenty-four days or more, by which Nehemiah brought this and other reforms into active operation. Our lesson is the first section of the account, and tells what happened in one day,—the first day of the seventh month (v. 2).

II. THE GREAT MEETING.—V. 1. This chapter should begin with the last clause of the last verse of the previous chapter: "And when the seventh month was come," etc. The first day of this month was the feast of trumpets, which proclaimed a day of rejoicing, like our Christmas bells. This was a week after the walls were finished.

1. ALL THE PEOPLE GATHERED THEMSELVES TOGETHER. From the city and from the surrounding country. AS ONE. In one place, with one purpose. INTO THE STREET. Rather, into the broad place, the public square, for the streets of an Oriental city are very narrow, "with hardly room to dodge the burden-bearing ass or camel one chance to meet in them." So "in Rome the favorite place for public meetings was either the forum within the city walls, or the spacious Campus Martius, sloping down to the Tiber, just outside of them. Out to this great meadow the people flocked on public occasions, and thither the magistrates came to address them." BEFORE THE WATER GATE. The open space south of the temple, called Ophel, lying between the temple wall and the city wall. It would thus lie within the modern Haram area. THEY SPoke UNTO EZRA THE SCRIBE. This is the first time Ezra's name occurs in the book of Nehemiah. It is probable that he had been absent during the past thirteen years, perhaps working as a scribe, in copying, studying, and perhaps putting into shape the Book of the Law, which they asked him to bring out to them. He seems to have returned at the opportune moment. There was great interest in him and his work, and they had gathered together on purpose to hear the words of the book he had copied and probably edited.

III. THE TEXT-BOOK.—Vs. 1-3. BOOK OF THE LAW OF MOSES. This "testifies to a general knowledge of the existence of a book the contents of which, so far as they are known, agreed substantially with our Pentateuch." WHICH THE LORD, Jehovah, HAD COMMANDED TO ISRAEL. This was not a merely human book, but one inspired and revealed by God.

2. THE LAW. Hebrew, "Torah, instruction," "here used in a sense which afterwards became universal." "Probably Ezra was for the first time publishing to the people laws which had hitherto been kept in the priests' hands" (like the "Eleusinian Mysteries"). "To Ezra is due the glory of promulgating the law, and making it pass into the life of the nation." BOTH OF MEN AND WOMEN. Both have equal need of studying God's Word. It is a great wrong that our Sabbath congregations are apt to be composed of twice as many women as men. AND ALL THAT COULD HEAR WITH UNDERSTANDING. The children, all who were old enough.

3. HE READ THEREIN . . . FROM THE MORNING UNTIL MIDDAY. Or, "from daylight." He began as soon as it was light enough, and read on (he and his assistants, v. 7) till noon, that is, for six hours or more. The reading appears to have been varied by occasional exposition (vs. 7, 8). THE EARS OF ALL THE PEOPLE WERE ATTENTIVE. Though there is no word in the Hebrew for "attentive," yet the meaning is quite correctly given: "the ears of all the people were to the book"—fixed on that, and on nothing else.

IV. THE TEACHING FORCE.—Vs. 4, 7. 4. EZRA . . . STOOD UPON A PULPIT OF WOOD. An elevated scaffold or platform, broad enough to allow fourteen persons to stand with ease upon it, and of considerable height (v. 5). AND BESIDE HIM STOOD. Six on his right hand and seven on his left. MATTHITHIAH, etc. Nothing is known of most of these persons except their names. They were probably prominent priests, perhaps chiefs of the courses of priests who ministered in the temple service.

7. ALSO JESHUA, etc. Thirteen of them are named. Leading men, or heads of clans. AND THE LEVITES. Even the Levites, or other Levites, less distinguished than the thirteen named, who were also Levites. CAUSED THE PEOPLE TO UNDERSTAND. In the three ways described in v. 8.

V. STUDYING THE WORD OF GOD.—V. 5. Preceded by Worship. 5. OPENED THE BOOK. Unrolled the scroll, or roll. For books in those days, as still in Jewish synagogues, were wide strips of parchment rolled upon sticks, one at either end, so that one side was rolled up as the other was unrolled to read. The writing was in parallel columns across the strip, and read from right to left. ALL THE PEOPLE STOOD UP. Rose to their feet as an act of respect and reverence for God and his Word. In latter times it was the attitude adopted during the reading of "the law," in the service of the synagogue.

6. EZRA BLESSED THE LORD. Praised God in prayer. ALL THE PEOPLE ANSWERED. Responsive worship is no new thing. AMEN. Lit., "That which is true." "So let it be." It was equivalent to saying, We accept the prayer as our own, as a true expression of our feelings. LIFTING UP THEIR HANDS. An appeal to God that they accepted the law thus read and would obey it. ROWED THEIR HEADS AND WORSHIPPED THE LORD WITH THEIR FACES TO THE GROUND. They sank down into the posture of humble, earnest prayer, first falling on their knees, and then bending forward and down till their faces came "between their knees" (1 Kings 18: 42). No one can understand the Word of God unless he is in the spirit of worship; and that spirit will make him ready to obey as well as to know.

"And the people stood up," rather "were," in their places. They remained quiet through the whole service. Two Ways of Studying the Bible. First 8, SO THEY READ . . . DISTINCTLY. "With clearness and precision, for which careful study was required." R. v. margin, "with an interpretation." It required clear enunciation to be heard by the many thousands assembled. The manner of reading made a great difference as to the sense.

Second. AND GAVE THE SENSE. Explaining the unusual words, expounding the meaning and the application of the law, interpreting the allusions to history, and in every way possible causing THEM TO UNDERSTAND THE READING. So Christ in the synagogue at Nazareth caused the people to understand Isaiah. (See Luke 4: 16-22).

VI. THE FRUITS OF BIBLE STUDY.—Vs. 9-12. 9. TIRSHATHA. "Allied to our word Pasha. It was the Persian title for a local or provincial governor." First Fruit, — Repentance. FOR ALL THE PEOPLE WEEP. "It is clear that their grief arose simply from their perception of their own miserable imperfections in contrast to the lofty requirements of the law, and in view of its sombre threats of punishment for disobedience."

Second Fruit, — Joy in the Lord. MOURN NOT, NOR WEEP. You have wept long enough; you have fastened your eyes on your sins too exclusively. Stop this, for there is something else to be seen quite as important.

10. GO YOUR WAY, EAT THE FAT, AND DRINK THE SWEET. These were expressions of joy, and aids to joy. AND SEND PORTIONS, etc. Another way of expressing and of increasing true joy. "It is the greatest mistake to represent the religion of the Old Testament as a gloomy cult overshadowed by the thunder-clouds of Sinai. On the contrary, its greatest offices were celebrated with music, dancing and feasting. The high day was a holiday, sunny and mirthful." NEITHER BE YE SORRY. Sorrow and repentance are never required for their own sake, but for the better things which grow out of them. If one has repented and forsaken his sin, then it is time to rejoice in the better things, to see God and the bright heavens rather than his own past. FOR THE JOY OF THE LORD IS YOUR STRENGTH. "your stronghold," R. v. margin. It is, says George W. Cable, "the joy of loving and being loved by God." "It is the joy of God's personal presence with us, and personal and entire care over us; or, rather, the taking of all our joys to God, and God into all our joys."

"Such joy is our strength" because we are stronger in joy than in sorrow. Joy gives courage and hope and free activity,

and health of body and spirit. It fits us for the service of God; it is a safeguard against the allurements of sinful pleasure, and against discouragement in trying times; it recommends our religion and our Master to the world, and attracts men to them; it honors God. This is especially true of joy that triumphs over sorrow and trials.

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