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[FROM PELOURET'S NOTES.]

FIRST QUARTER.—Lesson 4.—Jan. 24.

CAPTIVITY OF JUDAH.—2 Kings

xxiv. 1-12.

GOLDEN TEXT.—By the rivers of Babylon,

there we sat down; you we wept when we

remembered Zion.—Ps. cxxxvii. 1.

INTRODUCTION.—We turn again to the Book of Kings to continue the history of the kingdom of Judah. The same account is given almost word for word in chapter lii, an appendix to the Book of Jeremiah. Also more briefly in 2 Chron. xxxvi., and Jeremiah xxxix. We need to read them all in order to obtain a complete account of the last year of the kingdom, the destruction of Jerusalem and the great captivity.

I. APPROACHES TO THE FINAL DOOM. FIRST CAPTIVITY, B.C. 604.—Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon was approaching Jerusalem when Jeremiah sought, by means of the tested faithfulness of the Rechabites, to persuade the Jews to repent and be obedient to God. But it was all in vain. The people grew worse and worse. King Jehoiakim did evil in the sight of the Lord. He taxed the people heavily. He was not only a merciless tyrant, but a heartless persecutor of the Lord's prophets,—so recklessly defiant of God that he could cut in pieces the roll of Jeremiah's prophecies and burn them in his parlor fire (Jer. xxxvi. 23); and withal false to his treaty obligations with the Chaldeans.

Nebuchadnezzar surrounded Jerusalem, captured it, and carried away many of the treasures of the temple, and many of the leading persons of Jerusalem, to Babylon. Among them was Daniel, then a very young man, and his three companions (Dan. i. 1-6). This was the beginning of the 70 years' captivity foretold by Jeremiah (Jer. xxix. 10; 2 Chron. xxxvi. 21). After this Judah was ravaged by roving bands of surrounding nations, Moabites, Syrians, and Ammonites (2 Kings xxiv. 2).

SECOND CAPTIVITY, B.C. 598. Toward the close of his reign, so full of iniquity and rebellion, Nebuchadnezzar again came to Jerusalem, and bound King Jehoiakim in fetters to carry him to Babylon (2 Chron. xxxvi. 6), but he seems to have died in Jerusalem before the plan was carried out (2 Kings xxiv. 6; Jer. xxii. 18, 19). His son Jehoiachin (Jeconiah) was made king in his stead. He was only 18 years old and was as bad as his father. He seems to have immediately rebelled against Babylon, for he had reigned but three months when Nebuchadnezzar sent back his army to Jerusalem, captured the city, sent a great amount of treasures from the palace and the temple to Babylon, with 10,000 of the more important of the people (2 Kings xxiv. 9-15). Among these were King Jehoiachin, who lay 37 years in prison at Babylon and then was released (2 Kings xxv. 27-30); the prophet Ezekiel (Ezek. i. 1-2); and the great-grandfather of Mordecai, Queen Esther's cousin (Esther ii. 5-6).

II. OBSTACLES IN THE WAY OF THE TRANSGRESSORS.—God did everything He wisely could to prevent His people from rushing down to their own destruction. He laid upon them several lesser evils as warnings to avoid the way which would lead them swiftly on to their final destruction. The doom came slowly, and in mercy, to give time for thought and repentance. Prophets were sent to warn and entreat. Jeremiah had been speaking God's word to them for forty years in Jerusalem. For nearly ten years Ezekiel, also, from the land of captivity in Babylonia, had been uttering earnest words to the Jews in Palestine. We cannot understand the history of these times without reading these Prophets; nor do we see the meaning of the Prophets without a clear and comprehensive view of the history and the times. All through the last investment and siege, in those times of despair, there were sent by Jeremiah gleams of hope, and promises of return and prosperity, of the Messiah and His kingdom. (See Jer. xxxii. 3-8; xxx. 15-22.)

III. THE GREAT SIEGE OF JERUSALEM.—Vers. 1-3. (I.) DATE OF COMMENCEMENT. 1. And it came to pass in the ninth year of his reign, i. e., of Zedekiah the 21st and last King of Judah. He was the bad son of the good King Josiah. The last of the ninth year of his reign was B.C. 588. In the tenth month, in the tenth day. The month Thebet, which corresponds to our middle of December to middle of January, varying with the new moon. This date has been kept as a fast by the Jews ever since, so indelibly has it been written on their memory.

(II.) THE BESIEGERS. Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylon. Nabopolassar, the viceroy of the Assyrians in Babylonia, rose up against the Assyrians, Nineveh, its capital, was destroyed; and the viceroy be-

came King of Babylonia, and founded the Empire on the ruins of Assyria, B.C. 606. He lived only about two years, when Nebuchadnezzar, his son and general, became Emperor (B.C. 604), and made Babylon glorious during the 45 years of his reign. The inhabitants were called Chaldeans from the leading tribe.

(III.) METHODS OF ATTACK. He and all his host. These consisted of the fierce and cruel Chaldeans, with warriors from the surrounding nations, enemies of the Jews, and tributaries of Babylon, the Syrians, Moabites, and Ammonites (2 Kings xxiv. 2). Compare Jer. xxxiv. 1, where the vastness of the host is very strongly marked.—"Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and all his army, and all the kingdoms of the earth of his dominion, and all the people, fought against Jerusalem." Pitched against it. Surrounded it with armies to prevent all provisions from entering, and to starve it to submission, if they could not break down its walls. The army seems to have at first spread itself over all Judea. It fought not only against Jerusalem, but "against all the cities of Judah that were left." And they built forts against it round about. These forts were probably movable wooden towers, sometimes provided with battering-rams, which the besiegers advanced against the walls, thus bringing their fighting-men on a level with their antagonists. The thud of the battering-rams shook the walls day and night; archers made the defence increasingly hard, by constant showers of arrows from the high wooden forts; catapults of all sizes hurled stones into the town with a force as deadly as that of modern bullets, and darts tipped with fire kindled the roofs of houses; mines were dug under the walls, and attempts at escalade by ladders were renewed at every favorable opportunity.

(IV.) THE DEFENCE. Jerusalem was at this time a city of 20,000 inhabitants. Against the huge engines of Asiatic warfare the besieged citizens constructed counter-engines, and the struggle was worthy of the occasion.

(V.) CAPTIVES TO BABYLON. During the first year of the siege, probably the 3023 captives mentioned in Jer. lii. 28 were sent to Babylon. They were from the surrounding country, or those attempting to escape from the horrors of the famine in the city.

(VI.) JEREMIAH'S LAND PURCHASE. We read in Jer. xxxii. 6-15, that the prophet, during the siege, bought a piece of land on which the Chaldean army were encamped, showing his perfect faith in the word of God which he preached, and in the promise of a return. The deeds were written on clay as in Nineveh at that time. "Jeremiah's deed of purchase, moreover, was preserved in a jar, like the numerous clay deeds of the Egibi banking-firm, which existed at Babylon from the age of Nebuchadnezzar to that of Xerxes. These jars served the purpose of our modern safes." The whole transaction was striking at such a time. We extol the patriotism of the Roman, who bought at its full price the land on which Hannibal's camp was pitched outside the gates of Rome, but it was even nobler, in the son of a feeble race like the Jews, to buy a field at the moment in the hands of a mighty power like Babylon, knowing, as he did, that before the purchase could be of value, his people must expiate their sins by captivity for two generations in a far distant land.

(VII.) A SPASM OF REPENTANCE. In Jer. xxxiv. we have an account of a brief and false repentance of the leaders in Jerusalem. Contrary to the Jewish law they had held their own countrymen in perpetual slavery. Now, in the agony of the attack they set them free. But during the siege, Nebuchadnezzar called away a part of his army to meet the invasion of Pharaoh Hophra of Egypt. The Jews thought that their trouble was ended, and immediately repented of their repentance, and re-enslaved those set free. Thus false was even the repentance of these Jews.

(VIII.) THE SEVERITY OF THE SIEGE. Famine within the walls aided the besiegers without, and it was speedily followed, as is always the case, with an outbreak of pestilence. Mothers were driven to murder and eat their children. The richest citizens, even ladies in their magnificent crimson robes, wandered about searching for scraps in the dunghills (Lam. iv. 5-10). The houses were full of the sick and wounded; bloody fights between contending parties, as to surrendering or holding out, crowded the streets with fresh horrors; the roar of the siege night and day filled the air.

(IX.) DURATION OF THE SIEGE. 2. Besieged unto the eleventh year. The siege continued almost exactly a year and a half. 3. Ninth day of the fourth month. The siege ended about July 1. There was no bread. The end had come. They could hold out no longer.

IV. JERUSALEM TAKEN.—FATE OF ITS KING.—Vers. 4-7. 4. The city broken up. A breach was made in the walls, and the city was entered at midnight. The entrance was effected by the northern gate. The upper city and temple were not entered till a month later (Ver. 8). And all the men of war fled. And King Zedekiah with them (Jer. xxxix. 4).

5. And the army of the Chaldees. As the Chaldeans were encamped around the city, the flight was immediately discovered. Overtook him. Both Jeremiah (xxxviii. 23) and Ezekiel (xii. 13) had prophesied this capture.

6. Brought him up to the King of Babylon, and they gave judgment upon him, i. e., brought him to trial as a common criminal, not as a king. He had violated his oath (Ezek. xiii. 19; 2 Chron. xxxvi. 13).

7. Slew the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes. The punishment of Zedekiah was doubly cruel; first, his being made to witness the execution of his own sons, and then his being deprived of sight, so that the last scenes impressed upon him would be the death agonies of his children. According to Jer. lii. 10. and xxxvi. 6, all the nobles of Judah who had fled with the king, were also slain before his eyes. Put out the eyes of Zedekiah. Blinding has long been a common oriental punishment.

In Persia, during the time of the younger Cyrus, men deprived of their sight were a common spectacle along the highway. This penalty is still inflicted by the Persians on princes who are declared to have forfeited their right to the throne. Bound him with fetters of brass. The Assyrians' captives are usually represented as bound hand and foot,—the two hands secured by one chain, the two feet by another. There is in the British Museum a pair of bronze fetters, brought from Nineveh, which weigh eight pounds eleven ounces, and measure sixteen and a half inches in length. These probably resemble the fetters put on Zedekiah. The rings which enclose the ankles are thinner than the other part, so that they could be hammered smaller after the feet had passed through them. And carried him to Babylon. According to Jewish tradition Zedekiah was, like other slaves, forced to work in a mill at Babylon. Jeremiah tells us that he was kept in prison till he died (lii. 11).

Thus were reconciled in a very remarkable way prophecies, apparently contradictory, which had been made concerning him. Jeremiah had prophesied distinctly that he would be carried to Babylon (Jer. xxxii. 5; xxxiv. 3). Ezekiel had said that he should not "see Babylon" (xii. 13). His deprivation of sight before he was carried to the conqueror's capital fulfilled the predictions of both prophets. The punishment pronounced upon Zedekiah was the merited reward of the breach of his oath, and his hardening himself against the counsel of the Lord which was announced to him by Jeremiah.

V. DESTRUCTION OF THE CITY AND THE TEMPLE.—Vers. 8-10. 8. And in the fifth month on the seventh day of the month. Instead of the seventh day we have the tenth in Jer. lii. 12. This difference might be reconciled on the assumption that the burning of the city lasted several days, commencing on the seventh and ending on the tenth. There was a month's delay after the capture of the city before its destruction.

9. He burnt the house of the Lord. Compare the prophecies of Jeremiah (xxi. 10; xxxiv. 2; xxxviii. 18-23). The temple, the palace, the houses of the nobles, were deliberately set on fire. The very bones and framework of Jerusalem appeared to be wrapped in flames. The walls and gates seemed to lament and cry, as they sunk into the earth. The sepulchres, even the consecrated catacombs of the kings, were opened and the bodies thrown out to the vultures and beasts of prey, which flocked to their frightful feast outside the walls. Jackals wandered even over the sacred hill of Zion. Some of the princes were hung up by their hands on the temple walls; others were carried off to execution at Riblah. The havoc and carnage in the streets were such that passers-by avoided everyone they met, lest they should be defiled by their bloody touch. Age and youth, men and women, alike fell victims to the passions or cruelty of the conqueror.

VI. THE CAPTIVITY.—Vers. 11-12. 11. Three classes of captives are described: (1) The rest of the people that were left in the city. Perhaps the 832 mentioned in Jer. lii. 29. (2) And the fugitives. Those who had deserted to the enemy during the siege, to escape starvation, or in hopes of kinder treatment. (3) The remnant of the multitude, i. e., of the population of the land outside of the city. The bulk of the wealth and of the most important of the inhabitants of Jerusalem had been carried to Babylon on the two former captures of Jerusalem, 12 years and 18 years before.

12. The poor of the land. These had now some compensation for their poverty. They had been oppressed by the rich and great, as Jeremiah tells us; and now their oppressors are ruined captives, and the poor have full opportunity in the country. Among those who remained was the prophet Jeremiah.

VII. LAMENTATIONS.—Jeremiah's book of Lamentations consists of five poems or dirges, written about this captivity. They are read every year on the 9th of Ab (July) by the Jews, especially at Jerusalem, in the "Wailing Place" of the Jews.

LESSONS.—We see here an illustration of the justice of God. It is slow but sure. The wicked cannot go unpunished.

But God's justice is tempered ever with mercy and love. The punishment comes slowly at first, in smaller measures, in order to give opportunity for repentance. It is accompanied by earnest warning and entreaties. It is intended to save men from sin. If individuals persist in going on in sin, and receiving their final doom, yet the punishment will aid in making the world, as a whole, better. There is, therefore, because God is love, no escape except by repenting and forsaking sin. But God is always waiting to confer the blessings he loves to bestow, as soon as men are fitted to receive them.

We see God's wise providence over men,—giving them their free will, and yet controlling the results.

We see that the way of transgressors is hard. On account of the sorrows and troubles in the way. Because the transgressor must trample on the love and goodness of God, and resist all the influences God puts in his way to keep him from sin and death.

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