

The Sunday-School.

THIRD QUARTER,
LESSON IV.—July 24.

JEHOSHAPHAT'S REFORM.

2 CHRONICLES 19:1-11.

THE LESSON.—The history of Jehoshaphat's eventful reign, found in 2 Chron. 17-20, and the closely parallel passage, 1 Kings, 22.

GOLDEN TEXT.—*Deal courageously, and the Lord shall be with the good.* 2 Chron. 19:11.

Learn by heart Vs. 4-6; Psa. 118:8, 14; 2 Cor. 6:14-17.

HISTORICAL SETTING.—Time. — Jehoshaphat's reign of twenty-five years began 914 B. C. (common chronology) or 875 B. C. (revised chronology). The events of our lesson occurred after he had been reigning about twenty years.

Place.—The battle against the Syrians took place at Ramoth-Gilead, to the east of the Jordan; the "hallelujah victory" near Tekoa, south of Bethlehem.

Rulers.—Jehoshaphat's contemporaries in the northern kingdom were Ahab, Ahaziah and Jehoram. Ben-hadad II (Hadadezer) was king of Syria.

Prophets.—In Israel, Elijah, Micaiah, Jehu; in Judah, Jahaziel.

Place in the History.—Following Asa's successful reign, Jehoshaphat still further exalts the southern kingdom, in internal purity, and in power against external foes.

JEHOSHAPHAT'S SIN.—2 Chron. 18:1-17. Our lesson is the reign of Jehoshaphat, king of Judah.

His parents were Asa, the good king, and Azubah.

His age at his accession was thirty-five years, and he reigned for twenty-five years.

His character was pious, prudent enterprising.

His reign was among the best and most prosperous in all Judah's existence.

JEHOSHAPHAT'S SIN.—2 Chron. 18:1-34; 19:1-3. When Jehoshaphat was at the height of his prosperity and power, he committed his great sin by marrying his son Jehoram to Athaliah, daughter of Ahab, the wicked king of Israel, and of Jezebel, his still more wicked and idolatrous wife. This heathen marriage was the cause of numberless woes to Judah.

The misfortune that followed most closely, however, came from Jehoshaphat's consent to join Ahab, in winning back Ramoth-Gilead from the king of Syria. Ahab consulted 400 prophets, who foretold a successful issue. Jehoshaphat insisted upon Ahab's consulting Micaiah, a true prophet of Jehovah. Micaiah foretold that the expedition would end in Ahab's death and disaster to Israel. Making light of this solemn warning, Ahab went up against Ramoth-Gilead, Jehoshaphat accompanying him with the forces of Judah. The result was the utter defeat of the allies, the death of Ahab, and Jehoshaphat's bare escape with his life.

Jehoshaphat . . . returned from the lost battle at Ramoth-Gilead in peace. Jehu, a prophet who predicted the downfall and destruction of the dynasty of Baasha. The son of Hanani, the prophet who had rebuked Asa. Went out to meet him. The monarch was thus rebuked at the earliest moment, and in

the most effective way. *Shouldest thou help the ungodly?* The prophet truly considered that God would never bless an alliance with idolatry. *Therefore is wrath upon thee.* Showing itself in an inglorious return home. Jehoshaphat did not live to see the ultimate issues of massacre and depotism which came in the train of his son Jehoram's marriage.

Nevertheless, good things found in thee. These were a rule, whose climax was the removal of the chief temptation to idolatry, the groves of Asheroth, shrines sacred to the licentious worship of the Phœnician Venus; and a pure, personal life, the king's heart being prepared to seek God through study of Scriptures, prayer and meditation.

Lessons from Jehoshaphat's Sin.—1. It sprang from his "helping the ungodly." The Christian may associate with sinners as Christ did, to help them, but not for his personal advantage, and certainly not to help them do wrong.

2. Men find it easy to invent plausible excuses for sin, but God always considers only one thing, the heart within.

3. Though God loves the sinner, he hates the sin.

4. God always punishes sin. If you thrust your hand into the fire, nothing can prevent its being burned.

5. But God's mercy always tempers his justice.

JEHOSHAPHAT'S REPENTANCE AND REFORM. Vs. 4-11. He showed his repentance by practical reformations. Three steps in the reformations are to be noted.

FIRST, *Avoidance of the Sin.* And Jehoshaphat dwelt at Jerusalem. He minded his own business at home, and would not expose himself by making any more such visits as he had made to Ahab.

SECOND, *Personal Labors, the Religious Reform.* He went out again. He emphasized his repentance by going himself. From Beer-sheba, a city on its southern frontier, to mount Ephraim, the hill country of Ephraim. And brought them back, in some cases from the worship of idols, and in other cases from carelessness regarding Jehovah, unto the Lord God of their fathers. The God who had done so much for their fathers was ready to do as much for them.

THIRD, *Setting Others at Work, the Judicial Reform.* No man does his whole duty, however zealous he is personally, until so far as he can he sets others at work for God. And he set judges in the land. What exact change Jehoshaphat made in the judicial system of Judah, it is impossible to determine. Probably he found corruption widely spread, and the magistrates tainted with the prevailing idolatry. He therefore made a fresh appointment of judges. The fenced cities, the walled cities. In these leading towns the chief courts were established.

Jehoshaphat's charge to the judges consists of five particulars.

First, *Be Cautious.* Take heed what ye do. Judges, of all men, must think before they speak.

Second, *Act as in God's Presence.* The Lord, who is with you in the judgment, to note what you do, to help you judge aright, to call you to account. Not for man, but for the Lord there is no more steady and inspiring thought than the consciousness of God's presence.

Third, *Fear God.* The fear of the Lord is "the beginning of wisdom." This is not a cowardly dread, but a wholesome sense of God's just requirements and the terrors of his offended law.

Fourth, *Be Pure.* For there is no iniquity with the Lord. Any sin, like drunkenness or licentiousness, affects the mental balance, and prevents the judgment.

Fifth, *Be Impartial,* both toward the lowly, for there is no respect of persons with God, no regard for worldly rank; and also toward the poor, refraining from the taking of gifts, that is, bribes, either directly or indirectly—an especial danger of office-holders.

The Supreme Court. In Jerusalem, the capital, and under the king's eye, Jehoshaphat sat up a court of final appeal, to which the most difficult cases might be carried. (1) Levites who were not priests, (2) priests who were generally, if not always, Levites, and (3) the chief of the fathers of Israel. Each Israelite was head of his own family; these family heads made up the "fathers' houses" or clans, and the heads of these clans sat in the great court at Jerusalem. The judges were to consider two classes of cases: (1) the judgment of the Lord, matters regarding which some decision could be found in the Law of the Lord, i. e., the Pentateuch, and (2) controversies, ordinary civil suits, decided by the unwritten laws of custom and equity. When they returned to Jerusalem. And they returned.

In the fear, reverential law. A perfect heart. With integrity. And what cause soever shall come . . . cities between blood and blood. To decide between one kind of blood-shedding and another, i. e., between manslaughter and murder. Between law and commandment, statutes and judgments. To decide what particular ordinance applies to a particular case. Ye shall even warn them. Add admonitions to judicial decisions. Trespass not against the Lord. The judges were to remind all litigants and criminals that offenses were against Jehovah, and not merely against men. And so wrath come upon the entire nation, judges and people. Not trespass. Not be guilty. Amariah, the chief priest. The high priest. Matters of the Lord. To hear such cases, Amariah would preside over the court, as being especially conversant. Zebadiah, Ruler of the house of Judah. The tribal head, was evidently most suitable to preside over the king's matters, i. e., civil or criminal cases. The Levites shall be officers. He meant to assign to Levites, other than the judges, all the subordinate officers about the court. Before you. Waiting to carry out your orders. Deal courageously. Judge manfully and fearlessly. The Lord shall be with the good. That is, with the good judges.

Jehoshaphat's Repentance. 1. It was humble. He did not argue the case, and attempt to show that he was not so bad.

2. It was prompt. He made at once what amends he could.

3. It was thorough, going to the central cause of the sin, the religious laxity of king and nation.

4. It was personal. Jehoshaphat in person made a campaign for God.

5. It was influential. It did not stop with himself, but brought forth fruit also in the reformation of others.

6. In all this it was a model for us.

7. Finally, it was rewarded by a restoration to God's favor.

JEHOSHAPHAT'S RESTORATION TO GOD'S FAVOR.—2 Chron. 20. The sincerity of

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Jehoshaphat's repentance was soon tested. News came of the approach of a vast army of Moabites, Ammonites and Meunim. Jehoshaphat proclaimed a fast, and assembled the people. Standing before them in one of the courts of the temple, he prayed the most noteworthy prayer recorded of any king since Solomon, beseeching Jehovah to come to the aid of his people.

The answer came from an unexpected source. Jahaziel, a Levite, burst out in an inspired prophecy. "Ye shall not need to fight," he declared. "Stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord."

Accordingly, "early in the morning," Jehoshaphat and his people moved southward, not in battle array, but in solemn procession, with singers in the van chanting "Praise the Lord; for his mercy endureth forever."

In the wilderness of Tekoa, about ten miles south of Jerusalem, they came upon a terrible sight. An ambush, either of angels or of Jehoshaphat's own picked men, had sprung upon the invaders, and had thrown them into a wild confusion. The unorganized tribes, among whom there existed feuds, turned their hands against one another. In this savage struggle multitudes of them perished, so that Jehoshaphat's army had only to collect the enormous spoil of rich accoutrements. Before returning, however, they met in the Valley of Blessing (Beracah), and held a great thanksgiving service. "So the realm of Jehoshaphat was quiet: for his God gave him rest round about."

THE HEART OF THE LESSON.

The central teaching of the lesson is the great truth that, when we repent, God freely forgives us. Jehoshaphat teaches us that—

1. We need to watch against sin even more in prosperity than in adversity.
2. Human goodness is no guarantee against sin.
3. Sin is always punished.
4. God in his kindness is prompt and stern in rebuking sin.
5. God requires us to "bring forth fruit worthy of repentance."
6. It is only in Divine strength that we can reform.
7. Christ's forgiveness and help are always ready for the repentant sinner.

The attractiveness of heaven depends on the treasure we have there.