

Sabbath School Department.

International Bible Lessons.

Lesson III. January 19.

THE MISSION OF NEHEMIAH.

Neh. II. 1-8.

GOLDEN TEXT.—"The God of heaven, he will prosper us, therefore we his servants will arise and build."—Neh. II. 20.

Time, B. C. 445. About 12 years after the close of the Book of Ezra, 70 years after the dedication and 91 years after the first return from captivity. The events of the Book of Esther occurred during the interval between the dedication of the second temple and the mission of Nehemiah.

Place, Persia, Shushan (250 miles south-east of Babylon.)

Book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah himself was doubtless the author of most of the book. From the beginning as far as ch. vii. 6, and from ch. xii. 27 to the end the authorship is evidently Nehemiah's, but the middle part is perhaps by another hand. This can only be proved however of some few verses (chap. xii. 11, 22, 23,) where the lists of priests and Levites are carried down a century later than the time of Nehemiah. The main history of the book covers a period of twelve years, extending to the 110th year after the captivity. The book furnishes the latest canonical records of the Old Testament history.

Nehemiah. He was a man of noble and lofty character. He leaves the splendor of a court for toil and hardship among his own poor people. A more selfish man could have given plausible reasons for remaining beside the king. But he goes to the work of the Lord, and by his zeal and patience and generosity, incited other workers to great deeds. He seems to have felt God near him all the time, and is constantly making appeals to him. These pious ejaculations are a peculiar feature of his book. Nehemiah's character appears to us without blemish. This Nehemiah must be carefully distinguished from two other persons of the same name, mentioned once in Ezra ii. 2, and Neh. vii. 7, and the other in Neh. iii. 16.

Connection.

The last lesson closes with the dedication of the temple, in Ezra vi. The next chapter, Ezra vii., gives an account of Ezra's caravan, which set out for Jerusalem nearly sixty years afterwards. (The Book of Esther contains the only biblical record of events transpiring within that long interval.) After giving an account of the reforms Ezra wrought, his book closes abruptly, though we hear again of Ezra in the book of Nehemiah viii. 1. In the meantime the Jews in and around Jerusalem seem to have become disheartened. The wall of the city was not rebuilt nor the gates set up, and Nehemiah heard from Hanani and others what was the state of things. His heart was deeply touched and he desired to go to his people, but it was four months before he had a favorable opportunity of obtaining permission from the king. The permission was freely granted, when asked, and this Nehemiah ascribes directly to "the good hand" of his God.

Exposition.

1. Nisan. First month of Jewish year, the month they left Egypt, the month of the Passover, our March. Twentieth year etc., B. C. 445, seventy years since the last lesson. Artaxerxes surnamed Longimanus (long handed), so called says Plutarch, because his right hand was longer than his left. He was the son of the famous Xerxes, the invader of Greece. Began to reign B. C. 463, died B. C. 425. In his reign Persia was at the height of its splendour and power. I took up the wine. Nehemiah was the king's cup bearer. In ancient Eastern monarchies this was one of the highest offices under the king, and the person holding it had great influence, owing to his being so frequently in the king's presence, and there was no office, civil or military, to which he might not aspire. Solomon had cup-bearers, I Kings x. 5. Sad in the king's presence. In the Persian court this was a capital crime; there all must appear happy, and to appear sad was like saying that the king had no power to make happy. Nehemiah knew this well enough, but his anxiety about Jerusalem was so great that he could not help showing it.

2. Sore afraid. "A Persian subject was expected to be perfectly contented so long as he had the happiness of being in the presence of his king. Both Darius and Xerxes had put persons to death for unwillingness to accompany them on expeditions. A request to quit the court was thus a serious matter." Nehemiah was about to present such a request, and it would have been nothing strange if the king had at once commanded him to be put to death for doing so. In reading such accounts we must always remember how absolute the authority of Eastern monarchs was, and indeed still is. They had no parliaments, the people had no voice in their government, as with us. The king's command was the only law and had to be obeyed. And generally the king's commands were the results of his whims and passions. Take this for an illustration. When the Shah of Persia was in England a few years ago, one day he wanted the Prince of Wales to command that some one be hanged so that he could see how they executed criminals in England. He was quite surprised when the Prince told him that he could not do such a thing. No wonder that Nehemiah was "very sore afraid."

3. Let the king etc. The form used in addressing an eastern king. We would say, "May it please your majesty." See I Kings i. 31; Dan. ii. 4; v. 10; vi. 6-21. Why should not my countenance be sad etc. Was there ever a finer exhibition of patriotism? Nehemiah was in a high position and had the best prospect for further honor and preferment, he was in the midst of the luxuries of a Persian Court. To make request to leave that court was perhaps to risk his life, yet his love for his country rises

above all these considerations and expresses itself in the sublime words of this verse.

4. For what dost thou etc. The king takes it for granted that Nehemiah has a request to make. So I prayed etc. "A straw shows how the wind blows." This little sentence thrown in here so artlessly, reveals to us the whole religious character of Nehemiah. God is not to him an empty name, or a collection of laws, or blind fate, or unintelligent force, or some being far away; but a real, living, personal God, near at hand, the hearer of prayer, the helper of his people, and Nehemiah knows God so well and is so accustomed to commune with him, that, before making his request the most natural thing for him to do is just to ask God "mentally and momentarily" to help and guide him. With what ease and freedom he speaks to God, and how much this reveals of his daily, habitual walk with God.

5. He was ready to leave the ease and honor of his present position for a mission of toil, and discomfort and hardship. He was a true patriot, a noble soul, and no doubt his prayer to God had now composed his mind and filled him with confidence.

The queen etc. "Though the Persian kings practiced polygamy, they had always one chief wife, who alone was recognized as "queen."—Cook. So it pleased the king. It is worthy of notice how all these Jewish captives who rose to honor in the land of their captivity, seem to have won the good-will of their sovereigns. Was not this because they feared God and therefore always proved themselves trustworthy men? I set him a time. "Nehemiah appears to have stayed at Jerusalem twelve years from his first arrival, but he can scarcely have mentioned so long a time to the king. Probably his leave of absence was extended from time to time."—Cook.

7. Governors beyond the river. "The satraps and other inferior officers on the tract west of the Euphrates."—Cook. Let letters be given me. Having these letters from the king no one would dare interfere with his journey, nor would he have any difficulty in procuring supplies by the way.

8. Read "park" for "forest." "The Persians meant by this word a walled enclosure ornamented with trees, either planted or of natural growth and containing numerous wild animals."—Cook. This park must have been near to Jerusalem. Under the Persian rule the forests of Palestine were guarded with great care, a regular warden being appointed, without whose sanction no tree could be felled. The palace which appertained to the house. "The reference is supposed to be to the fortress of Antonio, at the north side of the temple area. Some however suppose it to refer to the old palace of Solomon and the kings after him, which Nehemiah wished to rebuild."—Peloubet. The house that I shall enter into, i. e. "My own dwelling house."—Cook. The good hand of my God upon me. The use of this phrase in a good sense is rare elsewhere, but is a favorite one with Ezra and Nehemiah, Ezra vii. 9, 28; viii. 18, 22, 31; Neh. ii. 8, 18. It signifies the guiding and sustaining help of God, whereby things go well with those that love and serve him."—Cook. See Ps. xxxiv. 18-22.

Remarks.

- 1. Nisan was the name given by the Persian Jews to this month; it was previously called Abib, Exod. xiii. 4.
2. The cup-bearer used to taste the wine before presenting it to the king to prove that it was unpoisoned.
3. What an inestimable blessing it is that we live not under such despots as those of old Eastern countries, but in the midst of freedom, social, political, religious. There is not a country under the sun more highly favored in this respect than Canada. We do not begin to realize how much we have to be thankful to God for, in that we are Canadians of the 19th century. Let love of Canada increase. One should love his country as well as his family. Nehemiah sets us a good example in this.
4. God can and will hear your prayer at any time, in any place, even if the prayer is only in your mind without rising to your lips, and if you can only say, "Lord help us." God knows all and your cry will not go unheard. So accustom yourself to God's nearness as to feel at home in his presence.
5. God's good hand is upon us more than we think. These O. T. heroes attributed everything to God.

Religion Essential in Education.

Many who reprobate the narrowness of traditional faith fall into the complementary error of pronouncing all faith unnatural or irrational. A broader and a deeper view of things would show the inevitableness of religious faith. It would enlarge their conception of education till it would embrace the nurture and development of the whole constitution of man. Schools are not for the sharpening of intellect alone; nor for moral and religious training alone; nor for exclusive instruction in handicraft. Hands, head and heart—emotions, will and taste—all have righteous demands on the services of education. Religion has as valid rights in schools as logic has, and sacred texts can no more be banished from human regard than the rule of honesty, or the multiplication table. What man is—what man must respect—what man needs to make him satisfied and useful—these education must regard; in these education must give him furniture, and valor, and strength.—Prof. Winchell.

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