

Sabbath School Department.
(From the Christian Helper.)
International Bible Lessons.
Lesson IV. January 26.
THE BUILDER INTERRUPTED.
Neh. iv. 7-18.

GOLDEN TEXT.—“Nevertheless we made our prayer unto our God, and set a watch against them day and night, because of them.”—Neh. iv. 9.

Connection.
King Artaxerxes having heard Nehemiah's request, (ch. ii. 5-8) gave him leave of absence “for a set time,” and furnished him with letters to the keeper of the king's forest and to the governors beyond the river. He also sent an escort with him—captains of the army and horsemen. Either he must have provided Nehemiah liberally with money for this expedition, or else Nehemiah must have had large possessions of his own; for we read that Nehemiah not only did not accept the governor's salary but he provided daily for one hundred and fifty of the people at his table, and that there were frequent additions to this number, Neh. v. 14-18. It was most likely the private fortune of Nehemiah that was taxed for this outlay. After receiving his commission, Nehemiah hastened to Jerusalem, a distance of a thousand miles from Susa or Shushan, the Persian capital. This journey probably occupied four months (Ezra vii. 9). It grieved exceedingly the enemies of Jerusalem that a man of such consequence should come to seek her welfare. After establishing himself at Jerusalem, Nehemiah began his work in earnest. It is pathetic to read of his sad and lonesome midnight rides about the dejected city, as he went to view the broken down walls and the gates consumed by fire. He did not however gather discouragement from the sight, but only felt the greater ardour for the task before him. He at once summoned the chief men of the city, and proposed his plans to them with so much evident faith in God and the means God had given them to perform the work, that they caught his ardour, and exclaimed, “Let us rise up and build.” And they went at the work with such energy and system that they finished it in fifty-two days (Ch. vi. 15.) They were not unmolested in their work. Sanballat, and his people first contented themselves with deriding the Jews, and Tobiah his servant, mockingly said that a fox would break down their stone wall. This witty remark may have caused a laugh among the enemies of the Jews, but like most of the sarcasm hurled against God's work in the world, it neither hurt or hindered the object aimed at, and it proved the folly of the speaker. The work went on “for the people had a mind to work,” and when at last “the wall was joined together unto the half thereof,” Sanballat and the rest began to take active measures. It is to the interruption—a very brief one—effected by them, and to Nehemiah's energetic measures of defence that our lesson relates.

Exposition.
V. 7. *Sanballat was probably satrap or pacha of Samaria. He was a Moabite of Horonaim. Tobiah is a Jewish name. He was servant, or slave, of Sanballat. He may have been a renegade Jew. These two, after their hostile efforts failed, adopted a different policy, and tried to corrupt the Jews by giving them their daughters in marriage. (Neh. xiii. 4 and 28.) For this vile Tobiah, a chamber was even prepared in the courts of the Lord's house. These things grieved Nehemiah sorely, and he “cast forth all the household stuff of Tobiah out of the chamber,” and eluded from him the son of Joiada, who had married Sanballat's daughter. Arabians, probably those settled in Samaria, Ammonites, children of Ammon, Ashdodites, Philistines from Azotus or Ashdod. All these people were subject to Persia, and could not, as nations, make war upon the Jews who were also Persian subjects. Sanballat may have had a guard composed of stragglers from these nations, and its attack upon Jerusalem may have seemed to the Persian court to be connected with some insignificant quarrel, and therefore unworthy of notice.*

V. 8. *This motley band of people had no very dignified object in view. They came not to avenge some wrong done them, not to conquer a territory, but simply to hinder the work that was going on, without having any idea of the importance of the work they were going to hinder.*

V. 9. *Very characteristic of Nehemiah. He not only “set a watch against them day and night,” but he says “We made our prayer unto our God.” He not only prayed but he set the watch too. He believes that God can and will protect them, yet he works as if all depended upon his own efforts. Prayer strengthens the hands for that toil which works out the answer to prayer.*

V. 10. *And Judah said. The provincial Jews are very likely meant. They were much discouraged. V. 11. And our adversaries say, “They shall not know.” They had some secret plot formed to surprise the Jews.*

V. 12. *A very difficult passage. Perhaps Bertheaux rendering of it is the clearest: “They said unto us ten times from all the places (from which they came) that you must return to us.” That is, the Jews from the different places, Jericho, Gideon, etc., that had sent up men to work on the walls, came and said over and over again to these men, “You must come home, it is of no use to try this work any longer.”*

V. 13. *We are now told Nehemiah's plan to foil his enemies, and in it we see displayed the same courage, wisdom and reliance upon God which marked Nehemiah throughout. There was to be no further cessation of the work. Nehemiah promptly organized the workmen into a body of militia, and disposed them in the best possible manner. In the lower places, that is, where the wall was yet low, and on the high places, this should be in the bare or exposed places, he set the strongest guard.*

V. 14. *Nehemiah cheered the hearts of the people, reminding them of God, great and terrible, who was on their side, and appealing*

to them by every tender tie that bound them, “fight for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your wives, and your houses.”

V. 15. *Every one unto his work.* Every man was again at his post, with his implements of labour, and his weapons beside him. The work was again in steady progress, as it could not be, unless every man was at his post.

V. 16. *Half of my servants.* “Probably a special band of men attached to his person, either by the order of the king of Persia, or the people at Jerusalem.”—Crosby. Habergons, old name for coats of mail: “Coats of mail were common in Assyria from the ninth century.—Cook.

V. 17. *Evidently means that every man was both a builder and a soldier, not that each man actually carried a weapon in one hand. This appears from v. 18 which says, “Every man had his sword girded by his side, and so builded.” The trumpeter stood by Nehemiah ready to sound the rally, as the workers were scattered in a large circuit.*

When all these arrangements were made, the enemies of Jerusalem seem to have withdrawn, at least they did not venture upon active hostilities. And so the work was completed. Nehemiah from first to last was the very soul of the undertaking, planning, admonishing, inspiring, organizing, setting an example all the time of self-denial and zeal. So absorbed was he in his mission that he did not change his raiment night or day, save only when cleanliness or ceremonial purification required it; and many were wrought on by his example to similar zeal and self-sacrifice in the work. “Such was the nobler side of that gallant undertaking in which were fulfilled the passionate longings of the exiles throughout their whole stay in Babylon ‘that the walls of Jerusalem should be built.’”—Stanley.

Practical.

1. Seldom has a more discouraging enterprise been attempted; yet what difficulties could not be surmounted by the same means—constant, self-denying, zealous labour, combined with calm, unwavering, prayerful trust in God.
2. Expect opposition, when you begin any good thing. Prepare to meet it, for it will come as sure as the work is a good work and this is an evil world.
3. Keep up heart as long as there is one promise to cheer you, one foothold for hope, and encourage others in the good cause. Often all that is needed to insure success are a few bright, hopeful words, an example of bold faith, a contagious zeal.
4. Let us be sure we have chosen the Lord's side in every contest, and then if God is for us who can be against us?
5. We must not give up the Lord's work to go searching for our enemies, but be prepared always to meet them. Be clothed with the whole armour of God, and then go calmly on with the work, humble or high, that we have been given to do.

Nearer and Nearer.

This is my birthday: I am sixty-two. It seems but a few days, as it were, since I was sixty-one. These birthdays—these milestones along the journey of life—that mark my progress onward, are seemingly passed with an increasing rapidity. It is sometimes alarming to think how few must remain, and how soon they will all be passed, and I shall be ushered into the world of the unseen and eternal.

I sometimes am startled to think how soon I shall be amidst these great realities of which I have heard and read and thought so much. Soon will they be present realities with me—objects of sight and no longer objects of faith. I shall gaze face to face on eternal scenes. And I shall know, even as I am known.

And, if I am prepared, as through abounding grace I hope I am, why should I shrink back? Why should I desire to block the rapidly revolving wheels of time? They are speeding me onward to my eternal home in the skies. They are bringing me nearer and nearer to my glorious Saviour. They are hastening my companionship with holy angels and the spirits of just men made perfect in heaven. The more rapidly I am borne onward the sooner I shall be done with sorrows, temptations and trials, and be an inhabitant of that city where “they shall hunger no more, neither shall they thirst any more; neither shall the sun light upon them, nor any heat. For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of water; and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.” Welcome then the flight of time!

“Ye wheels of nature speed your course!
Ye mortal powers decay;
Fast as ye bring the night of death,
Ye bring eternal day.”

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