



THE CAPTIVITY AND RETURN

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INTRODUCTION

When Israel broke the covenant God had so recently made with them by making and worshipping the golden calf, God threatened to exterminate them. Only Moses' intercession spared them. Then God made a secondary covenant with Israel. It was greatly inferior to the original covenant. God promised, in this alternate covenant, to give the land of Canaan, to Israel, if they would obey His commandments and keep His sabbaths and holy days. Israel failed to keep their part of this covenant also. The result was that God allowed the king of Babylon to defeat them and carry away many of the inhabitants into captivity. The prophets of the Lord, especially Isaiah and Jeremiah also foretold of the release of Israel from captivity and of their return and rebuilding of the temple and also the city of Jerusalem. Isaiah even named the Persian king who would order the return from exile and the rebuilding of the temple at Jerusalem. There are many practical lessons for us in these stories, and the history is full of fulfilled prophecies and coming types of Christ and His heavenly temple.

These lessons were written for the Emmanuel Pentecostal Sunday School by the pastor, Robert D. Kalis. This is the fifteenth in a series of twenty quarterlies (5 years) covering the greater part of the historical portion of the Bible. Now available are:

The Men and Women of Genesis	Captivity and Return
Lessons From Exodus	The Miracles of Jesus
Wilderness Examples	The Parables of Jesus
Possessing the Land of Promise	The Personal Ministry of Jesus
The Days of the Judges	We Beheld His Glory (John-I)
Israel's Early Kings	Full of Grace & Truth (John-II)
Lessons From the Kings	
Matthew: The King and His Kingdom-I & II	

DANIEL AND HIS FRIENDS IN CAPTIVITY

Read: II Kings 23:31-37, 24 & 25
II Chron.36; Daniel 1 & 2

Memory Work: I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust. Psalm 91:2

What we should learn from this Lesson

- 1. There comes a day of judgment when punishment cannot be averted.*
- 2. God will always have some young people who rise above peer pressure and put pleasing God first.*
- 3. When we honor God and seek first His way in our lives, He honors us and adds blessings and honor to our lives.*
- 4. All the wisdom of God is available to us through fellowship with Jesus and we may ask for and receive all that we need daily.*

I For the Sins of Manasseh: Josiah made the unfortunate and presumptuous mistake of interfering with Pharaoh-Necho in his war with Assyria. Egypt and Assyria were engaged in mortal combat for the supremacy of western Asia. Poor Josiah lost his life because of his interference. The people of Judah made Jehoahaz, a younger son of Josiah, king in his place. But Pharaoh-necho would not allow him to reign. After only three months, the king of Egypt took Jehoahaz away as a captive and made his older brother Eliakim king over Judah. He changed the new king's name to Jehoiakim and forced him to pay a heavy tribute to Egypt. So in those days Judah had only a vassal king who served Egypt. Jehoahaz died in Egypt.

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim, Nebuchadnezzar, the son of Nabopolassar, defeated Necho at Carchemish on the banks of the river Euphrates (Jer.46:2). Egypt was forced to abandon its interests in western Asia, including Judah, but

Nebuchadnezzar took up where Necho had left off. He went at once to Jerusalem and Jehoiakim surrendered to him quickly. Nebuchadnezzar took the young sons of the princes of Judah as hostages. In this way he hoped to guarantee their submission to his rule. Daniel and his three friends were among those taken as hostages at this time.

The wrath of God was vented upon Jerusalem and Judah at this time. Jehoiakim did evil in the sight of the Lord. He revolted from Nebuchadnezzar. He cut and burned the Word of the Lord on the scroll of Jeremiah and the Lord stirred up enemies all around that attacked and plundered Judah and Jerusalem. All this came upon them particularly because of the sins of Manasseh and because of the innocent blood which he shed in Jerusalem. The Lord would not pardon these excesses any longer and He determined that Judah would be held as captives in the land of Babylon for 70 years (Jer.25:11-12).

When Jehoiachin succeeded his father, Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem again and took the king and many others including Ezekiel and Mordecai, captive to Babylon. The treasures of the Lord's house and the treasures of the king's house and the vessels of gold which Solomon had made for the temple were all taken away at that time to Babylon. This fulfilled precisely the word of prophecy given by Isaiah to Hezekiah when he had proudly showed off his riches and glory to the ambassadors from Babylon 113 years before (see II Kings 20:16-18).

Mattaniah, the uncle of Jehoiachin and brother of Jehoiakim, was made ruler and his name changed to Zedekiah. After 9 years, and contrary to the word of the Lord by Jeremiah, Zedekiah rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar. The king of Babylon besieged Jerusalem for the third time. Jerusalem withstood the siege for 18 months until famine raged. Finally, the wall was broken through, Zedekiah was taken. His sons were slain before his eyes. Then he was blinded and bound in fetters and taken to Babylon according to the prophecy of Ezekiel (see Ezek.12:13). Nebuchadnezzar, angered by the rebellion of Jerusalem and the long siege, burned the city and destroyed the magnificent temple. For the third time, he carried away the inhabitants, leaving only the poorest of the people to dress the vines and till the ground. Thus the judgment of God came at last upon the nation of Judah for their sins and disobedience.

II Daniel's Purpose: Eastern custom was to render the king's

servants and advisers impotent and thus avoid scandals among the king's wives and harem. So Daniel and his friends, no doubt, were made eunuchs (Dan.1:3,7,8,9 & 11). Daniel was from the royal family of Judah (vs.3), and was a promising bright and handsome young man. His age was probably about 14 when he was taken. No doubt, he came from a devout family and the fear of God was stamped deep within his heart. Now in Babylon, Daniel along with his other friends, was chosen with a number of others, to attend the government college in Babylon. There they would learn the language and customs of Babylon and the Chaldeans. The courses would last for 3 years. Daniel was given a Babylonian name: Belteshazzar, honoring their idol-god "Bel". The 3 friends were also given heathen names which we recognize as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

Here in a strange and heathen land as hostages these young men did not abandon their religious beliefs. Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself by eating the king's meat and wine. The Jews had strong scruples concerning what was clean and edible, and what was unclean and forbidden. God brought Daniel into favor with the prince of the eunuchs. When Daniel requested for himself and his 3 friends, that they be excused from partaking of those foods which they considered unclean, the overseer, Melzar, was kindly disposed toward him. He feared, however, that he would jeopardize his life if Daniel came up thin and pale when the king called for them. Daniel proposed a 10 day trial. He asked that they be given only pulse (garden vegetables) and water for their diet. At the end of that time they could be compared with the other young men who partook of the regular king's provision. Of course, when the 10 days were fulfilled and the prince of the eunuchs examined and compared their countenances he found them "fairer and fatter" than the others.

Under the most favorable conditions, it is quite unusual for a young person to choose to be different from his peers. These young men under threatening and dangerous conditions purposed to do what they felt would please God. Let us stir up our courage to be different. The Lord's young men and women do not have to adopt all the customs and life styles and habits of the mass of other young folks. Real character is revealed in those who reject popular experiences in favor of doing what is pleasing to the Lord. Mocking and ridicule and sometimes outright persecution may result. But the blessing and approval

of God will outweigh any benefit of going along with the crowd. Let the Lord's young folk determine in their hearts, not to defile themselves with the loose sexual behavior of modern youth, or with the alcohol and drug use so prevalent among the young adults; or with foul language and rotten songs of the rock revelers. Keep yourself pure, God will bless and reward you abundantly as he did Daniel and his friends.

Not only did the outward appearance of Daniel and his friends prosper under the abstemious diet, but intellectually as well, they prospered, and indeed the king found them to be ten times better than his wise men, astrologers and magicians. Surely the Lord is anxious to cause his servants to prosper and get ahead in their careers. It is only reasonable that one who does not carouse and revel will have the advantage spiritually and intellectually over those who abuse their bodies and minds with all manner of excesses. Be vigilant and diligent. God will cause you to prosper.

III A Severe Test: In the second year of the sole reign of Nebuchadnezzar, which was the fifth year of the reign of Jehoiakim, the Babylonian monarch had a strange dream. The thing troubled him greatly. He had retired thinking very seriously about the future and what would come to pass in the years to come. The vivid dream puzzled him. As so often happens with dreams, the details went from Nebuchadnezzar. He could not remember them. He called for all the wise men and advisors in his administration and demanded that they interpret the dream for him. They asked for the details, but he could not give them. How could they interpret a dream that they did not even know? The king was adamant. They must tell him what he had dreamt and then interpret it also! Such a thing was unheard of and impossible. Yet Nebuchadnezzar demanded it on the threat of death if his wise men could not fulfill his demands. When the community of the wise men could not produce, they were sentenced to die. Daniel and his friends fell into the condemnation of the others. But Daniel suggested that the sentence was hasty and requested that time be given till he could receive the wisdom to grant the king's petition. When the king granted the stay of execution, Daniel and his friends prayed earnestly until the thing was revealed unto Daniel. Then he appeared before the king and related the dream and gave the interpretation. He was careful to give the glory to God who revealed the secret to him and did not forget to share the honors and promotions

given him by Nebuchadnezzar with the 3 friends who had faithfully stood with him.

All the wisdom of God is available to us as we wait on the Lord and seek for Jesus Christ who of God is made unto us wisdom and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption. Let us ask of God for the wisdom we need, daily.

NOTES:

LESSON 14

WE WILL NOT BOW DOWN

Read: Daniel 3

Memory Work: Surely he shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler, and from the noisome pestilence. Psalm 91:3

What we should learn from this Lesson

1. *There are customs and systems of the world to which the Christian believer is pressured to bow.*
2. *The government under which we live is entitled to the Christian's submission and loyalty in everything that does not conflict with the law of God and the teaching of Jesus.*
3. *Our willingness to suffer for matters of conscience will prove the sincerity of our convictions.*
4. *Though we are not promised deliverance in every instance, God often does give the miraculous help needed to those who yield thier bodies to His cause.*

I The Test: Nebuchadnezzar was deeply impressed by the wisdom of Daniel in revealing both his dream and the interpretation of it. He recognized that the God of Daniel was, "a God of gods, and a Lord of kings and a revealer of secrets" (Dan.2:47). However, it was not long before he forgot the supremacy of the God of Daniel and erected a huge image, in the plain of Dura. This image, which some have thought to be a likeness of Nebuchadnezzar himself, was more likely a representation of Bel-merodach, his favorite deity. The great king of Babylon named his son, Evil-merodach for this god. Nebuchadnezzar's worship, ascriptions of praise, and his thanksgivings are in almost every case directed toward this god.

He erected a huge image 60 cubits high and 6 cubits wide. The dimensions are out of proportion for the likeness of a human figure. They may have included a pedestal on which the image stood. In fact, an archaeologist named Oppert has discov-

ered the remains of just such a pedestal in the vicinity of the mound, Dowair, near the ruins of Babylon. The image was of gold, probably not solid, but extremely costly nonetheless. It was erected in an open area, "the plain of Dura," where a huge multitude could congregate. Nebuchadnezzar had conquered many nations. He had taken many captives. He had schooled many young men from these various nations and set them in places of authority throughout his kingdom. Now the king sent for all the officials of his administration. Quite a list of offices is given: "princes, the governors, and the captains, the judges, the treasurers, the counsellors, the sheriffs, and all the rulers of the provinces" (vs.2). They came to the site of the great image for a festival of dedication. When they were gathered together, a herald gave the instructions for the occasion. When they heard the sound of the musical instruments: "cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, dulcimer, and all kinds of music," (vs.5) they were all immediately to fall down to worship the golden image which Nebuchadnezzar had set up. The instruction was accompanied with a threat. Whoever did not comply to bow and worship would be cast into a burning, fiery furnace. When the moment arrived, the music sounded and "all the people, the nations, and the languages, fell down and worshipped the golden image" (vs.7).

II The Trust: There were, however, three young men who did not comply. They were the three companions of Daniel who were Jewish captives and faithful servants of the Lord God, Jehovah. Daniel's absence is not explained, but it is clear that for some reason he was not present. Nonetheless, these three Hebrews did not compromise their convictions. Everyone else was bowing down, but these three stood bolt upright. They were at once observed by certain jealous Chaldeans. They reported the disobedience to the king. They told Nebuchadnezzar that these men whom he had set over the affairs of Babylon would not serve his gods nor bow to his image. The king was furious and called for these non-conformists. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were brought before the king. He asked them if it was true, as reported to him, that they did not bow down and worship his image. He offered them a second chance and proposed to repeat the music and obeisance once more. Once more he reminded them of the consequences and, remembering, perhaps their loyalty to Jehovah, added, "and who is that God that shall deliver you out of my hands?" (vs.15). To this the

three courageous captives responded quickly, "Our God, whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thy hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up" (vss.17-18). They were totally committed to loyalty to their Lord. They would not disobey the first and second commandments which specifically forbade bowing down to graven or molten images or gods of any description. They were convinced that their God would save them from the capital punishment ordered for them, but even if God did not deliver them, they chose to obey their God and die faithful rather than to conform to the king's demand and disobey their Lord. Truly, these men made a total commitment, and presented their bodies a living or dying sacrifice to their Lord. Let us take inspiration from their consecration and offer ourselves, body, soul, and spirit to the Lord for His kingdom and service.

III The Triumph: The king was not accustomed to contradiction. He became so furious that his face was distorted. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual. Burning was the official form of execution under the Babylonian administration. The Medes and Persians used wild beasts to execute their victims. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were bound by the mightiest men in Nebuchadnezzar's army. When they carried the three to the mouth of the furnace, they themselves were burned to death by the leaping flames. The three were bound in their coats and hosen (upper garments) and even with their hats on. They fell down bound into the midst of that terrible fire. The sadistic king came to watch their bodies burn to a crisp in the heat, but an entirely different sight greeted his eyes. With great astonishment, he cried out, "Did not we cast three men bound into the midst of the fire?" "True, O king," they responded. "Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God," the shaken monarch exclaimed (see vs.25). The only thing which the fire burned was the rope which bound the three captives.

Then Nebuchadnezzar went near to the mouth of the furnace and called to them to come out. He recognized that they were truly servants of "the most high God" (see vs. 26). The great assembly of officials all saw this remarkable demonstration of the supremacy of the Lord God Jehovah. They saw that the fire

had no power on the bodies of these men. Not a hair was singed. Their clothes were not burned and not even the smell of fire or smoke clung to them. The king then made a great statement. He commended the three for trusting in their God and thereby changing the king's commandment. He highly commended them for "yielding their bodies that they might not serve any god, except their own God" (vs.28). He then made one more of his rash decrees commanding that anyone who spoke amiss against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, should be cut in pieces and his house made a dung hill. This, of course, was just as wrong as to command the three to bow down to his image. Our worship must be voluntary and sincere to be valid. Forced worship is hollow and meaningless. At any rate, what started out to be a national festival to honor the favorite god of the king turned into a triumph and demonstration that the Lord God of Israel was the God of gods and the Lord of lords and that He alone is worthy of worship and adoration.

IV The Relevance: We are not very likely to fall down and worship some beastly monument of gold. Nor are our government officials likely in these days to interfere directly with our sincere worship of our Lord. But society around us has erected great monuments of human ingenuity, and pressure is brought to bear upon the children of the kingdom to bow to these great monuments of human achievement. The standard of living has become a god in the western world especially. Men are no longer content with food and raiment. Second and third jobs are becoming the rule, rather than the exception, for many families. Care of children, wholesome family life and the faithful attendance of the services of worship are sacrificed on the altar of "the standard of living".

Higher education and the wisdom of this world have become another great image in the plain of Dura, Babylon. The pressure to achieve intellectual honors has set at nought the wisdom of our God. Certainly, every believer should have the education that God wants them to have, but let each one be sure of God's direction in this area, for the riches and the wisdom of this world create great difficulties for the simple childlike faith so necessary to our fellowship in the kingdom of God.

The medical world with its costly institutions and autocratic pronouncements has also become an image of gold in our

society. God has made marvellous provisions for the health and the healing of His people. Yet today even the Christian world utilizes, almost exclusively, the complex and ever changing treatments of medical science to the neglect of the prayer of faith, the anointing oil, the stripes and the blood of Jesus and the laying on of hands. Only when medical help fails do many believers finally turn to the Lord.

There are many other modern images at which we are urged to bow today. Oh that courage would arise in the hearts of God's people to yield their bodies to honor and obey Him. "If I perish, I perish," Esther said, and these three children recognized the remote possibility of their death. Yet they had rather died than compromise. Let us be instructed and inspired by the example of these three faithful servants of the most high God.

NOTES:

NEBUCHADNEZZAR'S PRIDE ABASED

Read: Daniel 4

Memory Work: He shall cover thee with his feathers and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler. Psalm 91:4

What we should learn from this Lesson

- 1. The mighty power of God can humble the greatest of men and kingdoms.*
- 2. The faithful servant of God must be willing to speak forth on unpopular subjects.*
- 3. We must thank God for the gift of a sound mind.*
- 4. We may spare ourselves needless suffering if we will humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God.*

I Another Dream: The fourth chapter of Daniel is the testimony of the Babylonian monarch himself, of how the "King of Heaven" dealt with him to abase his pride. Following his military conquests, which had subdued all the nations round about him, Nebuchadnezzar directed his energies toward building and beautifying Babylon and all his kingdom. All his resources were utilized to improve his territory and beautify the capital. The city of Babylon became the grandest city on the earth. The wall of the city was at least sixty miles in circumference and seventy-five feet high and thirty-two feet broad. The city spread out on both sides of the Euphrates River. Nebuchadnezzar had a remarkable bridge built to connect both parts of the city. He built the famous "hanging gardens" for his wife who was from Media and longed to see something to remind her of her mountainous homeland. The amazing structure was 400 feet square at the base and rose 75 feet at its summit. Sloping walls and beautiful arches adorned the structure, while remarkable engines raised water from the river to the summit where it was used to water the luxuriant garden. The ruins of the

city today cover 200 square miles. Ninety percent of the bricks found in this vast ruin bear the inscription of Nebuchadnezzar. The king desired to establish his fame for his building and beautifying more than for his military successes. Throughout his empire he built or rebuilt cities, repaired temples constructed quays, reservoirs, canals, and aqueducts on a scale of grandeur and magnificence surpassing everything of its kind in recorded history up to that time.

His great accomplishments must have produced a sense of great self-satisfaction. While he was at rest in his magnificent palace he had a most disturbing dream. It was such a vivid dream that he could not forget it, and no doubt, the interpretation must have suggested itself to the monarch. Forgetting his experience of the dream of the great image some years before, he attempted once again to have his Chaldean wise men and advisers interpret it for him. He gave the details to them this time. In his dream he saw a tree. It grew until it reached to heaven. It could be seen from everywhere. It afforded protection and food to all the beasts and fowl that dwelt in or beneath it. Then a heavenly messenger appeared and commanded that the tree should be hewn down. Yet it was not to be totally destroyed, for the root was to be left in the ground. At this point the figure changes, for the angel says, "Let his heart be changed from a man's, and let a beast's heart be given unto him; and let seven times pass over him." He is to be wet with the dew of heaven and to eat grass like an ox. The purpose was clearly declared by the heavenly messenger of the dream, "that the living may know that the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will, and setteth up over it the basest of men" (Dan.4:17).

The wise men and the advisers of the king could not, or would not venture to interpret the dream. But Daniel came before the monarch whom he had so served some years before and listened to the details of the dream.

II The Interpretation: This entire chapter is written after the fulfillment of the dream, which makes it clear that the effect was not all that it should have been upon the great monarch, for he still refers to Daniel as "Belteshazzar, according to the name of my god" (vs.8). But Daniel sat in perplexed silence after he heard the details of the dream. Finally, the king urged him to go ahead and not let the interpretation of the dream perplex him (vs.19). Then in a most sensitive and

diplomatic way Daniel proceeded. Daniel prefaced his interpretation with the observation that the dream would please his enemies and those who hated the king.

The tree represented the monarch himself. He had grown to be very great and his influence and reputation were recognized "to the ends of the earth." The decree of the holy one was the word of God against the king to bring him down so that he would be driven from society and live like a beast, eating grass like an ox until seven "times" should pass over him and he came to know that the most High ruled in the kingdoms of earth. The significance of the stump and roots remaining in the earth, was that after the fulfillment of this judgment, the king would be restored to his throne and dominion.

Daniel had a very delicate task to perform. He felt a loyalty to the king in whose service he was employed. Beyond the interpretation of the dream itself Daniel offered counsel to the troubled monarch. "Break off thy sins by righteousness" Daniel advised, "and thine iniquities by showing mercy to the poor." (vs.27). It seems that the king paid very little, if any, heed to Daniel's warning. As time went by the importance of the thing began to fade. God's judgments may come slowly but they are inevitable without sincere repentance.

III The Fulfillment: A whole year passed and then one day while walking in his elegant palace in Babylon the king said, "Is not this great Babylon that I have built for the house of the kingdom by the might of my power, and for the honor of my majesty" (vs.30). At once there came a voice from heaven, "The kingdom is departed from thee" (vs.31). The same hour the king lost his reason. He was driven from men and had to remain outdoors and live like a beast. His hair grew long, and became matted. His nails became like eagles' claws. After the "seven times," probably representing seven years, the king lifted up his head to heaven and his understanding returned to him. The king, in some measure at least, learned the lesson that the most High alone has an everlasting kingdom and absolute, sovereign power. The mental collapse which afflicted the king ended. His reason returned and with his reason the kingdom also, was restored to Nebuchadnezzar. His own testimony stands as a clear lesson at the conclusion of this chapter: "Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, all whose works are truth, and his ways judgment: and those who walk in pride he is able to abase" (vs.37).

IV The Relevance of the Record: The wise man warned that, "Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov.16:18). The followers of Christ must learn absolute humility. We dare not be lifted up in pride. Whatever we may accomplish in this natural life or even in the spiritual realm must be attributed to the grace and mercy of Christ. Without Him we can do nothing. Pride is Satanic. As much as pride rules our hearts, Satan rules. Learn of Jesus, for He is meek and lowly in heart. If we exalt ourselves we will be abased. If we humble ourselves we will be exalted in due time. Herod who accepted glory as if he were God, learned a terrible lesson when he was eaten of worms. The rich fool who attributed his prosperity to himself also was brought down by death. Let us come down of our own free choice, by the grace of God.

Daniel showed both courage and sensitivity in interpreting this chastening dream. He was perfectly courteous to the proud monarch and yet gave him wholesome advice to break off his sins and iniquities. The servants of the Lord must often speak unpopular messages. They must have courage to preach the truth no matter how it hurts. They should, however, learn to present the truth that hurts, courteously and with sensitivity. It is seldom beneficial to be rough and crude. Parents and teachers must also be willing to warn and discipline those in their charge. This ought never to be done in arrogance, however, for we must all look to the grace of God to keep us from falling.

What a great blessing is a sound mind. We ought to thank God often for the faculty of sound reason and it should be governed and controlled by His Holy Spirit. God is able to restore those who for some reason have lost their reason. It is certainly suggested in this account that this miserable malady can be the result of our not learning the lessons God has tried to teach to us.

We see here also, that although this earth is under the dominance of the Prince of this world, the Lord God Almighty can reach in and depose rulers and set up whom he will. We ought to pray that God's will shall be done in the matter of the choice of our government leaders. It ought also to be remembered by those in high governmental positions that the conclusion here is that God sets over the nations the basest of men. We have seen and are seeing ample proof of the truth of that statement all the time.

We may pray for the grace of humility. It should not be

necessary for God to chasten and judge us for seven years before we learn our lessons. Let us come down and humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God. Let Him do the exalting in His own time and way.

NOTES:

LESSON 16

WEIGHED AND WANTING

Read: Daniel 5 & Isaiah 45:1-4

Memory Work: Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night;
nor for the arrow that flieth by day; Psalm 91:5

What we should learn from this Lesson

1. *The inspired Word of God is more reliable than the profane histories of the world.*
2. *Intemperate drinking and carousing lead to judgment sooner or later.*
3. *Profanity and blasphemy arouse the wrath of God.*
4. *God's judgment can come at any time, even when we may feel secure.*
5. *God's promises are true and may be claimed by every believer; but His threatenings are true and sure also and cannot be avoided except by sincere and instant repentance.*

I Belshazzar's Feast: For many years Belshazzar was the object of the skeptics ridicule. They pointed out that Nebuchadnezzar had no son so named and that the list of the Babylonian kings to the end of their history did not include anyone by that name. Therefore, they concluded that the Biblical record in Daniel was incorrect. The great Nebuchadnezzar was succeeded by his son Evil-Merodach. He was murdered after two years by his brother-in-law, Neriglissar, who reigned for four years. After him, Laborosoarchod, his very young son was king for nine months. Nebonnedus was next in line according to the history, and he was defeated by Cyrus and was the last of the kings of Babylon.

Who then was Belshazzar and where did he fit into this confused picture? About one hundred years ago some cylinders were discovered in the ruins of Ur and deciphered by Sir

Henry Rawlinson. They contained the remarkable information that Nabonnedus had a son named Belshazzar and that he was governor of the city of Babylon and indeed it is apparent from the deciphered documents that when Nabonnedus went to war against Cyrus, he gave the reins of government into the hands of his son. So it was that after Cyrus defeated Nabonnedus, he proceeded to the city of Babylon where Belshazzar was securely situated. So the Biblical record has been vindicated in a remarkable way once again. The reason that Belshazzar is called the son of Nebuchadnezzar is, that the word "son" is used in a loose way. It could include grandchildren and even nephews. It has been reasoned by the scholars that Nabonnedus married a daughter of Nebuchadnezzar and so, Belshazzar would be a grandson of the great monarch.

Despite the presence of the army of the Medes and Persians outside the city of Babylon, Belshazzar was carousing and feasting within the city. He made a great feast for one thousand of his lords and drank wine before them, leading them in debauchery. Not content with the drunken revelry as it was, he called for the golden and silver chalices which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the holy temple in Jerusalem. He and his wives and concubines drank the vile wine from the holy vessels and praised the gods of gold and silver, of brass and iron, of wood and stone. They drank and praised. Here is the first instance of the evil custom of the "toast". Let every Christian avoid this profane custom that had its origin in the feast of Belshazzar. Unfortunately our nation has become full of drinkers and drunkards. Ninety percent of adult Americans drink. Drink is involved in 80-90 percent of all highway fatalities. The cost is staggering, far beyond the revenues collected from taxation of liquor. The misery caused to innocent children, the unnecessary poverty caused by wasteful spending of income on the booze, the sickness and decay of the mental capabilities all make the use of liquor to be the most irrational and degrading habit in this vile world. No wonder Christians have laid the axe to the root of the tree and taken an oath to abstain completely from its use in any circumstance.

II The Handwriting on the Wall: In the midst of the wild sacrilegious orgy, suddenly the king turned pale. He saw something that frightened him out of his wits. Isaiah, writing more than two hundred years before had named Cyrus as the one who would overthrow Babylon and cause the temple of the Lord to

be rebuilt. The words of Isaiah were addressed to Cyrus: "I will loose the loins of kings" (Isa.45:1). Now that is exactly what happened. Daniel records, "Then the king's countenance was changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his loins were loosed, and his knees smote one against another (Dan.5:6). He saw the fingers of a man's hand appear and write upon the plastered wall near the candlestick which was the source of light for the feast. There was no mistake. He saw it clearly and all but fainted from fright. The supernatural manifestation was made all the more mysterious by the writing which no one could interpret. The queen mother, who was probably Nebuchadnezzar's daughter, remembered Daniel at once and advised her son to call for him. All of his wise men and advisors and soothsayers and astrologers were at a loss to interpret the writing, despite the offers of the king to give the interpreter a scarlet robe, a gold chain and promotion to third rank in his kingdom (vs.7).

When Daniel was brought before the king, he refused all gifts. Certainly third place in the kingdom that was doomed was a worthless offer anyway. Before interpreting the inscription, Daniel chastened the king. He reminded the carousing king how God Almighty had warned and judged his (grand) father, Nebuchadnezzar. He upbraided Belshazzar because he knew the whole experience and despite this knowledge had not humbled himself. Above and beyond that lack of good judgment, Belshazzar had taken the sacred vessels from the temple of the Lord of heaven and defiled and degraded them by drinking wine from them at his gluttonous feast. No wonder, Daniel observed then, that the Lord sent forth this hand to write his judgment upon the wall.

Finally, Daniel interpreted the three words. The first, repeated twice, MENE, meant numbered and finished: the kingdom of Babylon and of Belshazzar had reached its end. The second word, TEKEL, meant weighed and wanting. The king himself was judged by God to be lacking and falling short of His standard. The last word, PERES meant divided and given. The mighty kingdom of Babylon which had reached such heights of glory and power under Nebuchadnezzar just a few years earlier was now to be divided and given to the Medes and Persians.

III The Fulfillment: Nothing had seemed less likely than that Cyrus and his army would overthrow Babylon, but the clever Persian general did. Both Zenophon and Herodotus, historians

of that era, record that Cyrus diverted the river Euphrates to an artificial lake which one of the former Queens had made. The diverted waters made the river shallow and allowed the troops of Cyrus to march up the riverbed into the city. There were gates and bars at the foot of every street that bordered the river but on this great festival night the gates were left open. So the Lord opened the "two leaved gates before" Cyrus (Isa.45:1), and his troops marched into the city and took it. That very night Belshazzar the king was slain and the kingdom passed to Darius, the Mede.

IV Relevant Warning: Belshazzar was responsible for his self-indulgent manner of life because he knew of the dealings of the Lord of heaven with his grandfather, Nebuchadnezzar. We are responsible, also, for we know of God's judgments upon the world of Noah's time. We are well aware of the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah; of the overthrow of Pharaoh and the Egyptians when they hardened their hearts. We know, too, of the terrible destruction of the Jewish nation and the city of Jerusalem after they had crucified the Son of God and said "His blood be on us and on our children." The Lord has warned us that in the last time the earth shall be burned up and we must appear before the Lord to give an account of what we have done. Let us remember that not only are the promises of God sure, but the threats of God are also very real. Though He in mercy delays the final judgment, it will come.

The sinking of the Titanic was a vivid reminder of Belshazzar's feast. There, on board, the wine flowed. The music played and the rich and the famous danced away the night hours until the sudden thump signalled the handwriting on the wall. How quickly the revelry lost its exuberance. The music changed. Now they requested, "Nearer my God to Thee," and soon over two thousand sunk into a watery grave to awake before the great judge. Let us be warned, this world and its systems are doomed. The hand has written, numbered and finished, weighed and wanting, divided and given. Let us live soberly in the light of the Lord's warning, "the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burnt up. Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought we to be in all holy conversation and godliness" (II Pet.3:10-11). Remember, faithful is He who threateneth!

THE LION'S DEN

Read: Daniel 6

Memory Work: Nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness;
nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday. Psalm 91:6

What we should learn from this Lesson

- 1. All who live a holy life will suffer persecution from some source.*
- 2. We must be especially wary when we are flattered and honored.*
- 3. When we must choose between sin and suffering we must act at once to choose the suffering. Delay and discussion are dangerous.*
- 4. No secular law can keep us from prayer for it is an action of the heart.*

I Daniel's Ministry Continues: Daniel had been brought to Babylon as a young teen-age boy while the father of Nebuchadnezzar was still king. He studied first and then served Nebuchadnezzar for many years, and continued on after he died and was still active when Cyrus reigned. Daniel survived when one after the other of Nebuchadnezzar's successors perished. After the sudden and startling victory of Cyrus over Belshazzar, Darius, the Mede became king. Without a doubt the new monarch found everyone in Babylon talking of the events of that dreadful night of carousing and the sudden turn of events culminating in the death of Belshazzar and the occupation of the capital city. He heard of the role of Daniel in the events of the night and no doubt discovered the facts of his long and illustrious career as an advisor and official in the Babylonian administration. Such a man could be very valuable to the new monarch to help smooth the transition of government. So Daniel was invited once again to participate in the government. Darius divided the entire realm into one hundred twenty provinces in each of which he set a prince. Over these princes three

presidents were set and Daniel was made the foremost of these presidents. The king preferred Daniel over the others because of the excellent spirit in him. He intended to set Daniel over the entire realm in a position which we would, no doubt, call "Prime Minister." But this aroused jealousy in the other officials and they began to watch him carefully to find some fault in him, but they could find none. Jealousy is a terrible vice and should be dealt with severely in ourselves. It is human nature to be jealous of another's good fortune, but it is not Christian. The self in us that seeks its own best interests must be crucified. And if we are blessed, we should not be surprised at the jealousy that success arouses.

II The Evil Conspiracy: It was a magnificent tribute which these jealous princes gave to Daniel when they concluded that they would never find any occasion against Daniel unless they could use his faithful service to his God against him. So they conspired together in this matter to devise a way to use his faithful devotion to his God against him. No doubt, they waited for an opportunity when Daniel was not present. Then they went to the king, Darius, and explained that all the princes, presidents, governors, counsellors, and captains had consulted together and recommended that a royal decree should be issued forbidding anyone in the entire realm from asking "a petition of any God or man for thirty days" except of the King. They further proposed that whoever broke this law should be cast into a den of lions. Such a proposition seems utterly preposterous to us today, but it should be noted that many nations of that time, and especially the Medes and Persians conferred divinity upon their monarch. That is the reason why the law of the Medes and Persians could not be changed. The king was considered divine and infallible. His word could not be changed. Now these clever conspirators flattered the king. No doubt, they suggested that such a commandment would consolidate his position and add to his authority. The foolish king was easily duped into signing the law and the decree was issued.

III Daniel's Faithfulness: As a teen-age boy Daniel had purposed not to defile himself with the unclean meat and wine from the king's provision. Since then his prayer life had grown and had brought wisdom and help to himself and his friends; to the various king's which he served, and indeed to the captive nation of Israel and the whole realm of believers

of all the ages. When he found out about the decree the decision was an easy one for Daniel. Gladly, would he suffer and even die rather than give homage due only to God to the self-indulgent king he had come to know. He retired to his house, and there in his room he knelt before a window facing in the direction of Jerusalem and prayed and gave thanks before his God just as before (ch.6:10). He was certainly not ostentatious or seeking to be seen of men when he prayed at the open window, but he was simply following the instruction of Solomon who, when the temple was dedicated in Jerusalem, asked the Lord to hear, from heaven, the cry of His people should they ever be captives in a strange land. The captives were directed to pray toward Jerusalem, where the temple and the ark and the mercy seat were. The temple and the shekinah glory of God's presence were the mediators between God and man until Jesus came. Now we look, not to Jerusalem, but to Jesus our mediator and advocate.

The conspirators searched for and found Daniel breaking the new and unreasonable law. At once they rushed to Darius and accused Daniel of having no regard or respect for the king because three times a day he made his prayer and supplication to his God. They reminded the king at once of the prescribed penalty and began to congratulate themselves on the cleverness of their conspiracy.

IV The Deliverance: Too late, the king woke up. These envious princes and presidents had duped him and he was chagrined at his own stupidity. He labored until the sun was down to find a technicality to save Daniel, but finally gave up and hoped for the God, whom Daniel served so faithfully, to save him. He exhibited unpardonable weakness to tolerate so obvious an injustice. It reminds us of Herod who for his oath's sake to a silly dancing girl, beheaded John whom he regarded highly and whose advice he had followed in many things. Pilate, too, weakly acquiesced to the insistence of the mob and delivered up Jesus to them to be crucified after he had found no fault whatever in Him. So, Darius was willing to lose his most valuable official to the jealous machinations of his princes and presidents rather than break the silly old tradition of the infallibility of the law of the Medes and Persians. He shifted the responsibility onto Daniel's God. So Daniel was cast into the den of lions. A stone was rolled before the mouth of the den and the king sealed it with his own signet. The king retired

to his palace where he spent a miserable sleepless night. He cancelled all entertainment. Early in the morning he rose and went to the den of lions. As he drew near he cried with a "lamentable voice unto Daniel, O Daniel, servant of the living God, is thy God able to deliver thee from the lions?" (vs.20). To his great relief and joy, the voice of Daniel answered at once, "O king live forever. My God hath sent his angel and hath shut the lions' mouths, that they have not hurt me." How we wish we could have seen the action in the den that night. The beasts must have cowered before their creator and Daniel must have had a blessed night of communion and fellowship with the angel of the covenant. What conversation they must have had.

But now the king acted quickly to bring Daniel out of the den of lions. Special note is made that Daniel was not hurt by the lions "because he believed in his God" (vs.23). But now the conspirators fell into their own trap. Those who had accused Daniel before the king were hastily sentenced to take his place in the den. Unfortunately, their wives and children had to share their fate and the lions made quick work of devouring them. Like Haman who perished on the gallows he had made for Mordecai, these men fell into the very "pit" which they had "dug" for Daniel. Then the king issued a decree that all men in his kingdom should tremble and fear before the God of Daniel. Daniel continued to serve Darius and when he passed from the scene, Daniel still survived and served Cyrus. So God prospered this faithful servant. He did not let the law of the land keep him from prayer. Above all else Daniel was a man of prayer. The last six chapters of the book of Daniel record the revelations given to Daniel by God concerning the last 490 years of the Jewish nation, the coming of the Messiah, His rejection and the final destruction of Israel. These revelations were given as a result of Daniel's prayers. May we learn to pray so that God can reveal His truth and His mysteries to us. No legislation can keep us from prayer if we truly desire to pray. Our God hears and answers prayer.

CYRUS AND HIS DECREE

Read: Daniel 9:1-18; Jeremiah 25:8-14; 29:8-14; Isaiah 44:21-28, 45:1-13; II Chron. 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-11, 2:64-70

Memory Work: A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee. Psalm 91:7

What we should learn from this Lesson

1. *God will cause us to understand from His Book, things which are to come to pass.*
2. *Even when the plan of God is revealed, prayer is necessary to bring it to pass.*
3. *The unlimited wisdom and knowledge of God reaches to the person of each individual and His love embraces all.*
4. *God is able to cause even heathen monarchs to do His will.*
5. *God always works through those who are willing and obedient.*

I I Understood By Books: Daniel had been in Babylon for many years and had served several kings. Even when the Babylonian government was overthrown by the Medes and Persians, Daniel continued to serve the new administration. He was the faithful servant of each king that employed him, but his first loyalty was to his God. He prayed daily for the restoration of the nation of Israel and the return to their native land of the Jewish people. As he read in the sacred prophets, he discovered that Jeremiah had prophesied that God's people would be held in captivity for seventy years (see Jer.25:11 & 29:10). When Daniel realized that the time was at hand, he set himself to pray for the fulfillment of this promise. He identified himself with the sinful and rebellious house of Israel. He confessed

their wickedness: "We have sinned, we have done wickedly." Then he pled for the mercy of God to be extended to Israel that the city of Jerusalem might be restored, and the sanctuary rebuilt.

It is certainly noteworthy that Daniel was first of all made to know the plan and the will of God through the scripture. We too, should learn from the Word of God, the truths concerning things to come, and especially regarding the Lord's second coming. Too many believers simply swallow widely publicized and accepted ideas of man regarding the second coming. We ought to see what the Bible says, especially the teachings of Jesus Himself in the parable of the tares, and in the 25th chapter of Matthew.

Another lesson to be learned from this interesting history, is that it is necessary to pray persistently for the promises of God to be fulfilled. God's promises are not automatic. Elijah had to pray seven times for rain even though the Lord had revealed to him that the rain would come. In like manner, we must pray for the showers of blessing and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit even though God has promised to give these blessings. We must pray for the deliverance from the bondage of inbred sin even though we know that Jesus has conquered every foe and promised full victory. Daniel's prayer brought more than he asked for. The angel Gabriel was sent to show him the future of the Jewish people. He foresaw the coming of the Messiah and His rejection and execution, and the destruction of Jerusalem. These things grieved him deeply. Likewise, when we seek the Lord, He often gives to us, more than we asked for.

II Surnamed By God: Two hundred years before Cyrus lived and conquered Babylon, the Lord inspired Isaiah to write concerning the captivity of Israel in Babylon and their remarkable release from that bondage. The Lord called the deliverer by name. He was Cyrus, king of Persia. He had absorbed the Median kingdom and conquered every enemy. Last to be overcome was Babylon. That kingdom and its capital city seemed impregnable. But in a most remarkable way Cyrus defeated Nabonnedus the last king of the Babylonian empire, on the field of battle. He then proceeded at once to the city of Babylon where Belshazzar, the son of Nabonnedus had been left in charge. The forces of Cyrus, in exactly the way foretold by the prophet Isaiah, entered the city through the "two leaved gates" (see Isaiah 45:1) and overthrew, without a battle, the strong power of that

great nation, Daniel was invited to join the new administration and was soon in a good position to influence the King. The Persian dynasty, which Cyrus founded, lasted two hundred years and was the greatest and broadest in history up to that time.

Imagine the monarch's astonishment when his minister for Jewish affairs brought him a two hundred year old scroll and read to him that the Lord God of heaven had said, "of Cyrus, he is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, thou shalt be built; and to the temple, thy foundation shall be laid" (Isa.44:28). He heard a perfect description of the way he had overcome the difficulties hindering the overthrow of Babylon. The main point of the prophecy of Isaiah was that God was naming the unborn monarch to prove the omnipotence of His hand, and to establish the inspiration of the word of the Lord through Isaiah. Some modern critics have found it difficult to accept such a phenomenal prophecy with such accurate details, and so have attributed the last 27 chapters of Isaiah to another author. Such an assumption is totally unacceptable since the word itself claims to be a prophecy of things to come and would be an outrageous fraud if written after the events described. The dramatic effect on the king certainly proves the authenticity of the prophecy. He was convinced even if modern scholars doubt. Josephus records that Daniel took a copy of the sacred writing to the king and showed it to him and read it to him. Cyrus felt compelled to act promptly in the face of such astonishing evidence. It seems to be true that Cyrus was a kind and generous emperor who gave permission to many displaced persons to return to their native lands and to exercise their right of free, unhindered worship. But his release of the Jews and his attitude toward them went much further. He urged the Jews to go and commanded them to rebuild the temple at his expense. Probably his generosity to other peoples was the overflow of his proclamation of freedom to the Jews.

Cyrus is surely a remarkable type of Christ. He is called "my shepherd" (Isa.44:28) even as Jesus was "the good Shepherd". He is also called by the Lord, "his anointed" (Isa.45:1). This is the title applied to Jesus. He fulfilled the type in his judgment of Babylon, and most of all in his building up the temple. Our Cyrus is even now building His eternal temple, of which you and I are living stones. As Cyrus decreed the rebuilding of Jerusalem, our Lord has decreed the building of

the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem. Our Lord too, was named before He was born and many of the events of His life were foretold by the prophets. Ancient secular history reveals that an attempt was made on the life of Cyrus while he was still an infant, adding to the remarkable type of our Lord whose life was endangered by Herod.

III The Decree Of Cyrus: It was in the first year of Cyrus that he issued his momentous decree. It was proclaimed by heralds throughout the empire and put in writing also, to make it very sure. The language of the proclamation suggests that Cyrus was fully persuaded that "the Lord God of Heaven" had charged him to have the temple built at Jerusalem in Judah. He encouraged the people to go and advised that those who could not go should support the effort with their means. Last, but not least, he restored the sacred vessels which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from Jerusalem, and which Belshazzar had so recently profaned.

Some of the children of Israel were willing and obedient to go. Others preferred to stay in Babylon and continue their activities and businesses. It is always through those who are willing and obedient that God does His work. How remarkable, that God can take a heathen monarch from the ends of the earth and cause him to fulfill His will and further His kingdom. May the Lord God grant that we shall be willing and obedient in the day of His power to go up and do our part in building the eternal city and temple of our God. The Lord, who foreknew and surnamed Cyrus, knows us. Before we were formed, God saw and knew us and His call for us today is to do His will.

THE TEMPLE REBUILT

Read: Ezra 3,4,5, & 6; Haggai 2:1-9

Memory Work: Only with thine eyes shalt thou behold and see the reward of the wicked. Psalm 91:8

What we should learn from this Lesson

1. *Every Christian needs an altar in his life. Morning and evening sacrifices of praise and worship establish a healthy climate for our spiritual growth.*
2. *The greatest opportunity this life presents to us is to serve the Lord Jesus Christ and His Kingdom.*
3. *The advances of the Kingdom of God are always met by opposition from the enemy.*
4. *The preaching of the Word should inspire God's people to do His will and to serve His cause.*
5. *We must not get weary in well doing, for in due season the work shall be finished and rewarded.*

I The Altar Set Up: After Cyrus had issued his remarkable decree, God stirred up the spirits of the chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, and also of the priests and Levites, to go and build the house of the Lord at Jerusalem. Many others contributed willingly, precious metals and jewels as well as domestic animals for the work. Special recognition is given to those who dedicated themselves to this work. The entire number of those who returned is listed by the family heads. Zerubbabel was appointed the governor and Joshua was the spiritual leader or High Priest. The great interest of the Lord in this endeavor is noteworthy, for every family is listed by name with the exact number from that family which returned to Judah and Jerusalem to do the work. The entire group numbered 42,360.

Even the servants which accompanied the returning exiles were numbered, (7,337); and the horses, mules, and camels and donkeys. Surely the Lord also takes note of every one today who dedicates themselves to the work of the Lord. We are building the eternal temple made of living stones. The temple which the Jews built in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah was soon destroyed again, but the temple of the Lord made up of believers will never pass away.

Those who returned from the captivity went first to their own home towns. Most, of course, had never seen their country. Seventy years had elapsed since Nebuchadnezzar had taken Jerusalem and transplanted the Jews in Babylon. So the returned Israelites dwelt in their own cities for several months. In the seventh month of that year, at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles, they all gathered at Jerusalem. The very first thing that was done was the erection of the altar. Joshua, the high priest, and Zerubbabel, the appointed governor, supervised this first step. The action was partly motivated by fear of the people in the area surrounding Jerusalem. As soon as the altar was set on its base, they began the lawful morning and evening sacrifice. The Feast of Tabernacles was celebrated that month from the 15th to the 21st day. This feast included more sacrifices than any other and so the altar was put to good use at once. It is surely significant that the altar was built first and that the daily sacrifices were established at once even before the foundation of the house of the Lord was begun. It emphasizes the need for daily devotion. In our lives, too, this is very important. We need the altar in our lives. Before any work for God is begun, it is important that we pray that work through. Just as the returned Jews were surrounded by enemies, so we are in enemy territory and it is good for us to establish our altar where we can daily bring our requests and receive help and guidance for the day.

II The Foundation Laid: Five months later the work on the temple began. In the meantime they had hired masons and carpenters and had purchased trees from Lebanon and had them transported by sea by men of Tyre and Zidon. Levites from twenty years of age and older were in charge of the work of the temple. It was cause for a celebration when the foundation was completed. Accordingly, priests with trumpets and the children of Asaph with cymbals led a thanksgiving service, praising God for His goodness and mercy. The people "shouted with a

great shout when they praised the Lord" (Ezra 3:11). However, many of the older Jews who had seen the former temple of Solomon, had mixed emotions. The natural grandeur of this rebuilt temple would never approach the outward glory of that former building. These older Israelites lifted up their voices and wept. So while most of the Jews were shouting and praising the Lord for the new work which had begun, the older Israelites were weeping because the new temple did not compare with the former edifice. The prophet Haggai prophesied, however, that the glory of the latter house would be greater than that of the former (Hag.2:9). The picture here is common to human nature. Older saints often have the tendency to think back on "the good old days". God's program is always advancing. "The path of the just is as a shining light that shineth more and more." We should expect the work of God to be greater and more glorious all the time. Haggai's prophecy went beyond the building of the temple, and spoke of the new covenant and the true temple of the Lord made of living stones. Haggai spoke of "the desire of all nations" coming, and that, of course, was Jesus.

III Opposition To The Work: As the work went forward, the enemies of the Jews attempted to disrupt the building of the temple. Their initial tactic was to attempt to join in the project. Zerubbabel, the governor and Joshua, the high priest, would not hear of this. "Ye have nothing to do with us to build a house unto our God: but we ourselves together will build unto the Lord God of Israel" (Ezra 4:3). Their next tactic was to disturb the building project and "weaken the hands" of the builders. They hired counsellors who did all in their power to hinder the work. Like modern lawyers they protested the rebuilding of the temple and wrote letters to the king accusing the Jews of preparing to rebel against the federal authority. When Cyrus had passed from the scene and had been succeeded in order by Darius and Ahasuerus and Artaxerxes, this last king received a letter of accusation from the enemies of the Jews and found their allegation to be true; namely, that Jerusalem had been a troublesome city and the Jews a rebellious people. Therefore, Artaxerxes issued the decree that the work should cease. The Jews' enemies were quick to bring the official restraining order to Jerusalem. They rejoiced in the success of their protest. The prophets of the Lord, however, prophesied to the people of God and encouraged them

to continue the building. The enemies, led by the governor of the territory "on this side of the river" Tatnai, came and enquired why the Jews were still building when the king had forbidden it. They explained that Cyrus had issued the decree to rebuild the city and the temple. Tatnai and his companions were unsuccessful in their attempts to stop the work, so they wrote an official letter to the king again detailing the Jews' claim that they had been commissioned by Cyrus to build both city and temple. They asked the king (Darius) to search the archives to see if this claim was true. Indeed the search was made and the decree was found. It specified in great detail that the foundation of the house of God at Jerusalem be strongly laid, the building be erected and the vessels which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the former temple be returned and placed in the rebuilt temple. The decree of Cyrus which king Darius discovered in the archives also ordered that the expenses of the rebuilding be paid for from the king's house (Ezra 6:4).

The directive was sent to Tatnai at once, to let the work of the house of the Lord alone. Even more remarkably, these enemies of the work of the Lord were commanded to give of the tribute money collected in their district to pay the expenses of the building and the builders and the work should not be hindered. So the trial was turned into a glorious victory for the people of God. Specific credit is given to the two preachers who encouraged the people of God during this trial. "They prospered through the prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah," the inspired word records, "and they builded and finished it according to the commandment of the God of Israel and according to the commandment of Cyrus and Darius" (Ezra 6:14). Then they dedicated the house of the Lord at the time of the Passover and the people rejoiced in the Lord greatly because of the way He had turned the heart of the king of Assyria in their favor and put their enemies to shame.

We are builders, in a sense, also. We are building the true temple of our God. Our Cyrus has decreed the building of His eternal temple, and at His expense. We, too, have an adversary who would hinder, and cause to cease, all progress in this heavenly building. The Lord has given to us His word and His preachers to encourage us to continue to build in the face of opposition and discouragement. Let our hands be strengthened to do to the work of the Lord. In due season our work shall be rewarded and we will worship in the House of the Lord and keep the feast with our Lord anew in His kingdom.

LESSON 20

THE TEACHING OF EZRA

Read: Ezra 7,8,9, & 10

Memory Work: Because thou hast made the Lord, which is my refuge, even the most High, thy habitation; there shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling. Psalm 91:9,10

What we should learn from this Lesson

1. *One consecrated vessel can bring great blessing upon an entire nation.*
2. *The people of God desperately need Spirit-filled teachers who will teach the whole truth of God.*
3. *God's Divine protection is given to those who serve Him faithfully and follow His guidance.*
4. *The blessing and protection of the Lord is forfeited when we disobey His commands.*
5. *It is sometimes necessary to take strong measures to purge our hearts and our homes and our assemblies from the compromising effects of wordliness.*

I Ezra, the Scribe and Teacher: Ezra was a priest directly descended from Eleazar, the son of Aaron. He went to Jerusalem about twenty years after the original group returned in response to the edict of Cyrus. He was a scribe and a teacher of the law of God. Ezra is generally credited with editing and writing the books of Chronicles and Ezra. Some think that he also wrote Nehemiah, though that is less certain. The events recorded from the seventh chapter of Ezra through the book of Nehemiah took place while Artaxerxes Longimanus was king of the Persian empire. No hint is given as to how Ezra came into such favor with the Persian king, except that repeatedly the sacred record reveals that "the hand of the Lord his God" was upon him (see ch.7:6,9, & 28; ch.8:13,22, & 31). The Persian king granted

Ezra all his requests. He gave to Ezra a letter of authorization giving him great authority and influence. The letter granted release to any and all of the Israelites living in his entire realm to go up to Jerusalem. The king gave generous sums of money to Ezra to further the work at Jerusalem and urged the Jews in the realm to send funds also, even if they did not go themselves. Specifically, the king's money was designated to purchase animals to be offered to the Lord in the newly erected temple at Jerusalem. Ezra was given the right to use the remaining funds in any way he felt necessary. The scribe was also granted the power to appropriate money and provisions from the king's treasurers in that province where Jerusalem lay. The king certainly had great confidence in Ezra for he gave him almost unlimited authority to furnish the house of the Lord, and to govern the Jews which had returned. Ezra was especially commissioned by Artaxerxes to teach the people the law of God. Above all else, Ezra was a teacher. The teaching of the law of God was backed up by the Persian king. Ezra was given the right to appoint magistrates and judges in the land of Judah and to speedily execute judgment on any and all who would not obey the law of God (ch.7:25-26). The king also gave Ezra the right to exempt the priests and Levites and all workers in the house of the Lord from tolls, tribute or custom fees.

At a later date Nehemiah exerted a great influence over the same king, Artaxerxes. His influence can be explained somewhat, in that he was the "cupbearer" to the king. This was an official position of great responsibility. But Ezra was a priest and a scribe and a teacher to the Jewish captives. That such a person should come to such favor and influence with the emperor is remarkable to say the least. The best explanation is simply what the scripture records; "the good hand of his God (was) upon him" (ch.7:9). The following verse explains how the good hand of the Lord came to be so mightily upon Ezra for good; "For Ezra prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments" (ch.7:10). Is it not remarkable to see what God can do through one individual wholly consecrated to the Lord? No life is without influence. Let us be sure that we seek the rule of God in our lives that the hand of the Lord may be upon us for good and that our influence might bring blessing to many.

II Ezra Leads Another Return: About eighteen hundred Jews

agreed to go with Ezra at this time. About 42 thousand had gone after the decree of Cyrus. Those who joined Ezra are once again listed by their families, reminding us of God's interest for each individual. The caravan assembled at the river Ahava where Ezra viewed the people. He discovered that no Levites were in the company and therefore sent at once and persuaded 38 sons of Levi to join them. At Ahava, they also fasted and prayed for guidance and protection. Ezra, having testified to the king that the hand of the Lord was upon him for good, was embarrassed to ask for military protection (ch.8:21-23). After fasting and prayer Ezra and his followers were reassured. And indeed the band of travelers were delivered from enemies who were laying in wait along the way (ch.8:31). Before setting out from the river Ahava, the gold and silver and precious vessels for the house of the Lord were committed to twelve of the chief priests with ten others until they should come to Jerusalem. Each one was given a portion. It was weighed and recorded. When the company had safely arrived in Jerusalem, on the fourth day the silver and gold and vessels were weighed again to be sure that all had safely reached its intended destination. Everything was provided honestly in the sight of all men. The next order of business was the offering up of numerous burnt offerings to the Lord. This was what the king had desired and given money for, and it is good to note that they discharged this obligation faithfully and promptly. The officials also delivered the commissions to the king's representatives in the province and especially furthered the work of beautifying the house of the Lord. The Lord prospered and protected the new group of returnees, and we, too, may expect the guidance, and provision, and protection of God when we dedicate ourselves to love and serve Him.

III Ezra's Reformation: Ezra's main purpose in coming at this time was to teach the people the law of the Lord. They had Haggai and Zechariah who preached to them, and they had Joshua who was a priest to them and offered the sacrifices and pronounced God's blessing upon them, but they also needed a teacher of the law of God. We also desperately need Spirit-filled teachers in the church today. The modern "sharing" and discussions are not the scriptural method of ministry. There are few today who are willing to be taught. Everyone wants to be the teacher. Jesus' own ministry is listed as teaching and preaching and healing. Teaching is always mentioned first. Also the

order of Holy Ghost ministries to the church lists teachers third in the order, following only apostles and prophets. How the church would profit from the Spirit inspired ministry of teaching today. Let us pray for this ministry to develop in our assemblies. Ezra was a teacher and he came to Jerusalem to supply that need among the people of God. Alas, he found to his horror that many of the leading men of Israel, including priests and Levites, had married the heathen women from the surrounding area. Ezra was dumfounded when he learned of this gross disobedience to the law. He rent his garments and plucked the hair of his head. Others who feared God joined Ezra. They sat together in dismayed astonishment until the evening sacrifice. Then Ezra fell upon his knees and spread out his hands to the Lord in deep repentance and intercession for his people. He confessed the sin of Israel which caused the 70 years captivity and poured out his heart's sorrow for this new transgression after God's merciful reviving of the nation after those long years. He recognized that this trespass placed all Israel outside the shield of God's protection. As Ezra wept and confessed and prostrated himself on the ground before the house of the Lord a multitude gathered. They too, wept and repented. One of the men who repented went to Ezra and confessed that he had married a heathen woman. He proposed that all Israel make a covenant with God to put away the heathen wives and the children they had borne. He urged Ezra to take charge of the whole miserable proceeding. He arose and made the chief priests and Levites and all Israel to swear to carry this purpose through. After fasting and prayer, Ezra demanded the attendance of all Israel at Jerusalem within 3 days on pain of the confiscation of all their possessions. They came and sat before the house of the Lord shivering from fear and the rain. Ezra bade them confess their sin and put away their wives and the children of those wives. They asked that they be dealt with by appointment for the work of equitable provision was a great work requiring much time. The work indeed did take three months. To their credit the men of Israel were true to their word, and despite the grief and pain it caused, they separated themselves from their heathen wives. Although it is not specifically recorded, it is certainly implied that careful provisions were made for the women and children who suffered under this stern judgment. To get rid of the women and children without just settlements and provisions would only have added to the sin. The reason the affair took 3

months must have been that Ezra considered each case separately. Of course, this is not the basis for believers today to divorce non-believing partners. The New Testament teaches just the opposite. But it does forbid born again believers to marry unbelievers. This is also a powerful lesson in the spiritual realm, how we are to cut off all love of the world and its material substance. To fully please the Lord we must do violence to ourselves. It is necessary, on occasion to take harsh measures against ourselves to break the ties of the world and the flesh. May God help us to be true to our purpose to obey and please Him always.

NOTES:

REBUILDING THE WALL

Read: Nehemiah 1,2,3,4,5, & 6

Memory Work: For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. Psalm 91:11

What we should learn from this Lesson

1. *We should be interested in the welfare of God's people in all places.*
2. *We must not let the greatness of the task keep us from getting started to build for our Lord.*
3. *Each of us has a responsibility to fulfill and if all are faithful to do their portion, a great work can be accomplished.*
4. *The enemy will try anything to bring about disunity to hinder the work of God.*
5. *A good example is even more important than good teaching.*

I Sad News: In the king's service at Shushan, capital of the Persian empire, was a devout Jew named Nehemiah. He was "cup-bearer" to the king. This position seems to have been a very responsible one, carrying with it much more than domestic duties. This Nehemiah enquired from Hanani, a brother or relative of his who had just returned from an official trip which took him to or through Jerusalem, concerning the welfare of those who had returned to rebuild the temple and the city. About 35 years had elapsed since Cyrus had issued his decree and the first contingent of Jews had returned to build the temple and city. Because of adverse conditions and an unfavorable ruling by Darius who succeeded Cyrus, the work was hindered. The temple was dedicated 16 years after the decree of Cyrus. The attempts to rebuild the city and the wall were resisted by Sanballat, governor of Samaria, and other enemies from the surrounding area. Nehemiah learned of the great

affliction of those who had returned from his brother, and it saddened him greatly. He began at once to pray for the welfare of God's people. Nehemiah wept before the Lord (ch.1:4). He confessed the sins of the people of Israel and, like Daniel, identified himself with the sinners of Israel, begging mercy from the Lord. He prayed specifically that king Artaxerxes, whom he served, would be favorably disposed to help the cause of Jerusalem (ch.1:11).

As he served the king, Nehemiah appeared sad. The observant monarch noticed Nehemiah's sorrowful disposition, and realizing that it was not caused by sickness, concluded that it was sorrow of heart (ch.2:2). When the king enquired as to the cause of Nehemiah's sadness, the cupbearer was frightened. He respectfully told the king that his sorrow was caused by the news just received, that Jerusalem lay waste and the walls were broken down and the gates burned with fire. Then the king asked Nehemiah what his request was. Nehemiah lifted his heart to the Lord, for this was a direct answer to his earlier prayer and asked to be commissioned to go to Jerusalem with authority to requisition timber from the king's forest to build the wall with its gates and for his own house. He asked that letters be given to him assuring his protection. The king asked Nehemiah to set a time for how long he should be gone from his post. Apparently that time was set for 12 years and accordingly Nehemiah was appointed governor of Judah and Jerusalem and the letters were given.

II Come, Let Us Build: Nehemiah went with all speed to Jerusalem. When he showed the king's letters to Sanballat, the governor of Samaria and to Tobiah they were displeased. But Nehemiah went on to Jerusalem. He told no one of his plans. Three days after, Nehemiah arose by night and took a few trusted men with him to survey the walls and the state of the city. In some places the donkey which Nehemiah rode could not get through. Having seen the distress that the inhabitants of Jerusalem were in, Nehemiah at once gathered the leaders together. He told them how the Lord had answered his prayer and moved the heart of the king to send him with authority to build the walls of Jerusalem to protect the inhabitants and improve the welfare of the city. "Come, and let us build up the wall," Nehemiah urged. The men were inspired by his enthusiasm and reassured by his authority from the king and agreed to build up the walls. Preparations were begun at once.

III The Work Opposed: Every work for God is opposed by the Devil. Nehemiah showed great wisdom in keeping quiet the work he intended to do until he was ready to begin. The first tactic of the enemies was to belittle the work and to mock at the undertaking. Nehemiah organized the work well. He assigned the various families each a section of the wall which they were responsible to build. Thus, the entire wall was begun all at once and proceeded from the ground up. Everyone did not perform in the same fashion. The nobles of Tekoah, "put not their necks to the work of their Lord" (ch.3:5). Little did they realize that their laziness would be noted and recorded by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit for all to see and know. Let us be sure that we do the work of the Lord, not negligently, but whole-heartedly. Some got discouraged by the immensity of the task of cleaning up the rubbish before the actual building could begin. Judah said, "the strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed, and there is much rubbish; so that we are not able to build the wall" (ch.4:10). There are certain individuals who never learn to work. They always find an excuse for not doing their job. Thank God that there are also those who work wholeheartedly. Baruch the son of Zabbai earnestly repaired his section of the wall. He is the only one who is singled out for his particular attitude. It is always an encouragement to the leaders to find some who fulfill their responsibility earnestly.

Tobiah and Sanballat were indignant at the work which had begun and was progressing so rapidly. They publicly ridiculed the work. Tobiah joked that if a fox jumped onto their wall it would crumble. Nehemiah and his workers heard the taunts, but they prayed to God against these enemies. They continued to build. "The people had a mind to work" (ch.4:6). Quickly, the encircling wall was raised to the half-way mark.

IV Watching and Working: Realizing that their mocking taunts were not hindering the work of rebuilding the wall, the enemies got down to serious opposition. They conspired together to attack Jerusalem and stop this work before it went any further. Nehemiah, noting the change in tactics, set a watch against them day and night. The enemies thought to surprise the builders and come upon them suddenly to slay and destroy them (ch. 4:11). Some Jews who lived near these enemies came and told Nehemiah that they were coming to wipe them out. Nehemiah issued an alert and armed the men and guarded the

wall. He inspired them to fight courageously for their brethren; their wives, and their sons and daughters. When the attackers realized that the Jews were ready and waiting for them, they feared to attack and withdrew (ch.4:15). At once Nehemiah ordered the work resumed. Now, however, they divided the workers into two groups. One half worked with their swords at their sides. The other half watched and guarded the workers. So the groups alternated and the work went forward. Nehemiah prayed and set a watch against them. He ordered the workers all to sleep within the walls. He set up the system that all should run together at once to the place where the trumpet would sound in the event of an attack. They kept themselves in a state of readiness, sleeping in their clothing with weapons at hand. We, too, must be vigilant for our adversary, the devil, goes about as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour.

V Internal Trouble: Not succeeding to destroy or hinder the work from the outside, the adversary brought about dissension within. This is a favorite tactic of the enemy today. He uses it effectively to hinder the progress of the kingdom of God. He will do anything to sow discord among the brethren. At Jerusalem, the rich had lent money to their less fortunate brethren at the rate of one per cent per month. The result was hopeless debt. The debtors had to mortgage their lands or sell them outright and some had been forced already to sell their daughters as slaves (ch.5:5). Nehemiah was very angry when he heard this complaint. Nehemiah consulted with himself and took immediate and resolute action. He reprimanded the nobles for taking advantage of their poorer brethren and reminded them that they themselves had been recently redeemed from 70 years of captivity. His own example gave authority to his orders. As governor, he had the right to take taxes from the people for the provision of his house and its needs. He had, however, chosen to abandon the practice of appropriating funds for his administration which the former governors had practiced. So Nehemiah ordered the nobles to restore the lands and houses and the interest which they had taken from their fellow Jews. Their respect for Nehemiah is proven by their willingness to do this. So the trouble was settled.

VI The Wall Finished: The enemies without, tried yet again to weaken the hands of the builders. They invited Nehemiah to a conference in the plain of Ono. But he said, "O, no, for I am

doing a great work and cannot come down. Why should the work cease" (ch.6:3). Then they wrote open letters accusing Nehemiah of preparing a revolt against the king. They falsely accused him of making himself a king. But Nehemiah simply denied these false accusations and went on with the work. They attempted to shake him by sending false prophets and warning him to flee to save his life. Nehemiah steadfastly led the work of God. Let us continue steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as we know that our labor is not in vain in the Lord.

NOTES:

LESSON 22

TEACHING THE LAW

Read: Nehemiah 8,10,11,12 & 13

Memory Work: They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone. Psalm 91:12

What we should learn from this Lesson

- 1. The anointed preaching of the Word of God should bring real joy to the hearers.*
- 2. We need to be reminded again and again of the commandments of our God which bring us His blessing and protection.*
- 3. It is necessary for the people of God to give financial support to the work of God and the workers.*
- 4. Questionable associations need to be determinedly cut off, and the commandments of our Lord carefully obeyed in the Spirit, if we want the great power of God on our lives and service for Him.*

I Teaching the Law: After the wall was finished, the inhabitants of Jerusalem enjoyed a measure of security. Nehemiah arranged that the gates should be guarded at all times. They were not to be opened in the mornings until the sun was high and then to be shut again before the sun set (Neh.7:3). Despite the security of the newly walled city its inhabitants were few. Most of the Jews chose to live in the towns and cities of their forefathers. Nehemiah called for an assembly of all the people to Jerusalem that he might reckon them by their genealogy. Among the priests Nehemiah discovered some with questionable ancestry. He ordered them not to function as priests until a High Priest with "Urim and Thummim" arose. Whatever this was, it revealed the yes or no of God and was a gift of wisdom of some type to God's people.

On the first day of the seventh month all the people gather-

ed in the street before the water gate. They requested Ezra to read the law of God to them. He brought the precious scrolls and read to them from the pulpit of wood he had set up in the street. Both men and women listened attentively to the reading of the law. Ezra unrolled the scroll and read from it in the sight of all the people. When he read, all the people stood to their feet. The law was read from morning until midday. On the platform to his right and left, Ezra was surrounded by honorable assistants. Ezra pronounced the blessing of God upon the people and the congregation responded, "Amen, amen." They lifted up their hands and bowed their heads, worshipping the Lord with their faces to the ground.

It was an historic day. Ezra and thirteen other teachers mentioned by name (ch.8:7), as well as unnamed Levites taught the people and "caused them to understand" (ch.8:7 & 8). Here is a marvellous definition or description of expository preaching or teaching: "So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading" (vs.8). When the people heard the Word and understood it they began to weep. Nehemiah urged the people not to weep and mourn. He urged them to go and eat and drink and send portions to those for whom nothing was prepared and to rejoice for the day was holy unto the Lord. He admonished the people not to be sorrowful but to rejoice "for the joy of the Lord is your strength" (vs.10). So the people obeyed and did indeed rejoice, especially because they were made to understand the law of the Lord.

Don't we need the same type of expository teaching and preaching today? Many people are living their lives oblivious of what the law of the Lord requires of them. Even many church goers hear only of blessings and religious sensationalism, to the neglect of the teachings of Jesus. We have the New Testament to expound. Not only must we learn the law of our God, but also of His marvellous grace and power which empowers us to fulfill His law. Nothing in this life is more important than understanding the Word of God. To help and enable God's people to understand the whole counsel of God is the greatest calling of this age of grace. Those who are made to understand will be eternally grateful.

On the next day the people learned from the reading that they were required to keep the Feast of Tabernacles in the seventh month. They determined to do this. Not since the days of Joshua, the son of Nun, was this feast observed properly. The

result was great gladness. Daily for eight days they listened as the law was read to them from the scrolls.

II A Solemn Covenant: The results of this ministry of the Word were remarkable. It brought the people to deep repentance. They fasted and humbled themselves and took resolute steps of obedience to separate themselves from the heathen. They confessed their sins and prayed for mercy (see ch.9:1-3). Several of the Levites stood on the platform, which had been erected for Ezra's teaching, and prayed great prayers of confession. They recalled many of the provocations of the children of Israel against the Lord throughout their history. They praised and thanked God for His long patience and tender mercy. Their prayer concluded with the determination to enter into a covenant with the Lord to keep His law. Many of the leading elders sealed this covenant, as well as a great number of unnamed Levites and wives and sons and daughters. The covenant included quite a list of particular promises on the part of the people. They vowed not to allow their children to intermarry with the nations round about them. They promised not to buy or sell on the sabbath day and to observe every seventh year as a sabbath year. They promised to financially support the house of the Lord and to establish, by casting of lots, the courses of service for the priests and Levites. They determined to bring the first-fruits of their crops to the house of God and to dedicate their firstborn sons and domestic animals to the service of the Lord. They vowed to support the Levites and priests with the tithes of all their increase and finally they promised not to forsake the house of the Lord.

It was desirable that Jerusalem should have more inhabitants. Many of the elders of the Jews volunteered to move into the city. In order to fill the quota for Jerusalem, they cast lots and thereby chose one of every ten to come and make their residence in the city. The rest all lived in the cities of their fathers.

At this time also the children of Israel dedicated the newly built walls. Nehemiah organized the princes of Judah into two groups. Half marched upon the wall in one direction and the other half marched in the opposite direction. They marched to the sound of trumpets until they met and then joined forces and went to the house of the Lord to give thanks. The singers sang "loud" if not well (ch.12:42), and there was great joy and rejoicing in the city of Jerusalem.

III Nehemiah's Strong Leadership: The last chapter of the book of Nehemiah records how this zealous patriot and devout Jew vehemently insisted on obedience to the law of God which Ezra had taught and which the people had covenanted to keep. While Nehemiah had returned to his post in the capital of the Persian Empire, Eliashib, the priest had allied himself with Tobiah, the enemy of the people of God and friend of Sanballat, governor of Samaria. The Priest allowed Tobiah to set up housekeeping right in the house of the Lord. When Nehemiah returned and discovered this situation, he acted promptly and forcefully. "I cast forth all the household stuff of Tobiah out of the chamber," Nehemiah records. Then he disinfected the place and brought back the vessels of the service of the Lord.

Nehemiah also noted on his return that the Levites were gone from Jerusalem. He realized at once that they were at work in the fields because they had not been supported by the tithes and offerings which had been pledged. He made all of Judah to bring the tithes at once and set up treasurers to see that this did not happen again.

On the sabbath Nehemiah saw some making wine and harvesting crops and bringing them into the city. He stopped this practice at once. He ordered the gates to be kept closed on the sabbath day. When Gentile merchants appeared at the locked gates on the sabbath day, Nehemiah warned them not to appear there again on the sabbath day, for "if ye do so again, I will lay hands on you" (ch.13:21). They never came again on the sabbath day.

Nehemiah chastised those who had married outside the Jewish nation. He "contended with them, and cursed them, and smote certain of them and plucked off their hair" and made them swear not to continue this sinful practice. One of the sons of Eliashib who had made the apartment for Tobiah in the house of the Lord was predictably married to the daughter of Sanballat, one of the chief enemies of the people and the work of God. Nehemiah "chased him" out of his sight.

While we cannot recommend the same actions taken by Nehemiah in these cases, for application in the church today, we can urge the spirit of this uncompromising and strong leadership. Too many spiritual leaders today are intimidated by careless believers. We must be more concerned with offending the Lord than with offending careless believers. Of course, correction is only to be given in the spirit of humility and love, but it must be given. The church needs discipline as well as inspiration. Let us thank God for uncompromising teachers and preachers of righteousness.

LESSON 23

TO THE KINGDOM

Read: Esther 1,2,3,4 & 5

Memory Work: Thou shalt tread upon the lion and adder: the young lion and the dragon shalt thou trample under feet. Psalm 91:13

What we should learn from this Lesson

- 1. The beauty of Esther's character was her submission to Mordecai and to circumstances which fate brought her into.*
- 2. Mordecai is an example of moral courage which should inspire all of us to stand up for our convictions.*
- 3. Promotion to a place of authority is a true test of character.*
- 4. Prayer and consecration will enable us to meet any crisis or emergency that comes our way.*
- 5. While we are responsible first of all for our own life, we also have a responsibility to others; especially when we are in a position to help.*

I Ahasuerus and Vashti: The king called Ahasuerus in the narrative in Esther is most likely the Xerxes, son of Darius and father of Artaxerxes Longimanus of History. He is remembered historically for his unsuccessful invasion of Greece. The historian, Herodotus, tells of his vile temper. When the famous bridge Xerxes built over the Hellespont was broken up by a storm, the despotic king executed the engineers which had built the bridge, and childishly ordered the sea to be scourged and stupidly attempted to chain its waves by sinking fetters into the deep. He reigned over 127 provinces. Darius, his father, had annexed India. His Queen was beautiful and independent, Vashti.

In the third year of his reign before launching his expedi-

tion to invade Greece and Europe, Xerxes had a great feast in Shushan the palace. The feast lasted for an inordinate and intemperate 180 days. No doubt, officials from the far flung 127 provinces came and went during that time. Those from the capital itself, no doubt, celebrated too much. The one thing to be said favorable about the long feast was that the drinking of wine was not by compulsion. But the intemperate example of Xerxes, no doubt, encouraged others to over indulgence. While the men of the kingdom caroused, Vasti, the beautiful queen, made a feast for the wives of the officials. On the seventh day of the party Xerxes was under the influence of the wine. He called for Vashti to come and show the people her beauty. She refused to do so and the king became very angry. There are differences of opinions as to the virtue or blame of the Queen's refusal to come to the king. Some praise Vashti for refusing to be immodest. The customs of those near eastern countries veiled their women completely. Certainly we cannot condemn her for not wanting to be the object of the lustful gazes of a bunch of wine-heated men. Others point out that her stubborn disobedience cost her the place of Queen in the realm. It is surely true that we must learn to obey our king and to submit one to another in the Lord. We live in an age of personal human rights and that is good to a point. No one is to be treated as a slave or animal or inferior person in the kingdom of God, but we must learn to humble ourselves and serve one another in the Lord.

At any rate, Vashti lost her place and a silly decree was issued from the king to all 127 provinces and in 20 languages "that every man should bear rule in his own house" (ch.1:22).

II Esther and Mordecai: After a while the king began to miss Vashti. She must have been more to him than an object of his lust. Now the king's servants advised that he gather all the beautiful young virgins of the land and choose the one from among them which pleased him most. The king was only too willing to try them all. There was in the capital city of Shushan a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin. He must have been of noble parentage for they were carried away in the captivity with Daniel from Jerusalem when only the nobles were taken. His name was Mordecai. When his uncle and aunt died, orphaning his little cousin, Mordecai took her in and raised her as if she were his own daughter. Her name was Hadassah in Hebrew and Esther in the Persian tongue. She was young and beautiful, and unmarried and conspicuous, for Mordecai lived

and served in Shushan. This girl was caught in the beauty net and brought with many other maidens to the king's house. Mordecai told Esther not to reveal her nationality. It seems that he was at least willing if not anxious for Esther to obtain the place of Vashti. Esther had been well trained by her older cousin. She was not a spoiled child. Even after Esther became the Queen she "did the commandment of Mordecai as when she was brought up with him" (ch.2:20). Now in the harem of prospective brides, Esther left all the preparations for her appearance before the king to Hegai, the keeper of the king's women. Each maiden was given the right to ask for whatever she desired to make her attractive to the king. Esther asked for nothing but put her trust in Hegai (and her God). When she went to spend the night with the king, she pleased him and he loved her. The crown was placed upon her head and she replaced Vashti. This occurred four years after the deposing of Vashti. In the meanwhile Xerxes (Ahasuerus) had made his ill fated attempt to invade Greece. Mordecai sat in the gate of the king and served in some capacity. He was always anxious to know how Esther fared. By the providence of God, Mordecai became aware of a plot against the king's life. He told Esther, who told the king in Mordecai's name. Investigation verified the report and two conspiring servants were executed. So, Mordecai saved the life of the king.

III Haman the Agagite: The king promoted one of his servants named Haman. He apparently was of low and common background for he gloried in the honor and homage his promotion brought. Everyone bowed and revered Haman because the king had commanded it. All but Mordecai. He refused to bow and reverence any man, least of all an Agagite. Agag was the title of the kings of the Amalekites and it is remotely possible that here was a descendant of that long condemned tribe. Mordecai's refusal to bow and reverence Haman infuriated him. He had his servants speak to Mordecai. He refused to bow on the grounds that he was a Jew. Rather than vent his wrath on Mordecai alone, Haman decided to wipe out all the Jews in the realm whose religion prevented them from reverencing him. He used his recent promotion to the place of power to advise the destruction of all Jews from the realm. Haman assured the king that 20 thousand talents of silver could be confiscated from the Jews. The king thoughtlessly gave his approval and handed his ring to Haman to seal the destruction of thousands of sub-

jects as if they were rodents. He told Haman to do whatever he desired with the Jews and their money. Haman, being a superstitious man, cast lots to choose a "lucky day" for the execution of the Jews. He came up with the 13th day of the 12th month. The date was far enough away for prayer and action to circumvent the execution of the order. Haman sent out the posts at once. Of course, he never dreamed that the Queen was a Jewess.

IV Esther's Challenge: When Mordecai found out what Haman had done, he rent his clothes and put on sackcloth. He cried bitterly, no doubt, realizing that he was responsible for this new threat to the existence of the Jews. Esther's servant girls told her about Mordecai and she sent clothing for him but he refused it. Esther, ignorant of the threatening events, sent Hatach a trusted chamberlain of the king to find out what was bothering her esteemed guardian. Mordecai told Hatach of the decree and gave a copy for Esther to see. He sent word that the Queen should go before the king and intreat for the preservation of her people. Esther sent word again to Mordecai that if anyone appeared before the king without an appointment, they would be put to death unless the king chose to extend his golden sceptre. She told Mordecai that she had not seen the king for 30 days. When he got this word from Esther, Mordecai sent word back that she should realize that she would not escape the destruction of the Jews because of her position. He assured her that deliverance would come from another source if she failed, but warned her she and her father's house would perish. He suggested that all the preceeding events that had brought her to the place of Queen in the Persian empire had perhaps occurred to place her where she could plead for deliverance for her people. "Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" he questioned. The brave queen responded that she would go in before the king after three days of fasting (and prayer). Courageously she declared, "If I perish, I perish" (ch.4:17).

IV Esther's Conquest: On the third day, after fasting, Esther prepared herself to appear before the king. She dressed in her best royal apparel. With heart pounding, but with calm poise outwardly Esther approached the inner court of the king. When the king saw Esther, he was pleased and extended the sceptre to her. He asked for what she requested to the half of his king-

dom. Esther simply invited the king with his exalted deputy, Haman, to come to her banquet. The king understood that she would make her request at the banquet. Haman was delighted that he alone should share the intimate banquet with the king and queen. As they sat at the banquet the king asked Esther what her request should be. She came right up to making her petition and then decided to invite the king and Haman again the next day and make her request at that time. She certainly kept the king in suspense. Haman went to his house joyful. Only the unbending Mordecai tempered his elation as he told his wife and servants how he alone had enjoyed the banquet with Esther and the King. Then he complained of the Jew, Mordecai, who would not honor him. Haman's wife, Zeresh, like Jezebel, advised her husband to get rid of his nemesis. So he built a tall gallows to hang Mordecai on even before the destruction of the rest of the Jews.

The name of God does not appear in the book of Esther yet His working is evident in every paragraph. Once again the Lord did not leave Himself without a witness even in the palace of the great heathen monarch of the Persian empire. Truly, God has His hand in the affairs of mankind over all the earth.

SEPTUAGINT RENDERING

The Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament, which Jesus quoted from most frequently, relates the story of Esther as follows:

"And it came to pass on the third day, when she had ceased praying, that she put on her glorious apparel. And being splendidly arrayed, and having called upon God the Overseer and Preserver of all things, she took her two maids, and she leaned upon one, as a delicate female, and the other followed bearing her train. And she was blooming in the perfection of her beauty; and her face was cheerful, as it were benevolent, but her heart was straitened for fear. And having passed through all the doors, she stood before the king: and he was sitting upon his royal throne, and he had put on all his glorious apparel, covered all over with gold and precious stones, and was very terrible. And having raised his face resplendent with glory, he looked with intense anger: and the queen fell, and changed her colour as she fainted; and she bowed herself upon the head of the maid that went before her. But God changed the spirit of the king to gentleness, and in intense feeling he sprang from off his throne, and took her into his arms, until she recov-

ered: and he comforted her with peaceable words, and said to her, What is the matter, Esther? I am thy brother; be of good cheer, thou shalt not die, for our command is openly declared to thee, Draw nigh. And having raised the golden sceptre he laid it upon her neck, and embraced her, and said, Speak to me. And she said to him, I saw thee, my lord, as an angel of God, and my heart troubled for fear of thy glory; for thou, my lord, art to be wondered at, and thy face is full of grace. And while she was speaking, she fainted and fell. Then the king was troubled, and all his servants comforted her."

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LESSON 24

FOR SUCH A TIME

Read: Esther 6,7,8,9, & 10

Memory Work: Because he hath set his love upon me, therefore will I deliver him: I will set him on high, because he hath known my name. Psalm 91:14

What we should learn from this Lesson

1. *Even such an insignificant thing as a sleepless night can be in the providence of God. He truly works all things together for good for those who love Him.*
2. *Every service we do for our King will certainly bring us His reward.*
3. *We reap what we sow. Evil plots to harm others, like a boomerang, return to injure the conspirator.*
4. *Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall.*
5. *God watches over, and protects His own redeemed people. He will not allow the evil intentions of their enemies to be fulfilled.*

I Haman Begins to Fall: The night following Esther's banquet, the king could not sleep. Probably, the events of the day had so aroused the King's curiosity that he could not fall asleep. He probably tried to imagine what in all the world was on Esther's mind that had moved her to risk her life to get an audience with him and then to serve a great banquet for himself and Haman, only to delay her request to the next day. The King's active imagination, no doubt, would not allow him to fall asleep.

Haman's sleep, too, may have been disturbed, for at his residence workmen were busy all night erecting a seven story high gallows for Mordecai to be hung on in the morning. All

Haman's joys were ruined by the unbending form of Mordecai, the Jew. Haman's wife and friends advised him to build the gallows and get rid of Mordecai in the morning before going to the banquet of Esther.

When the King could not sleep, he called for the chronicles of his administration to be read to him. The reading reminded the King of how Mordecai had saved his life by warning him of the plot of Bigthana and Teresh. The King asked what had been done to reward Mordecai for such a service. His servants told the king that nothing had been done to reward Mordecai. Dawn was just brightening the eastern sky and the King asked if anyone was yet in the court. Haman, anxious to see his evil purpose accomplished on Mordecai, had seen the finished gallows and come early to get approval for the execution. The King's question prevented Haman's purpose, "What shall be done unto the man whom the king delighteth to honor?" The self-centered Haman could think of no one except himself whom the King would delight to honor, and so he suggested to dress such an one in the King's robes and to set him on the royal steed with the crown of the King on his head. He suggested that one of the King's most noble princes lead the horse and rider through the streets of the city proclaiming, "Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delighteth to honor" (ch.6:9). Of course, he had himself in mind for all these honors. He clearly was ambitious to become the next king.

Imagine the shock and dismay of Haman when the King approved his suggestion, and commanded him to take the part of the servant and bestow all these honors on Mordecai, his hated enemy. What a revolting development for the proud Agagite. Suddenly the tide had turned against Haman. He did all that he himself had described and led the horse through the streets of the capital and proclaimed Mordecai's honor. He dared not pursue his purpose to hang Mordecai, now, so he returned to his house mourning and with his head covered. He sadly told his wife, Zeresh, all that had befallen him. His wise counselors told him that this sudden turn of events indicated that Haman's purpose to destroy the Jews with Mordecai would not succeed.

It is noteworthy how the Lord used very natural events to save Mordecai and to bring Haman down. Just that night the King could not sleep. He might have done many things to while away the time, but he chose to hear the record of his administration read. The history was read at just the right point to

remind the King of his debt to Mordecai. Also Haman came to the courtyard at just the right moment. The fact that no miracle was performed and that all of these things happened naturally is the greatest miracle of all. Another clear lesson is illustrated in the sudden turn of Haman's fate. His pride was humbled. The honors he imagined and suggested for himself, he had to confer on his hated nemesis. Before the day was over the star of Haman which had ascended so remarkably, had plunged into oblivion and darkness forever.

II Hanged on His Own Gallows: Before Haman had finished discussing his misfortune the King's chamberlains came to bring him to Esther's banquet. Ahasuerus was very anxious to hear Esther's request. He quickly asked her to make her request known. Very diplomatically and politely she asked the king to spare her life and the life of her people. She explained to the astonished king that she and her people had been sold "to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish" (ch.7:4). She told the king that if it were only a matter of being sold to be slaves, she would not have spoken up, but the destruction of her people would be a great loss to the Empire and to the administration of the King.

Ahasuerus asked in amazement who would dare to attempt such a thing or even to think of such a thing. Then Esther accused Haman; "The adversary and enemy is this wicked Haman." Ahasuerus arose in wrath and went out into the palace garden. Haman fell at Esther's feet and begged for mercy. The king came back and found Haman clutching at Esther and this made him still more angry. The king's servants covered Haman's face and one told the king of the gallows Haman had built for Mordecai. The king instantly commanded that Haman should be hung thereon. So Haman died that day. What a sudden turn about for Haman. He had come to the palace early that morning to get approval for the execution of Mordecai. Interrupted in that purpose he imagined that he was to receive the honors and acclaim for "the man whom the king delighteth to honor." But instead he became the lackey of Mordecai, leading the royal horse, with this hated Jew as its rider, through the city proclaiming Mordecai's praise. The day which had such great disappointment in the morning, only got worse in the afternoon when the banquet, Haman felt so honored to attend, turned into an indictment of his evil dealings against Esther and the Jews. Never did it enter the proud Haman's head, that the Queen was

a Jewess. So from the honorable position of prime-minister, to disgraced execution as a criminal, Haman fell in one day. Let us remember how easily the honors and fame in this world can pass away. Let us seek only for honor from God in the day we stand before Him.

So the honor Haman intended for himself was conferred on Mordecai. The death Haman devised for his enemy was inflicted on himself. The house and position of Haman was given to Mordecai. Now he became prime-minister.

III The Salvation of the Jews: The order to annihilate the Jews was still in effect. The law of the Medes and Persians could not be altered. So the Jewish people were still in mortal danger. Esther, once more appeared, unsummoned, before the king. Once again he extended to her the golden sceptre. She requested of Ahasuerus that he reverse the order which had been issued to exterminate the Jewish people. The king told Esther that he had reversed everything within his power, but the order, signed and sealed with his ring, could not be reversed. The king suggested, however, that Mordecai, his new prime minister, should find some way to neutralize and make ineffective, Haman's order. He gave Mordecai authority to seal such an edict with his own ring. Mordecai cleverly issued the proclamation that on the fateful 13th day of the 12th month, when the Jews were scheduled for extermination that they would have the right to band together and defend themselves and to slay their attackers and claim their possessions as their own spoil. The proclamation was sent in the 20 languages of the empire to all 127 provinces on the fastest horses of the kingdom. When Haman had issued his order to kill and destroy the Jews, the city of Shushan, the Capital was perplexed. At Mordecai's proclamation the city was glad and rejoiced.

When the day came, the Jews fought for their lives only when and if they were attacked. Seventy-five thousand attackers perished, five hundred in the Capital city. The ten sons of Haman were slain that day. To their credit the Jews did not claim the spoil.

The great victory became the occasion of an annual celebration which is observed to this day by the Jews. It is the feast of Purim and reminds us how God is concerned for the welfare of His people. He is able to turn the hearts of the hardest of earthly rulers to do His will and to accomplish His purposes. Yes, our Lord is able to reach His hand into the affairs of our

earthly governments and to cause His great purposes to be furthered and fulfilled.

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