

NEHEMIAH'S CORRECTION OF SABBATH - BREAKING.

– DEC. 3. – NEH. 13:15-22. –

"Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy." – Exod. 20:8.

NEHEMIAH remained with his people as its Persian governor for twelve years, when he was recalled to the palace by Artaxerxes. (Neh. 13:6.) He returned to Jerusalem by the king's permission probably five years afterward. Meantime the interests of the Israelites had prospered in temporal matters, but suffered from a moral and religious standpoint. Malachi prophesied during this period, and from his book we get a clear insight into some of the degeneracy of that time. The demoralization seems to have started with the desire to be on friendly terms with the gentiles in that vicinity, contrary to divine command.

This led to more mixed marriages, and correspondingly to a growing lack of interest in the divine law and worship. The high priest's grandson, Manasseh, married the daughter of Sanballat, once a prominent enemy of the Jews, and a man of influence; and one of the tithe-chambers of the Temple was desecrated by fitting it up as a dwelling place for Tobiah, the Ammonite, who by marriage became related to the high priest: and this policy, sanctioned by such high authority, was greatly followed by others. (Neh. 13:4,5,28; Mal. 2:14-16.) It is not surprising that such disregard of divine law led naturally and quickly to the neglect of tithes for the support of the ministers of the Temple, leading also to further selfishness, which, if it brought a sacrifice to the Lord at all was disposed to bring the poor, the lame and the blind of the flock, not the unblemished fatling. It is no wonder, either, that there followed in the wake of these things sorcery, adultery, false swearing, oppression, defrauding of widows and fatherless, etc. – Mal. 1:7,8; 3:5,9.

But our lesson deals particularly with another evil of that time – Sabbath-breaking. The policy of those who succeeded Nehemiah on his return to Persia was, as we have seen, to conciliate foreigners, and this, no doubt, largely in the interest of commerce. With the coming of heathen wives and the relaxing interest in the Lord and his commandments, and the frequent intercommunication with heathen who observed no Sabbath day, Sabbath day regulations were quickly broken down.

We may draw a lesson here for Spiritual Israel, and apply the Apostle's words, "Evil communications corrupt good manners," and our Lord's words, "Ye are not of this world, even as I am not of this world." The Spiritual Israelite is commanded to be separate from the world, and to seek his fellowships with his *own* people, the Lord's people, and not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers. (2 Cor. 6:14.) We may apply this specially to marriage, but to some extent it might be regarded as applicable also to business partnerships, etc. As the heathen peoples surrounding Israel exercised a continual pressure upon them, so worldly influences surrounding the Spiritual Israelites continually press them with the spirit of worldliness, which needs to be continually repelled; for once this spirit is admitted to the citadel of the heart it wars against the spirit of holiness, devotion to God, etc., and to whatever extent the worldly spirit invades the family, in that proportion the sanctifying of the spirit of truth is antagonized and offset. Let us, as Israelites indeed, be continually on guard against all alien and alienating influences of the world, the flesh and the devil.

Nehemiah, on his return to the governorship, at once addressed himself to the rectification of the disorders described, beginning with the cleansing of the Temple, the restoration of its service, and the proper supplies for its ministers. Then he came to the question of Sabbath desecration, with which our lesson particularly deals. He remonstrated with the nobles against such a violation of the divine command – the fourth in Israel's Decalogue. He pointed out to them the fact that Sabbath desecration had much to do with their Babylonish

captivity. It will be remembered that in explaining the seventy years' desolation of the land of Israel the Lord declared that he would make it desolate seventy years until it should have fulfilled its Sabbaths – its Jubilee years. (2 Chron. 36:21.) True, those were year-Sabbaths, and not day-Sabbaths, but we are to remember the Sabbath system (the seventh day and the fiftieth day, the seventh year, and the fiftieth year) was a ***connected whole***: and doubtless had Israel properly observed their Sabbath days they would also have properly observed their Sabbath years and Jubilees.*

*See [MILLENNIAL DAWN, VOL. II., Chap. 6.](#)

Nehemiah, after thus discoursing with the nobles on the propriety of the matter and the danger to the nation of thus violating the divine Law, began a reformation by closing the gates of Jerusalem at sundown of the sixth day of the week (Friday), and keeping them closed until sundown of the seventh day of the week (Saturday). The foreign tradesmen coming for business on the Sabbath were disappointed and obliged to camp outside the city; but in expectation that the reformation would be shortlived they came in like manner the next Sabbath. Nehemiah then warned them that to come again for Sabbath trade and to keep up a commotion around the gates of the city on the Sabbath day would subject them to arrest as disturbers of the law and peace of the city, and they were thus restrained. **[R2534 : page 253]** We must all commend Nehemiah's devotion to the divine Law and must concede that he in no sense of the word exceeded its requirements.

The Spiritual Israelite, altho in no sense of the word under the Law of Sinai, which was given exclusively to the fleshly Israelite, has nevertheless his Sabbath day – his rest day. It is a larger and a fuller day than was the Jewish one, as his rest is a grander and more perfect rest than the physical one of the Jew. The spiritual Israelite rests in faith, rests in Christ. Having taken upon him the yoke of this new Master he finds, as was promised, ***rest to his soul***, and not merely rest to his flesh – mind-rest, not merely bodily rest. (Matt. 11:29.) This is

the rest or Sabbath mentioned by the Apostle (Heb. 4:3) saying, "We which have believed do enter into rest." Our rest in the Lord is as complete as is our belief in him. He who believes fully *rests* fully; he who believes only partially *rests* but partially. The ideal condition of the spiritual Israelite is the attainment of a perfect rest, a perfect Sabbath-keeping, in his present experience, and a waiting and laboring for another and still more complete rest – the actual rest of the perfected condition – the rest that remains for the people of God. "Let us therefore labor to enter into that rest [Sabbath], lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief [of fleshly Israel.]" – Heb. 4:9-11.

While the Spiritual Israelite should never lose sight of these, his real Sabbaths, the antitypes of fleshly Israel's Sabbath *days* and Sabbath *years*, and while he should never forget that he is completely freed from the Law of Sinai respecting any and all Sabbaths, holy days, new moons, etc. (Col. 2:16), nevertheless he does rejoice in and should avail himself of any arrangements of nominal Christendom which may appear to be favorable to his spiritual resting, his continual Sabbath-keeping.

It so happens that nominal Christendom has set apart one day in seven as a Sabbath of rest – not the seventh day, which was commanded to the Jews, but the first day of the week, which was never commanded to anyone by divine authority. No matter by whatsoever misconception this first day of the week, called Sun-day in commemoration of the ancient heathen worship of the sun, was originally set apart as sacred and is still set apart by the laws of Christendom, it contains a great blessing, not only to the people at large but especially to the true Israelites.

(1) To the people at large it means a day of rest from toil, a day of recreation, refreshment, change; a day for different sights and sounds, a day different from other days immersed in toil; a day of opportunity for mental development according to the best lines they may have knowledge of and be willing to follow. For a time some

laborers, mechanics and merchants regarded the compulsory cessation of toil as a hardship, injurious to their interests, but they very generally have come to see that there is an over-supply of labor anyway, and that as far as the whole people is concerned, the labor of the six days will be worth exactly as much as the labor of seven. Consequently we find that now labor organizations are earnest for the enforcement of Sunday laws, and that practically the only persons of contrary mind are those who own and operate machinery. In 1886 a thousand carpenters in Berlin petitioned the government for protection against Sunday labor; in the same year a Socialistic congress in Belgium propounded as one of its chief demands Sunday rest. In Holland there is at present in progress an effort for emancipation from Sunday work; and recently in Wisconsin a Law and Order League was organized to enforce Sunday laws, etc. Working men are finding that in losing Sunday they gain nothing to compensate them.

While the fourth commandment to Fleshly Israel was chiefly in the nature of a type, foreshadowing the rest coming to Spiritual Israelites, nevertheless, like every divine law, it was in no wise injurious, but on the contrary very beneficial to Fleshly Israel to observe the seventh day, even as it is now beneficial to all mankind to observe a seventh day – whether the first day of the week, observed by Christendom, or the seventh day of the week observed by the Jews. Experience proves that such a rest is necessary from the human and physical standpoint. **[R2535 : page 253]**

(2) To the true Spiritual Israelite Sunday is and for long centuries has been a great boon, a great blessing – the only drawback has been that not infrequently he has been mistaught to believe that Sunday is the Jewish Sabbath or a divinely appointed substitute for it, and in consequence has been brought under a bondage – the bondage of the Jewish Law, with which really the Spiritual Israelite has nothing whatever to do, he being under a *new* covenant with a *new* law and a *new* Mediator. (Heb. 8:6.) But the Spiritual Israelite, already resting in heart (Sabbath-keeping antitypically, by faith in the Redeemer's

finished work), rightly understanding the matter and appreciating the privileges which a general Sunday observance brings, may use this day to wonderful profit and blessing. And the fact that he has an opportunity so to do means to him an obligation so to do; because, tho without stipulations of law to bind him, he is under the general Law of Love, and by it is obligated to do with his might what his hands find to do – to glorify the Lord, to bless the brethren, and to do good unto all men as he may have opportunity: and the day and customs are favorable to his exercise in all these respects.

The Spiritual Israelite is to esteem that whatever mistaken notions humanity may have had which led [R2535 : page 254] them to set apart the first day of the week, the matter has nevertheless been evidently of divine providence to present special opportunities for profit and progress to the Spiritual Israelites now called to be of the Royal Priesthood. And such are prompt to avail themselves of these privileges and opportunities; to assemble themselves for the study of the divine Word, for praise, for prayer and for spiritual fellowship, – building one another up in the most holy faith.

In view of the fact that the majority of the Lord's consecrated people are poor, – not many great, not many wise, not many learned, not many rich – how necessary it has been that the Lord should provide such an opportunity as this day affords for release from earthly toil and spiritual refreshment; and how fortunate it is for such that the masses of Christendom esteem rest on this day to be compulsory from the divine standpoint.

Of all the people in the world, therefore, those who enjoy the light of present truth and recognize this day as a God-given *privilege*, and not as compulsory, should be the very last to either do or say anything which would bring discredit on the day and its sacred observance as a day of rest. This, of course, does not mean that we should advocate its observance with the usual arguments; but it does mean that all such should be careful in their observance of the day for three reasons:

(1) Because they would not wish to see the day fall into disuse or disrespect in the esteem of the world in general, for humanity's sake, as well as for their own sakes – physical and spiritual.

(2) Because they would not wish to do anything which would lead others to a violation of a less enlightened conscience, remembering that the conscience is the most valuable as well as the most tender and easily injured quality of the human nature.

(3) Because they do wish to maintain a proper religious influence with their neighbors, whose minds are not clearly and fully enlightened on this subject – to the intent that they may exercise the greater influence for good and for the truth as time and opportunity shall offer.

For all these reasons we urge upon the readers of this journal a glad and careful observance of Sunday as a sacred, a holy day, providentially set apart by human law. Let it be entirely separated from business, and so far as possible from all labor not actually necessary; let it be employed in the upbuilding of themselves, and their families, and the household of faith, and as many as the truth shall draw into their sphere of influence, – in moral and spiritual directions.

In the concluding verse of the lesson Nehemiah asks the Lord's blessing upon himself, in view of the work which he had done in the name of the Lord. He was fighting valiantly for God's cause, and thereby making many enemies; and hence while not flinching from his duty it was not unreasonable, but very proper, that he should think of the Lord's faithfulness toward all faithful to him. Had Nehemiah lived in our day, with its Gospel high calling and privileges, we doubt not he would have been one of the "saints," and then, assuredly, he would have known definitely and clearly of the exceeding great and precious promises given to the Gospel Church. But he lived before the "high calling" began, before the exceeding great and precious promises were made. He knew not what he would receive of the Lord for his faithfulness, but we may know, because instructed of the holy Spirit

through the Apostle's writings. We may be assured that if Nehemiah continued faithful to the end of his career he would be amongst the worthies of the past mentioned by the Apostle in Hebrews 11 – those who wrought righteousness, and were valiant on the side of God and his Law. We are assured that these were acceptable with God and will ultimately be made perfect – in the future, after the Church, the elect body of Christ has been completed, been made perfect, and glorified in the heavenly Kingdom. – Heb. 11:39,40.
