

THE CAPTIVITY OF EPHRAIM.

– 2 KINGS 17:6-18. – *DECEMBER 11.* –

Golden Text: – "The face of the Lord is against them that do evil."
– I Pet. 3:12.

EPHRAIM was the name of the ten-tribe kingdom of Israel, as Judah was the name given to the two-tribe kingdom of the same people. Our lesson recounts how, at the divinely appointed time, Ephraim was utterly overwhelmed by the kingdom of Assyria. The people, deprived of weapons, although otherwise well treated, were deported to the lands under Assyrian control, while other peoples conquered by the Assyrians were settled in the land of Israel. The object of the conqueror evidently was to break the national spirit and reduce the various peoples conquered to a kind of serfdom, the better to collect taxes or revenues for the Assyrian treasury. Probably the people were not worse off as respected their material welfare, for they were not treated as slaves but as emigrants and settlers.

For many centuries Ephraim, the ten-tribe kingdom, especially after Solomon's death, was extremely perverse: not more degraded, we may presume, than the surrounding nations, but their perversion was more wicked, more reprehensible, because of greater privileges, blessings, knowledge and opportunities which the Lord had granted to them as the posterity of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the inheritors of the great Oath-bound Covenant made to Abraham and confirmed to Isaac and Jacob. One is amazed, in reading of the Lord's dealings with Ephraim and Judah, to note their general tendency toward idolatry, and this in spite of the divine chastisements, corrections, etc., which evidently influence only the few. In thinking of these matters we are to remember that the surrounding nations were still more grossly steeped in idolatry and its lustful orgies, practised in the name of worship. These other nations were not specially chastised for idolatry as was Israel, but

were allowed to practically take the course they chose, as the Apostle explains in Rom. 1:28: God gave them over to a reprobate mind and to doing those things which were not proper because they had not wished to retain him in their minds.

The captivity of Ephraim should be viewed from this same standpoint. It was God's abandonment of the ten-tribe kingdom, his permission for them to have their way, and henceforth be treated of him as the heathen – without special chastisement. It was in this sense and in this sense only that those tribes were "lost." Located in various parts of Assyria they gradually assimilated with the population surrounding them, and lost identity as Israelites, intermarrying with their neighbors.

It was because of their failure to appreciate him, because of hankering after false gods and false worship and the more or less mingling of these false worships with the true worship, that God withdrew his **[R3463 : page 350]** favor. It is pointed out that God did not cast them off without reproofing them, chastising them and sending them messages by prophets and seers. To the seers the Lord gave prophetic visions and messages built upon these, and by the prophets he sent them instructions and warnings, encouragements and threatenings. Elijah and Elisha had been amongst them, and later Jonah and Amos and Hosea. Through all these the Lord had warned and cautioned. Through Hosea the Lord had made especially kind and loving appeals to them as a father to children – "How can I **[R3464 : page 350]** give thee up, Ephraim? How shall I make thee as Admah?" – a desolate room. Again we read, "Ephraim feedeth on the wind" – "I will heal thy backslidings, I will love thee freely." These messages had indeed some effect upon a few individuals in the nation, but did not affect the people as a whole, neither did it lead to a reformation. As our lesson declares (vs. 14), "They would not hear, but hardened their neck like to the neck of their fathers...And they rejected his statutes and his covenant that he made with their fathers, and his testimonies which he testified unto them;

and they followed vanity," etc. Hardness of neck here is a figure of speech doubtless drawn from the stiffness of neck of a yoke of unruly bullocks – unmanageable, self-willed, resenting every effort to turn them in the right way.

The wrong course of the people is further declared in the statement that they not only worshiped false gods but made their sons and daughters pass through the fire, and used divination and enchantments, and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the Lord. They became the slaves of their passions and self-deceptions, and were so misled of the evil spirits as to consider this burning of their own children as acceptable sacrifices to false gods. It was well that all pretensions on their part to be people of God should cease; it was well that they should be removed to new scenes, amongst strangers, where under new conditions their minds would be otherwise engaged, even though it should be an entire alienation from God.

VIEWED FROM THE DIVINE STANDPOINT.

There is but one standpoint from which the history of Israel can be properly understood and appreciated: namely, Israel's inheritance in the Abrahamic Covenant. All of God's dealings with the children of Jacob were with a view to a selection of the two seeds of Abraham – a natural seed and a spiritual one. To this end their national experiences conspired – to find in that nation certain noble, loyal, reverential souls, such as David, Jonathan, and all the holy prophets, and to prepare that people by disciplines, prunings, etc., to be the people to whom Messiah would first present himself and among whom he would find a goodly "remnant" prepared to be his followers.

The separation of the ten tribes from the two tribes at the death of Solomon was an important step in this selection. The Lord had distinctly stated in advance that the Law-giver whom he had promised should come out of Judah, and hence any Israelites indeed

in the ten-tribe kingdom must have looked with longing interest toward Judah as the ultimate end of their hopes – the Messiah, and the fulfilment through him of the Abrahamic Covenant. Throughout the varying history of these two kingdoms the greater religious faith and zeal was always to be found in Judah, and gradually many of the more religious in Ephraim removed to Judah and identified themselves therewith, because of the greater religious privileges and blessings there enjoyed. Thus Judah eventually represented the cream of the nation, and the records show that not only Hezekiah, the king of Judah, was favorably disposed toward his brethren of Ephraim and made them welcome to the religious assemblies, but that other kings, his predecessors, had done similarly. Thus seen the captivity of Ephraim was merely the rejection of the skim milk of the nation, and as we have already seen was really not at all to their injury so far as temporal interests were concerned. It was their cutting off from divine favor in respect to the Abrahamic Covenant that was specially regrettable.

When a good while afterward the kingdom of Judah was overthrown and its people similarly taken into captivity and similarly scattered amongst the nations composing the Babylonish empire it was merely a carrying out of a further development of the divine plan. By this last stroke the Lord would put away all the more grovelling, sensual and worldly-minded of his people. The desolation of the land for seventy years permitted all who would to forget the original covenant of which they were heirs, permitted them to intermarry with the nations around them if they would, permitted them to settle and prosper and be content in their new homes; and then the Lord in his providence opened up a way for all who were not satisfied with the good earthly portion they were enjoying to return to their own land – a desolated land.

We can readily see that none of them would come back under such conditions except those who had strong faith in the Lord and in the original Oath-bound Covenant made to Abraham and

confirmed to Isaac and Jacob and the nation. All without faith and all of weak faith, all lacking in zeal, would surely find it much to their advantage every way to remain where they were. And so we find that only 55,000 [R3464 : page 351] out of all the millions of those two nations cared to return to the land of promise – for in the Lord's providence the proclamation of King Cyrus permitted all Israelites of every tribe to return to their own land. The faithful people who did return were the very cream of that nation, and their successors, to whom our Lord Jesus presented himself as king, represented, in many respects, the noblest and best people in the world. We should not be misunderstood: while the majority of Ephraim and Judah commingled with the heathen, others preserved their identity as Israelites without returning to Palestine, just as we see the Israelites today in every part of the world preserving their religious institutions and faith. But then each preserved his tribal identity, whereas now all tribal lines are lost and obliterated. It is of these that the Apostle sometimes spoke as "our twelve tribes scattered abroad" – not lost but scattered, as today. The only ones lost are those who have become Gentiles, by utter disregard of the peculiar characteristics of the nation, of which by divine arrangement circumcision was one.

Our lesson viewed from this standpoint is profitable. It shows us that God is working out his great and wonderful plan. Those favored in that plan are not coerced, though graciously dealt with and appealed to; neither does their neglect or rejection of divine favor estop the development of the divine plan.

"God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform."

ANALOGIES IN SPIRITUAL ISRAEL.

We may reasonably expect analogies in spiritual Israel, and we find them. The first epoch of the Church's history in the days of the

apostles was quickly followed at their death by the great "falling away" from the faith and simplicity of the original establishment; chastisements followed, persecutions, etc., and finally the great majority went into captivity to the world – to Babylon. To these the worship of images and shrines and pictures and the offering of incense and burning of holy candles were associated with a great false sacrifice – the "sacrifice of the mass" – the "abomination that maketh desolate."

Gradually the Lord separated from that system of confusion and error the few who were spiritual Israelites indeed. Protestantism thus gradually grew, and in some respects represented more nearly than did the Greek and Roman churches the true hopes and prospects of the Christian; and yet in Protestantism much was found that was reprehensible in God's sight, many who had only a form of godliness without the power, but some – a proportionately larger number than in Papacy – were found at heart loyal to the Lord and desirous of knowing his will and plan.

These dealings with nominal spiritual Israel for the past eighteen centuries are gradually separating to the Lord an overcoming class and preparing a remnant for him in his second presence. The Reformation movement gathered out of Papacy the majority of the loyal souls indeed at that time: and now in the harvest time of this age the ripe wheat is being garnered from "all Israel," from Catholicism as well as Protestantism, though because of previous siftings, etc., much the larger proportion, as might be expected, will be gathered from Protestantism – Israelites indeed in whom there is no guile.

"KEEP YOURSELVES FROM IDOLS."

The Apostle's words, "Keep yourselves from idols," are not by any means meaningless to spiritual Israel. All around us we see idolatry – not on the same low plane practised in olden times, but idolatry nevertheless. Some worship the idol of wealth, others at the

shrine of fame, and in a general sense the spirit of worldliness is swallowing up the time and talent and influence of the civilized world, which professedly claims to be Christendom – Christ's kingdom – spiritual Israel. As natural Israel had its groves and totem-posts, some plain and some carved, so many spiritual Israelites today have for their totem-posts the various creeds of the various denominations set up in the past. To these the masses bow with reverent thoughtlessness, largely neglecting the Almighty One and the Word of his testimony, which Word rebukes all such misrepresentations of the divine character and plan.

We have not today in nominal Christendom a literal Moloch of brass, heated red hot by internal fires, with arms open to receive the children to his embrace, as ancient Israel had, but we have instead a Moloch on a much larger scale – a much worse misrepresentation of the only true God, whose character is wisdom, justice, love and power. We have today in the minds of people, revered by many, mental imaginations of a god red hot with the flames of hell or purgatory, and visions of millions agonizing in his embrace. How terrible the thought! How God-dishonoring! How manifestly the work of the Adversary and totally contrary to the gracious messages which the Lord has so repeatedly sent, not only through the prophets of old but also through his Son and through the apostles, "speaking peace through Jesus Christ," and assuring us of his love, as manifested in the great redemptive **[R3465 : page 351]** sacrifice, and of his intention to bless the world through the glorified Christ by appointing "times of restitution of all things spoken by the mouth of all the holy prophets since the world began." – Acts 3:21.

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