

GATHERING AND WINNOWER.

– EZRA 8:21-32. – NOVEMBER 12. –

Golden Text: – "The hand of our God is upon all those for good that seek him."

APREVIOUS lesson showed us how the rebuilding of the Temple had been delayed for about twenty years, with various discouragements, by the returning exiles from Babylon, but was finally finished, the people being spurred on in their zeal through the prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah. With the completion of the Temple came a lull in the zeal of the people and a corresponding deadness in religious matters for about fifty years. We must sympathize with the struggles of those poor people against the unfavorable conditions surrounding them. Their city wall was still unbuilt, they were exposed to the malevolence of their neighbors, who hated the Jews, largely because of their refusal to mingle with the Samaritans, a thing which the former were not permitted to do according to the law of Moses.

Added to this unfriendly relationship to their nearest neighbor was the fact that they were continually subject to trouble, loss of life and loss of property from marauding bands. They did not connect these losses and disadvantages properly in their minds, nor see that, rightly received, all these matters would have been working together for good to them, and that anything which would not have been for their welfare the Lord would have hindered. Instead they grew careless and indifferent to religious matters, losing considerably the zeal which first brought them from Babylon. Indeed many of them concluded that they would affiliate more with the Gentiles round about them, thus setting at naught the divine counsel – would seek worldly alliances for themselves and their children. As a result, with many of them religion reached a very low plane – their law was disesteemed and disobeyed.

God, however, still had his eye upon the nation which he had chosen, and which, according to divine purpose, must be sifted yet kept together until the coming of Messiah and the establishment through him of Spiritual Israel. In harmony with this we find that at this time the Lord stirred up the love and zeal of others residing in Babylon, chiefly the children of some who [R3659 : page 333] had declined to participate in the first return under Zerubbabel or were too young to go or to exercise their own volitions at that time. It was nearly seventy-five years after the return of the first company of about 50,000 under the decree of Cyrus that Ezra, a young man filled with religious zeal, became the leader of a company of the Jews still residing in Babylon, and went up with them to inspire and revive those who had first returned and their children and grandchildren meantime born in Palestine. Our lesson relates to the return of this second company.

THE KING'S ASSISTANCE

Xerxes, the Persian king who took Esther to be his queen, and who exalted Mordecai, her uncle, to be chief minister of state in the Persian empire, had been murdered by a palace conspiracy, and his son Artaxerxes was the reigning monarch at the time Ezra undertook the expedition in question. Three things were necessary for the success of the project: First, the king's promise or decree; secondly, money not only for the expenses of the expedition but also to properly forward the work at Jerusalem and encourage those who had become discouraged there; thirdly, the interest of the Jews required to be aroused so that a sufficient number of volunteers might be found. The king furnished the money and gave the necessary authority. This might seem remarkable did we not remember that in the Lord's providence his acquaintance at his father's court as a boy would more or less associate him with Mordecai and other Jews prominent in the empire and inspire him also with a respect for the God of the Jews.

Ezra belonged to the priestly family and evidently was very sincere, not only inspiring the king with confidence in the project but also enlisting the sympathy and cooperation of many of his fellow countrymen to the number of about 1,700 – probably including the families of some of them. These were volunteers – no one had a right to insist upon their going. Some may have gone with more or less of a spirit of adventure, but doubtless having knowledge of conditions at Jerusalem the majority were thoroughly enthused with a religious ardor for God and for his law. Knowing what we do through the records of Ezra's thorough-going character, teaching, practices, we may be sure that no other class would be attracted to the standard raised by him in this expedition. An illustration of his spirit is furnished in the first verse of our lesson.

A certain point for the assembling of those who would return with him had been established at the river Ahava. The first condition enjoined on the assembly was a day of fasting, and we may be sure also a day of prayer to the Lord for his blessing upon the expedition – "That we might humble ourselves before our God and seek of him a straight way for us and for our little ones and for all our substance." It was a great undertaking in those days to set out upon a journey of over eight hundred miles and requiring slow travel, made necessary by the presence of women and children in the company and the absence of vehicles. The journey required about four months' time. True, there was a shorter road through the desert, but that would have been much more unfavorable in every way, and extra hazardous on account of the Bedouin tribes of the desert, who would have sought to take from them the treasures of gold and silver which they took along and which are estimated at between two and three million dollars in our money, but really equivalent to much more than this when measured by the standard of the value of labor now as compared with then. **[R3659 : page 334]**

SPIRITUAL ISRAEL'S TESTINGS

Seeking to apply this lesson to spiritual Israel, we see during this Gospel age somewhat similar siftings and tests of the Lord's people. We find to-day that some of the children of the most devout reformers have lapsed into measurable indifference respecting the holy things of the Lord and his law, and are disposed, like the Israelites of the first return, to not only fellowship the world but to amalgamate with it in customs, in habits, in social functions. The spirit of separateness and consecration which enthused their forefathers is dying out, leading to a mixed or Churchianity condition not at all pleasing to the Lord and calling for reformation. On the other hand we see spiritual Israelites coming forward from Babylon with great zeal for the Lord and his cause, and if perhaps we wonder, we find a solution of the matter to be that some of these inherited a blessing from their parents, and we remember the word of the Lord that he would show mercy and favor to many generations of them that love and reverence him.

Ezra seems to have been led to the announcement of the fast by a realization of his own weakness and of the dangers which would beset the Israelites on the journey. Relying upon the Lord's promises given to natural Israel, that they would be blessed in temporal things while obedient to the divine precepts, he had almost boasted of this matter to the king Artaxerxes, saying, "The hand of our God is upon all them that seek him for good, but his power and his wrath are against all them that forsake him." It had been on the strength of this faith and this testimony that the royal decree had gone forth and the moneys had been subscribed, and Ezra felt that now to ask the king for a troop of soldiers for the protection of himself and his associates would have implied at least their doubt of the favor of God toward them or of his ability to protect them.

Realizing the perils of the situation and the danger from enemies, and that he was responsible in great measure for the lives

of those who would be under his direction, and that under the circumstances he could not ask for soldiers, Ezra felt all the more the necessity for going before the Lord in prayer and with fasting, and hence the fast was enjoined upon all the people. We cannot doubt this did them good, tending to direct their hearts to the Lord as the great Captain of their Salvation, awakening in them the thought that the whole expedition was based upon faith in the Lord and in his promises as respects the future and the present life.

FASTINGS OF SPIRITUAL ISRAELITES

That there is an advantage in fasting and prayer to the spiritual Israelite is beyond question. Our case is not exactly that of the Israelites under Ezra, and yet there is some similarity. We are not guaranteed earthly blessings or earthly protection against earthly adversaries. As spiritual Israelites, however, we have a still higher guarantee, for in our estimation our spiritual interests as new creatures are higher and grander than all of our earthly interests, beyond comparison. We have the guarantee that, whatever shall befall us, the Lord is able and willing to overrule it for good if we trust in him. It is in proportion as this gracious promise of the Lord fails to be appreciated by us that we look to the world for protection. The very experience of realizing danger and feeling timidity may prove indeed a superior blessing to us if it will but lead us nearer to the Lord – through fasting and prayer.

Fasting, as we have seen heretofore, signifies self-denial. The thought is not the weakening of the body by absolute abstention from food, but rather a disciplining of the body by abstaining from delicacies, relishes, etc. No doubt such fastings are profitable to us in other ways than one. They not only relieve the physical system of over pressure, but with many tend to clarify the mind and make it more acute, more spiritually inclined. We all recognize this as a fact whether we can explain the philosophy of it or not. To all believers, especially to all starting upon a course of consecration, of self-

devotion to the Lord and to his cause, we commend fasting in reasonable and proper ways, the denying to one's self the gratification of natural passions, and in general the living moderately, abstemiously, using this world and its comforts and blessings as not abusing them – the using of them in so far and in such a manner as will be to the highest advantage as new creatures in Christ. With the consecrated Christian this is not only the incident of a day but the course of a life. His every day is a fast day, a day of self-denial as respects any and everything sinful, and as respects any and everything that would not inure to the spiritual advantage of himself or others.

CONTINUOUS BAPTISM AND FASTING

Our fasting is like our baptism – it has a definite point of beginning and a definite point of ending. It begins with our baptism even unto death and it ends in death. These self-deniers, these fasters, are the self-sacrificers, the overcomers of the world, to whom the Lord has promised his special blessing of spiritual favors, peace, joy and all the fruits and graces of the Spirit in the present time, and by and by the everlasting blessedness of fellowship with himself in all the joys and perfections and completeness of the Kingdom condition – glory, honor and immortality.

Ezra says, "So we fasted and besought our God for this: and he was entreated of us." This verse could be applied in full measure to the spiritual Israelites who, under the lead of the great High Priest of our profession, are travelling to the New Jerusalem. Their fasting and prayers to the Lord for protection and help along the narrow way and for success to the journey's end are heard, and the Lord assures us in advance that all such petitions are granted. It is our Father's good pleasure to give the holy Spirit to those who ask, and to make all things work together for their good, and to bring them under the leading of the great Chief Shepherd and ultimately to the Kingdom. In other words, "He is faithful who has called us, who also will do

it." (1 Thess. 5:24) – he will do all he has promised to do, exceedingly more abundantly than we could have asked of him or expected. The whole matter is with us: if our consecration is based upon faith in the redemptive work of our Lord, if it is a full and complete consecration, and if we live it out day by day, the results will be all and more than we ever expected.

"LET EVERYTHING BE DONE DECENTLY AND IN ORDER."

Our lesson shows that Ezra divided the wealth contributed by the Jews throughout Babylonia and Persia and by the king amongst twelve prominent men of the Levitical tribe, strict count being kept of what **[R3660 : page 335]** each received and he being held responsible for the delivery of that amount to the properly constituted representatives of the Jews at Jerusalem. Thus our Lord, who is the Captain of our journey and who is bringing us to the heavenly Kingdom, gives to every one of his followers pounds and talents for which they must ultimately give account.

In verse 28 Ezra said to these twelve men, "Ye are holy unto the Lord and the vessels are holy, and the gold and silver are a freewill offering unto God, the God of your fathers. Watch ye and keep them, until ye weigh them before the chief of the priests and the Levites and the princes of the fathers' houses of Israel at Jerusalem in the chambers of the house of the Lord." The chambers of the Temple were the little rooms of the court, separate from the Temple yet connected therewith. In these the officiating priests lived, and in them were stored the treasures belonging to the Temple and its service; they were, therefore, the safety deposit vaults of that time for the Lord's treasury.

We can see the responsibility that rested upon those men, yet still greater responsibility rests upon us who have received of the Lord's spiritual gifts and treasures, his great Truth. If it was required of those men handling earthly treasures that they should be faithful

and watchful, diligent, much more may this be reasonably required of us – "A charge to keep I have, a God to glorify." All of these lessons should come to us as fresh reminders of our responsibility, not for our discouragement, but reversely to make us more watchful, more careful, more zealous, more appreciative of the riches of God's grace committed to us. Those of old time were to hide their treasure, but we are commanded to show ours on every occasion – "Let your light so shine before men, that they seeing your good works may glorify your Father who is in heaven." The more we let our light shine, the brighter it will shine; the more we use and display the riches of God's grace entrusted to us, the more valuable will be our treasure and the more safe we will be, for it is a treasure which our enemies will not really covet, and our faithfulness in acknowledging the Lord in all our ways will assure us of his protection and care.

AT THE JOURNEY'S END

Ezra and his company, after a four months' journey, arrived safe at Jerusalem, the Lord having indeed kept them and delivered them from the marauding bands of enemies on the journey. Then it was that Ezra's real work began. He found matters at Jerusalem and throughout Judea in a much worse condition than he had anticipated, and was used of the Lord in instituting a very radical national reformation which proved a great blessing to the people, though it sifted out some of their number.

Ezra magnified the Law, showing the people how the calamities that had befallen them as a nation were all foretold in the Law and were all the result of a failure to keep that Law, and the proper course now was not only to rebuild the Temple, as they had done, but to go back to the Law and seek to keep it inviolate to the best of their ability. He pointed to the fact that they had made unlawful unions with the tribes and nationalities surrounding them, and that the only course remaining was to separate themselves from all heathen people. This involved special trouble and trial in cases where Jews

had married heathen wives, and Ezra's course would be roundly denounced by the entire civilized world to-day; but evidently he did the proper thing at the proper time in God's estimation, and was the divine instrument in sharply separating between the Jews and other peoples. This spirit has persisted amongst the Jews ever since, and the effect has been what the Lord desired, the keeping of that nation and people comparatively separate and distinct from all others. True, it wrought great hardship upon the wives who were put away and the children who were thus alienated, though much the same course is to-day prescribed by law against the Mormons, and the wives of plural marriages and bigamists.

A lesson for spiritual Israelites may be found herein, though not according to the exact letter of Ezra's teaching. The spiritual Israelite is directed by the Captain of our Salvation, through the Apostle Paul as his mouthpiece, to be not unequally yoked together with unbelievers in marriage, and to have as little as possible to do with the world in general. Nevertheless the spiritual Israelite is enjoined that if the unbelieving husband or wife remain and it be possible to live together in unity even under trying circumstances, they should do it; but if the unbelieving one depart, let him depart, consider it to be of the Lord's providence that the Israelite should be free from a vexatious alliance, though he would not be free to remarry.

"HOW LOVE I THY LAW!"

The call of Ezra's teaching, enforced by the word of the Lord through the Law upon the Israelites who had gotten into worldly conditions and alliances, must have been very similar to the proclamation of Present Truth to-day amongst Protestants. After having come out of Babylon to the extent of leaving Roman Catholicism, they have become involved with the world in a system which may very properly be termed Babylonish – Churchianity. The Lord's people have entered worldly alliances through worldly sects and parties, contrary to the divine injunction and the spirit of the

divine law, which commands us to be subject in religious matters to the Lord and to him alone. These misalliances with the daughters of Rome are so general in our day that only the Israelites indeed will have the spiritual ears to hear the message or the spiritual courage to break off the improper union, to stand out separate from all earthly alliances as the people of God, recognizing one Head of the one Church whose names are written in heaven – recognizing as brethren all who are united to that one Head, and repudiating all false bodies of Christ (churches) as well as the false heads to which they are united.

This is the particular trial apparently of our day. The voice of the Lord is being sounded forth in every quarter of Christendom, saying, "Babylon is fallen, is fallen, Come out of her, my people, that ye partake not of her sins and receive not of her plagues." The churchianity of Protestantism is but a transplanting of the spirit of Babylon to new ground, and brings into bondage all those who will associate with these sects and parties; and all who would be in full accord with the Lord and have his fullest blessing must be faithful to his message and stand firm and loyal to him at any cost. To such and such alone the message of the Lord is now going forth, proving a glorious blessing and uplift, bringing them nearer to the Lord and into closer fellowship with those who are truly his and most completely under the blessings and provisions which he has made for his faithful.

