

A GREAT REFORMER

– *EZRA 8:15-36. – NOVEMBER 19TH. –*

"The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek Him."

The Jews evidently were prosperous in Babylon, and their exile for a time at least led them to earnest study of the Law and the Prophets. In fact, Judah, probably under Ezra as one of its chief representatives, seems to have prospered more in Babylon than in Jerusalem – not as a whole, but a certain pious few. These were vexed as they from time to time heard of the poverty of their brethren in Jerusalem, and that matters religious were not prosperous there, and that the rebuilding of the temple which represented Divine presence with the nation was but poorly served.

Deeply in earnest for a revival of the true religion, Ezra laid the matter before representatives in Babylon and before the Persian king, with favorable results. Large donations were made for the repairs of the temple and the institution of its worship upon a proper basis, and in general to help the interests of the Jewish cause in Jerusalem. The donations of gold and silver totaled a little more than two million dollars, and the total number of persons who volunteered to be the company numbered about seventeen hundred. The donations were a public trust, and Ezra wisely divided the treasure between twelve principal men of his party, taking receipts from each.

Before the journey proper was begun, a fast was proclaimed and the Almighty God was entreated to grant His blessing upon the undertaking and to direct the course of the travelers. They were not without cause for fear for themselves, for it must have been generally known that they carried a large amount of treasure with them, and the country through which they must pass was infested with robbers who might pounce upon them at any time to carry off their treasure, which

consisted of large supplies of wheat, wine and oil besides the gold and silver.

"IN ALL THY WAYS ACKNOWLEDGE HIM"

The beginning of the journey with fasting and prayer gives us an insight into Ezra's power and efficiency. "God was with him" – he walked with God, he sought to know and to do the Divine will. Surely it is in vain that any would attempt to serve the Lord and yet neglect to humble themselves before Him and to make request for His blessing and guidance. We submit that fasting and prayer and earnest desire to know and to do the Lord's will are far more efficacious for good than are large donations of money. Perhaps there has been too great a tendency on the part of many to leave out the matter of religious work at home and abroad save along financial lines, forgetful in part at least that they labor in vain unless the Lord grant His blessing.

The fact that notwithstanding our wonderful financial efforts during the past century there are today twice as many heathen as there were a century ago, should take us to the Lord in prayer to assure ourselves regarding the meaning of the prayer He taught us – "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is done in heaven." Seeing the futility of our efforts to bring about heavenly conditions on earth ought to lead all of God's earnest children to search His Word and to see whether or not it teaches that the second coming of Messiah is to unite to Himself His "elect" Church as His Bride and then to establish the Kingdom of Righteousness which, backed by Divine power, will bind Satan, overthrow sin and death, and uplift mankind and make of earth a paradise.

THE WAY OF TRANSGRESSORS

Ezra and his party reached Jerusalem in safety after a journey of exactly four months. As great a distance can be covered in less than four days with our modern conveniences, which surely seem to be

precursors of the [R4911 : page 411] glorious Messianic Epoch, the wonderful prosperity of which has so long been foretold.

Ezra has been censured as narrow and cruel because of the reforms at Jerusalem of which he became the leader and adviser. The Jews who first returned from Babylon were full of zeal for the Divine Law, and refused to inter-marry or to have social dealings with their heathen neighbors; but as their prosperity lagged their zeal slackened. Carelessness and irreligion came in. Hence Ezra soon found that many Jews were inter-marrying with their neighbors, and that a condition of things prevailed which, if continued, would mean the corruption of the nation to which God had given the promise of national continuity, and the promise that ultimately He would use them as a nation for the sending out of the light and truth which He has promised shall yet bless all the families of the earth.

A general assembly or convocation of Israelites was called and held to consider this matter of mixed marriages and the requirements of the Law, and any failing to be represented were notified that they would be in danger of being counted out of the congregation as aliens. It was a time of weeping and sorrow and distress [R4912 : page 411] amongst the people as they realized that conformity to the Divine Law would mean the breaking of family ties. The Divine Law had been broken and now the penalty was to be felt. The way of the transgressors was hard.

This requirement of the Law can be understood only by those who realize that Israel was under a special Covenant with God by the compact at Mt. Sinai, and that that nation was subject to every feature of that Law. No such law is or has ever been put upon other nations – nor upon Christians, who are not under the Law but under Grace. We must not, however, object to the Jew's being faithful to his Covenant, for that Law Covenant is as binding upon him today as it ever was; and it will remain binding until it shall be superseded by the New Law Covenant referred to in Jeremiah 31:31. The great Messiah, Head and

Body, will be the Mediator of that New Covenant, and its sealing will be effected by the blood of "the better sacrifices" of this Gospel Age.

To the Christian, the next thing corresponding to this Law is the Apostolic injunction that the consecrated followers of Christ should not inter-marry with the worldly but "only in the Lord." (2 Cor. 6:14.) There is surely Divine wisdom in this injunction, yet it is not a law, and Christians who have married unconsecrated persons are not to leave them but to fulfil their marriage covenants. – I Cor. 7:14.

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