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THE VALUE OF PRAYER

– NOVEMBER 26TH. – NEHEMIAH 1. –

"The effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much."

– James 5:16.

THIRTEEN YEARS after Ezra's company returned to Jerusalem, Nehemiah went thither with an escort and full authority from the king of Persia to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and to restore its gates. It would appear that Ezra's reformation, while very helpful to the people, brought against them the violent opposition of their neighbors, as was to have been expected. The Jews, now considerable in numbers, were despised by their neighbors who wished to drive them out of the land. The wall of the city was poor and did not withstand the attack.

Josephus says that Nehemiah, wealthy and favored of the king of Persia, resided in the king's palace at Shushan. He was a pious man and deeply interested in the land of his fathers. While walking one day he overheard two men talking in the Hebrew tongue, and accosted them. [R4913 : page 411] They had been to Jerusalem and had returned. One of them proved to be his own relative. He gladly inquired respecting the holy land, the holy city, God's temple, and concerning the Jews who had returned from Babylon. The sad story of their trials and the desolation of the city and its exposure to enemies touched his heart and led him to prayer. That prayer is the subject of this lesson.

ANSWERING OUR OWN PRAYERS

Undoubtedly, the recorded prayer of Nehemiah is merely an epitomized statement, for we read that he made the matter a subject of earnest prayer for four months before he reached the point of action where God used him in the fulfilment of his own petition. This reminds us of how our Lord instructed His disciples, saying, "Pray ye the Lord of the Harvest that He would send forth more laborers into His Harvest."

While the disciples thus prayed it would imply that they would be laboring in accordance with their prayers, that they would be doing all in their own power to forward the Harvest work as well as to interest other laborers in the same. Thus it must always be that earnest effort will accompany prayer. Prayers not accompanied by efforts brand themselves as insincere. The prayer which is not of faith is sin – unscriptural, sacrilegious.

THE SOUL'S SINCERE DESIRE

The poet has well defined prayer as being "The soul's sincere desire, uttered or unexpressed." Another has well declared that it "is the Christian's vital breath" – that is to say, Christian character cannot be maintained without prayer any more than a human life could be maintained without breathing. Who has not noticed that all the great Bible characters used of the Almighty were accustomed to go to Him regularly in prayer and to seek for guidance from Him in respect to every matter. Even the great Redeemer, holy, harmless, undefiled and separate from sinners, needed to pray to the Father – needed His fellowship and communion – needed to be in touch with the Infinite One. Several of His prayers are recorded, and we are told that He spent the entire night in prayer on more than one occasion.

Some may ask, Would the Almighty change His plans in answer to our petitions? Assuredly He would not. Indeed, on the contrary, we are cautioned in the Scriptures to ask only according to His will. We are warned that if we ask amiss our petitions will not be answered. Hence the necessity for studying God's Word and being enlightened thereby respecting the Divine program that we may ask in harmony with every feature of it and receive strength and encouragement through the answer to our petitions.

The Redeemer gave us the keynote to this, saying, "If ye abide in Me and My words abide in you, ye may ask what ye will and it shall be done unto you." (John 15:7.) Alas! how few seem to note the two limitations of this promise:

(1) The one asking must be *in Christ* – abiding in Him. This means that the petitioner has turned from sin, has accepted Christ and the terms of discipleship. It implies that he has made a full consecration of his [R4913 : page 412] life to the Lord and become a new creature in Christ Jesus. Such, abiding in Christ, may pray to the Father.

(2) After having come into membership and fellowship with the Head, the Messiah, these must ask in harmony with God's Word and promises; in order to know what things to ask for they must search the Scriptures, which are sufficient, "that the man of God may be thoroughly furnished." There are many things for which we may pray, the answer to which would not involve any change in the Divine plans. We are not to understand that all the little incidents of life are foreordained and predestinated. So far as the world is concerned, many of its affairs are purely of chance under the permission of natural laws with which God does not generally interfere. It is in the affairs of His consecrated people that God assures us He takes a special interest. These are so supervised by His providence that He guarantees His children that all things shall work together for good to them.

WHAT TO PRAY FOR

God is pleased to make use of the little talents possessed by His consecrated people, and their usefulness as ambassadors for God and for Christ, in their own families and own cities, will avail in proportion to and depend very much upon the earnestness of their prayers and endeavors. Those who pray for opportunities to serve the Lord and His cause and who watch for the fulfilment of their prayers in the open doors of opportunity will surely have them. "He that seeketh findeth, and to him that knocketh it shall be opened."

The baptized in Christ may pray for earthly necessities, as in the Lord's prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread;" but we are not to pray for more than the bread and water which the Lord has authorized His people to pray for. The true Christian, instead of thinking about what he shall eat, what he shall drink, and wherewithal he shall be clothed –

instead of making earthly things the subject of his prayers, will be thinking of and praying about his higher, his heavenly interests. More particularly he will be concerned respecting his spiritual food, spiritual clothing, spiritual growth in grace and knowledge and love, and for these particularly he will pray and strive.

Our Lord declares, "After all these things (food and clothing) do the Gentiles seek; but seek ye first (chiefly) the Kingdom of God and His righteousness." God's people are consequently to attain a joint-heirship in Messiah's great Kingdom according to the Divine invitation that we should be "heirs of God and joint-heirs with Jesus Christ our Lord." We are to seek possessions in that Kingdom with our Lord in His throne, by seeking to develop characters which will have divine approval and make us fit for that high exaltation. Our Lord speaks of these as seeking the righteousness of the Kingdom – that Kingdom which will be established amongst mankind for the very purpose of enforcing righteousness; and whoever will be a joint-heir with Christ must love righteousness and hate iniquity, and must develop this character before he dies in order to hope for a share in this Kingdom and its glory, honor and immortality. For this he will be seeking, striving, praying – above all else.

