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JEWES PROVIDENTIALLY DELIVERED

—ESTHER 4:10-5:3—NOVEMBER 5—

Golden Text:—“The Lord preserveth all them that love him.”—Psalm 145:20

WHILE the more faithful of the Jews had gone back to Palestine to repair its wastes and, as seen in our last lesson, were rebuilding the Temple, the Lord was not negligent of the remainder of the people who had not been sufficiently zealous to return to “the land of promise” under the decree of Cyrus granting them the privilege. Hundreds of thousands of Jews resided in all parts of the Persian empire, which then included Babylonia and Persia and nearly all Asia, including India. While special lessons and peculiar trials were given to those rebuilding the Temple, the Lord’s favor was upon the remainder of the chosen people to the extent that he permitted to come upon them a great trial, severe testing, which undoubtedly taught them a valuable lesson in their far-off homes.

A record of this great testing is furnished us in the Book of Esther. The king of Persia at this time, about forty years after the completion of the Temple, was Ahasuerus, otherwise known as Xerxes, who chose for his queen the beautiful and accomplished Esther, a Jewess—apparently without particular thought or knowledge respecting her nationality, and without knowing that Mordecai, one of his faithful attendants, a keeper of the palace gate, was her uncle. The story of Esther is a most remarkable one, and confirms the proverb that “Truth is stranger than fiction.”

Haman, one of the nobles of the land and a favorite with the king, became incensed against Mordecai because the latter would not show him as much respect as others of the people. His pride excited his animosity to such an extent that he secured the king’s decree against all Jews everywhere throughout the civilized world under the control of the Persian government. The edict was sweepingly broad, and directed the people in every quarter of the Persian empire to destroy, to kill, to cause to perish, all Jews both young and old, both little children

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and women, in one day, even upon the thirteenth day of the twelfth month. This commandment of the king was written out in various languages of the various peoples of the realm, signed with the king’s seal and sent out by special messengers, a year being allowed to give ample time for the

information to reach even the most distant quarters of the realm; and as an incitement to the doing of the work thoroughly, those who killed the Jews were given the privilege of taking all their possessions. Haman felt that he now had accomplished a great revenge against the Jew who stood at the gate. Mordecai and all the Jews, on learning of the edict, were of course greatly troubled. They had but a year to live. We may safely assume that such an experience as this would do more to draw the hearts of the Jews to the Lord in reverence and supplication than anything else that could have occurred to them. They fasted and prayed, in sackcloth and ashes.

Our lesson touches upon the matter at this point. The proclamation and edict had been in force for more than a month. Queen Esther had heard of her uncle's mourning in sackcloth, and its cause, and felt a special interest in him, as she had been an orphan and had been his special protegee. Mordecai assured her that it was not only for him she should mourn, but that this edict included herself as well as all Jews, and that she should bestir herself to bring the matter before the king, and if possible, to have another edict issued which would counteract this in some measure. But there lay the difficulty: the laws of the Medes and Persians altered not, could not be changed, must stand as though they were unalterable. Nevertheless, something must be done, and the queen was the only one in position to make any approach to the king. For others to have done so would have cost their own lives.

NOTING OPPORTUNITIES AS DIVINE PROVIDENCE

Mordecai, evidently trusting in the Lord that the decree could never be accomplished, called the queen's attention to the fact that quite possibly she had come into her present position of honor and privilege for the very purpose of staying this evil against her people. His suggestion was that quite likely God's providence had brought her to that place to be the divine agency for preserving the Jews from the evil malignity of their enemies in power. But he added that if she failed to respond to these opportunities, to manifest loyalty to the Lord's people, failed to risk something on their behalf, it would mean her own loss anyway shortly; and that he believed that God would provide some means for the deliverance of the people in general. It was her opportunity, it was her duty to act, and the responsibility he cast upon her.

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There is a beautiful lesson of faith here that should appeal to all of the Spiritual Israelites. Whatever we have, whatever positions we occupy of influence or power or wealth or confidence in the esteem of others, is so much of a stewardship granted to us by the Lord and respecting which we should expect to give an account; and if the account would be rendered with joy, we must be faithful even to the risking of our lives in the interests of the Lord's people, the Lord's cause. Let us lay this feature of Esther's experience to heart, that we may draw valuable lessons therefrom,

helpful to us in the spiritual way. The suggestion that she had not come to a place of honor and privilege by accident, but that the Lord had overruled in the matter, is one that should appeal to all Israelites indeed. Whatever we have is of the Lord's providence; let us use it faithfully and as wisely as possible for him and his; thus our own blessings and joys will be increased as well as our favor with the Lord.

The queen's answer was that Mordecai, as well as all the people, knew that if she or anyone else should attempt to go into the king's presence uninvited it would mean their death, unless the king chanced to feel favorable to them and extended his golden sceptre. She remarked, also, that evidently the king was not feeling very gracious toward her, because he had not called her into his presence for more than a month. That her fears were not groundless is evident to those acquainted with the history of those times. For instance, it is recorded of this very king that when en route for a war he rested at Olaenae of Phrygia, where he was the guest of Pythias, who entertained him magnificently; but when the latter begged as a favor that of his five sons in the king's army the eldest might be left with him in his old age, the brutal Xerxes in a rage caused that son to be slain in the presence of his father, the body divided into two parts, the one part placed on one side the road and the other on the other side, and the whole army marched between them. Of another Persian king it is related that to show his skill in archery he shot an arrow into the heart of his young cup-bearer, the son of his greatest favorite, Prexaspes. It is related of this same Xerxes that he allowed one of his previous queens to mutilate one of her rivals most horribly. "Her breasts, nose, lips, ears, were cut off and thrown to the dogs, her tongue was torn out by the roots, and thus disfigured she was sent back to her home."

SEEKING DIVINE GUIDANCE

Persuaded that no other course was open than to risk her life in approaching the king, Esther sent word to her uncle and through him to all the Jews of the palace city that they should fast with her for three days, and this, of course, implied prayer. We cannot suppose that they abstained absolutely from food and drink for three days, but that they went on short allowance, avoiding anything that would be specially pleasurable and all luxuries. This prayer and fasting convinces us that not all the Jews who had faith in the Lord had returned to Palestine, that some of this kind were still scattered throughout all Asia. No doubt the exceptional trial of this time thus proved a great blessing and strengthening to the faith of Esther and her uncle and all the Jews.

At the close of the three days the queen, attired in her best royal robes to appear as attractive as possible, approached the king. Thus she used wisdom and sought to cooperate with her prayers for divine guidance and blessing. The king was very gracious to her and extended the golden sceptre, which she touched, and then perceiving that only some urgent matter of request had thus

brought her into his presence he inquired what he could do for her, assuring her that it should be done even to the extent of half of his kingdom—the latter expression, however, being doubtless a mere formality indicating great interest.

The queen's plans were evidently all well thought out, although at this time she was only about fifteen years of age. Doubtless the Lord granted the wisdom necessary for the occasion. She did not communicate her request, but rather led on the king's expectancy by inviting him first to come to a banquet which she had arranged in his honor, and to which also his most trusted officer, Haman, was invited. The appointment was kept, and at that banquet the queen again parried the inquiry as to her real desires by asking that the same two should honor her by attending a banquet on the day following also, and this was agreed to. Some of the Lord's dear people of the spiritual Israel are a little inclined to go to extremes and, trusting in the Lord, do nothing to forward the cause they wish to serve. We believe that Esther's course is a good example of propriety. We should both watch and pray, labor and wait, be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. We should do all in our power while trusting to the Lord for the results, assured that he is able to make up all of our deficiencies, but at the same time leaving as little deficiency as possible.

Meantime the Lord worked upon the king from another standpoint, we know not how—divine providence has a thousand ways for its operation. The king passed a sleepless night, and seems to have inferred in some manner that he had been derelict to some obligation—that some one who had done him a favor had not been suitably rewarded. He called for the reading of the court records as to various incidents, and amongst these noted an occasion on which two of his trusted palace servants had conspired to take his life and had been frustrated by the exposure of their plot by Mordecai. No doubt the king was guided to this matter in some way by the Lord's providence. He inquired what recompense had been made to Mordecai, what had been done for him, how had he been rewarded for this faithfulness to the king? Finding that no special reward had been given he called for Haman to offer suggestions.

The latter had been grieving over what he considered Mordecai's insult to him in not bowing to him, and feeling very confident of his influence with the king he had already erected a gallows in the court of his own house, purposing to have Mordecai hanged thereon by the king's decree before another day. He had come to the palace for the very purpose of requesting Mordecai's life when he was inquired for by the king, and asked to suggest what would be suitable honor to be done to a man whom the king desired to honor. Thinking that he was the person to be honored he suggested the king's horse, the king's robe, the king's crown, and one of the king's chief men to lead the horse throughout the city proclaiming in a loud voice that the king was thus honoring the one who rode. To his surprise the king directed him to carry out this program with Mordecai as the

honored man, and himself the king's representative leading the horse and proclaiming the king's favor.

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The king's word could not be disputed or even questioned, and the matter was carried out in every detail, but Haman, covered with shame and mortification, returned to his own house for consolation from his friends for his wounded pride.

In the afternoon the messenger arrived to escort him to the banquet with the king and the queen. Thither the unhappy man went, little surmising what more there was in store for him. In the midst of the banquet the king again pressed the queen to know the important thing she had to request. Her time had come, and she besought the king for her own life and the life of her people, telling him that their enemies had inveighed against them for their utter destruction. The king, evidently failing to comprehend, asked who was the wicked person who had thus plotted to kill his queen and all her family connections, and she replied, This wicked Haman, who is with us at the banquet board. The king was perturbed in mind and walked from the banquet room into the garden to meditate what course he should pursue.

THE WICKED CAUGHT IN THEIR OWN TRAP

Meantime Haman perceived that everything was going wrong with him, that his life was in jeopardy, and that only the queen's word could spare his life; and so when the king left the apartment Haman made every appeal to the queen for her forgiveness and intercession on his behalf. In his frenzy of fear he forgot the circumstances and surroundings, and was partly stretched upon the couch upon which the queen was reclining at the banquet, when the king re-entered, and noting the situation his wrath knew no bounds. Ascertaining about the gallows, he commanded that Haman should be hanged at once upon the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. Haman's estates were conferred upon the queen by the royal decree, and then the queen, explaining that Mordecai, who had once saved the king's life, was her uncle, requested the royal interposition to counteract the effects of the previous edict for the extermination of the Jews.

It was well understood that no decree or edict of the Medes and Persians could be altered, amended, withdrawn—once issued it must stand; but the king gave permission to Mordecai to arrange the matter with the wise men of the palace, so that another decree should be issued which would be equally binding, and which would, in some measure if not fully, offset the first decree. This was done by formulating a decree permitting the Jews throughout the entire realm to defend themselves, and to do to all their enemies all that their enemies were permitted by the first decree to do to them. This last decree was similarly sent by messengers, under the king's seal, to

all parts of the empire, and as a result, when the fateful day came which was to have meant the extermination of all the Jews, the Jews privileged by the second decree to defend themselves were prepared, armed, and had favor with the magistrates of all the lands, because the second decree was understood to be a measurable offset to the first, and it was known that Mordecai, a Jew, was now the king's chief counsellor, or, as we would say to-day, Secretary of State. The result was the slaying of thousands throughout the realm, not chiefly the Jews but their opponents, their enemies, some eight hundred of the Jews in the palace city being destroyed.

“DO GOOD TO THEM THAT HATE YOU”

We are not to look back to this record of the slaying of enemies as an illustration of what Spiritual Israelites are to do. We as Israelites indeed, begotten of the holy Spirit, are to love our enemies and to do good to those who hate us and despitefully use us and persecute us. We are to bless and injure not. We are to remember that at this time the Lord had not even revealed his own love. He had revealed his justice and his power but not his love, for the Scriptures declare, “Herein was manifested the love of God, in that he gave his only begotten Son,” etc. (1 Jno. 4:9)—it was never manifested before. It is this great love which God has manifested, and which he has inculcated upon those who appreciate his love and who have been benefited by it, that appeals to us. We love him because he first loved us, and we love others because, having learned first to love the Lord, we have experienced an enlargement of heart and a broadening of sympathies. And this breadth of sympathy and love, which is a continual growth in the Christian in its relationship to the others, is proportionate to its exercise toward God. He that loveth God loveth also his brother and his neighbor.

The heart of this lesson is respecting divine providence, divine care over the Lord's people. True, God's providence has not been manifested in favor of the Jews for more than 1,800 years, because they have been cast off for a time, rejected from the Lord's favor, their house left desolate because of their rejection of Messiah. We are glad, however, that the Lord through the apostle has made clear to us that this blindness on their part and rejection of them are not to last forever—that in due time their blindness is to be turned away and the good promises of the Lord are still theirs and shall be fulfilled to them. The Apostle assures us that their casting off is merely until the fulness of the Gentiles shall have been brought in to divine favor, until the full number of the elect Church to be selected from the Gentiles shall have been gathered. With the completion of the elect spiritual Israel, the Apostle assures us that divine favor will again return to natural Israel, who are still beloved for the fathers' sake—these now shall obtain mercy through your [the Church's] mercy—through the mercy of the glorified Christ.—Rom. 11:25-32.

When we note the divine providential care over God's typical people it increases our faith and trust

as his spiritual children, for with the Apostle we reason that if God so loved us while we were yet sinners as to give his Son for us, much more does he love us now that we are no more sinners, aliens, strangers, foreigners, but consecrated to him and seeking to walk in the footsteps of our Redeemer. Likewise we reason that if God exercised his providential care in the interests of the typical people he is both able and willing to do as much and more for his spiritual Israel—Israelites indeed, in whom there is no guile—those who have entered into covenant relationship with him and are seeking to walk not after the flesh but after the spirit.

Our Golden Text is in accord with this thought, “The Lord preserveth all them that love him.” True, he has a sympathetic love for the world which has led him to provide a redemption for all in due time—all the redeemed ones will have a manifestation of divine love and care over their interests—but now, during the Gospel

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age, divine blessings are conferred upon those who will constitute the Church, the body of Christ, who love him more than they love houses or lands, parents or children or self. All who can thus affirm to their own hearts their loyalty to the Lord, their faith and trust in him, may be assured that all things are supervised for their good and working out for their welfare, in matters temporal and eternal.

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— November 1, 1905 —



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