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EFFECTUAL FERVENT PRAYER

—NEHEMIAH 1:1-11—NOVEMBER 19—

Golden Text:—“The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.”—Jas. 5:16

NEHEMIAH was a young Jew of one of the prominent families of the Babylonian captivity. He occupied a confidential position with Artaxerxes, the Persian king, somewhat similar to the office held by Mordecai under King Xerxes (Ahasuerus), the father of Artaxerxes. His official title, “cupbearer,” does not give the proper conception of the dignity of his position. In those days kings needed to be continually guarded against poisons, which could be easily mingled without detection with their liquid refreshments. Consequently the cupbearer was one whose loyalty was esteemed irreproachable, and his duties afforded him privileges and opportunities for intimate intercourse with the king more than others. They became confidants of royalty and court advisers, really occupying the position of Minister of State.

Though possessed of wealth and enjoying the king’s favor, and in every way advantaged so far as this world’s affairs were concerned, Nehemiah’s heart was not surfeited with his earthly blessings and privileges, comforts and advantages. His brother had been amongst those who went up to Jerusalem with Ezra, as narrated in our last lesson. That expedition had been partially successful and partly a failure. Ezra had heroically drawn the line of demarcation between Jews and others. The walls of the city had been repaired in a fashion, but their enemies had been angered by what they no doubt considered the arrogance of the Jews in considering themselves separate and distinct from other peoples, refusing to intermarry with them. The sending back to their homes of all foreign wives under Ezra’s direction capped the climax of what they considered to be injury done to them. These enemies had spitefully attacked the city, broken its walls and burned its gates, and the people of Jerusalem, comparatively few in number, weary and exhausted, had not the energy to rebuild and repair. Moreover, they feared to do so lest their enemies would deal harshly with them.

It was through his brother, who returned, that Nehemiah gained information respecting the deplorable condition of affairs at Jerusalem. The news made him heartsick, for he not only had the usual patriotism, but, as a Jew and as a believer in the divine threatenings and promises, he had an intensity of love for the land of promise, a burning desire to lend his assistance in every manner

for the recovery of the Lord's people and their re-establishment in power as the Lord had promised.

IMPORTUNITY IN PRAYER

Our lesson relates chiefly to Nehemiah's prayer to the Lord after he had heard of the conditions in Judea—his prayer for the Lord's blessing and assistance, to the intent that the good promises of the Lord respecting his holy city and land might be fulfilled. Nehemiah does not give us the words of all his prayers, for we learn from other parts of the narrative that he prayed after this manner for four months before he began to have an answer. What we read, therefore, is supposed to be

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a general outline of the sentiments which he expressed in various forms at different times, praying without ceasing during those four months. Of course during all this time he attended to his duties, but this prayer was always in his heart, the sentiment of his mind, and more or less associated with all his thoughts and plans and arrangements.

So it should be with all of the Lord's people of spiritual Israel. The things which we have only a slight desire for we may mention once or twice at the throne of grace, but those things which lie very close to our hearts become our continual prayer, associating in our minds with all of life's duties and interests, the heart gravitating continually toward the thing we have desired of the Lord, and on suitable opportunities repeating to him the request—making sure that the thing we request is in accord with his promises. This is the kind of praying which the Lord commended saying, "Men ought always to pray and not to faint"—that the Lord's people ought to continue asking for the right things with some degree of persistency, and should not grow weary, hopeless, faithless, faint in their hearts.

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ANSWERS LONG DELAYED

Doubtless there are many reasons why the Lord does not promptly grant such of our requests as are in accordance with his will, in harmony with his Word. We may not know all of these reasons, but some of them are apparent. Undoubtedly one reason for the Lord's delay in answering us often is to test the strength and depths of our desires for the good things that we request of him. For instance, he informs us that he is more willing to give his holy Spirit to us who ask than are earthly parents to give good things to their children: yet the giving of his holy Spirit is a gradual process, and we are enabled to receive it only in proportion as we are emptied of the worldly or selfish

spirit. It requires time to thus become emptied of self and prepared for the mind of Christ—in some it requires longer for this than in others, but all need emptying in order to receive the refilling. He that seeketh findeth, but the more he seeketh the more he findeth; to him that knocketh it shall be opened, but his continual knocking and his increasing interest in the knocking means his increasing desire to enter, so that as the door of privilege, of opportunity, swings slowly open before him his courage and strength increase as he seeks to avail himself of the opening, and thus everyway the blessing is greater than if the Lord were to answer the petitions more hastily.

Whenever we think of prayer and answers thereto we should remember our Lord's words, "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.) Ah, there are conditions in this statement. Those who abide in Christ must have gotten into him by faith, repentance and consecration, and to abide in him means that the faith will abide, the repentance for sin and opposition to it will abide, and the consecration to the Lord and his service will abide and be manifest.

The other condition also is a weighty one: "if my Word abide in you." Ah, how evident it is that the Lord meant to associate himself and his Word, the Scriptures, in the minds, in the hearts, in the lives, in the prayers of all who are truly his. We must search the Scriptures to know the will of the Lord, to know what he has promised and what he has not promised, to know what we may ask and what we may not ask for, and ascertaining these, the fully consecrated one will not want to be, to have or to do anything except that which will be pleasing to the Lord in respect to him—"Thy will, not mine be done, O Lord," is his prayer. And when this position has been reached we can readily see that whatever would be asked by one thus well informed respecting the divine promises and fully submissive to the divine will, would be things which God would be well pleased to grant in answer to his requests.

We are to think of our heavenly Father as rich and benevolent, kind and generous, yet wise as well as loving. We are to suppose that he will have pleasure in giving us the desires of our hearts if those desires are in harmony with his plan, which plan he has already framed on such lines as to include our very highest and best interests and the highest and best interests of all his creatures. So, then,

**"Faith can firmly trust him,
Come what may."**

And his well-informed children can have all the desires of their hearts because their hearts are in full accord with the Lord, and they desire nothing of the Lord except the good things of his purpose and promise.

NEHEMIAH'S FASTING AND PRAYER

The substance of the prayers of Nehemiah is stated: "I beseech thee, O Jehovah, God of heaven, the great and terrible God that keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments." Thus praying, he had before his mind the testimonies of God's Word respecting his dealings with Moses and the prophets and the kings of the past. He did not reproach the Lord as having failed with his part of the covenant, but, quite to the contrary, acknowledged that the Lord's ways and dealings with Israel had been just and true, and that the difficulties in which they were involved as a nation were the just penalties due them for their violations of the covenant made at Sinai. He expressed confidence also that the Lord would keep his covenant and have mercy upon the people, or upon those at least who would seek to walk in his paths.

He entreated, "Let thine ear now be attentive and thine eyes open that thou mayst hearken unto the prayer of thy servant which I pray before thee now day and night for the children of Israel, thy servants, while I confess the sins of the children of Israel, thy servants, which we have sinned against thee; both I and my father's house have sinned." No proper prayer can be offered to the great Creator that does not acknowledge in some manner the weaknesses, deficiency, imperfection, sin of those who approach the throne of grace. As the Apostle declares, even we who are new creatures in Christ approach the throne of heavenly grace to find

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mercy and grace to help in every time of need. But our boldness, our courage, is not that of self-confidence, but of confidence in him who loved us and who bought us with his precious blood—in him who died for our sins and under whose covering robe we have peace, forgiveness, harmony with God.

O, how much this means to us! More than it could have meant to Nehemiah or others living before the great atonement sacrifice had been made. It is our privilege to see how God can be just and yet be the justifier of him who believes on Jesus. We see that by the grace of God, Jesus Christ has tasted death for every man, and that ultimately the merit of his sacrifice will be made applicable to every man through the Lord's own channels and agents.

Nehemiah was very open in his confession, and we believe that such an attitude is the proper one for all who would approach the Lord. Sins and weaknesses should be confessed to the Lord, however they may be reasonably screened from the eyes of others while we are seeking to do our best in walking not after the flesh but after the Spirit. He says, "We have dealt very corruptly against thee, and have not kept the commandments, neither the statutes, nor the judgments which thou hast commanded thy servant Moses. Remember, I beseech thee, the word that thou

commandedst thy servant Moses, saying, If ye transgress I will scatter you abroad among the nations: but if you turn unto me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts were in the uttermost part of the heaven, yet will I gather them from thence and will bring them into this place that I have chosen to set my name there. Now these are thy servants and thy people, whom thou hast redeemed by thy great power, and by thy strong hand.”

“BELOVED FOR THE FATHERS’ SAKES”

This prayer, mentioning the Lord’s threatenings and acknowledging the justice of them, and acknowledging also the transgressions and the infliction of the penalties, and this turning to the Lord’s promises for forgiveness and mercy and reconciliation, exhibit the very proprieties of prayer which all should imitate—Jew or Gentile. The “Israelite indeed” who transgresses the divine precepts and is chastened of the Lord can plead the Lord’s promise to be very merciful to those who are of a contrite heart, and ask forgiveness based upon the great redemption sacrifice, and may by faith accept the divine promise immediately and enter into rest of soul so soon as he shall have done all in his power to rectify the wrong bemoaned.

The Lord did respond to Nehemiah’s prayer by granting him the opportunity for being associated in the rebuilding of the city and the placing of it upon a more satisfactory and permanent foundation, but it was not God’s time for fulfilling all the gracious promises that he had made to that nation. It was not for Nehemiah to know the mysteries of the divine plan as they entwined in all the affairs of the Jewish nation and held them together as a separated people for several hundred years, until Messiah was sent unto them to gather to himself the Israelites indeed in whom there was no guile, and to reject, to blind, to give over to be scattered amongst the nations the remainder of the Jewish people. Because it was not time to reveal the divine plan in all its details, therefore the Lord in hearing Nehemiah’s prayer merely granted him the privileges and blessings and opportunities possible for him at the time, leaving the larger fulfilments of that prayer and all the prayers for Israel to the glorious consummation when the glorified Christ, the antitype of Moses, shall stand forth to gather into one all nations under his own headship.

The Apostle Paul had in mind the still greater scattering of Israel amongst all nations of the world, accomplished at the beginning of this Gospel age by the utter destruction of Jerusalem, from which it has not yet recovered. To the Apostle it was given to understand and appreciate the matter, and to explain to us who are of the spiritual Israel that he who scattered Israel was the Lord, who also would regather that people in his own due time. The Apostle points out to us most explicitly that all the history of this nation was known to the Lord, including the scattering in fulfilment of our Lord’s Word, “Your house is left unto you desolate.” It was in view of this greater scattering that the Apostle, full of faith in the promises of the Lord’s Word, speaking under inspiration, assures us

that “the gifts and callings of God are not matters of repentance”—that God never gave nor promised things ill-advisedly, that he knew the end from the beginning, and that ultimately every promise would be graciously fulfilled. He explains to us that the casting off of natural Israel was the appropriate thing during the period that God was gathering spiritual Israel to be the Bride, the Lamb’s wife, joint-heirs with Christ. He assures us that as soon as the Church has all been selected, tested, proven, glorified, then divine favor will return to natural Israel, and he

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says, “They shall obtain mercy through your mercy”—fleshly Israel shall obtain mercy through the glorified spiritual Israel.

THE RECONCILING OF THE WORLD

What a wonderful plan! All for which Nehemiah prayed will be much more than fulfilled, not because the heavenly Father has changed his plan to suit the prayer, but because in his prayer Nehemiah asked in accordance with the Lord’s plan, yet did not ask as much as God has purposed to accomplish. The finite mind cannot grasp the lengths and breadths and heights and depths of the divine provision. Consequently the Lord is about to do for natural Israel exceedingly and abundantly more than we or Nehemiah could have asked or could have thought. He is about to gather them out of every nation, people, kindred and tongue, and to reestablish their judges and law-givers as at the first, only that these judges and law-givers of the future will be perfect, and, more than this, under the direct instruction and guidance of the then glorified Christ—Head and body.

Doubtless it was because it would have been beyond the comprehension of the Jews that the Lord did not

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make very plain in all his prophecies that the blessings proposed for fleshly Israel were the same blessings which later would be bestowed upon all nations, peoples, kindreds and tongues. As he veiled the fact that there would be a spiritual Israel as well as a natural Israel, so he veiled in the promises the fact that in the future all the nations, peoples and tongues will have an opportunity of becoming Israelites indeed, children of Abraham. These gracious promises are indeed clear when we attain a proper viewpoint in respect to the divine Word, though hidden from any other standpoint. For instance we now see the meaning of the Lord’s word, “I have constituted thee a father of many nations,” (Gen. 17:4); and again the promise, “In thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed” (Gen. 12:3); and again the Apostle’s assurance that as the rejection of

natural Israel meant the acceptance of spiritual Israel to the higher and chief elements of the promise, so the regathering of spiritual Israel would mean life from the dead to all humanity.—Rom. 11.

PRAYING TO THE POINT

Nehemiah's prayers were to a point, namely, that he might have a special blessing from the Lord upon himself and upon the mission which he believed the Lord would be willing to put into his hand through the authority and cooperation of the king Artaxerxes. His prayer was, "O Lord, I beseech thee let now thine ear be attentive to thy servant and to the prayer of thy servants [all true Israelites], who delight to fear thy name: And prosper, I pray thee, thy servant this day and grant him mercy in the sight of this man." As we have already seen, the monarchs of those days were absolute in authority, and their ill will might very easily be aroused by any plans and arrangements or suggestions which might strike them as inimical to their own hopes, aims, ambitions and prospects. Nehemiah might well doubt that the king would take favorably to the suggestion that he be permitted to go to Jerusalem to endeavor to establish law and order there and to help along his own kindred. The king might very properly view this as disloyalty. If he were a loyal servant and appreciated his position in the king's confidence and his home in the capital city, why should he wish to leave these and go elsewhere to reestablish a nation and capital which had once been competitors in the race for world power. The king in his anger might order his execution, or cast a javelin at him.

Nehemiah's prayer to the Lord that he might grant him mercy in the sight of Artaxerxes shows that he had faith in the divine power. We have often wondered if a deficiency of faith along such lines is not a part of much of the trouble of the Lord's truly consecrated people to-day—of spiritual Israel. We know that sometimes they have severe trials from those who hate them, from those who perhaps despise them and deal unjustly with them, and we wonder to what extent they remember, as Nehemiah did, that God has full power to open ways and means before us whereby we may engage in his service, if he be willing to accept of our services, if we find favor in his sight, if our prayers of lips and of heart go up before him as a memorial, acceptable through Christ.

PRAYER AND TRUST IN ALL AFFAIRS

We remember in this connection a story told us by a sister at one of the Conventions. She said: "My husband is quite wealthy, has a large farm, well stocked, etc., and, although I have served faithfully for years, he is so opposed to the Truth and so seeks to hinder me in respect to it that he begrudges me even the small sum of the WATCH TOWER subscription or the price of books I need. When I heard of this Convention I felt a longing in my heart to go and meet with some of the Lord's

dear people, and I took the matter to the Lord in prayer, telling him that if it were his pleasure I should greatly enjoy the privilege of attending the Convention, but I was willing to leave the matter entirely with him. I felt somehow that it would be quite probable that the Lord would open the way for me to go, and by way of cooperation I suggested the matter to my husband in good time, saying that I would like very much to attend the Convention. He was violently opposed, and said that the distance to the railroad station was so great that I could not walk it, and that he would not allow me to use a horse. I replied quite calmly that I did not know, but somehow I felt that the Lord would be willing to have me go and would perhaps open the way yet for me. I answered quietly, because I had committed the matter entirely to the Lord, and was willing to abide by whatever his providence might mete out to me. I was even cheerful, therefore, notwithstanding my husband's words of opposition. He seemed to read my confident expectation and several times referred to the matter, reiterating that I should not go, that he would not allow me to take a horse, etc. I merely replied that I did not know, but that if it were the Lord's will that I should go, he would be able to open the way. About ten days before the Convention one of my husband's best horses took sick, and although he is very successful in doctoring his stock, and on this occasion called in a veterinary surgeon, the horse died. Then another good horse took sick and it died, and a third horse took sick. My husband began to realize that it might be the hand of the Lord in his affairs, and evidently associated his losses with his declaration that I might not use a horse to go to the Convention. He brought up the subject of the Convention himself, intimating in a very mild way a possibility of rescinding his previous decision. My quiet answer was the same, that perhaps the Lord would open the way. The third horse died, and my husband came to me and said, 'You may go to the Convention.'

WE WALK BY FAITH, NOT BY SIGHT

In relating these circumstances we do not wish to give the intimation that the Lord would thus deal in every such case. We must remember that a part of our lesson as the Lord's followers is that we must learn to walk in the footsteps of Jesus trustfully—by faith and not by sight; that we must learn patient endurance, and

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thus develop more and more all the fruits and graces of the spirit of love. Our object in referring to this case is that all of the Lord's people may have the suggestions which it offers, in harmony with those of Nehemiah's prayer, namely, that God is able to shape all our earthly affairs for us, and that a part of our lesson is to learn to trust him. He will not suffer us to be tempted above that we are able, but with the temptation will also provide a way of escape. He does indeed permit us to be tried as gold in the furnace, yet as gold is not permitted to be consumed in the furnace, so the Lord will not permit us to receive injury under any conditions so long as we are trusting in him. All

things must work together for good to them that love God, to the called ones according to his purpose.

As Nehemiah's prayer was delayed of an answer four months, and no door of opportunity seemed to offer for him to bring the matter to the king's attention, so with us—patient endurance and faith may be amongst the lessons which the Lord wishes us to learn by the delay in the answers to our petitions. Likewise, doubtless, that four months of delay was used by the Lord in more or less a preparation of the king for cooperating with the request of Nehemiah. And so with us it may be that, while we are praying, the Lord is not only preparing us for the blessing and opportunity and privilege we desire, but also preparing the circumstances and conditions which will bring us these opportunities and privileges in the best form. Let us, then, lay to heart and utilize the lessons of our Master's words, "Men ought always to pray and not to faint."—Luke 18:1.

"The effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much," says our Golden Text. The prayers of the unrighteous, we understand, will avail nothing; and in this connection we are to remember that "there is none righteous, no, not one," and that all the righteousness which we have or which permits us to present ourselves before the Father, or which guarantees us that we shall be heard of him, is the righteousness of Christ imputed to us—the merit of his sacrifice covers all our blemishes. Let us remember, too, that it is the fervent prayer that is the effectual one—the prayer that is earnest, from the heart and not merely from the lips. It is for this reason that self-denial, fasting and praying should be associated in the minds, and in fact we should be so earnest, so fervently desire the things that we request, and be so confident that they are the Lord's will, as guaranteed by the promises of his Word, that we would

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hold on and wait for the mercies the Lord thus prepares us to receive.

It would be rather unsafe, we think, for any of the "new creation" to make request for temporal blessings. "After all those things do the Gentiles seek." (Matt. 6:32.) They seek those things because they know not of and appreciate not the higher and better, the spiritual things. Spiritual Israelites are exhorted by the Lord to appreciate the spiritual clothing, the spiritual food, the heavenly riches, which moth and rust cannot corrupt, and to seek for these.

The Master tells us what we may freely ask, what we may be assured that the heavenly Father will be very willing to grant to us, though he bear long with us, though he give it gradually to us, and not perhaps as rapidly and as fully as we request it. His words are: "If ye, then, know how to give good gifts [earthly gifts] unto your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the holy Spirit to them that ask him." (Luke 11:13.) The holy Spirit is the spirit of love—to God and to

man. It cannot be given to us under present conditions except gradually, as the old selfish, wrong spirit is deposed from our hearts. This, therefore, must be continually our prayer to the end of life's journey, that we might be filled with the Spirit of the Lord, and thus praying means that we will be thus laboring day by day, and that the Lord will continually bless us, giving us the fruits of his Spirit in our hearts and in our lives more and more, its joy and peace and blessing.

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— November 15, 1905 —



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