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THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES

—NEHEMIAH 8:8-18—DECEMBER 10—

Golden Text:—”Blessed are they that hear the word of God and keep it.”—Luke 11:28

NEHEMIAH was governor at Jerusalem, and after the repair of the Temple walls, noted in our last lesson, he did not consider that great work the end of his mission but rather the beginning of it. The wall was necessary first for the security of the people, to arouse their national spirit, to revive their hopes in respect to the promised Kingdom of God, and afford them a practical demonstration of God’s favor with them in the accomplishment of that work, and thus to lead on to trust in the accomplishment of other promises of the Word still future.

In the Lord’s providence the work was accomplished just at the right time to permit of the rest of the week at their homes, and then to have a general gathering to celebrate the New Year. The Jewish civil year begins with the seventh month, this year September 30, but varying a few days either way from that date, as their calculations were made by lunar time. In God’s providence the national interests were associated with the religious interests of the Jews. They were God’s people, and all their political and national hopes were associated with the divine promises, and hence a revival of interest in their city and nation and national hopes meant a revival also in their reverence for God, in their religious sentiments, in their desire to honor the Lord and obey him, to observe the festivals which he had commanded.

Nehemiah was evidently a prudent man in such matters to begin with. Indeed we know that this is the Lord’s general way of choosing those whom he may use in his service. He chooses suitable persons, and then adds his blessing to promote the outcome which he desires—as, for instance, when instructing Moses respecting the intricate devices for the Tabernacle structure, the Lord said, “Choose out from the children of Israel cunning workmen and I will put my spirit upon them.” The thought is that the Lord employs as little of the miraculous as is necessary—he takes advantage of conditions as they are so far as possible, and uses them. While, therefore, the Scriptures

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declare, and all the facts of the case correspond to show, that not many great, not many learned,

not many wise, not many noble according to the course of this world are chosen by the Lord for his special servants, we are to assume that the Lord chooses as noble, as great, and as learned as he can find who are of the right condition of heart.

LOVE AND DEVOTION FIRST

We are not to consider that qualifications are despised of the Lord, but rather to note that the Lord puts first and foremost the qualities of honesty, humility, obedience and love, and that these things being present in a number, those possessing the greatest number of other qualifications would have the preference. For instance, we may assume that the twelve apostles chosen represented the best material for the Lord's purpose every way, yet subsequently when Saul of Tarsus, educated, talented and wealthy, consecrated himself, saying, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" the Lord was willing to use him, and his peculiar talents, combined with his deep consecration, humility and zeal, enabled him to take a foremost place amongst the apostles.

Nehemiah, the man of opportunity, brought to the governorship of the Jews at this important juncture, manifested his humility and his zeal in many various ways. When calling for the convocation for a general assembly of the Israelites for the New Year's celebration, called the Feast of Trumpets, he did not ignore the worthy ones of the Lord's people and seek to take all the honor to himself. On the contrary, he recognized Ezra the Scribe, a member of the priestly family, as more suitable than himself to take a prominent part in the work of educating the people in the knowledge of the Lord through his Law. Ezra's chief place of importance was the ceremony of reading the Law and introducing it to the attention of the people. On his right hand were seven of the prominent men, on his left hand six more, and the reading was done by course, and probably participated in by many if not all of these fourteen.

The place of the reading was on the plaza of the Temple. The people, sitting about over a considerable area, arose when the Law was read, and after the reading of a section they sat down. Meantime amongst

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them had been scattered various of the Levites, the teachers of the people, who explained to them the meaning of the words they had heard, giving them the sense of the language. This was necessary probably for two reasons: first, that the people who had been in Babylon had more or less of a corrupt tongue or ear, while undoubtedly the Law was written and read in classical Hebrew; secondly, even if they had understood all the words, a particular explanation of the sentiment or meaning is sometimes both convenient and necessary. This reading of the Law in sections, and expounding it both from the higher platform occupied by the fourteen officiating and

also its further expounding to the people by the Levites who were in their midst, occupied all of one afternoon and a good portion of the next forenoon. The result was that the people had an understanding of God's own message.

“PREACH THE WORD”

Here we see the real essence of preaching, as the Apostle wrote to Timothy, “Preach the Word.” The difficulty of much of the preaching of our day is that it is not the Word of God that is preached, but the traditions of the ancients, or more frequently perhaps something that has very little to do with religion at all. Higher criticism and evolution theories and general agnosticism prevail to so large an extent both in pulpit and pew that the Word of God is losing its place of importance in the minds of those who are nominally God's people. Why should they study the book which they no longer accept as divinely inspired. Ignorance of the Scriptures is greatly on the increase amongst those who profess godliness. Undoubtedly there was great advantage in the Scripture studies of olden times, even though ignorance and superstition and the false theology of the dark ages gave a distorted view to much that was studied; nevertheless, fifty years ago the Scriptures were very much better known to the masses of those professing godliness. The loss is a keen one. On the other hand we know how those who have come into the light of present Truth, and whose eyes of understanding are opened wide to a greater appreciation of the lengths and breadths and heights and depths of the divine character and plan, are becoming more and more deeply interested in the study of the Word. This is sure to be the case. No religion, no theory, can be either true or helpful that does not bring us to God's book and deepen our interest in his message. Canon Farrar pays a splendid tribute to the value of the Bible as a civilizing influence, in the following words:—

“It was the Bible that gave fire and nobleness to her (England's) language; it was the Bible that turned a dead oppression into a living Church; it was the Bible which put to flight the nightmare of ignorance before the rosy dawn of progress. ... It was the Bible which saved England from sinking into a tenth-rate power as a vassal of cruel, ignorant, superstitious Spain, whose Dominicans and tyrants would have turned her fields into slaughterhouses, as they turned those of the Netherlands, and would have made her cities reek as she made Seville reek with the bale-fires of her Inquisition.” “Let England cling to her open Bible.”

“And what the Bible did for England, it did for the United States of America. It was the Bible that made America what she is.”

“EAT THE FAT AND DRINK THE SWEET AND SEND PORTIONS”

Evidently this was the first presentation of the Law to the people since their return from captivity.

Evidently Ezra had given his attention to the rearranging of the Law and the instruction of the priests and Levites therein, but had not up to this time caused it to be promulgated amongst the people. Quite possibly it was a part of Nehemiah's wise insight as a governor to see that the explaining to the people of God's own message would be helpful to them; that it was not sufficient that the priests and the Levites should be learned in the Law and that they should tell the people, but that the people themselves should be made to understand the divine message. The same is true to-day. It will not do that others shall attempt to tell the Lord's plan, but ignore the Lord's Word, in order to have weight and influence. Those who receive the message must know that it is more than man's message, must have the evidence that it is from the Lord.

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When the Law was read and expounded to the people they saw at once that they had been under chastisement and in difficulties because of their neglect of the divine institutions, and they wept; but Nehemiah and those conducting the services under his direction sent word to the people not to weep, not to mourn, but on the contrary to rejoice and give thanks to God that they now were at last awake to the true state of affairs, that their troubles had come as a result of their disobedience, and that they had started in to reform and to have God's blessing in their endeavor, their effort, to obey his statutes. There is a time to mourn, but it is when sin and opposition are prevailing; when repentance has come, when contrition for sin has led to reformation, it is time to cease mourning lest utter discouragement should result. They had met to thank God for returning favor, to realize that they had received chastisement at his hands, to thank him for the same, to take good courage, to start afresh to walk in his way, and now were hearing his Law with a view to observing the same and thereafter having his blessing and favor. The message was, "This day is holy unto the Lord your God; mourn not, neither weep. Go your way, eat the fat and drink the sweet, and send portions to them for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy unto our Lord; neither be ye sorry,—

"FOR THE JOY OF THE LORD IS YOUR STRENGTH"

Spiritual Israel can take an excellent lesson here: "Why should the children of the King go mourning all their days?" It was proper that we should mourn for sin, that we should realize the need for a Savior, that we should lay hold upon him by faith; but once we have accepted the Lord and realized the forgiveness of our sins, the time for mourning is past, the time for joy and rejoicing is commenced. To so great an extent is this true that the Apostle exhorts that we should rejoice in everything, even in tribulation, realizing that since we have given ourselves to the Lord and he has accepted us as his children and given us the anointing of his spirit, adopting us into his family and made us heirs with Christ in the glorious promises to be fulfilled, our hearts should be so full of rejoicing that all the trials and difficulties of the way should seem as nothing.

Whoever can exercise the proper faith in the Lord and in his Word can rejoice; those who cannot exercise the faith cannot have the joy and rejoicing in this present time, but must wait for their portion by and by. The Lord is now seeking those who may firmly trust him, come what may; he is seeking those who will walk by faith, not by sight. Those who cannot walk by faith now will have the opportunity of walking by sight very shortly, when the Kingdom shall be established. They indeed shall have a goodly portion, but the portion which God has specially provided for the faithful is joint-heirship with his Son in the Kingdom. Let us, then, who have accepted the Lord and his Word, cast away everything of doubt and of fear, and live rejoicingly day by day while seeking to walk in the footsteps of him who loved us and bought us with his precious blood. The joy of the Lord is our strength, the joy which God gives, the joy which comes from realizing that the Lord is our fortress, and that no ill can betide us without his knowledge, and that he has promised that all things shall work together for good to them that love him—with all their heart, mind, soul and strength.

This message that the leaders set forth, uttered from the main stand, was repeated to the people by the Levites in their midst. The tears were dry and the company dismissed to rejoice in the opening of a new year, which symbolized to them a fresh start in the ways of the Lord and in his favor. The reading of the Law on the second day (v. 13) would seem to have been principally to the priests and Levites and heads of the various families—probably some of the special selections of the Law, appropriate to them as persons charged with certain responsibilities amongst the Lord's people. It was during this reading that it was discovered that for some time this feature of the Law had been entirely overlooked, namely,—

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They found that in the Law it was commanded that at this season of the year, namely, from the fifteenth to the twenty-second of the seventh month, the Israelites should dwell for a week in booths constructed of branches of trees, and keep that week as a special festival of thanksgiving to the Lord. It was a feast of ingathering or harvest home. Our American Thanksgiving day to some extent resembles this. They were to live for a week in these booths to remind them of how once they had been a people without a home, when God delivered them out of Egypt and brought them on the way to Canaan. The yearly remembrance of this experience would tend to produce in their hearts thankfulness to God as the one who had given them the land of promise, the one upon whom they were dependent for their national existence and freedom from slavery, and the one who had promised to bring them to a full inheritance of all the glorious things contained in the great promise, the Oath-Bound Covenant made to Abraham, that ultimately through his seed all the families of the earth should be blessed.

Our general three-day Conventions are somewhat after this Feast of Tabernacles pattern, only on a higher plane, adapted to us as Spiritual Israelites. This year we had such Holy Convocations in June in Chattanooga, Tenn.; in July another at Niagara Falls, N.Y.; in September one in Denver, Colo., and another in Portland, Oregon, besides one in Germany at Elberfeld; one in London, England; one in Glasgow, Scotland, and one in Stockholm, Sweden. These various

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gatherings of the Lord's people now in different places are made necessary by reason of the larger scope of country in which Spiritual Israel resides. We do not live in tents and booths, yet our absence from our regular homes for a few days implies temporary dwelling-places or tabernacles. We are absent for a time from some of the conveniences and comforts of our homes, yet these conditions may be very favorable to us as reminders that here we have no continuing city, that we are not to set our hearts upon houses or lands or any earthly thing, but to remember that our citizenship is in heaven and that our present sojourn is toward the heavenly Jerusalem, the Kingdom, and that everything in the present time should be considered by us as a temporal or tabernacle condition, waiting for the eternal conditions which God has promised us.

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OUR FEASTING IS SPIRITUAL

For the entire seven days the Jews rejoiced and had a feast of good fellowship one with another, dwelling in these booths. The whole people, for a time at least, were on a common level. The booths were erected inside the city or outside the walls as might be convenient, and many of them were on the roofs of the houses, which there are usually flat. It was not a feast of sensuality nor an occasion for moral abandon, but, quite to the contrary, was a time for Bible study. The reading of the book of the Law and the expounding of it were the main centers of interest, and the people no longer wept and repined at the reading of it, but on the contrary, rejoicing that the Lord's favor was with them, they studied the Word with a view to practising it to the extent of their ability.

This also corresponds well with our Conventions, in which Bible study has the chief place and chief interest. Surely we do have spiritual refreshing, feasting; surely these gatherings, these spiritual feasts in temporary tabernacles away from our usual homes, are proving very helpful to the Lord's people. For this reason they grow more and more to be appreciated amongst those who put spiritual matters first. We live in a very busy day, when business, money-getting, is placed in the first rank by all civilized peoples. If worldly people can take vacations to engage in hunting and fishing and other so-called "sports," why cannot the Lord's people take their spiritual refreshment and recreation, and cultivate in their children more and more of the desire for the spiritual things?

for these gatherings so far as possible should be family gatherings, and the pleasure of an outing and change of surroundings and rest from ordinary work should be combined with the highest pleasure of which we have knowledge, the pleasure of meeting with the Lord and with those who are his, the pleasure of studying the divine Word and helping one another onward and upward in the heavenly way.

We exhort that so far as possible all the friends of Present Truth shall have in mind the spending of one week in each year separate and apart from ordinary business and work, in something resembling the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, only on the higher, spiritual plane. It is our thought that hereafter the General Conventions may best be held under circumstances that will permit those of the friends who desire to stay longer than the three days, engaging in quiet study and reflection upon the things discussed during the three days, a rest time aside from the world and its hurry, giving special attention to spiritual nourishment after the example of our Lord and his disciples.

HEARING AND OBEYING

Our Golden Text should not be forgotten. It is important that we should hear the Word of the Lord, that we search the Scriptures, that we have them well at our command, that we be able to give an answer to him that asketh us a reason for the hope that is in us, and we need more than all this. We need to obey the Word, to practise it to the extent of our ability. True, we cannot come up to the demands of perfection, for God's law is perfect, but we can have the perfect attitude of heart, and nothing less than this will be acceptable to the Lord. We can show him and to some extent show to others the endeavor of our lives in the direction of righteousness and all the fruits and graces of the holy Spirit. If we had all knowledge and zeal and had not the spirit of obedience it would evidence a lack of the spirit of love, and prove us unworthy of the divine favor and blessings promised to those who are rightly exercised by the message from above.

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— December 1, 1905 —



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