

The International Lessons.

I.

Jeremiah xxxix. 1-10.

THE DOWNFALL OF JUDAH.

1. "The middle gate" is supposed to have been the gate between the upper and lower city.

2. "Nergal-sharezer," etc. (ver. 3). These names are puzzling, and it would waste time to explain them. Let it be noticed simply that Rab-saris and Rab-mag are titles, not names; the one means "chief cupbearer" (probably), and the other "chief magician."

3. "The gate betwixt the two walls" (ver. 4) opened towards the south, the way of the "plain" of Jericho. The Chaldæan army had entered at the north.

4. "Those that fell away" (ver. 9),—the deserters. Those who deserted to the Chaldæans before the end of the siege shared the same fate as those who held out to the last.

FIRST of all, let us see if we can follow this somewhat difficult narrative. We already know that Zedekiah, King of Judah, had rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, although he had raised him to the throne, and that Nebuchadnezzar had come in person and besieged Jerusalem. The siege lasted eighteen months. It came to an end at last, through sheer starvation on the part of the inhabitants of Jerusalem. A breach was made in the north-east wall, and the Chaldæan army entered the city. Then Zedekiah made his escape in the opposite direction, and fled southwards, in the effort to cross the Jordan at the fords near Jericho. But the Chaldæans pursued and overtook him. He was sent to Riblah, where Nebuchadnezzar was then holding his court; for he had not himself remained with the army all the time it was besieging Jerusalem. Riblah was in the land of Babylon, ten days' journey from Jerusalem. It was a weary journey for Zedekiah. When he arrived, Nebuchadnezzar passed sentence on him as a rebel, slew his children in his sight, and then put out his eyes, loaded him with chains, and confined him in a dungeon, where it is almost certain he was left till he died.

Now let us think for a moment about this King Zedekiah. A sadder life than his has rarely been lived. Raised to the throne of Judah when he was twenty-one, he was too weak to control the scheming and determined princes, and consented to deeds of which he did not always approve. One of these was the imprisonment of Jeremiah. But a worse deed than that was the slavery of his poorer subjects. When Nebuchadnezzar first laid siege to the city, Jeremiah induced the king and nobles to release those who had been sold into slavery contrary to the law of Moses. But when

Nebuchadnezzar had to leave Jerusalem for a time in order to go south and meet the King of Egypt, the nobles became quite insolent, and compelled their fellow-countrymen and women who had been released to return into slavery. Either Zedekiah was a party to this treachery, or else he was too weak to prevent it.

When we think of the terrible end of Zedekiah, we must take this weakness into account. What did his weakness, as we call it, mean? It meant simply a want of faith in God. When Zedekiah made up his mind he could do a bold enough action, as when he ordered the release of Jeremiah from the foul hole into which the princes had thrown him. *But he scarcely ever could make up his mind.* He never had more than a half belief in Jeremiah. He leaned nearly as often to the false prophets. He pretended that he was confused between the prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The secret of his failure was as simple and commonplace as that of any boy or girl among us—he had not trust enough in God to do the right thing when he saw it was right, because it demanded self-denial.

Zedekiah had a wretched life. More wicked men have often fared better. For he was made the scapegoat for the sins of others. But God, who is the final judge, will hold him guilty for the sins of his own soul. And "it is better to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire."

ILLUSTRATIONS:—1. It is evident that Zedekiah was a man not so much bad at heart as weak in will. He was one of those unfortunate characters, frequent in history, like our own Charles I. and Louis XVI. of France, who find themselves at the head of affairs during a great crisis, without having the strength of character to enable them to do what they know to be right, and whose infirmity becomes moral guilt.—WRIGHT.

2. "The king of Babylon slew all the nobles of the land" (ver. 6). . . . "But left of the poor of the people who had nothing, in the land of Judah, and gave them vineyards" (ver. 10). The nobles were more guilty than the king; and one of their most guilty deeds was the cruel injustice of enslaving their own countrymen because they were poor. Now see how Nebuchadnezzar is in God's hands to put that right. No doubt many of these very slaves got vineyards and fields, for they were to be had in plenty now.

3. "The Chaldæans burned the king's house, and the houses of the people with fire" (ver. 8). In the Assyrian sculptures it is seen that when the battering-ram has effected a breach, and the assault has commenced, the women appear on the walls, and tearing their hair, or stretching forth their arms, implore mercy. The men are not unfrequently represented as joining in this cry for quarter. But when the assailants

become masters of the place an indiscriminate slaughter appears to have succeeded, and the city was generally given over to the flames.

II.

Ezekiel xxxvi. 25-38.

THE PROMISE OF A NEW HEART.

1. "I will yet for this be enquired of by the house of Israel" (ver. 37). God promises to give good things to *them that ask Him*. The desire must be there, and the desire must be expressed in prayer.

2. "As the holy flock, as the flock of Jerusalem in her solemn feasts" (ver. 38). At the Passover and other feasts great flocks of sheep were led to the temple courts for sacrifice. The waste cities shall be filled by men flocking to them, as the sacred flocks of sheep to Jerusalem at the solemn feasts.

EVERY prophet is original. He tells his message in his own way. But no prophet is entirely original. The message he tells is the same message as the prophets told who went before him. This is one of the distinguishing marks of a true prophet: he takes up the same eternal truth of the eternal and unchanging Jehovah, simply applying it to his own time and people. Thus we find Ezekiel here speaking of the day when the people will be obedient in heart to God, just as Isaiah and Jeremiah did in former lessons. It is the same gracious promise, only Ezekiel's way of expressing it is his own.

And the two things that Ezekiel promises to the people of God are cleanliness without and a right heart within.

1. "Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean." That is what we now call justification. He says the day will come when the people will appear in God's sight as if they had no sin, clean, accepted by God as right and good. He does not say how God can accept them as righteous, but Isaiah tells us, when he says: "The Lord hath laid on *Him* the iniquity of us all." All Ezekiel declares is the immediate outward sign, the sprinkling of water, what we now call baptism, the outward sign of our justification.

2. But the people of God must not only be accepted for Another's sake, they must be pure within their own hearts. "A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you." This is what we now call sanctification. And this also is God's doing, and it is as marvellous in our eyes as the other. It is marvellous, surely, that God can change the very heart, can make a heart of stone into a heart of flesh; a heart that is cold and dead to all love for Him, into a heart that leaps at the sound of His voice, and delights to do His will. With men this is impossible; and therefore many

persons will not believe it ever is done. But with God even this is possible.

And it is imperative. That is the thing to know and never forget. "Ye must be born again," said Jesus. Who? One of those whom He Himself spoke of as "righteous," not the open sinners merely. There is no getting over that "must"; even Nicodemus cannot give it the go-by. "Verily, verily I say unto you, except a man be born of water (Ezekiel's 'sprinkling') and the Spirit (Ezekiel's 'new heart put within' us), he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Lastly, it is all got for the asking. "For this will I be enquired of." For it is the doing of the Holy Spirit, and "how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to *them that ask Him*."

ILLUSTRATIONS.—1. "Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you" (ver. 25). Men have fabled fancies of a fountain in which whoever bathed grew young again, his limbs restored to elasticity and his skin to clearness. To the old world it was as good a thing as priests could promise to the good, that when they died, the crossing of that dark and fateful river should be the blotting out for ever from the soul of all memorials of the past. But God gives us a better mercy than the blessing of forgetfulness. The Lethe which obliterates from recollection a sinful past is a poor hope compared to the blood of cleansing, which permits us to remember sin without distress, and confess it without alarm.—DYKES.

2. "A new heart" (ver. 26). The best lesson which the years can teach is, perhaps, this one: that the new thing we need (we all crave for *some* new thing) is, not a new world, but a new self. Not change in any outward surroundings of our lives: not an easier income, not a cheerfuller home, not stronger health, not a higher post, not relief from any thorn in our flesh against which we pray; but a change within—another self.—DYKES.

3. "I will be enquired of" (ver. 37). Prayer is always the preface to blessing. It goes before the blessing as *the blessing's shadow*.—SPURGEON.

III.

Isaiah xl. 1-11.

THE BLESSINGS OF THE GOSPEL.

1. "She hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins" (ver. 2). Is it double blessing or double suffering? Almost certainly suffering. The Lord remembers the miseries of the exile; they were very needful to bring Israel to repentance; but now they seem to Him who delights in mercy almost more grievous than the sins that caused them.

2. "The voice of him that crieth" (ver. 3). We are not told whose voice, either here or elsewhere. These mysterious, unknown voices make the scenes more impressive.

3. "O Zion, that bringest good tidings" (ver. 9). The Revised Version has, "O thou that tellest good tidings to

Zion." It is not so natural a translation, but it is better sense. Another "Voice" is addressed, the Voice whose duty and pleasure it is to announce to Jerusalem and the cities of Judah that the Lord has come again to be their God.

4. "His reward is with him, and his work before him" (ver. 10). That is, He will recompense speedily with the power and promptitude of a king. The Revised Version translates: "His reward is with him, and his recompense before him."

"COMFORT"—that is the first word of the lesson, and it is the key-word, not to this lesson only, but to the whole great prophecy which begins with this chapter and runs to the end of the book. What is the key-word to the thirty-nine chapters that precede? You will find it here also, in the second verse. It is "warfare." Thus the Book of Isaiah is divided into two parts here, and the message of the one part is just the opposite of the message of the other, for "warfare" is just the opposite of "comfort."

Thirty-nine chapters of prophesying, and always of "warfare," that is, of conflict and suffering; not merely what we call the battle and the drudgery of life which all must endure, but special affliction. Why was Isaiah sent to prophesy this to the people of Jerusalem and Judah? Because of their iniquities. For God cannot pass sin by; the penalty for it must be paid. And why is the prophet sent to change his prophecy, and speak of comfort now? Because the penalty has been paid, and the iniquity is forgiven. The people have suffered so terribly in the exile from home, the slavery, and the mockery, that it seems as if the penalty had been paid twice over. But now it is all at an end; "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people."

Thus the first two verses. The remainder of the lesson consists of three "calls," three verses being given to each.

1. In the first "call" (vers. 3-5) we have a picture of the march of the exiles back to Jerusalem, led by Jehovah Himself. It is a journey through the wilderness, and a herald is sent out in the fashion of the ancient East when a king was about to make a progress through his lands, with the call to the inhabitants to prepare a road for him: "Make straight in the desert a highway for our God." The mountains must be brought down and the valleys lifted up, that the way may be smooth and level. It is a poetical description.

2. But what is the occasion of this triumphant journey? The next three verses tell us, another

herald is sent along with the great procession to proclaim the meaning of it. And the words of his "call" are these: "The grass withereth, the flower fadeth; but the word of our God shall stand for ever." Men and empires shall rise and fall, even haughty Babylon shall perish as the grass shrivels up at the hot breath of the south wind; but the word of God will abide for ever. He said that Babylon should fall, that the warfare of His people should have an end, that a remnant should return; behold, now it is seen that His word is true and eternal.

3. Now Jerusalem is reached, the march is at an end (vers. 9-11). Again a herald is summoned, that he may go to the top of the high hills and call to Jerusalem and all the cities of Judah, that the Lord has returned to dwell among them. And they need not fear, for henceforth He will be to them a king and a shepherd, a king with strong arm and speedy recompense to protect them, and a shepherd with tender care to feed and guide them.

ILLUSTRATIONS.—1. "Comfort ye" (ver. 1). These words are a blast of the silver trumpet of the gospel. Blessed are the people that know the joyful sound. They are like the words of the angel at Bethlehem: "I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people." This is the voice of the Shepherd, which all his flock know and love.—M'CHEYNE.

2. Some say it is a dangerous thing to be happy. They are afraid of too much joy. They say it is better to be in deep exercises—better to have deep wadings; it is not good to be of too joyful a spirit. What says the Word of God? "Comfort ye, comfort ye." If your joy flow from the Cross of Christ, you cannot have too much joy. "Rejoice in the Lord alway; and again I say, Rejoice."—M'CHEYNE.

3. "Every valley shall be exalted" (ver. 4). Now, children, this road-making is hard work, and you are very weak, and you feel as if you could not do much. Well, answer me this question: When they are making a new road or railway, and have a high hill to cut down, or a great hollow to fill up, how much soil can one man take away from the hill or throw into the hollow at one time? Only a spadeful!—W. W. HOW.

4. "The grass withereth, the flower fadeth; because the Spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it" (ver. 7). Only within the last week or so, in my own county of Kent, these very words were made so wonderfully clear. The whole country round was covered with the blossoms of the fruit trees, and though their blossoms remained longer than people thought they could have remained, because the weather happened to be colder than usual, and the sun could not shine upon them sufficiently, when there came a few days of sunshine, the very warmth which enabled them to live caused them to fade away, because "the Spirit of the Lord" had blown upon them.—J. G. WOOD.