

Mr. Bryan's Bible Talks

A HEART DEDICATED TO GOD

By WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN

BIBLE TEXT—LESSON FOR AUGUST 20

(Ezra 7:10; 8:21-23, 31, 32)

For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.

Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance.

For I was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy in the way; because we had spoken unto the king, saying, The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek him; but his power and his wrath is against all them that forsake him.

So we fasted and besought our God for this: and He was intreated of us.

Then we departed from the river of Ahava on the 12th day of the first month, to go unto Jerusalem; and the hand of our God was upon us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and of such as lay in wait by the way.

And we came to Jerusalem, and abode there three days.

He was the servant of a heart dedicated to God.

So Ezra has come down to us through the centuries, not only as a great leader of the Jews, but as one whose life is a model for all times for those who believe and give their hearts to God.

The great lesson that Ezra's life holds for us is abundantly revealed in that phase of his career centering around the second return of the Jews to Jerusalem from their enforced exile, as human spoils of war, in Babylon. Cyrus, King of Persia, successor of the great Nebuchadnezzar, who had carried away the Jews captives, was moved of God to bring about the first return to Jerusalem, and the same Divine influence caused Artaxerxes, "king of kings," to commission Ezra to lead the second band of exiles home.

Ezra is a fascinating character; he was a Levite, a member of the priestly branch of the family. He came from a long line of priests; his great-great-grandfather was put to death by Nebuchadnezzar, and he had a still more remote ancestor in Hilkiah, who discovered the Book of the Law, the basis of our Bible today, after it had long been lost to the Jews during the reigns of their idolatrous kings.

A HEART PREPARED TO SEEK THE LORD

As a youth in Babylon Ezra had every opportunity for receiving an education, but his learning, instead of becoming a substitute for religion, was the servant of a heart dedicated to God. We are told that Ezra "had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments." It was an ambition formed early. As a scribe, he entered upon his duties at 13, and it required 17 years of preparation to fit him for his work.

The world does not change rapidly—in some respects it does not seem to change at all. All through history and in every land we find instances of early consecration to a life work.

A countless multitude of boys devote themselves to having a good time, with seemingly no thought of life's realities; they have no plan and drift hither and thither as some promised pleasure points the way. While this is often the fault of the parents, it is not always so; sometimes the most favorable environment fails to furnish the needed restraint and the necessary incentive.

As time goes on, this multitude divides into three different groups. Some catch a belated vision of life's possibilities and attempt to make up for lost opportunities. Some become worthless and neglect priceless opportunities for service. Still others wander from idleness into crime and end their lives in the custody of society's guardians.

BLAME FOR WASTED LIVES

The blame for wasted lives must be borne partly by society. Even Christians may not be wholly guiltless if they think only of themselves and their own children while those about them walk the way to ruin.

A story is told of a very charitable woman who not only refused to speak evil of others,

but would not allow evil to be spoken in her presence. Her children thought one day to put her to the test. By agreement they assembled in her room and one after another began to criticize the devil, just to see if she would permit the censure.

They had not gone far when she interrupted them with the protest: "Well, children, if we were all as industrious as the devil is, we would accomplish more."

Is it not true? If all Christians were as zealous in their efforts to save souls as the devil is in his effort to lead them astray, the number of the lost would be greatly reduced.

But while the many are hard to awaken, a few scattered over the world begin early, as Ezra did, to plan for life. Great inventors often manifest their interest in that line of work while they are children; great business men often indicate a fondness for merchandising; great lawyers begin to prepare themselves for their profession; great statesmen commence as embryo debaters, and great preachers sometimes indicate in their early years the direction in which they travel through life.

WHERE MANY FAIL IN GOOD WORKS

I know an Oriental student who, when only 18, had become so absorbed in the study of government that he left his home with only a few dollars, traveled to a distant country and worked his way among strangers until he finally secured the information which he sought. Then, as the bee carries the honey back to its hive, this student returned to his native land to give to his countrymen the benefit of garnered wisdom and the zeal of a devoted heart.

Ezra's life is one that should arouse hearts from lethargy and put high purpose into aimless lives.

It will be noticed that Ezra set his heart to do according to the law, as well as to learn the law. This is a very necessary addition to knowledge. Many who know the law fail to live up to it. Knowledge that is not translated into action is of little value.

Ezra carried his plans a step farther; his purpose found a triple expression; he learned, he acted, and he taught. He went at his work in an orderly way; he could not act until he learned, and he could not teach effectively until he embodied his learning in his own life.

SIN THE SILENT BLACKMAILER

Inconsistency between practice and preaching has often nullified the efforts of those who thought to instruct while they themselves failed to live up to the light that they had. A dual life is possible only when one of the lives is concealed; when both lives are known one can live but one life, and that is the lower one. And it must be remembered that a failure to practice usually silences one who might otherwise teach.

Sin is the silent blackmailer that paralyzes the usefulness of many who might be towers of strength to the community. Consciousness of secret sins palsies the purpose and weakens the influence.

When Ezra set out with his little band of exiles to return to Jerusalem he stopped at the river Ahava and proclaimed a fast, that they might humble themselves before God, "to seek of Him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance."

The fast had long been regarded as a religious rite. It is a temporary turning away from the multitude; it is a short journey into the wilderness—a communion with God. It is a suppression of that which is most natural—the appetite—that we may open our hearts to the supernatural. Every Christian might well have his river Ahava where he stops a while to fast and pray.

"THE HAND OF OUR GOD"

When Ezra appeared before the King he expressed his confidence in God so strongly that he felt it inconsistent to ask for the armed guards that the King would willingly have provided for the expedition. He says:

"For I was ashamed to require of the King a band of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy in the way; because we had spoken unto the King, saying, The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek Him. But His power and His wrath is against all them that forsake Him."

But the same confidence that led him to be al-

most boastful before Artaxerxes sustained him on the journey. After they had fasted and prayed they started on their journey, trusting in God to guard them from enemies, and their trust was rewarded. Ezra took his little band through a hostile country infested by robbers and none molested him.

The unbeliever may speculate as to the reasons that accounted for Ezra's security; he may guess that the robbers were busy plying their profession along some other highway, but Ezra gave credit to Jehovah. "The hand of our God was upon us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and of such as lay in wait by the way. And we came to Jerusalem."

FAITH THAT UNLOCKS THE FUTURE

Here is another lesson of faith—a faith that unlocks the future to those who possess it. Ezra's faith blossomed early, long before reason could have been of much aid to him. His faith led him to seek to know the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach it. This faith developed in him a life that impressed a King and a life that furnished leadership for an expedition.

Eight hundred miles Ezra led his followers through the desert from the Euphrates to the promised land. It was in the spring and the flowers of the desert cheered the travelers as they journeyed—the flowers that God has scattered over all of earth's wildernesses as He scatters evidences of His love throughout all the lonely portions of life's pathway.

Never wavering, Ezra completed his journey and undertook the refurbishing of the temple. Only those who believe attempt the seemingly impossible, and, attempting, prove what can be accomplished.

"Faith, mighty faith, the promise sees,
And looks to that alone;
Laughs at impossibilities,
And cries, 'It shall be done.'"

HOW SHALL WE PRAY?

By WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN

BIBLE TEXT—LESSON FOR AUGUST 27

(Nehemiah 1:1-11)

The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah. And it came to pass in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Shushan the palace.

That Hanani, one of my brethren, came, he and certain men of Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews that had escaped, which were left of the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem.

And they said unto me, The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire.

And it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven.

And I said, I beseech thee, O Lord God of heaven, the great and terrible God, that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love him and observe his commandments:

Let thine ear now be attentive, eyes open, that thou mayest hear the prayer of thy servant, which I pray before thee now, day and night, for the children of Israel thy servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against thee: both I and my father's house have sinned.

We have dwelt very corruptly against thee, and have not kept thy commandments, nor the statutes, nor the judgments, which thou commandest thy servant Moses.

Remember, I beseech thee, the word that thou commandest thy servant Moses, saying, If ye transgress, I will scatter you abroad among the nations:

But if ye turn unto me, and keep my commandments, and do them; though there were of you cast out unto the uttermost part of the heaven, yet will I gather them from thence, and will bring them unto the 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.

O Lord, I beseech thee, let now thine ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and to the prayer of thy servants, who desire to fear thy name: and prosper, I pray thee, thy servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man. For I was the king's cup bearer.

Prayer is the keynote of our Talk today. The text is the first chapter of Nehemiah, wherein is recorded one of the truly great prayers of the Bible—the supplication that one of the most remarkable of Biblical characters made to God before he sought permission from the Persian king to whom he was cup bearer that he be allowed to go to Jerusalem and rebuild that desolate city.

"The effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much," God assures us in His Word; or, as the revised version has it, "The supplication of a righteous man availeth much in its working." Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the important consequences flowing from Nehemiah's prayer. And his is a prayer