April 29, 2017

Prison Ministry

**Prophets and Kings** (1917) Edition Chapter 56 – “Instructed in the Law of God”

It was the time of the Feast of Trumpets. Many were gathered at Jerusalem. The scene was one of mournful interest. The wall of Jerusalem had been rebuilt and the gates set up, but a large part of the city was still in ruins.

On a platform of wood, erected in one of the broadest streets, and surrounded on every hand by the sad reminders of Judah's departed glory, stood Ezra, now an aged man. At his right and left were gathered his brother Levites. Looking down from the platform, their eyes swept over a sea of heads. From all the surrounding country the children of the covenant had assembled. "And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God. And all the people answered, Amen: . . . and they bowed their heads, and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground."

Yet even here was evidence of the sin of Israel. Through the intermarriage of the people with other nations, the Hebrew language had become corrupted, and great care was necessary on the part of the speakers to explain the law in the language of the people, that it might be understood by all. Certain of the priests and Levites united with Ezra in explaining the principles of the law. "They read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading."

"And the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law." They listened, intent and reverent, to the words of the Most High. As the law was explained, they were convinced of their guilt, and they mourned because of their transgressions. But this day was a festival, a day of rejoicing, a holy convocation, a day which the Lord had commanded the people to keep with joy and gladness; and in view of this they were bidden to restrain their grief and to rejoice because of God's great mercy toward them. "This day is holy unto the Lord your God," Nehemiah said. "Mourn not, nor weep. . . . Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto 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."

The earlier part of the day was devoted to religious exercises, and the people spent the remainder of the time in gratefully recounting the blessings of God and in enjoying the bounties that He had provided. Portions were also sent to the poor, who had nothing to prepare. There was great rejoicing because the words of the law had been read and understood.

On the following day the reading and explaining of the law were continued. And at the time appointed--on the tenth day of the seventh month--the solemn services of the Day of Atonement were performed according to the command of God.

From the fifteenth to the twenty-second of the same month the people and their rulers kept once more the Feast of Tabernacles. It was proclaimed "in all their cities, and in Jerusalem, saying, Go forth unto the mount, and fetch olive branches, and pine branches, and myrtle branches, and palm branches, and branches of thick trees, to make booths, as it is written. So the people went forth, and brought them, and made themselves booths, everyone upon the roof of his house, and in their courts, and in the courts of the house of God. . . . And there was very great gladness. Also day by day, from the first day unto the last day, he [Ezra] read in the book of the law of God."

As they had listened from day to day to the words of the law, the people had been convicted of their transgressions, and of the sins of their nation in past generations. They saw that it was because of a departure from God that His protecting care had been withdrawn and that the children of Abraham had been scattered in foreign lands, and they determined to seek His mercy and to pledge themselves to walk in His commandments. Before entering upon this solemn service, held on the second day after the close of the Feast of Tabernacles, they separated themselves from the heathen among them.

As the people prostrated themselves before the Lord, confessing their sins and pleading for pardon, their leaders encouraged them to believe that God, according to His promise, heard their prayers. They must not only mourn and weep, and repent, but they must believe that God pardoned them. They must show their faith by recounting His mercies and praising Him for His goodness. "Stand up," said these teachers, "and bless the Lord your God for ever and ever."

Then from the assembled throng, as they stood with outstretched hands toward heaven, there arose the song:

"Blessed be Thy glorious name,

Which is exalted above all blessing and praise.

Thou, even Thou, art Lord alone;

Thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens,

with all their host,

The earth, and all things that are therein,

The seas, and all that is therein,

And Thou preservest them all;

And the host of heaven worshippeth Thee."

The song of praise ended, the leaders of the congregation related the history of Israel, showing how great had been God's goodness toward them, and how great their ingratitude. Then the whole congregation entered into a covenant to keep all the commandments of God. They had suffered punishment for their sins; now they acknowledged the justice of God's dealings with them and pledged themselves to obey His law. And that this might be "a sure covenant," and be preserved in permanent form, as a memorial of the obligation they had taken upon themselves, it was written out, and the priests, Levites, and princes signed it. It was to serve as a reminder of duty and a barrier against temptation. The people took a solemn oath "to walk in God's law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our Lord, and His judgments and His statutes." The oath taken at this time included a promise not to intermarry with the people of the land.

Before the day of fasting ended, the people still further manifested their determination to return to the Lord, by pledging themselves to cease from desecrating the Sabbath. Nehemiah did not at this time, as at a later date, exercise his authority to prevent heathen traders from coming into Jerusalem; but in an effort to save the people from yielding to temptation, he bound them, by a solemn covenant, not to transgress the Sabbath law by purchasing from these venders, hoping that this would discourage the traders and put an end to the traffic.

Provision was also made to support the public worship of God. In addition to the tithe the congregation pledged themselves to contribute yearly a stated sum for the service of the sanctuary. "We cast the lots," Nehemiah writes, "to bring the first fruits of our ground, and the first fruits of all fruit of all trees, year by year, unto the house of the Lord: also the first-born of our sons, and of our cattle, as it is written in the law, and the firstlings of our herds and of our flocks."

Israel had returned to God with deep sorrow for backsliding. They had made confession with mourning and lamentation. They had acknowledged the righteousness of God's dealings with them, and had covenanted to obey His law. Now they must manifest faith in His promises. God had accepted their repentance; they were now to rejoice in the assurance of sins forgiven and their restoration to divine favor.

Nehemiah's efforts to restore the worship of the true God had been crowned with success. As long as the people were true to the oath they had taken, as long as they were obedient to God's word, so long would the Lord fulfill His promise by pouring rich blessings upon them.

For those who are convicted of sin and weighed down with a sense of their unworthiness, there are lessons of faith and encouragement in this record. The Bible faithfully presents the result of Israel's apostasy; but it portrays also the deep humiliation and repentance, the earnest devotion and generous sacrifice, that marked their seasons of return to the Lord.

Every true turning to the Lord brings abiding joy into the life. When a sinner yields to the influence of the Holy Spirit, he sees his own guilt and defilement in contrast with the holiness of the great Searcher of hearts. He sees himself condemned as a transgressor. But he is not, because of this, to give way to despair; for his pardon has already been secured. He may rejoice in the sense of sins forgiven, in the love of a pardoning heavenly Father. It is God's glory to encircle sinful, repentant human beings in the arms of His love, to bind up their wounds, to cleanse them from sin, and to clothe them with the garments of salvation. {PK 668.3}

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