

God's Way Out

"For Us and For Our Little Ones"

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

Ezra 8:21.

Lesson 10. Why They Missed the Way Out

Almost unbelievable--in this chapter is set forth God's plan to keep enemies from the land and to bring happiness and prosperity to its homes.

GOLD! Solid gold! Over four thousand tons of pure, gleaming gold! Yes tons! Scores of goldsmiths were employed hammering it, beating it, carving it, melting and molding it. This astounding mass of precious metal was gathered by King David and his princes as material for the now temple of God which Solomon his Son was to build at Jerusalem. [1]

No wonder the fame of Jerusalem and its temple spread over the valleys and plains of the ancient world. Kings and ambassadors spoke about it in ancient Babylon. Visitors from other countries afar off came to see and admire. [2]

The work of building that temple employed 183,000 men for seven years. Eighty thousand of these were needed in the mountains of Lebanon and other places to cut down the fir trees and cedars, and to hew the timber and stones for the building. Seventy thousand men were employed transporting the wood from Mount Lebanon to the sea, floating it along the coast to Joppa, carting it from Joppa to Jerusalem, and in fetching and carrying the stone and other materials. [3]

What processions of straining oxen moved up that steep road from the Mediterranean with their creaking carts and wagons! Gold? Yes, the whole interior of that temple was overlaid with gold. Beams, floors, posts, walls, and doors, were all covered with the precious metal. [4]

Besides its gold the temple had other wonders. By the inner door were two immense pillars of brass which in those days were triumphs of the metal-founders' skill. Down in the valley of the Jordan the furnaces had roared, and in the clay ground Solomon's men had made the huge moulds. When these were ready the glowing metal had been poured in and cooled. [5]

See those great pillars which were then lifted out! Thirty feet high and six feet wide, bearing finely molded pomegranate fruits and artistic wreaths, to be

surmounted by eight-foot capitals with carving of lilies. There was another wonder of brass in the court of the temple, a huge water-basin, seventeen feet across, supported on twelve brazen oxen, and was accounted by the ancients the largest brazen vessel ever made. [6]

In the most holy place were set two exquisitely carved cherubim of great size, bending over the ark of the covenant below. It was a work worthy of a Hebrew Michelangelo. [7] Under these overshadowing wings was the ark of the covenant, the sacred chest containing the two tables of stone inscribed with the Ten Commandments. The cover of the chest bore two beautifully molded figures of cherubim, wrought in solid gold. Between the two cherubim the glory of God was manifested in a mysterious glowing radiance. [8]

What an object lesson! Heaven itself was mirrored in that building. The temple was an emblem, a type or picture of the temple of God on high, where God dwells in glory between the cherubim which overshadow the mercy-seat of the ark of His covenant, [9] where righteousness and judgment, shown in His holy law, are the habitation of His throne. Yes, God Himself gave the pattern for the temple. [10]

The city of Jerusalem itself was of outstanding attractiveness. "Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, is Mount Zion," sang David. Hebrew exiles far from home sang: "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning." [11]

Jerusalem had strong natural defenses, besides its great walls. There were deep valleys on the east, the west, and the south of the old city. Across these valleys were the everlasting hills, symbols of God's guardian care.

"Oft of old the psalmist David,
Playing harp of solemn sound,
Sang his songs of God's protection
When he viewed the hills around.

"Sunset gleams over Judah's mountains,
Touched the clouds with heavenly light
Till they seemed like hosts of angels
Sent to guard him through the night."

And so long as God's people were loyal to Him, He Himself was their protection, stronger far than walls or valleys or hills. The Eternal God, Creator of heaven and earth, manifested in that beautiful temple, would ever prosper them.

Its King's Fame Among the Nations

Solomon, the handsome young king, began well. Oppressed with the thought of his own inability, he appealed to God for direction. "Give me now wisdom and knowledge," he prayed. "And the speech pleased the Lord."

Swift came the answer in a dream. "Because thou has asked this thing, and has not asked for thyself long life, riches nor the life of your enemies lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart. So that there was none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any rise like unto thee." [12]

And because Solomon had so humbly asked this great gift, God declared He would add that which he had not asked: riches, honor, and long life. Soon it was noised abroad that this young king showed unusually good judgment, outstanding intelligence, profound knowledge, and practical goodness. The Queen of Sheba came from "the end of the earth" to hear his wisdom.

His wise sayings were compressed into three thousand little nuggets of wisdom which delighted his hearers. A multitude of these are preserved in our Bible in the Book of Proverbs. [13]

He was an accomplished composer of music, and created a thousand and five songs. We have just one left--Solomon's Song, a love story which makes one wonder that the human heart could experience so much happiness. As a naturalist, he studied the trees, the birds, the animals, the insects, and the fishes. He became one of the foremost zoologists of his time.

As navigator, he had a fleet of trading ships in the Mediterranean and another in the Red Sea. To the wonder and delight of his people these ships brought home ivory, gold, silver, peacocks, monkeys, and cargoes of other valuable and strange products. His Red Sea ships may have gone as far as Ceylon. In Solomon's reign the country with its beautiful capital seemed destined to lead the world. After the dedication of the temple, God appeared to the young king in a second dream and promised him: "Mine eyes and Mine heart shall be there perpetually."

What a precious assurance that was!

"And if thou wilt walk before Me in integrity of heart," said God, "to do all that I have commanded thee, and wilt keep My statutes and My judgments: then I will establish the throne of thy kingdom upon Israel for ever."

"But if you will not keep My commandments but go and serve other gods and worship them: then will I cut off Israel out of the land." [14]

A Promising Beginning, But . . .

Had Solomon only remained loyal to God! What an object lesson of divine blessing the land would have been! But Solomon married heathen wives. God had forbidden such alliances, but the king persuaded himself that these attractive women would listen to him and be converted. And as most of them were daughters of the kings of surrounding nations, great prestige would come to his court, he hoped.

Vain hope! Many once-Christian young people of our day could have told him from bitter experience how much he would be deceived. Instead of becoming converted, the heathen wives led Solomon into idolatry. He actually built pagan shrines for them near the holy temple of God.

With paganism, as always, came indifference to the rights of others. The people's welfare became of secondary importance to Solomon's growing love of luxury. His tax-collectors appeared oftener at the people's doors with increased demands.

When Solomon Died

The burden became insufferable. When Solomon finally died and Rehoboam his son came to the throne, the people asked that their burdens should be lightened. [15] The new king refused. "No!" said he, haughtily, "my father hath chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions."

This was enough. A cry of rage rose from the people. Ten of the twelve tribes revolted. They left Rehoboam and chose for themselves a new king, Jeroboam. From that time onward there were two separate kingdoms. They never united again. Jeroboam's new kingdom in the north was henceforth called Israel. Rehoboam's little remnant of a kingdom was called Judah. Its area was less than two thousand square miles.

It is easy to remember the character of the two lines of kings. Judah's kings--some were bad and some were good. Israel's kings--some were bad and some were worse! The men of the northern kingdom became noted for their idolatry. They worshipped the sun, the moon, and the stars; they sacrificed their children; they left God's commandments. Though the Most Merciful sent His messengers to warn and to win, their efforts met with little success.

In the year 724 BC, the beginning of the end came for them, The armies of Shalmanezar, the Assyrian king, came marching into the land. After three years' siege. Samaria was taken, and the people of Israel were deported to the land of Media, south west of the Caspian Sea, almost a thousand miles from home. [16]

The Southern Kingdom Escapes--for a While

The southern kingdom of Judah retained some of her independence for a hundred and thirty years longer. Good kings like Hezekiah and Josiah were loyal to God's commandments, and succeeded in partially checking the drift toward idolatry. But the drift could not be wholly stopped. Idolatry and Sabbath-breaking seemed too attractive for the people.

Perhaps it was human nature--or human selfishness--if they reasoned that little harm was done by breaking the first four commandments--their duty to God. What did it matter if King Manasseh set up in his courtyard an altar to Baal, the sun-god of the Assyrians? It would hurt no one, and it would make the Assyrians feel at home when they came to Jerusalem. It would give the king influence with them.

And whom did it hurt if Ben-Israel used profane language in his temper and took God's name in vain? Or what did it matter if Merchant Joaz and Merchant Simeon and two score other shopkeepers opened up their businesses on the Sabbath day? Or worked in their gardens? What did it matter? Just this. Where the first four commandments are broken, the reverence for God dies. The authority of the Giver of the Ten Commandments is then no longer respected, and the six other commandments are lightly regarded. Unbelievably cruel deeds may then take place.

So when King Manasseh set up the altar to Baal and worshipped him, and ten thousand of his subjects did the same, what wonder if they took part in the adulterous ceremonies connected with Baal-worship? Was it any wonder that soon they began to offer human sacrifices?

And when Ben-Israel and his wife took God's name in vain, could he be surprised when his children ceased to honor God, and set light by their father and mother? When Merchant Joaz and his companions opened their businesses on the Sabbath, and no longer went to the house of God with their children, then it would be a marvel if the sons and daughters obeyed any of the commandments. And the grandchildren even less! We see this plainly enough today. We need to take solemn warning.

Before long Jerusalem presented a sorry sight. There were the children gathering wood, and the fathers kindling fires, so that the mothers could bake cakes as an offering to the moon! Of all foolishness! Also they worshipped the sun and the stars of heaven. They listened to deceiving astrologers, but forgot Him who made

the planets. They brought in witchcraft and consulted familiar spirits. They burned their children in the fires.

They became hardened to the needs of the fatherless. They neglected the widows. They would steal, murder, and commit adultery--and then go to worship in the temple of God. [17] The hypocrites! Surely at such times the priests and ministers of God would be striving to turn the people back to God! Some did faithfully endeavor to do this--and were martyred as a result. But the majority were infected with idolatry like the people. Scores of them burned incense to abominable beast idols. From between the porch and the altar of the very temple of God they worshipped the sun-god after the manner of the heathen. If they venerated any day of the week, it was "the venerable day of the sun."

A Storm Approaches

Does God continue His protection of a country which sets His law at naught? Was it mere chance that storm clouds began to gather over the nation? No! Strange stories came to Jerusalem. The great Assyrian nation had been felled to the ground, as God's prophets had predicted. The rulers of Babylon and Persia had laid Assyria low. But rumor said that the new king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, was ambitious to be the greatest monarch of the world.

Then news came that Nebuchadnezzar's armies were on the move. They were conquering city after city. At any time they might turn south against the little kingdom of Judah. What should the men of Jerusalem do to keep the day of doom away?

Way Out of Threatening Danger

Men discussed the news gravely as they went about the streets. What preparations should they make? What should they do? As the people walked in and out of the city gates one morning, a voice rang out with the strange answer: "Hear you the word of the Lord, you kings of Judah, and all Judah, and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, that enter in by these gates." [18]

"It is the prophet Jeremiah," said Ben-Israel to his companion. "What foolishness is he uttering now?" Jeremiah looked over the groups of people and called out earnestly: "Thus said the Lord; Take heed to yourselves, and bear no burden on the Sabbath day, nor bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem;

“Neither carry forth a burden out of your houses on the Sabbath day, neither do you any work, but hallow you the Sabbath day, as I commanded your fathers.”
“Hallow the Sabbath day!”

“And it shall come to pass, if you diligently hearken unto Me, said the Lord, to bring in no burden through the gates of this city on the Sabbath day, but hallow the Sabbath day, to do no work therein;

“Then shall there enter into the gates of this city kings and princes sitting upon the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, they, and their princes, the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: and this city shall remain for ever.”

“A wonderful promise is this--but hard counsel,” thought Merchant Joaz. “I have agreed with those buyers to meet them on Sabbath. I shall lose contracts if I disappoint them.”

“And I should lose my employment,” thought Merchant Simeon’s assistant. “The Sabbath is one of our busiest days.”

“I feel I ought to keep the Sabbath,” reasoned the Hebrew young woman. “But no one keeps the Sabbath now. How people would laugh at me!”

“What is the fellow talking about?” says a military officer scornfully. “What difference would it make to Nebuchadnezzar’s plans if every one of us began to keep the Sabbath this week? Nebuchadnezzar does not care one hair of Bel’s beard whether we keep the Sabbath or not. He would probably hasten and attack us on the Sabbath!”

“Yes, yes! From now on we ought to work seven days a week preparing our defenses against him,” assented his hearer, looking at the gates and the walls guarding their city, their temple, and their palaces.

“Much more practical, that,” growled many of the people. “This fellow ought to be stopped!”

“But if you will not hearken unto Me,” the prophet’s strong voice was speaking again with anguish in its tones--“If you will not hearken unto Me to hallow the Sabbath day, and not to bear a burden, even entering in at the gates of Jerusalem -on the Sabbath day. Then will I kindle a fire in the gates thereof, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem, and it shall not be quenched.”

It did look preposterous. Will God do miracles for those who keep the Sabbath? Would the German bombers have kept away from London town in our day if all

the people of the city had begun to keep the Sabbath of God--Saturday, busiest day of the week?

But God knew, and Jeremiah knew, that if the people of Jerusalem had begun with all their hearts to keep the Sabbath, then their other wicked practices would cease. Their eyes would be turned to God, the great Deliverer, and He would have saved Jerusalem from Nebuchadnezzar as He had saved the city from Sennacherib's cruel hosts. He may do astonishing things for our own loved country if we all regard His holy day. Surely we, in these days, should at once begin to walk in God's way, keeping His Ten Commandments--keeping the Sabbath. He will make the way clear to every loyal heart and will bless abundantly.

But what course did the people choose? They listened to Jeremiah as he continued to warn the Hebrews at the various city gates. They thought over his words, but finally they refused God's counsel, or put off action for a more convenient day. Fatal was their delay. Merchant Joaz and his competitors still worked on the Sabbath, and their assistants followed suit. The Hebrew young woman refused to face ridicule--and plunged deeper into sin.

Jeremiah himself was thrown into prison; his life was threatened. Foul deeds were committed by a people who had turned from the righteous God to wicked idolatry. Neighbors slandered and deceived each other. Brother supplanted brother. Murders, robberies, and assassinations increased until it seemed as though the streets were polluted with blood. The messengers of God pleaded to no purpose. God did all in His power for the people--only to be rejected. Then the Babylonian army came.

"In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah came Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon to Jerusalem, and besieged it. "And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with part of the vessels of the house of God: which he carried into the land of Shinar [Babylon] to the house of his god; and he brought the vessels into the treasure house of his god." [19] Many of the young princes, among them Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, were taken to Babylon.

But if Nebuchadnezzar hoped that Jerusalem would submit forever to being under Babylon, he was mistaken. It was necessary for his armies to come again and again to this city on the hills of Judea. The second time they took away large numbers of the people. They broke up the rest of the golden vessels and took the valuable metal to Babylon.

The third and last time, the city withstood the Babylonian siege for eighteen months. There was a great famine, and at last the king and his men of war fled by night by the way of the gate by the king's garden. They hurried away down the steeps toward the plains by the Jordan. But the army of the Chaldeans swiftly pursued after the king and overtook him not far from Jericho. All his army scattered from him and fled.

Zedekiah was taken by the enemy to Riblah, on the River Orontes in Syria, to the king of Babylon. He was tried. His sons were slain before his face, then his eyes were cruelly put out and he was carried captive to Babylon. What a tragic ending to a reign which might have had the smile of God upon it! Never let us endanger our children's future by lightly regarding the Sabbath. Let us begin its observance this very week. The Father in heaven will open the way for us.

Four weeks after the king's flight, Nebuzar-adan, the Babylonian guard, began the destruction of the city. At his command his soldiers burned the house of the Lord and the king's palace. Every great man's house they burnt with fire. All the houses of Jerusalem were burnt with fire; they all went up in smoke. The soldiers broke down the walls of the city. They smashed up those famous pillars of brass, and the great brazen sea, and carted the metal away to Babylon. The gold of the temple, those thousands of tons, had long since gone. The city was a pile of blackened, smoking ruins.

The holy city of the Jews, the holy temple of Solomon's days was gone. [20] Gone! Because its people refused to "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy." They missed God's way out.

A Better City

But, thank God, He has given a promise that raises in our hearts the vision of a New Jerusalem, more glorious by far than that city of old. We see by faith the Holy City of God, and within its walls we hear no shout of battle nor crackle and roar of burning. Through its pearly gates shall pass the princes and kings of the kingdom of Christ. Among them are men and women, boys and girls, of our own generation. They are preparing now. They have received forgiveness of sins and acceptance with God. They keep the Sabbath of God; they walk in His way; they are loyal to His commandments. They love God and their fellow men. Soon they shall tread the streets of gold in the train of Christ Jesus, their Redeemer. And, praise God! This city shall stand forever!

REFERENCES

1. 1 Chronicles 22:14.
2. 2 Chronicles 9: 23.
3. 1 Kings 5:13-17.
4. 1 Kings 6:20-22, 30, 32, 35; 7:49, 50.
5. 1 Kings 7:15, 46.
6. 1 Kings 7:23-26.
7. 1 Kings 6:23-28.
8. 2 Chronicles 7:1; Exodus 25:22.
9. Hebrews 8:5.
10. 1 Chronicles 28:19.
11. Psalm 48:2; 137:5.
12. 1 Kings 3:9-12.
13. 1 Kings 4:32.
14. 1 Kings 9:2-7.
15. 1 Kings 12.
16. 2 Kings 17:5, 6.
17. Jeremiah 7:9, 10.
18. Jeremiah 17:19-27
19. Daniel 1:1, 2.
20. 2 Chronicles 36:17-20.

