

PERSECUTION RIGHTLY RECEIVED

—ACTS 5:33-42—FEB. 16.—

„Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake; for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.”—Matt. 5:10.

WE SAW, in a previous lesson, Peter and John before the Sanhedrin, and the subsequent growth of the Church in numbers and in the graces of the holy spirit, including joy and peace with God and with each other and with fellow-men. The Lord's blessing upon the apostles, through the gifts of the holy spirit, enabled them to heal the sick, and at the same time to declare that the work was done by the power of Jesus, whom the rulers had crucified; but whom God had raised from the dead, and who was now in heavenly glory, a prince, a Savior, a glorified High Priest, ready and willing to grant forgiveness of sins and the blessing of the holy spirit to those who would accept.

For a time the chief priests and their associates in religious power, ignored the new movement and the fact that it reflected against them; but by and by they were aroused, and used the power at their hand for the arrest of the apostles; at the command of the chief ones the latter were put into prison. The account says they had „indignation”—margin, „envy.” Thus the truth, in whatever way presented, has either a savor of life unto life, or of death unto death, according to the heart-conditions of those coming under its influence. In the present case the simplicity of the apostles, their earnestness in presenting their message, their power and kindness in respect to the healing of disease and casting out of devils, and their evident sincerity, had a right influence upon all „Israelites indeed;” but the formal, perfunctory Israelites, in favored positions of honor and affluence, were provoked to hatred and envy; envy because of a power over the people which they could not exercise; hatred, because of a feeling that these teachings were assailing and weakening their influence, and tending to break down the religious system which they represented.

So, too, we see matters to-day in nominal spiritual Israel. The spirit of sectarianism is jealous and envious, and resents and opposes whatever is not in accord with it;—fearful of its own fall,—realizing continually the weakness of its own position. On the contrary, now as ever, the truth, presented in simplicity and under the guidance of the holy spirit, will appeal to all who are in a right attitude of heart, all Israelites indeed, all whose eyes of understanding are open to see the inconsistencies of sectarianism and formalism. Sectarian leaders in our day have not the power to

imprison those toward whom they feel enmity; nevertheless, having the same spirit as their prototypes, they manifest it to the extent of their ability. For instance; during the „Volunteer” service in Allegheny—in which brethren and sisters quietly and pleasantly tendered tracts and booklets free to Christian people on Sunday—some of the modern Pharisees and Sadducees were envious, and manifested their envy as nearly as possible after the manner described in our lesson. Some of the preachers *commanded* their congregations not to take the pamphlets, and heaped abuse and scandalous epithets upon God’s faithful children, whose only object in the matter was to serve his cause, and to feed his flock. A committee of preachers waited upon the city officials and endeavored to have their cooperation—to secure the arrest and imprisonment of the brethren and sisters unless they would cease to preach this „gospel of the Kingdom,” and let them alone to continue their blinding and deceiving of the Lord’s flock. They perceive that the truth is against them; against their positions; against their false theologies. They perceive that the truth has Scriptural support, which they cannot answer; and they fear lest it should „turn the world upside down,” and that, in the melee, they would lose some of their dignity, honor of men and good salaries. As one of them declared, „My bread is not buttered on that side!”

The city officials, desirous of being on good terms with influential citizens, called at our office, rehearsed the facts, and notified us to discontinue the work. We replied that we are living in the United States, and not in Russia; and that there is no law here yet, against giving men booklets, any more than against giving them bank-bills, if they desire to take them, and if the procedure is conducted in a quiet, orderly manner. We assured them that if there were any breaches of the peace they would not come from the distributors, and explained further that those who engaged in this Volunteer service were as truly preaching the gospel by the printed page as were those who taught orally inside the church buildings; and further, that the real objection was, that our friends were circulating the *true* gospel, „good tidings of great joy which shall be unto all people,” while those inside the churches were deceiving their confiding flocks, misrepresenting God’s character and plan, and withal reaping goodly rewards for their evil services;—whereas our friends, the Volunteers, were preaching the true gospel without money and without price;—seeking to educate the people in a knowledge of God and of his plan, as revealed in the Scriptures. The civil authorities readily saw the justice of our position, and there was no interference. Is not this a case of the blind seeing better than those who boast of having escaped from blindness?

The Lord’s power was wonderfully manifested in the early days, not only in the healing of the sick, but afterwards in the deliverance of the apostles from imprisonment. The angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them forth; instructing them to proceed in the proclamation of the truth as before. The apostles and early Church at this time almost

walked by sight; for, under such conditions, faith would be very secondary. However, we see that the object of this was the establishment of the Church upon broad, sure foundations. Subsequently the miraculous features were withdrawn, and are still withdrawn: frequently the Lord's people have been imprisoned and otherwise mistreated throughout the age, without any special physical deliverance,—even as the miraculous gift of healing also passed away. We walk by faith, not by sight; we can see the spiritual healings and casting out of evil spirits progress, but are not granted physical demonstrations; and if imprisoned or otherwise despitely used, our consolations must be those of the heart, grasped by the arms of our faith.

The next morning, on the assembling of the Sanhedrin (also termed the Senate), when it was found that the apostles were not in the prison, but boldly teaching as before in the Temple, the chief priests found matters more complicated; and fearing the influence of such miracles upon the minds of the people, they caused the next arrest of the apostles to be made with great leniency, bringing them before the Sanhedrin. Thus another opportunity was afforded God's servants to testify, and to the chief priests and rulers to hear a strictly gospel sermon; and the speaker failed not to impress the same points as on previous occasions. What an opportunity this would have been for honest men, Israelites indeed! What a blessing it might have brought them! But being in an evil condition of heart they were merely angered, embittered, „cut to the heart.”

Their words betray the source of their fear, when they said to the apostles. We have already forbidden you to teach the people, but instead of obeying us you have „filled Jerusalem with your doctrines” (teachings), and you evidently intend to bring upon us the

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ill-will of those who receive your teachings, by charging us with the blood of this Jesus. They feared not only for the safety of their sectarian systems, but they had a personal fear as well. And so we believe it is with the chief priests, scribes and Pharisees of to-day; they feel not only a necessity for supporting their various denominational structures, but, additionally, they realize that their personal standing is at stake. In proportion as what we present as the truth is accepted by the people, the ministers of the nominal churches are seen to be false teachers, false prophets, deceivers, who ignorantly or wilfully have woefully misrepresented the divine character and plan.

However, if the chief priests, etc., had only understood matters better they would not have been so alarmed. They would have realized that the apostles and their teachings would influence only a comparatively small number;—that the large majority of Israelites were such only in name; drawing nigh to God in outward forms and lip service, but far from him in heart. The same is true to-day. The preachers of Babylon need have little fear that the true gospel will affect the majority of their hearers in the least. On the contrary, now, as at the first advent, only such as „have an ear

to hear" will hear, can hear: the remainder will continue under the leading of their blind guides, until, by and by, both shall fall into the ditch of general doubt and unbelief here, as their prototypes did in the trouble which closed the Jewish age. Subsequent events proved that, altho' the apostles filled Jerusalem with their doctrine (teachings), a comparatively small number were ready and able and willing to receive the good messages, as the Apostle and the Prophet declare.—Isa. 10:22; Rom. 9:27.

Gamaliel was a great teacher amongst the Jews. It will be remembered that the Apostle Paul, as Saul of Tarsus, was one of his pupils. Gamaliel was a member of the Sanhedrin, and present on the occasion of this trial, and his wise counsel turned aside the murderous intentions of the chief priests toward the apostles. His wise and moderate language draws our esteem, and it swayed fully those who heard him say,—“Refrain from these men and let them alone; for if this counsel or this work be of men it will come to nought; but if it be of God ye cannot overthrow it, lest haply ye be found even to be fighting against God.” We must esteem these words as merely worldly wisdom, and their author not as an Israelite indeed, but simply prudent and, possibly, a just man. So to-day, we find men in the councils of the nominal church and in the civil councils who are broad-minded, wise and liberally disposed. This does not mean, however, that these, any more than Gamaliel, are Israelites, indeed. They are noble-minded, and should have our respect accordingly; but we are not to be surprised if we find that they do not accept the truth, and that they are not of the „little flock.” We are to remember, on the contrary, the inspired word—that not many great or wise or mighty hath God chosen, but „chiefly the poor of this world, rich in faith, to be heirs of the Kingdom.” (I Cor. 1:26-29; Jas. 2:5.) We would like to press this point, because we have found at times that some of the Lord's people who have received the truth themselves are more or less stumbled by the fact that they see good, honorable, noble people who seem to have no ear to hear the truth, and no heart to accept discipleship amongst the Lord's people under the terms of his discipleship—full consecration, even unto death. The number of wise, learned people who are willing to become fools, in the estimation of men, for Christ's sake, is exceedingly small now, as ever.

The Sanhedrin warned the apostles to preach no more in this name,—the name of Jesus—and sentenced them to be whipped. Thus they would discredit the ministers of the new teaching in the eyes of the many, for then, as now, the majority of people were disposed to look to their leaders, and to accept their judgment as superior. It is well indeed that wise, true leaders should be appreciated and acknowledged and followed; but it is a lesson that all need to learn, that the Lord is the real leader and commander of all those who claim to be his people; and that while looking to leaders of ability for guidance and for help, all of the Lord's people need to look beyond the leader also to the Lord; and to have their senses exercised in respect to the righteousness, the justice, the truthfulness, of the advice and example of their leaders.

REJOICING IN TRIBULATION

As the apostles departed, at liberty, altho' sore from the thirteen strokes of a three-tailed whip („forty stripes save one") they doubtless remembered our

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Lord's words, „Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you falsely for my sake." So far from being cast down, their experience, because rightly received, made them stronger in the Lord. They went again before the people to teach, but in no wrong attitude. They did not threaten the scribes and Pharisees, reviling them as corrupt, etc., nor did they bemoan their fate, thinking it strange that the Lord should permit these fiery trials to come upon them. No; they were true soldiers of the cross; they knew that they had enlisted in the Lord's army for service, and not merely for dress parade. They realized that present lessons and experiences were under providential guidance, and would work out for their good. They suffered pain—we are not to suppose that a miracle was performed to hinder their feeling the lashes, else there would have been no merit in endurance;—but their faith so firmly grasped the situation, and the Lord's word of promise, that we read, „They rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his Name."

The world is full of grumblers, and with good cause often; as the Apostle remarks, „The whole creation groaneth and travaileth together." But as he also declares, „We, who have the first-fruits of the spirit, groan *within* ourselves." The Lord's people are not to parade their difficulties, bemoaning their lot; on the contrary, they have the throne of grace, and the instructions of the Word of God teaching them why present evil conditions are permitted at all; and how and when and why the time is nearing in which all tears will be wiped off all faces, and there shall be no more sighing and crying and dying. Instead therefore of groaning before the world they should rejoice and show forth the praises of him who has called us out of darkness into his marvelous light. Our sympathy for the poor world without these advantages should so bestir us to tell them the gospel, that our own woes would be smothered;—partially forgotten. And if faithfulness to the Lord and his truth brings us extra hardships, as it did to the apostles, this, also, is a cause for rejoicing as it was with them. The Master instructed us that we should first have sat down and counted the cost of discipleship, so that thereafter none of the things coming to us as his disciples would move us. True, we may all have in our natural dispositions a tendency to repine, to grumble, to bemoan afflictions which come to us, even in the service of the truth; but as we become more and more developed in the heavenly character the Lord surely will expect of us that we shall gradually attain more and more to that standard which he sets for us; in which the trials and difficulties of the present will be more than offset, more than over-balanced by his gracious promises, and by the witness of his spirit, that all these things are working together for good to

us,—working out for us the greater glory by preparing us therefor. The developed Christian will surely find himself counting present trials and difficulties, even tho' severe to the natural man, to be but „light afflictions, not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.”

The record is that the apostles so rejoiced that the threatenings of the Sanhedrin were powerless to stop them from declaring the good tidings—they preached not only in the Temple, but in their homes,—wherever they had opportunity. And so it must be with the same message in all those who receive it now, as well as then. They do not need to be „called” by a large salary to the ministry of the truth; but without any salaries, and even with the wages of tribulation, stripes and imprisonment, they rejoice in the privilege saying, „He hath put a new song into my mouth;—even his loving-kindness.”

We must again call attention to the attitude of the apostles—their boldness and their meekness. They knew well the Lord's regulation, that his people should be „subject to the powers that be,” and that they „should not speak evil of the rulers of their people;” and following this instruction we find that while stating the truth very plainly their words contain nothing of venom or bitterness or threat. No wonder that the people took note of them, that they had been with Jesus! At the same time, in respect to religious matters they recognized a higher law, and that the same God who directed that they should be subject to the powers that be, had given them a message of peace and joy and blessing which was to be declared everywhere. They could not permit the civil power nor the religious power of their time to hinder their obedience to God in this matter.

So it should be with us to-day; we are to be strictly law-abiding, speaking no evil of the government, nor of its servants: if God sees fit to permit them, that is reason enough why we should be subject to them. When his time shall come he will institute his own King upon his own throne, and we shall rejoice thereat; but meantime we can have neither part nor lot with those who defame the laws and defame the rulers. We may see various things which our consciences and judgment of the Lord's Word indicate to us are seriously wrong; yet we are to remember

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that even the poorest government in the world is far superior to anarchy, and our sentiments are to be always on the law-abiding side of every question. This, however, must not hinder us from defending the truth and its interests whenever they are assailed;—in love, and with the wisdom from above. If the Lord has opened a door of opportunity for us for the promulgation of the truth, and if, in his providence, the laws are favorable, we are to use the opportunities, and to protest against any obstruction of them—yet not with bitterness. (For instance, our appeal from illegal Postoffice rulings.) If special privileges then are closed to us, we are to submit, remembering that no power could prevail against us except as God would permit it. But, like the apostles, we are to

continue to use our talents, our tongues, our pens, in the service of the truth, in making known the good tidings of great joy, wholly regardless of what this obedience to God shall cost us in the way of earthly interests.

While touching this subject we urge upon all of our readers to copy the methods of the apostles in their quiet, forceful speaking of the truth. Rarely have we found much good to result from boisterous argument; and frequently it has, to our knowledge, resulted in evil. Those who seem to need boisterous

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argument evidently have not an ear for the truth, and should be let alone. If the Lord's servants adopt such methods they are likely not only to do no good to their hearers, but evil, and especially likely to do injury to their own hearts. The spirit of strife is not the spirit of the Lord: his spirit is described in the Scriptures as „the meek and quiet spirit,“ not the contentious, boastful, arrogant spirit; and whoever attempts to serve the truth and to spread it abroad in boisterous argument and boastful manner, is doing injury to the cause as well as to himself and his hearer.

The truth was impressed by the plain, simple statement of the facts of the case, by men whose hearts had been cleansed by the truth and whose lives were irreproachably moral—whose conduct demonstrated their honesty, whose joy and rejoicing proved that they had in them the new mind of the holy spirit making them glad. It was by these manifestations of the spirit and power of the truth that the Lord was glorified, and that the hearers were blessed; and so it will be to-day, and we should order our conduct and words and sentiments accordingly.

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— February 1, 1902 —