

A LIGHT TO THE GENTILES.

– *MAY 16.* – *ACTS 14:11-22.* –

"I have set thee to be a light to the Gentiles." – *Acts 13:47.*

LET their table become a snare and a trap unto them," said the prophet respecting Israel. Their "table" consisted of the divine favors and truths which were spread before Israel. "What advantage then hath a Jew? Much every way; chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God." Divine favor produced pride of heart instead of humility, and unfitted the majority of Israelites to inherit the chief blessing offered to that nation. Consequently the words of the Apostle (considered in our last lesson), logical and convincing, in that they were in harmony with the testimony of the Law and the prophets concerning the Messiah, were nevertheless coldly received, because they ran counter to certain Jewish prejudices: (1) Altho Paul preached a Jewish Messiah it was the crucified One. (2) If his message were true, it reflected very discreditably upon the heads of their nation and church, of whom they had been accustomed to boast as the greatest and holiest teachers of the world. (3) If the Apostle's message were true, it vitiated if it did not utterly destroy their long cherished national hopes that Israel would shortly be the great nation of earth, in principal power, instead of Rome. The Messiah for whom they hoped was not the meek and lowly crucified One whom the Apostle preached, but a mighty, earthly conqueror of men and nations. (4) If the Apostle's preaching were correct, Israel was no longer in a place of preference above the other nations, and those who would accept Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah, whether Jews or Gentiles, would become the holy and divinely recognized Kingdom on a common level. The various promises which in their selfishness they misinterpreted, served to blind them to the pure, true light of the gospel as it now shone upon them.

But those of their number who had been proselyted from amongst the Gentiles had less cause for stumbling on these points, being less

prejudiced by national pride and selfishness. These seem to have heard the message with true appreciation and inquired for further opportunities of meeting and hearing more of the good tidings, and the privilege of bringing with them Gentile friends who were feeling after God (verse 42). The result of the second meeting was a little nucleus of believers. By and by the news of the new Jewish gospel became noised abroad throughout the city, the result being a large concourse to the synagogue on the following Sabbath.

Here was a new line of temptation to reject the gospel, which bore upon such Jews as were not in proper condition of heart to receive it; the concourse of the Gentiles made them "envious." They said within themselves: We have tried long and earnestly to make an impression upon these Gentiles, but they seem to have no ear for the Law of Moses, few of them attend our meetings: but now that these missionaries of a new gospel have come they seem both willing and anxious to hear them. The result will be that they will despise the Law of Moses, and claim that our church is breaking up, and that after waiting for Messiah for centuries our holiest people crucified him. Thus we shall become a reproach in the eyes of our neighbors, even if we reject this new gospel, and still more so if we receive it. Their selfishness and envy triumphed, and then they began to think of and use all the arguments they could find in opposition to the teachings of Paul – even "blaspheming" the Messiah whom he preached. Thus the greatest and grandest truths become the most crucial tests, stumbling the proud and selfish, and lifting up and blessing the humble and devout. There is a great lesson here for all. As our Lord said, "Take heed how ye hear."

Then Paul and Barnabas told them very plainly that while it was necessary that the gospel should be preached first to Israel, as per divine promise, it was nevertheless now to be extended beyond them to all Gentiles. As usual he quoted them a text on this subject from the old Testament, saying, Thus the Lord through the prophet commanded us: "I have set thee [Christ] to be a light to the Gentiles, that thou shouldest be for salvation unto the ends of the earth." The rightly

disposed among the Gentiles were glad of this message, but the Jews, who should have rejoiced at the broadening of the divine mercy and grace, only hardened their hearts the more against the message; because the light and favor which they had already received had not dissolved the selfishness of their natural hearts.

Concerning the Gentiles it is written, "As many as were ordained to eternal life believed" – better translated, "As many as were *disposed* for everlasting life believed;" – as many as were in the right attitude of heart, who desired reconciliation with God and eternal life along the lines preached by the apostle, believed.

But as usual the majority were in opposition to the truth, and amongst their number were found some of the most religious and most prominent. These raised the persecution, and "the brethren," obeying [R2150 : page 140] the Word of the Lord, "When they persecute you in one city flee unto another," shook off the dust from their feet and departed for Iconium, where, notwithstanding the prejudice which spread from Antioch, quite an interest was aroused; and when later an endeavor was made to stone them there they fled to Lystra, the scene of the present lesson, where the apostle Paul performed a very notable miracle, healing a cripple. The people, seeing it, came to the conclusion that as their heathen mythologies told of the visits there of gods in the form of men, in the past, this must be another such occasion. Barnabas, the elder and more venerable looking of the two, they called Jupiter; and Paul, the fluent speaker, they called Mercury. When the brethren found that they were about to do sacrifice to them, they went quickly into the crowd, explaining that they were merely men, and quite in opposition to such procedure were there for the purpose of explaining to them the true God and the true [R2151 : page 140] sacrifice for sin.

What a temptation would have been here for any not well controlled by the Lord's spirit! How many arguments the world, the flesh and the devil could bring up to encourage them in accepting the

homage of the people? It would have been a pleasant experience to be treated as gods, feasted and honored, as a change from their usual experiences of privation, persecution and tribulation. They might have reasoned, moreover, that by accepting a little homage they might gain a larger amount of influence with the people and thus pave the way for a gradual presentation of the gospel. Or they might accept the homage applied to themselves in a symbolic fashion as true, might speak of the Lord Jesus as a still greater God than themselves, and Jehovah as the Almighty God above all, and might thus put a *favorable turn* to the superstitions of the people. But all of this would have been subterfuge which would have done injury not only to the people and to the gospel, but also to the brethren themselves. And altho they did no more than their duty in resisting the homage as they did, nevertheless we note in the fact that they did it with alacrity, the proper spirit of loyalty to the one God and our Lord Jesus Christ, and the properly prompt resistance of every suggestion of the adversary towards self-aggrandizement or self-exaltation. Would that this noble spirit were fully exemplified in all of the Lord's people! Let us take well to heart the lesson of *promptness* in resisting the devil's baits for the weak points of our earthly natures. We are not ignorant of his devices.

The apostle immediately made this mistaken reverence a text for a discourse in which he presented to his hearers, the one true God as the source of every blessing.

But persecution followed them, and the same people who at one time were ready to offer them sacrifices, stoned Paul as they supposed to death. Miraculously revived, he departed with Barnabas to the next field of labor, Derbe, where he found some more (pupils) ready to enter the school of Christ as disciples.

Notwithstanding persecution in these various cities, the brethren were mindful of the interests of the Lord's flock, and returned to them for the purpose of strengthening or confirming the faith of those who already believed, but apparently with no thought of public meetings;

the inference being that all who were "*disposed*" to accept the offers of eternal life under the gospel call had already heard the message. These, however, needed help and development. This is a point too frequently lost sight of to-day by servants of the gospel; public preaching is very proper and necessary, but in addition "the flock of God" needs constant feeding. Quite evidently the brethren had no expectation that the gospel, even when preached under plenary inspiration, would convert all, or even a majority, of the people. Knowing that God designed it for the selecting of the "little flock" to be joint-heirs with Christ in his Kingdom they acted accordingly.

We note that in these exhortations to believers an important place is accorded to "faith," and we have found in our own experience that a well-founded faith is essential to a well-constructed character built upon it. The second point of their exhortation to the believers was, – that "through much tribulation must we enter into the Kingdom of God." They did not tell them that all their tribulation was past and that God would protect them from any in the future, because they had believed, neither did they tell them that the Kingdom of God consisted of a work of grace in their hearts; neither did they assure them that they already were the Kingdom of God in the full sense; but on the contrary they assured them that this Kingdom of God, which Israel had failed to attain, because not ready of heart to receive their King, had been postponed of establishment until God should select from the Jews and Gentiles "a people for his name" to be joint-heirs with the Messiah in his kingdom. They would therefore have the believers *wait* for the Kingdom for which they pray, "Thy Kingdom come;" assuring them that the narrow path which leads to the Kingdom signifies much experience in tribulation as fitting and preparing them for a share in that Kingdom, by developing in them good characters as copies of God's dear Son.

How necessary that this should be the exhortation to believers still! The Kingdom is a great prize, and he who would attain it must run faithfully and endure hardness, and that unto the end of his race.

For such is laid up a crown of righteousness which the Lord of righteousness will give him in that day.
