

[R2190 : page 216]

PREACHING TO ATHENIAN PHILOSOPHERS.

– JULY 25. – ACTS 17:22-34. –

"God is a spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth." – Jno. 4:24.

ALTHO the Jews of Berea received the message of Christ in a proper spirit and searched the Scriptures daily for the proofs of the gospel, a measure of persecution was at least threatened there. The Jews of Thessalonica, hearing of the progress of the gospel amongst their brethren at Berea, went thither for the express purpose of fomenting strife and hindering the gospel. Satan seems always to have plenty of agents ready and willing to oppose the truth – frequently blindly, as in Paul's own case.

We do not know that there was much persecution at Berea: the brethren merely saw that it would follow, and judged it to be the wiser plan that the Apostle Paul, who was always the chief object of attack, should at once withdraw. The absence of his powerful testimony left nothing for the opposers to contend against, and they probably speedily withdrew, satisfied with having, as they supposed, put a stop to the influence of the gospel, by chasing Paul away. But Silas remained with the Bereans, to strengthen and establish them, as Timothy had remained at Thessalonica, and Luke at Philippi, for similar reasons. Thus Paul was alone when he came to Athens, the center of the world's civilization, religious philosophy and art, at that time, as indeed it had been for several centuries. It was a college city, where resided the most eminent philosophers [R2190 : page 217] of the world as instructors in its great colleges to which came the brightest and ablest thinkers of the world. Some one has said of Athens: "In its prime it sent forth more great men in one hundred years than all the rest of the world could show in five hundred." Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Demosthenes, Sophocles, Aristides, Phidias, Zeno,

Epicurus, Xenophon and Themistocles, still of world-wide renown, were sons of this famous city.

It would appear that there were no Jews in Athens, and this was doubtless for two reasons: (1) The Jews had a religious philosophy of their own which would have been in continual conflict with these heathen philosophies. (2) Not interested in heathen philosophies, nothing would draw them to Athens, except commerce, and Athens was not a commercial or manufacturing city. Finding no synagogue, the Apostle wandered through the streets of Athens, noting the endeavor of its people to reach, by mental philosophy, a knowledge of God, while ignorant of the holy Scriptures, the revelation of the only true God. In a city so given over to philosophical speculations, it is not surprising that such questions were discussed in the streets, in the market places and wherever its intelligent, cultured citizens came in contact with each other or with strangers. As an educated man the Apostle was well versed in the various speculations of the day, and had besides the philosophy of the divine plan which others had not.

Where the Jews were the auditors one-half of the preaching would do, for they already knew the one living and true God and acknowledged him; they already knew of Moses and the law, and of how Moses had foretold Messiah; and they were already waiting for this long promised Messiah. To such the Apostle merely needed to present the evidences that Christ fulfilled in every particular the predictions of the prophets. But with these Athenians even the true God was not known. Hence, the first point in preaching to them was to establish faith in Jehovah; the second, to establish faith in the prophets as his mouth pieces, and then third, to prove that Christ fulfilled the predictions of the prophets. This was the Apostle's first contact with undiluted heathenism, and he began by talking as the others did, in the market places, on the subject of the true God.

Noting that the Apostle was consistent and logical in his remarks, some of the leading men made an appointment for him to give a public

address before the Council of the Areopagus, which occupied chief seats in the auditorium on Mars Hill, and was surrounded at its sitting with the intelligent population of this metropolis of philosophy.

For the first time the gospel is preached to the most learned and most scientific, according to the estimate of this world, – by its most able exponent on earth. We note with intense interest the method of presentation employed, and the results obtained. It was necessary first of all that these philosophers should learn of their error in supposing that there are many gods, and come to understand that there is but one living and true God, the Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, his Son: then they would be prepared to see how the Father's law was infringed through sin; how a ransom was necessary, and that Christ came into the world and died and rose again for the justification of sinners, and their release from sin's penalty, – death.

We are impressed with the wisdom of the Apostle's method of procedure in addressing a congregation so cultured in error. Our Common Version (v.22) does the Apostle great injustice, by representing him as beginning his discourse by insulting his hearers; – telling them that they were "too superstitious." What he did say to them signified, "You are reverential to an extreme; for as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription – 'To the unknown God.' Whom, therefore, you worship [admittedly] without knowledge [of his name and character], him declare I unto you." What a lesson we have here of presenting the truth with wisdom, in meekness and in love.

Our respect for the Apostle's method is increased when we know that the Athenians considered themselves so well supplied with gods that they had passed a law inflicting the death penalty upon any one who would set forth in their midst any foreign god not previously recognized in their city. (Possibly this helps to account for the absence of Jews.) Thus the Apostle seized upon the only opportunity for presenting to his hearers the true God without risking his own life, by

calling attention to the fact that *they already recognized and offered worship to the true God*, altho ignorant of his name. Such masterly wisdom must have had weight with so intelligent an audience: and apparently the Apostle received a careful hearing as he described some of the characteristics of Jehovah – far above and beyond anything which his hearers had ever claimed for their divinities.

The secret of the Apostle Paul's success, and the reason why God used him so graciously as a servant, is a lesson which all who attempt to serve the truth to others would do well to note and to apply to themselves. Was it not because he preached not himself but the Lord and his gospel? Do not many would-be teachers fail to attain results and to be more used of the Lord because their ambition really preaches self, and the gospel as a means for calling attention to self; – and do not others combine self-glorification with the **[R2190 : page 218]** gospel, and thus obtain only partial results for the Lord? The Apostle's course was self-abandonment, as he explained, "I determined to know nothing among you save Christ, and him crucified." (1 Cor. 2:2.) His knowledge on other subjects was all sunk out of sight. It is for this reason that many comparatively ignorant men have been greatly used of the Lord in the gospel service – great learning in the philosophies often proving a snare, a temptation to preach these and to make a show among men rather than to preach the divine philosophy – redemption through the blood of the cross. Let us all copy the Lord and his greatly used and thus approved servant, Paul, until the expression of our every word and act will be

"None of self and all of Thee."

Athens was full of idols and temples representing the homage to deities of various degrees of distinction. Pliny, the historian, informs us that in Nero's day Athens contained more than 3,000 public statues – of gods of various grades and of notable human heroes. In one street there stood before every house a square pillar supporting a bust of the god Hermes, and every gate-way and porch had its protecting god.

Paul preached (1) a God so great that he not only could not be made by human hands, but that all things, both in heaven and in earth, were his creation; (2) a God who needed no temple or house; (3) a God so great that nothing could be done for him, seeing that he himself is the Creator of the world and the author of every good gift, including life itself; (4) that all the human family evidenced his handiwork, and all from one source or parent; and (5) that God had in general one great plan with reference to the entire human family. All this was very different from the confused ideas presented by the philosophers respecting various gods and the competition and strife between them as between human heroes.

Having set forth the character of God, the next point was to show that all God's creation should *seek* him, that he is nigh unto all that call upon him; for his power and intelligence are everywhere present. Seizing upon a truthful statement by one of their poets to the effect that all mankind are God's offspring, the Apostle endorses this, and then points out that this, being true, it logically follows that images of gold, silver and stone could not properly represent this great God.

Anticipating the question in their minds – If there is so great a God why has he not previously manifested himself to us? and why has he permitted us to look to and to worship other gods? and would he not be very angry with us, because of this false worship? the Apostle [R2191 : page 218] answers, No; the past period of ignorance God entirely overlooks: You are not charged with responsibility for rejecting that of which you did not know. But, *now* this great God has sent forth his gracious message, that all men everywhere should come to a knowledge of him, and should repent of sins and seek to do his will.

Here is a definite statement from an inspired source informing us that the millions who lived and died in heathen darkness prior to the coming of Christ are not held responsible and will not be punished for that ignorance. And the same principle can logically be applied to all

since who have not known of Christ and of the redemption through his blood. All of these must yet come to a knowledge of the truth.

But note the Apostle's reasoning: God has appointed a day of trial ("judgment") for the whole human family, in which Christ will be the righteous Judge, and in which every man – the whole world – will have a righteous trial, a fair opportunity for accepting divine favor and eternal life, or of rejecting these and receiving the wages of sin, the second death. Here, the Apostle was able to bring Christ to the attention of his hearers. The little portion of the discourse set before us omits all mention of a redemption by the second Adam, before any blessing of life or even a trial for life eternal could be offered to any: doubtless, however, this was part of the discourse, set forth along the same lines as the Apostle's argument in Romans 5 and in 1 Cor. 15.

In logical order, it was necessary that the Apostle would present the doctrine of the resurrection. (1) He must show that Christ, having died for our sins, did not remain dead, but was raised up and clothed with authority and power to be the Deliverer in due time of those whom he had purchased with his own blood. (2) He must show that the ignorant ones of preceding centuries, as they had shared the Adamic penalty, would have an opportunity also of sharing the benefits of the atonement, and he must therefore show that, altho the penalty, death, was justly enforced against all, yet God purposed an awakening from death for all mankind; and a complete resurrection to the condition enjoyed by Adam before the fall, to all who would render obedience to the Redeemer when he would be the Judge. (The mention of the high calling and the way of full consecration leading to it, he reserved for such as would accept justification.)

The Apostle held the attention of his hearers and evidently made considerable impression until it came to this last part of his discourse. But the doctrine of the resurrection ran counter to all their latest philosophical deductions which were to the effect that death is merely a change to a higher form of life. According to their philosophy there

could be no resurrection of the *dead*; for they believed that there were no dead. These philosophers had become so thoroughly imbued [R2191 : page 219] with the sentiments wherewith Satan deceived mother Eve ("Ye shall not surely die") that they were ready and willing to reject what they must have conceded was the grandest philosophy respecting the Deity that they had ever heard. This same error has been a stumbling block to many, hindering them from seeing the beauty and consistency of the divine plan.

The Apostle's efforts were not wholly without fruitage, for one of the Professors of the university, Dionysius, and a lady of note, Damaris, and some others believed, but evidently not satisfied with the prospect for future service, the Apostle departed for Corinth. Aside from the general lesson of this narrative other valuable lessons may be drawn.

(1) As Athens, the seat of learning, was full of idols, so the heart, even tho enriched with earthly wisdom, may be full of idols and wholly lacking of any proper conception of the great Creator and his plan. Many cultured minds have nevertheless idols of selfishness, passions, earthly ambitions and love of falsehoods, to such an extent as to reject the sublime testimony of the gospel, even when brought to their attention.

(2) Culture and refinement are not always accompaniments and indications of the Lord's presence and the light of his grace, but quite frequently are hindrances, in that they give a measure of satisfaction which serves as a substitute for Christ and his gospel.

(3) Forms of worship are not acceptable with God: the Athenians were worshipful and reverential to an extreme. God not only seeks worshipers who have the true spirit of worship, but he arranged also that these shall have a knowledge of the truth, so that they may worship in truth, according to the truth. Hence, the declaration, "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." A knowledge of the truth is essential before we can worship in spirit and in truth. As

a spirit of worship without the truth is not sufficient or accepted, much more a knowledge of truth is not sufficient nor acceptable without a spirit of worship.
