

## PERSECUTION AND ITS GOOD FRUIT.

– *ACTS 8:3-13. – MARCH 9. –*

**"Therefore, they that were scattered abroad went everywhere, preaching the Word."**

PERSECUTION is never right, nor is it a joyous matter; nevertheless, God can overrule this, as well as all wrongs, for the good of his people, who can learn also the lessons of "rejoicing in tribulation," and of tracing divine providences through them, – seeing by faith the desirable results. The first persecution of the Church began about the time of Stephen's death, noted in our last lesson. This is variously estimated as having been from three to seven years after the day of Pentecost, tho we have no means of definite information. Saul of Tarsus (afterward called Paul the Apostle), was evidently a leader in the heresy-hunting and persecution which started with Stephen and extended in a general way to all believers, – except the apostles, who, for some reason, seem to have been providentially protected.

The persecution began in Jerusalem, because this so far had been the center of the work, as our Lord had directed, – "beginning at Jerusalem." Not only was it the principal city of Palestine, but, as we have previously seen, it was the resort of pious Jews from all quarters of the world, many of whom sought to make it their home in the close of life, even if they [R2959 : page 60] had previously lived abroad. The Lord had graciously granted a season of development for those brought into the Church at Pentecost, and subsequently; and now that they had reached a fair degree of growth in grace and in knowledge, he permitted the winds of persecution to blow against the Church, and to scatter the ripened seeds hither and thither, in every direction.

The same God who directed thus in the affairs of the early Church still loves and cherishes his own; still directs and guides in respect to the interests of his own cause, his Zion. Now, as then, it is with him to

permit or to hinder persecution, according as in his wisdom would be for the best interests of his people, and the outworking of his glorious plans. The persecution which then arose had, doubtless, a twofold effect (1) It served to test and to sift those who had already named the name of Christ; – to prove their loyalty, their willingness to endure hardness as good soldiers; – their worthiness to be reckoned amongst the overcomers. Not only did it test them, but it undoubtedly strengthened them; for experience shows us that every trial and test endured with faithfulness brings an increase of victory and strength of character. (2) It became the Lord's means of spreading the truth in every direction, and thus of greatly broadening, as well as deepening, his work in the world. Having first blessed those who, by his providential arrangements, had been gathered to one center, he now scattered them, as lights throughout Palestine and the adjacent country.

Drawing applications to ourselves from this feature of our lesson, we note how the Lord has gathered to this new land, America, a specially prepared class of people, liberty-lovers and truth-lovers, from all parts of the world. We note how he has lighted the torch of liberty and civilization here more generally than elsewhere. We note how, in this specially prepared soil, he has planted the present truth, the "harvest" message which is now shining forth in a feeble manner, not only to all the people of this favored land, but, to the world in general. We note a correspondency, also, in the fact that thus far in this harvest our persecutions have been quiet, – rather than public, open, and demonstrative. We like the early Church, have had an excellent opportunity for cultivating the knowledge of the truth and the graces of the holy spirit. Surely it will not surprise us now, or shortly, if the Lord's providence would permit some open persecution; and if this should be the divine will, are we in that proper condition of heart that it would profit, instead of discourage us, and destroy our faith? Would it mean to us, as to the faithful of the early Church, merely an enlargement of our opportunities, and the broadening of the Lord's work today? We trust it would be so.

An important lesson for all of the Lord's people to learn, is that the Lord himself has full charge and direction of the affairs of his Church; that he who blesses it with his holy spirit, and with the light of the knowledge of God, is the same one who has permitted a restraining of the persecutions and siftings from without and from within. Those who learn this lesson thoroughly are the only ones who, amid all the affairs of life, can rest themselves fully in "the peace of God which passeth all understanding." Let us learn to trace divine providences in the past, and to appreciate them and to apply them as far as possible, to affairs of the present time; and then to trust the Lord, even where we cannot trace him, knowing that all things shall work together for good to them that love him.

### **HOW TYNDALE'S PERSECUTION RESULTED.**

As an illustration of how persecutions sometimes, indeed generally, greatly prosper the cause of truth, note the following respecting that eminent English reformer, William Tyndale, who was [R2960 : page 60] amongst the first to publish the holy Scriptures in the English language. Not being permitted to do his work of Bible translating in Great Britain, he removed to the city of Worms, Germany, and published there his first complete edition of the New Testament. Several hundred copies of the work went to England. These, by order of King Henry VIII., were bought up for destruction, by the Bishop of London; but Tyndale read the meaning of this providential hindrance of the circulation of the work thus: "I shall get money of him for these books to buy myself out of debt, and the whole world shall cry out at the burning of God's Word; and the over-plus of money shall help me to correct again, and nearly to imprint the same." And so it was. Bishop Tunstall purchased not only all he could secure in Great Britain, but also purchased copies in the city of Antwerp, and had a public burning of these at St. Paul's Cross, London, A.D. 1526. Later on, in spite of the prohibitions of the king, and the energy of the clergy, copies of the New Testament, published in the English language, were smuggled in by vessels laden with grain.

What we all need is implicit trust in God and a burning zeal for the service of the truth, which nothing can daunt or hinder. If thwarted in one way we are to adopt another plan. If hindered in that, to change again – always observing the laws and principles of righteousness, and relying upon the Lord to overrule the results to his own praise. Under the Lord's providence hundreds of thousands of copies of *Millennial Dawn* and millions of tracts have been scattered as seed in all civilized lands. It would not surprise us at all if some persecution or opposition were to arise which would cause these seeds of truth to germinate. The man who, in his anger, stamped his feet upon the seeds, merely pressed them into the earth, where they the better took root. And so it may be in respect to any opposition which the great Adversary may raise up now, and which the Lord may permit. We may not pray for temptations, trials and persecutions, nor may we pray to escape them; but it is surely our privilege to ask that the Lord will not abandon us in temptation, but will ultimately deliver us from the Evil One – in his own time and way – and generally, to overrule our affairs to his own praise.

### **DEACON PHILIP'S MINISTRY.**

There was a Philip amongst the twelve apostles, but it is not he that is referred to in this lesson. This Philip was one of the seven deacons whose choice [R2960 : page 61] by the Church has been related. (Acts 6:5.) Evidently he had used well the opportunities thus afforded him, by attending not only to the distribution of the natural food to the needy, but by the feeding of his own heart upon the spiritual food also, – thus preparing himself, as a servant and messenger of the Lord, for further service of a more spiritual kind. Philip was one of those whom the persecution drove out of Jerusalem. Let us stop here to notice that the early Church might have said, – Persecution is getting severe; but we will stay where we are, suffer imprisonment, etc., esteeming that the Lord is able to protect us here as well as elsewhere. This would have been sound reasoning; but it would indicate a neglect of the Lord's directions to his Church, saying, "When they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another." (Matt. 10:23.) The persecution

was intended to scatter them, and failure to take heed to the Lord's directions might have led some of the most earnest and faithful of the Church to obstinately resist the designs of providence. So now, let those who may be called upon to endure persecution remember the Lord's direction; and after giving a proper testimony, if the door of opportunity opens, let them remove to another locality, where their faithfulness and increased knowledge and wisdom in the handling of "the sword of the spirit" may give them opportunities for still greater usefulness. This was the case with Philip, who removed to Samaria, and apparently lost no time in beginning the ministry of the truth, preaching Christ.

It will be remembered that this city of Samaria was the capital of a district called Samaria, whose people were known as Samaritans; being of mixed blood, Jewish and Gentile, they were counted by the Jews as though they were Gentiles; hence "the Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans." We remember, further, that it was respecting these people that our Lord said to his disciples, when sending them forth, "Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the *Samaritans* enter ye not; but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (Matt. 10:5,6; 15:24.) Our Lord thus marked the Samaritans as being separate and distinct from the Israelites. We remember, further, that it was because our Lord would not enter into the City of Samaria, and heal its sick, that the people of that city refused to sell the disciples food, as they passed by. It was in resenting this affront that James and John, the apostles, said to our Lord, "Wilt thou that we command fire from heaven to consume their city?" Jesus answered, "Ye know not what spirit ye are of; the Son of Man came not to destroy men's lives, but to save them." It was a woman from this same city who later met the Lord at the well, and got from him a little taste of the water of life, then brought many of her friends and neighbors, who also tasted and were refreshed, and many of them believed on him. Nevertheless, our Lord's testimony then was, "Ye worship ye know not what;...salvation is of the Jews." – John 3: [Luke 9:54-56](#); [John 4:22](#).

The fact that Philip now came into Samaria, under the leading of divine providence, and preached the gospel there, signifies that the time had come for the gospel to be extended beyond Judaism. It implies, therefore, that this incident occurred at least three and a half years after our Lord's death – after the close of the seventieth symbolical week, and the full end of Israel's special favor as respects the gospel invitation of this age. Evidently the apostles had less strenuous feelings of opposition against the Samaritans than against Gentiles in general, because they were of mixed Jewish blood.

The Samaritans were ripe for the gospel, and the fact that the Jews had disdained them much as they did the Gentiles no doubt made them all the more ready to receive the gospel message, which ignored all caste and class distinction, and accepted into its brotherhood all who confessed their sins, accepted Jesus as the Redeemer, and made full consecration to him. Philip's preaching was backed by the open manifestations of the spirit, in healings, etc., as was all the preaching of that time – intended to establish the faith, and to counteract the wonder-workings of Satan, through necromancers, those possessed of a spirit of divination, etc.

The truth reached the Samaritans just in time to rescue them from some of Satan's wily arts, known at that time as "Black Art," etc., practiced by Simon Magus, the sorcerer. The record is, that his influence with the people had been great, both with rich and poor; and that they recognized him as possessed of "the great power of God." Times have changed since then; sorcery and magic no longer captivate the world to the same extent, and the great deceiver has changed his tactics with the times. As the Apostle declares, he assumes a garment of light, and presents himself as a messenger of light, for the deception of those who are seeking the truth. Today he has a variety of devices, snares and traps for those who are awaking out of the slumbers of gross superstition and ignorance brought down from the dark ages. To these he variously presents himself as a Higher Critic, searching for the truth in the Bible, and finding it a mass of contradiction. To others he appears

as an Evolutionist, teaching doctrine wholly contradictory to that of the Scriptures, proving that there was no fall; and hence that there could be no redemption from a fall, no times of restitution from its consequences. To others he appears as a Christian Scientist, affecting the name of Christ as one deception, and the name of Science as another, and presenting a confused medley opposed to both – yet backed, nevertheless, by certain physical reliefs and cures distributed (by the same power which worked through Simon Magus) to those who will yield themselves to the deception, and who will deny the truth and persistently stick to the denial; – they shall have the reward of healing.

We who now oppose the Adversary and his methods are not armed with the powers of physical healing, whereby to appeal to the people; but we are possessed of the truth, which operates as an eyesalve upon the eyes of the understanding of those who accept; – as a cleansing from sin and a relief from burdens; – as the oil of joy upon their heads and in their hearts. The whole matter has taken a higher plane, by reason of the advancement in general knowledge and civilization which have come to the world as a result of the shining of the light [R2961 : page 62] through God's faithful ones in the past. Now, as then, the truth brings conviction to those who are in a proper attitude of heart, and relieves them from the bondage of ignorance, superstition, priestcraft, and sectarianism, – bringing them into the liberty wherewith Christ makes free indeed all who become truly his.

Those who accepted Philip's message, and made a consecration to the Lord, signified it by baptism – immersion – in water, symbolizing the immersion (burial) of their wills into the will of God as expressed in Christ; – signifying that henceforth they would be dead to self and to the world, and rise to walk in newness of life, as members of the body of Christ. We read nothing about a creed or a sect or a denominational name, nor about the recording of the names in a denominational register. The early Church recognized, as we do, that the important matter is that believers should be *joined to Christ*, and that their names, on this account, should be "written in heaven." Simon,

who had previously been the religious(?) leader of the people – their leader into darkness, into the wiles of the Adversary, – became one of Philip's converts, one of those immersed, and a constant attendant upon Philip's ministry, beholding with amazement the power of God operating through him, which power he recognized as being superior to the power of Satan which had operated in himself.

News of God's favor to the Samaritans, and of their acceptance of the Lord, soon reached Jerusalem; and representatives of the whole company of the apostles and others at Jerusalem, went down to Samaria to note the work of the Lord, and, no doubt, to encourage the believers. But they went specially because the *gifts* of the holy spirit (miracles, healings, tongues, etc.) could only be communicated through the apostles. However well Philip might proclaim the gospel and immerse believers, he, not being one of the chosen twelve, had not the power of communicating those gifts. (As those gifts were communicated only by the apostles it is evident that they must have ceased in the Church shortly after the apostles died.) Peter was one of those sent, and John, the very one who had said, "Lord, wilt thou that we command fire from heaven, to destroy these men and their city?" was the other delegate. How much change the Gospel of Christ had wrought, even in this good man! He had learned of Jesus, and now had the same spirit, which sought not to destroy men's lives but to save them.

When the apostles arrived they prayed with the disciples, and then laid their hands upon them, communicating some of the gifts, – power to speak with tongues, to interpret tongues, to perform miracles, etc. As Simon Magus was one of the believers, one of the baptized ones, he, with the rest, undoubtedly received some gift of the holy spirit. Yet he, and quite probably others of the number, were not in full harmony with the Lord and his gracious plans. The *gifts* of the spirit might be imparted instantaneously; but the *fruits* of the spirit could only be had by growth. Those gifts, therefore, are not to be esteemed as being such good evidence of the divine favor, and nearness to the Lord, as are the fruits of the spirit, which all of the Lord's consecrated people of today



should possess in some degree, – meekness, patience, gentleness, brotherly kindness, love. The Apostle Paul declares that if he had not merely one of those gifts, but all of them, yet lacked love, it would profit him nothing, eventually, as respects the great favor to which the Lord has called his Church. – I Cor. 13:1-8.

Simon Magus, while astonished with what he had seen, and interested from that standpoint, and convinced that the power was a holy one; and although he had cast in his lot with the believers, and received a gift, – was still "in the gall of bitterness, and in the bonds of iniquity," as the Apostle Peter subsequently told him. He was thus all the time, but neither recognized the fact himself, nor did the others recognize it. It was then that his interest in the matters under consideration led him to the point of asking Peter to give him the apostolic power of communicating gifts; promising him in return a good compensation in money; – thus showing that he was not interested in the truth and its service from the right standpoint; – that his was merely a curiosity interest, and that selfishness had not given place to love; that he would like to have this apostolic power so that he could use it in a selfish way, for his own aggrandizement, and for his own advantage amongst the people.

There have been many of this same disposition since. They are not necessarily worse men than many others in the world, because they give evidence that they have neither part nor lot with the Lord's people. It is safe to say that there are hundreds of thousands, yes, millions, of the Simon Magus class in the nominal churches of today; men and women who have never discerned the real spirit of the gospel; but who look at its various arrangements from a mercenary point of view, considering what shall be the gain or loss, the advantage or disadvantage, of their relationship thereto; – and maintaining the relationship because of the honor or social position or worldly prosperity which it has brought them, or is bringing them, or which they hope yet to obtain through it. To all such we would like to say, kindly but firmly, "Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter." We

would not say, nor did Peter say to Simon, Your day of grace is past, and you shall be eternally tormented. What God may have for such in the future, under different conditions, we may or may not see clearly; but the point which we are now noting is that such characters have no share in the **Kingdom**; neither in its present, nor in its future development. Even amongst those who have received present truth, we have reason to fear that some have received it, not in the love of *it*, but merely in a spirit of curiosity; or with a view to having something which they can use as a means for bringing themselves into some place of prominence amongst the brethren. Such persons are dangerous characters – dangerous as respects themselves, and dangerous as respects their influence in the Church. Such should be carefully avoided in the selection of leaders amongst the Lord's people, no matter what their natural gifts, riches, or talents may be.

