

CONTRASTING EXPERIENCES OF THE SAINTS.

– ACTS 12:1-9. – MAY 11. –

**"The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear him,
and delivereth them." – Psalm 34:7.**

HEROD, was a family name. There were several kings over Israel by this name; (1) Herod the Great, who flourished about the time of our Lord's birth, and who murdered the babes of Bethlehem. (2) Herod Archelaus, son and successor to Herod the Great – deposed A.D. 6. (3) Herod Antipas, another son of Herod the Great, the murderer of John the Baptist, who subsequently, with his men of war, set at naught and mocked Jesus, just prior to his crucifixion – deposed A.D. 40. (4) Herod Agrippa I., grandson of Herod the Great, mentioned in the present lesson as the murderer of the Apostle James. (5) Herod Agrippa II., the last of the Herods, before whom the Apostle Paul defended himself. – Acts 26:28.

The Herod of our lesson (Agrippa I.) was given his kingdom by Claudius Caesar, Emperor of Rome, whom he saved from a violent death. History says of him, "He curried favor with the Jews in every way: he hung in the Temple, as a votive offering, the gold chain which the Emperor Caligula had given him; he lived in Jerusalem, and punctiliously observed the traditions of the fathers, and secured the fervent loyalty of the Pharisees. At the Feast of Tabernacles, A.D. 41, he took the reader's stand, and read the whole Book of Deuteronomy aloud, bursting into [R3002 : page 135] tears, as if quite overcome, when he reached the words, 'Thou mayest not set a stranger over thee, who is not thy brother.' He feared that because he had Edomite blood in his veins he might incur the hatred his grandfather, Herod the Great, had borne, and took this way to gain the political favor of the Jews, who cried out, 'Do not weep, Agrippa; thou art our brother.'" Within a month after the events of this lesson he was a corpse. His tragic end at Caesarea, whither he had gone to a magnificent festival, in honor of

Claudius Caesar, is thus summed up by Geike, from Josephus' account: –

"A vast multitude assembled to see the festival and games, and before these the king, in all the pride of high state, appeared in robes inwrought with silver threads. The time chosen was daybreak, so that the kindling sun shining on his grand mantle lighted it into dazzling splendor. Presently some of his flatterers, always at hand beside a king, raised the cry, echoing a reminiscence of the days of Caligula, 'Deign to be gracious to us, thou divine one! Hitherto we have honored thee as a man; henceforth we own thee as more than mortal!' Instead of rebuking such lying servility he drank in this adulation with high pleasure. Next moment a great pain racked his bowels. Conscience-stricken at this blasphemous folly, the poor wretch felt that the wrath of God had struck him down, and the cry arose from him in his agony, 'See, your god must now give up life, and hasten into the arms of corruption!' In the Acts (12:23) we are told that he 'was eaten of worms.'"

Knowing thus much about the man, Herod, enables us to understand why he made his attack upon **[R3003 : page 135]** the Church. Altho not a descendant of Jacob, but of Esau, he had espoused the religion prevalent in his kingdom, and was seeking favor with the Jews by his zeal for Judaism, – which meant, of course, his zeal and energy correspondingly against Christianity. As we have already seen, the Jews had begun a work of persecution against the Church, but were hindered by their own troubles with Caligula Caesar; but the latter was now dead, and the persecuting tendencies of misdirected fervor could again be exercised. The Lord, of course, was not subject to these conditions, and could have miraculously prevented the persecutions recorded. But, as the lesson shows, he permitted the evil to triumph in part and restrained it in part.

The Apostle James, whose death is here recorded, in few words, was a matter of fact one of the most noble and notable of the apostles.

He was one of the three who usually accompanied our Lord in the most confidential capacity; – with his brother John, and Peter, he was with the Lord in the Mount of Transfiguration. In the same company he was present at the awakening of Jairus' daughter. In the same company he was one of the inner circle of the Lord's friends in the trying hour in the Garden of Gethsemane. It was he and his brother whom our Lord surnamed Boanerges – "sons of thunder" – probably because of their eloquence and forcefulness of speech. It was he and his brother whose mother entreated the Lord that they might sit "the one on his right hand and the other on his left, in the Kingdom," and who, when questioned by our Lord, declared their willingness to share in his work and suffering, even unto death. They were both faithful, James being amongst the earliest of the martyrs for the cause, and John living to a life of old age, – being probably the last survivor of the apostles. Altho the record of James' ministry is brief in the extreme, it contains nothing that gives the slightest suggestion of anything except zeal and faithfulness to the Lord and to his cause. This James, who died early in the Christian era, should not be confounded with the other James, the author of the Epistle of James – known as "James the Less," the son of Alpheus (Cleopas – Mark 3:18) – husband of Mary, supposed to have been second cousin to our Lord, and for this reason, according to Jewish custom, styled "the Lord's brother." – Gal. 1:19.

When Herod saw what satisfaction it gave his subjects, and especially their leaders, the Pharisees, that he should thus persecute the Christians, he proceeded to take Peter also. The implication is that James and Peter were two of the foremost amongst the apostles in the Church at this time. The expression, "When he had apprehended him," implies that some delay occurred between the order for his arrest and the time of his imprisonment. He was delivered to four quaternions of soldiers. A quaternion consisted of four soldiers to guard a prisoner, two of them being chained to him, one on each side, by the wrists; the other two doing sentinel duty, one at the door of the cell and the other in an outer court. The four quaternions were in the nature of relief

guards, so that each quaternion would have charge of the Apostle for six hours of the twenty-four.

It was at the season of Easter, or, more properly, the Passover – "the days of unleavened bread." The time of his arrest was too close to this religious festival to make it proper for such a public execution as Herod had determined upon. He would reserve his show of zeal for the Jews' religion until this festival was at an end. Meantime, the infant Church at Jerusalem was evidently sadly perplexed by the trend of affairs – at a loss to know how to interpret the Lord's providences. Doubtless they held their memorial of the Redeemer's death at this time, as we now do, and their hearts were sadly stricken with a realization of the fact that the Lord's faithful must all drink of his cup – of ignominy and death. Altho a considerable number of Jews had accepted Jesus, as we saw in a previous lesson, apparently the majority of the believers were scattered abroad, but few of them residing in Jerusalem. These few it seems met in little groups, in private houses, for prayer and praise, for study of the Lord's Word and for building one another up in the most holy faith; and such a meeting was in progress during this eventful Passover week. We are informed that the burden of their prayer was for Peter.

Well instructed by the apostles, we may be sure that they strove not to ask amiss; and that they copied the Master's petition, at least in so far as the expression, "Nevertheless, not my will, but thine, be done." We have no record that the Church met in prayer for James, tho quite possibly it did; neither are we bound to suppose that if they had not met and prayed **[R3003 : page 136]** for Peter, Herod would have succeeded in killing him also. It is sufficient for us that we remember that God has plans of his own, irrespective of the plans and prayers of his people, and that all of his good purposes will be accomplished; but it is well that we should note also his good pleasure that his people should come so fully into accord with him and his plans that they would neither be surprised nor disappointed in their fulfilment.

Probably James' death was accomplished suddenly, while, as we have seen, Peter was held over in bonds. This gave the Church time to consider how much she had already lost, and how much she might lose further were not the Lord to interpose for her protection. No doubt they reasoned that they had already sustained a great loss; and no doubt Peter's life and his service seemed much more precious to them since the loss of James. In any event, the Lord's people were getting a blessing through their experiences and through their prayers. Peter also was getting a valuable experience; and doubtless the Lord was overruling in the matter so that a great blessing and stimulus to the faith of all, would ensue through Peter's release.

Peter, his heart filled with the peace of God which passeth all understanding, was enabled to sleep peacefully in the prison, notwithstanding the unfavorable conditions in which he was placed, and his expectancy that on the morrow he would be called before the king and publicly executed. What a blessing is this rest of heart, this ability to entrust to the Lord all of life's affairs! It is written, "He giveth his beloved sleep." (Psa. 127:2.) We cannot say that the Lord's people are never troubled with insomnia, sleeplessness, but we can say that many, previously troubled with the cares of this life, exciting to nervousness, have by the Lord's grace been enabled so to cast all their care upon him that it has in great measure controlled their nerves and brought back to them the ability to enjoy sweet refreshing rest in sleep. Nothing is more favorable to this peace of heart than a **full consecration** to the Lord – "all to his wisdom resigned:" it entitles to a **full confidence** in the divine promises, – through faith in the divine wisdom, love and power, which has guaranteed that all things shall work together for good to those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

Peter was aroused from his sleep, loosed from his chains, bidden to arise and fasten the girdle usually relaxed in slumber, to put on his sandals, – wrap himself in his outer cloak and follow the messenger, the light of whose glory filled the prison cell. The doors opened before

them; they passed the sentinel unobserved, and Peter was led from the castle of Antonia into the city proper. There the heavenly messenger left him. There is a simplicity to this narrative which, even on the surface, commends it as truthful. Were it a fiction doubtless the author would have stated matters altogether differently. He would have represented the angel as doing homage to the apostle, or delivering to him some complimentary message from the Lord, or lifting him up or putting on his sandals and fastening them for him, or assisting in girding him or putting on his mantle. He would have had him give Peter certain directions at the time of leaving, etc. But this simple account merely represents the angel as doing for Peter what he could not do for himself, and no more, and leaving him without a word as soon as he had brought him properly into the city.

The record shows that Peter was so surprised with what had transpired that he for a time fancied himself in a dream, in a trance, – expecting that he would awaken shortly to realize himself still bound; but the cool morning air, between three and six o'clock, and being left alone, brought him to his senses and convinced him that he was actually at liberty. He knew well the usual meeting place, and thither he bent his steps. It was the home of Mary, mother of John Mark – cousin of Barnabas, (so "sister's son" should read in Col. 4:10.) John was his Hebrew name and Marcus his Latin name. It was this Mark who was the Evangelist, the author of the Book of Mark, – the same who accompanied Barnabas and Paul on their first missionary journey.

Altho the hour was an unusual one, the inmates of the house were awake, the prayer-meeting was still going on at the very time when the Lord was answering the petition. Peter's knock on the outer door was responded to by the little maid-servant of the family, Rhoda (Rose), who, child-like, discerning the voice of Peter (for it was customary to make inquiries before opening the door) was so surprised and delighted that she neglected to open the door before running back to give word to the assembled disciples.

The fact that the praying ones were amazed, astonished, and could scarcely believe that it was Peter who had come, does not prove that they had not faith in their own prayers. Rather, we may say that their faith in prayer was well attested by their continuance in it all night, and to such an hour in the morning, and that they were not asleep at the time Peter knocked; but, knowing something regarding the prison and the appointment of four quaternions of soldiers, they would reasonably expect that whatever answer might come to their prayers would not be a [R3004 : page 136] release of Peter under such circumstances, but might rather be some interference at the time of the trial, something to change the mind of the king, who would be the judge in this case, and thus to bring about Peter's release. But "God works in a mysterious way his wonders to perform," and not infrequently his ways are not as our ways, and sometimes we learn valuable lessons under just such circumstances. Doubtless the faith of some was shaken considerably by the death of the Apostle James; doubtless they queried concerning the lack of the manifestation of divine favor and interference for the protection of the Apostle and for his preservation as a helper in the Church. But if they were thus tempted and tried, and their faith sorely tested for a while, they had now, in Peter's experience, a valuable lesson on the other side – an illustration of God's power to intervene when he will and how he will on his people's behalf.

Here again, in this contrast between the experiences of James and those of Peter, we have something that would be entirely contrary to the manner or thought of a forger attempting to write such an account from his imagination. It would not occur to him to have so marked a manifestation of divine providential care in the case of Peter, and to leave James' case with apparently no evidences of divine [R3004 : page 137] protection. And this calls to our mind the fact that divine providence seems frequently to operate along these lines – contrasting between the experiences of different members of the body of Christ, and sometimes instituting contrasts in our own individual experiences as Christians. In some of life's events we can see the Lord's protecting

and guiding care most markedly, while in others it would seem absolutely lacking. The lesson it should bring to us is one of full faith in the Lord, and of full submission to all his providences. Indeed, we are to note that in the majority of cases our experiences are far more like that of James than like this experience of Peter's. The miracles which we can trace in our own experience are certainly few and far between. Whatever we have had, or whatever the apostles or others have had in this direction, which serves to demonstrate to us God's supervision of his own affairs, is evidently intended to give us strength and courage, whereby we can walk fearlessly and courageously in the dark, for, as the Apostle says, under divine providence we generally are called upon to "walk by faith, not by sight." – 2 Cor. 5:7.

"IT IS HIS ANGEL!"

"Are they [angels] not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for them [unto those] who shall be heirs of salvation?" (Heb. 1:10.) Knowing the Apostle Peter to be one of the heirs of salvation, and never for a moment considering the possibility of his escape from prison, the brethren queried if their visitor might not be Peter's angel as his representative, come in answer to their prayers, to give them consolation. Soon, however, they realized that it was Peter himself, and afterward learned of his miraculous deliverance by the angel.

Verse 17 implies that when the brethren realized that it was actually Peter who stood before them they were excited with joy, and would probably have created quite a commotion had not the Apostle beckoned to them with his hand that they should be quiet. Then calmly explaining to them his providential deliverance, and sending a message to James ("the Less") "the Lord's brother" or second cousin and to all the brethren, he at once left the place – left Jerusalem. When Peter and John were delivered from prison it was by the Lord's instruction that they went back to the Temple and continued to proclaim; but now, in the absence of any instruction from the Lord to the contrary, the Apostle wisely understood that his proper course, in

co-operation with the Lord's providences, was that he should flee, that he should not put himself unnecessarily into danger, nor attempt to wage a warfare with the representative of the Roman government, trusting to further miraculous deliverances.

We know some who would have been inclined, in Peter's place, to have made a great hurrah about the escape, and to have boasted that prison-walls and Roman soldiers were powerless against the Lord; and who, perhaps, would have gone the length of daring the king to arrest them again. But we believe such a course would not have been the will of the Lord, and that Peter evidently took the proper course. This suggestion may be valuable to some of the Lord's people. This is the time in which "the prince of this world" is permitted to maintain his general control; and we are to expect miraculous deliverances to be the exception rather than the rule, and are to act accordingly; – so far as lieth in us, preserving the peace, living peaceably with all men. Peter's conduct in not daring the king was not a manifestation of lack of confidence in divine power, but it was in obedience to the Master's words, "When they shall persecute you in one city flee ye to another." The persecution had reached him personally; he had been delivered from it, and now was his time to flee to another place, where doubtless, the Lord had other work for him to do. Let us be prompt in following a similar course in proportion as our circumstances correspond. When the persecution gets too severe, cry to the Lord for help, and if he opens a door of deliverance flee to another place or condition, where, with equal boldness and courage and faith you will, as before, lift high the royal banner.

OUR GOLDEN TEXT.

It is comparatively easy for us to associate our Golden Text with Peter and his deliverance, and with ourselves in instances of peculiar assistance from the Lord in our affairs, temporal or spiritual; but it is much more difficult for us to associate it with the experiences of the Apostle James and with our own experiences, in which disasters,

difficulties and fiery trials are permitted to come upon us. Such experiences are doubtless sent of the Lord for the development and testing of our faith. The Lord's providential care was none the less in the case of James, and we may be sure that nothing happened to him contrary to divine intention and permission; and so with ourselves; we may be sure, not only that the Lord knoweth them that are his, but sure also that "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints," and that he "will not suffer us to be tempted above that we are able, but will with the temptation provide also a way of escape." In James' case the "escape" was final and decisive, in Peter's it was temporary.

Our trials and difficulties are not, therefore, to be esteemed as the results of divine carelessness in respect to our interests, but as the outworkings of divine providence for our good. Those who are able to view the matter from this standpoint are thus enabled to learn some of the very best and most helpful of life's lessons, and are thereby prepared for the glorious things coming; whereas those who allow faith to falter in times of trial, and who will walk with the Lord and have confidence in him only when they are the recipients of miraculous favors, are correspondingly weak, and correspondingly unprepared for the Kingdom. And as these lessons are necessary to the individual, so they are necessary also to the Church as a whole, as in the case of James and the Church in our lesson. So far as James was concerned, it could matter little to him which way the Lord effected his "escape" if, in the Lord's wisdom, he had finished his course, perfected his character and stood the test. As for the Church, it could learn an important lesson; viz., that God, while pleased to use the Apostles and various agencies in the prosecution of his work, was not at all dependent upon them, but that one or all of them could be dropped out, and yet the Lord be thoroughly competent to manage his own work and to accomplish all the gracious promises of his Word. **[R3007 : page 138]**

"THY WILL BE DONE!"

My Lord, thy will not mine be done:

Whatever path thy love shall choose for me,
Through desert sands, or if beside the sea, –
Thy will be done!

Oh, may thy will in me be done!
Should "harvest" labor be for me thy will,
Or if I may but suffer and be still, –
Thy will be done!

My Father, let thy will be done:
If *sweet* the Cup thou pourest for me to drink,
I'll praise thee; but, if *bitter*, I'll not shrink, –
Thy will be done!

Forever may thy will be done:
I would not choose, I leave it all with thee, –
The pilgrimage, if short or long it be, –
Thy will be done!

– G. W. Seibert.

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