

ENDURING HARDNESS AS GOOD SOLDIERS.

– ACTS 14:8-19. – JUNE 1. –

**"Thou, therefore, endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ."
– 2 Tim. 2:3.**

LEAVING Antioch of Pisidia, Paul and Barnabas went to Iconium, about 100 miles distant. There also they preached the Word faithfully, and there also opposition was aroused and persecution threatened; "and when there was an assault made, both of the Gentiles and also of the Jews, with their rulers, to use them despitefully and to stone them, they were aware of it, and fled unto Lystra." They did not allow fear to hinder them from the preaching of the gospel with courage, boldness; neither did they fear threats; but when the persecution took a positive form they delayed no longer, but fled. Why did they not wait, and expect the Lord to grant them some miraculous deliverance? Why did they not challenge their opponents to see whether the power of God or the power of Satan was the stronger? We answer, Because they were better instructed respecting the divine will. They were following the instructions of the Lord. He did not say to them, Be fearful of persecution, withhold your message, and put your light under a bushel; but the reverse. He did not say, Flee in fear, when there is no danger; but he did say, "When they persecute you in one city flee ye to another."

Arriving at Lystra, the preaching of the gospel was begun afresh, as courageously as tho there had been no previous opposition. Amongst the auditors was a cripple, presumably a Jew or a proselyte, who manifested much interest in the Apostle's words. Paul, perceiving this, and that the man had faith, stopped in his preaching and called out to him, "Stand upright on thy feet!" – a thing he had never done. He had the necessary faith and obeyed the Apostle's command; and thus a miracle resulted, evidently to the astonishment of the entire congregation. The effect upon the people was electrical,

and they shouted in their own dialect, "The gods have come down to visit us!"

The city of Lystra figured as the scene of a mythological event, the tradition being that Jupiter and Mercury, two of the gods of mythology, having once come to their city in the form of men, had been everywhere refused lodgings until they came to the lowly hut of a poor man who entertained them to the extent of his ability. They rewarded him by turning his hut into a gorgeous temple, and punished the others of the city with a flood. These traditions were very old, but were perpetuated by a statue of Jupiter at the gate of the city, as its protecting god.

It is easy to discern how a comparatively ignorant and superstitious people might jump to the conclusion that the visit of Paul and Barnabas was a repetition of this visit of Jupiter and Mercury, handed down to them through tradition. They called Paul, Mercury, because in their tradition, Mercury was the orator, the speaker; and they called Barnabas, Jupiter, and forthwith the priest of Jupiter prepared to offer a sacrifice of oxen before the statue of Jupiter, at the gate of their city, in honor of the supposed gods present with them as men, in the persons of Barnabas and Paul.

The missionaries were probably preaching, or conversing and explaining quietly, to the more interested ones, when they heard of the commotion in the city, and of the sacrifice which was about to be offered. They did not for a moment think of taking advantage of the superstition of the people to make of themselves some great ones, nor did they attempt **[R3011 : page 153]** to turn the event to a service of the truth by claiming that God was Jupiter, and that Jesus was Mercury, and that they represented them. On the contrary, most earnestly and simply they entreated the people to desist; explaining to them that they were nothing but imperfect men like themselves, "of like passions," and that their mission was the very reverse of what they supposed, and that Jupiter and Mercury and their fabled deeds

were only products of imagination, ignorance and superstition. They ran in amongst the people while they, full of excitement, were preparing for the sacrifice, and with difficulty, even then, amid protests of their own nothingness, did they restrain the people from sacrificing in their honor. Noble men they were, and their faithfulness to the Lord and to the truth attested the wisdom of the divine choice in sending them on this missionary errand.

We may draw a lesson from the incident, helpful to all of the Lord's people who are to any extent his ambassadors, representatives, teachers of the truth. The truth itself, especially in the light of our day, is so wonderful, so brilliant, that it naturally reflects some of its brilliancy upon those who represent it, causing men to marvel, and to say, as of old, "Whence hath this man this wisdom?" In some instances it might lead to an undue deference, to an ascription of undue honor, and to a subserviency which it would not be proper for the Lord's ambassadors to receive, and which they should as promptly and as thoroughly repudiate and refuse as did Paul and Barnabas refuse the honors which the Lystrians were about to bestow upon them. From the worldly standpoint this would be an unwise course. Those who will accept flattery and adulation and honor more than is due, are likely to be prospered in this course to some extent by the Adversary, and apt to find that the worldly spirit likes to worship worldly heroes, Jupiters, Elijahs, etc. The only wise course for the Lord's servants is, therefore, the one followed by these missionaries of our lesson – to repudiate the entire matter; to confess that they are men of like passions with others; to hold up the light of God's Word, and behind it to hide and ignore themselves entirely. Not alone will this be profitable as respects the finding and development of the true children of God whom he is now gathering out of the world, but it will be profitable also for the Lord's ambassadors; for in this way they will grow in the Lord's grace and likeness; of which humility was a prominent trait. Thus they will best abide in his love, and ultimately attain to the still greater exaltation which God has **[R3012 : page**

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The Apostle, in pointing out to the Lystrians that their ideas were vanities, well knew that this could not bring him the favor of his hearers; for it is not human nature to appreciate being told of our follies. To have worked his way into their good graces he would have needed to tell them a lie – that they were very wise, and that their course was a very proper one, etc. He, therefore, in his endeavor to be candid, and to serve the truth, risked their disappointment and displeasure; and he was undoubtedly keen enough to know this in advance, and what result to expect. Nevertheless, as God's mouthpiece, he shunned not to declare the whole message, whatever its results might be as regarded himself and his work. Here are good lessons for all of the Lord's people. It requires comparatively little courage to be a soldier of the cross and faithful to the truth amongst those of like precious faith and obedience; but it requires great courage to resist improper honor of men when we know in advance that this resistance will not only deprive us of their honor and friendship, but make us ignoble in their sight, and turn them into enemies. True soldiers of the cross still have the same trial, and it still requires hardness – a hardening campaign of experience in the Lord's service – to endure these things and come off joyful in the Lord. The babes in Christ, the weak, the untried, those who have not passed through trials and experiences and development of character, are not hardened, and could not stand such experiences. Hence it is that the apostle advises the Church that even proper exaltation to a service in the Church should not be accorded to a novice, lest he should be puffed up and thus be injured himself, as well as become injurious to others. (I Tim. 3:6.) It requires time and seasoning to know how to either rightly accept and appreciate the honors of the brethren or others along proper lines, or to decline honors and dignities along improper lines.

The Apostle pointed out to his hearers that in times past God had been permitting all the nations to walk in their own ways. He had interfered particularly in the affairs of only the one nation, Israel; all the others had been permitted to take their own course, except in so far as they might be crossing some feature of the divine plan. Thus the Prophet expressed the matter to Israel, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth." (Amos 3:2.) The reference to "time past," implies the change of dispensation which had just occurred in connection with the death of Jesus and the cutting off of Israel from any special favor, and the throwing open of the gospel call to all who had ears to hear; – to the Jew first and also to the Greek. Now God was sending a message of instruction to all the nations, that they should turn from such vanities and should recognize the only living and true God, and his Son who had redeemed the world, and whom he had ordained should in due time become its King and ruler, to put down sin and death, and bless with his reign of righteousness all the families of the earth. The Apostle points out that altho God had left the nations without the instructions of the Law Covenant the Prophecies, he had given them some indications of his care in making provision for their necessities, – causing the sun to shine and the rain to fall upon the just and the unjust, upon the evil and the good.

The sudden change of public sentiment, the result of the Apostle's explanations and plain statements of the truth, led the Lystrians to look at the missionaries with very different eyes, now that they were, according to their own declarations, common men like themselves. We may even suppose that they felt rather mean about their own superstition, which had so quickly aroused them to do reverence to men who repudiated it and acknowledged their unworthiness of it. It was while the populace was in this spirit that certain Jews from Antioch and Iconium came thither, explaining to them that the missionaries were **[R3012 : page 154]** impostors, working upon the credulity of the people, "turning the world upside down," raising questions about theology, and disturbing the minds of the people. The populace was ready for just such leading in the

reverse direction, and disposed to feel somehow that if these men were not really Jupiter and Mercury they were pretenders and falsifiers who had deceived them and should be put to death. As a result, Paul was stoned, and dragged outside the city, and left for dead.

How erratic is the natural mind, in its condition of ignorance and superstition! How easily the priest of Jupiter could lead the ignorant in one wrong course, to make gods of men, – and how readily he could lead them again in an opposite direction! But altho the greatest of all the apostles, and one of the most remarkable orators and logicians the world has ever known, was in their midst, how few, comparatively, he could and did influence in the right direction – for the truth and for righteousness, in obedience to God. The world is in many respects the same world that it was then, altho civilization and general intelligence have done considerable to lift it out of that abject benightedness which leads to idol worship, – altho Mohammedanism, Confucianism, churchianity and a certain kind of Christianity, have put a veneer of respectability and reason and common sense upon the world, yet under this veneer the masses are still in a very unsatisfactory condition – disposed to be humbugged; disposed to appreciate those who would be boastful and pretend to be great; disposed to worship that which demands worship, rather than that which is worthy of it; disposed to misunderstand God and his plan, and to consider these from a devilish standpoint, rather than to appreciate the lengths and breadths and heights and depths of the love of God, – rather than to understand that as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are God's ways higher than man's ways, and God's plans than man's conceptions.

But God was not through with the Apostle Paul; he was not stoned because of God's indifference, nor because of his lack of power to protect his servant. On the contrary, quite probably the Lord was teaching the Apostle some great lesson, valuable both to himself and to the Church, for whom he was a general minister, – and to whom even today he ministers in the matter of these experiences. Quite

probably the Apostle, while being stoned, remembered afresh the death of Stephen, to which he had consented; and quite probably, too, the result was a fresh realization of his own unworthiness to be so prominent a representative of the Lord and of his truth, – a humbling of his heart before the Lord, profitable to him and to the Church also.

Had the incident of the sacrificing not been thus followed by some trying experiences, who knows but that the Apostle might have felt a little of self-gratulation, such as would be natural to any man who, having honors thrust upon him, had voluntarily renounced them. He might have been disposed to glory in his strength of character; but his experiences led him in an opposite direction – as he himself subsequently wrote, "I will glory in tribulation." All of the Lord's faithful ones can learn good lessons here; can learn to trust to the Lord's providences in all of their affairs; – not only in those which seem to go favorably, but in those also which apparently are working disadvantage and disaster. The Lord said concerning Paul, when declaring that he was a chosen vessel for his service, "I will show him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake." From this lesson we may draw the inference that when the Lord's servants are permitted to suffer for his name's sake (not for wrong-doing, not for anger, malice, hatred, strife, evil-speaking, etc., but for his sake) it is an attestation of the Lord's favor, in the acceptance of his sacrifice – as in the type, Abel's sacrifice was accepted with fire.

As the disciples stood about the prostrate form of Paul, supposing, as the others had, that he was dead, he rose up and returned to the city. We are not to suppose that all of the citizens joined in the mob which stoned him, tho we are to suppose that there must have been a general sympathy on the part of the majority, else such mob violence would not have been possible. It is quite probable, therefore, that the Apostle's return to the city was in a very quiet manner, so as not to unduly re-arouse the passions of the mob. The spirit of bravado which impels some people seems to have been absent in the case of these missionaries. They had the true courage and endured hardness

as good soldiers in the way which the Lord approved; but we never see them tantalizing the people by boastful manner or words. They, and not others who misinterpret the divine will by an opposite course, should be our patterns, our examples, in such matters.

Their entire public preaching at Lystra was at an end, and the next day the missionaries went to Derbe, a distance of 35 miles – which implies that the Lord wrought a wonderful miracle in Paul, in that, after receiving so severe treatment, a stoning unto apparent death, he was able on the next day to continue his journey. The Lord sometimes works marvelously for his people, as in this instance; at other times he leaves them to the general vicissitudes of life as other men.

We are not informed that the Apostle made special prayer for his recovery, but are reminded of Timothy, who was one of the converts at Lystra, and to whom the Apostle, years afterward, wrote in his epistle that he should use some natural means "for his stomach's sake and his often infirmities" – without a suggestion of miraculous intervention, other than whatever the Lord might be pleased to give voluntarily without special request. And so it should be with us. We should use natural means for the reasonable **[R3013 : page 154]** care of our health or for recovery from sickness; not denying or ignoring the divine power, but accepting the divine providence in all of our affairs; rejoicing if, in the Lord's providence, our health and strength and opportunities for service are preserved to us; rejoicing also if they suffer impairment, especially if the impairment come in connection with the service of the truth; rejoicing, if the will of God be such, if we are quickly and miraculously healed, and rejoicing equally if, in the Lord's providence, we use natural means for the alleviation of our often infirmities, as the Apostle directed in the case of Timothy. The child of God, is to recognize that all of his affairs are in the Lord's hands and under his direction. In the meantime he is to seek to use his every talent and opportunity to the best of his judgment, according to the **[R3013 : page 155]** spirit of a sound mind, remembering that the

Lord's will concerning us is that we should learn not to walk by sight, finding everything going favorable to us; but that we should learn rather to walk by faith, tho this necessitates that at times things should go unfavorably and that we should be without any special manifestations of divine protection or relief.

No particulars are given regarding the ministry of the truth at Derbe. We may presume that it was without special incident. Having gone thus far, instead of proceeding and returning homeward by the nearer route, via Tarsus, Paul's home city, the missionaries determined to retrace their steps, – their motive in so doing apparently being their realization that the little groups of believers at Lystra, Iconium and Antioch in Pisidia would by this time need some encouragement and establishment in the truth; – that because of the fierce opposition in these places there would probably be more or less contention and trouble, and questions arising which the new converts would not be competent to solve.

This was pastoral work; and in the homeward journey there is no intimation that the missionaries attempted further missionary work. They had no expectation whatever of converting all the people at these cities; they understood the plan of God too well to have any such expectations as modern mission workers seem to have. They knew very well that the mission of the gospel was, not to convert the world, but to choose or select out of the world a special people. (Acts 15:14.) They had witnessed the truth to these people, and had confidence that the Lord was behind them, and that such as had the hearing ear and the understanding heart (the only one, therefore, worthy of the truth) had already been reached by them, or would be reached through those who had already been enlightened. They accordingly contented themselves with the work of upbuilding the little flock, – encouraging them to make their calling and election sure to a place in the Millennial Kingdom which, in God's due time, in the age to come, shall be glorified, empowered, and then be used of the Lord in the world's blessing, the world's conversion, the world's uplift.

The brethren of these various places were, doubtless, surprised that if the gospel was of God its servants, its ministers, should be so at the mercy of the forces of evil; and this may have tended to shake their confidence considerably, because the natural expectation would be that God would protect his servants. The Apostle explained this to the believers – that tribulations are necessary for the perfecting of the saints, for the trial of faith, for the testing and the preparation of those who would be joint-heirs with Christ in the Kingdom; and that after the permission of evil shall thus have served its purpose during this gospel age – the purpose of keeping the little flock separate from the world and polishing and refining of them for the Kingdom – then the time will come when Satan shall be bound, – when the righteous shall be persecuted no more, but reign as joint-heirs in Christ's Kingdom.

Concerning the return of the apostles to these cities where they had previously been persecuted, an able writer suggests: "Precautions of secrecy they doubtless took, and cheerfully faced the degrading necessity of guarded movements, and of entering cities perhaps in disguise, perhaps only at late nightfall and early dawn. The Christians had early to learn those secret trysts and midnight gatherings and private watchwords by which alone they could elude the fury of their enemies." The missionaries returned, without further incident, to the Church whose special representatives on this journey they had been, and made their report to the Church at Antioch in Syria.

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