

[R3138 : page 27]

## "THIS IGNORANCE GOD WINKED AT."

– ACTS 17:22-34 – FEBRUARY 1. –

**Golden Text – "He preached unto them Jesus and the resurrection."**

PERSECUTION followed the Apostle to Berea, where we, in a previous lesson, left him teaching a very noble class of inquiring and searching minds. His enemies in Thessalonica discovered his whereabouts, and at once began to create a disturbance – no doubt believing that thus they were doing God service. The Apostle's own experience as a persecutor of the body of Christ must have helped him to [R3138 : page 28] very charitable views of those who so viciously pursued him. The evidences of coming trouble were so strong that the Berean friends feared to have him embark at a regular port, at which he might have been recognized, and the direction of his journey anticipated, and thus prejudices might have gone with him or before him into new fields; they, therefore, secretly hastened him to the near seashore where he obtained coastwise shipping for Athens. The Apostle, as the chief spokesman, "drew the fire" of his enemies to such an extent that their hatred seems to have been confined to him alone – not affecting Silas, his companion, nor Timothy, at this time his assistant or servant. The latter two were left behind, to strengthen and encourage the believers, whose faith already had been established.

Under these circumstances the Apostle arrived at Athens, once the world's capital in every sense of the word; but still its capital in respect to science and art and theology and schools of general instruction – its commercial and political influence having gone to Rome with the imperial control. To Athens came the youth of wealthy families of the world, and many others possessed of a special craving for wisdom, – to avail themselves of the teachers, studies and lectures – practically the only means of instruction at that time.

Without a miracle no other one of the apostles would have been competent to secure a hearing before the Athenian Council of the Areopagites – composed of the teachers of the various schools of learning, and generally speaking, of the reputedly wisest men of the world. That the Apostle Paul, without letters of introduction, without political or other influence, serving as such, should succeed in a few days in obtaining an invitation to address this august body of men, indicates clearly that he was a man of remarkable talent, as well as learning. These natural qualities in him were reinforced by the spirit of a sound mind, the spirit of the Lord, the spirit of the divine revelation, the true Gospel. The Apostle lost no time in beginning his special work: true, he first made a general inspection of the chief features of the city's attractions, noting its numerous public statues to the gods, whose number Pliny gives as over three thousand in the time of Nero. It was while making this inspection of the city and considering how best he could launch the gospel message there, that his attention was drawn to one altar erected "To the Unknown God." He kept this as a text for his principal effort when the time should be ripe, and meantime, as usual, he began his ministry by going into the Jewish synagogues; but apparently finding little interest here he resorted to the public squares and markets, and discussed religious topics with the numerous students and others who gathered there.

Amongst those who heard him were some of a cynical turn of mind who said, Let us listen to what this babbler is saying; the word "babblers" signifying seed-picker, inferentially meaning that the Apostle had gained a mere smattering of knowledge, picked up some seeds of thought from others of the great teachers, and was now attempting to set himself up as a teacher. Others, disposed to persecute, said, He seems to be a setter forth of strange gods; – for to set forth any strange gods in Athens was a crime, it being held that they already had them in plenty, and that to admit that any one could present a new god of which the Athenian teachers knew nothing, would be an insult to their learning and evidently a fraud. This, together with the Apostle's talents, secured for him a hearing before the Areopagites, or Council

of the Learned. It was this Council which had the power to sentence to death anyone who should attempt to set forth strange gods in Athens; and hence the Apostle's hearing before them was probably, more or less, in the nature of a trial for life, because he had been preaching Jesus – an unheard-of god amongst the Athenians up to this time – and the resurrection.

The Apostle's theme is worthy of our notice. Under the divine guidance he seemed to have a way of approaching the pith of the gospel most directly, and these words of our Golden Text, "Jesus and the resurrection," really embraced the whole of the gospel preached. The world, under divine sentence, was dead or dying: the redemption price, our Lord's ransom sacrifice, had just been paid, and the hope to be built upon his work and to be announced to the people was *the resurrection of the dead* – that our Lord's death was the purchase price for the sins of the whole world, and that as a result, in God's due time, an awakening of the dead shall [R3139 : page 28] come, and eventually the full raising up to the perfection of life of all who will accept the Redeemer as their leader and guide. This is the gospel which should still be preached, but which, by reason of various errors that crept in during the dark ages, has been beclouded and forced out of its way to such an extent that remarkably few lay any stress whatever upon the grand doctrine of the resurrection of the dead; and some are even dropping from their teachings "the ransom for all" given by Jesus.

We can picture before our minds the Apostle addressing the Council of Mars' Hill, composed of "the noblest blood of Athens, the first politicians, the first orators, the first philosophers; accordingly the most august, not only of Athens, but of Greece, and, indeed, of the whole world, under whose supervision 'came the transactions of the popular assembly, religion, laws, morals and discipline.'" Now the Apostle had use for the text he had found. He must prove to these men that he was not the setter forth of a *new* theology, but an [R3139 : page 29] *old* one. He at once brought forth his argument, not in the discourteous language of our English Common Version, intimating

that his auditors were ignorant and superstitious, but, on the contrary, in complimentary language, which we paraphrase: he said to them; – "I perceive that more than others you Athenians have respect for whatever is divine. The conviction of this came to me as passing through your city I beheld the various evidences of your devoutness, and amongst other altars noticed one with the inscription, "To the Unknown God." Information regarding this God I am setting forth. He is the God that made the world and everything therein, and is the Lord of heaven and earth, too great to dwell in any temples made with hands, for he is the Lord of heaven as well as earth; neither can he receive service at our hands, for he needs nothing which we have to give, but is the author of life and breath and all things; who himself created every nation of men dwelling throughout all the earth – and even all their affairs are subject to his regulations and appointments.

Thus did he set before them the greatness of the true God, in contrast with their numerous gods whom they feared or hated, revered or placated, and whose vices and frequent impotency they admitted. The Apostle thus brought his teachings within the rules and regulations, as being not a new teaching, but a fuller declaration of a God already recognized by his hearers. And indeed, so high, so noble, so great a thought of God, must have impressed his hearers favorably. We cannot doubt that the teachings of the Jews, supplemented by the gospel presentations, have done much to lift the minds of men out of the deep degradation which came upon them soon after the flood, as explained by the Apostle. – Rom. 1:20-32.

A God who was not merely the God of one nation or of one city or of one precinct, but who had created all races and nations, and had had to do with the rise and fall of nations, was certainly a very different God from anything that had ever been heretofore suggested to the minds of these philosophers; for although the Jews had preached the same God, undoubtedly their presentation of him as the God of the Hebrews must have favored the impression that each nation had its own god or gods, demanding its worship, reverence, sacrifices, etc.

In vss. 26 and 27 the Apostle implies that the Lord's ordering of the national affairs had something to do with the propagation of the knowledge of himself, and so we find it has been. The bringing of the world under successive empires – the Babylonian, Medo-Persian, Grecian and Roman – had tended to unify the race to some extent, and to make more possible the promulgation of the gospel. During the Grecian period the Greek language was spread abroad throughout various lands, and it still maintained its supremacy as the language of the world, although the reins of government had passed to the hands of the Romans, under whose pushing, warlike power the world in general would be brought much closer together than it had ever been from the time of the confounding of tongues at Babel. All this had occurred at the proper juncture of time as concerned God's favor to Israel, according to the flesh, the birth of Jesus, his crucifixion and the gathering of the ripe "wheat" from that nation, and the scattering of the remainder. All these things were, under divine supervision, working in the interest of mankind, "that they should seek God, if haply they might feel after him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us." The Apostle would assist his hearers in finding this true God, who was to be found of them, and whom they had indicated their desire to know when they erected the altar referred to.

Describing the true God further, the Apostle assured his hearers that none could live or move or have existence, even, aside from the power and good intent of this great God. His words are equally truthful, whether we restrict them to the imperfect existence of the present time and the dying condition of the world, with but a spark of life, or whether we apply them in the fuller sense to the Lord's provision for the future by restitution processes and arrangements. Still wishing to offset the thought that his message was a new one, the Apostle declares that certain Grecian poets had practically expressed this thought in saying, "We are also his offspring." Carrying the mind, then, to the logical conclusion, he urges that if we are the offspring of God our thoughts respecting divinity should not lead us to make or to worship images of any kind, all of which are professedly of man's device.

The Apostle's *method* is worthy of our imitation. All wise people distrust novelty, and incline to say that whatever is valuable has long been. We, like the Apostle, should endeavor to show that the true gospel is not a new theology, but the old theology; not a new gospel, but the old gospel, – the one foretold to Abraham; the one announced by the angels on Bethlehem's plains as "good tidings of great joy which shall be unto all people;" the one declared by the Lord Jesus himself and by all his apostles. In proportion as we would show that errors prevail today, which had their origin in the "dark ages," we must show that we are not forging a new theory equally erroneous, but that we have discarded the errors of the dark ages, and have gone back to the first principles and precepts and instructions of the gospel, as announced by the Lord and his authorized representatives, the apostles.

An explanation was necessary as to why this great [R3139 : page 30] God who had created all nations, and was directing their welfare, had neglected to send word to the Athenians until now. The Apostle did not go into a full explanation of the matter, with which his hearers would not have sympathy – he did not attempt to show how God in the past had merely been giving the world lessons in respect to the wages of sin, neither did he mention how Abraham's seed had been selected as the line through which divine blessings were to be carried eventually to all the families of the earth, and that God had been dealing with the natural seed of Abraham for the preceding eighteen centuries, making types of them and through them illustrating the progress of the divine plan as it shall ultimately be carried out. He did not explain, either, how that Christ offered himself to this nation of Israel, and (in harmony with the divine foreknowledge) had been rejected, and that now God was seeking a spiritual seed of Abraham – spiritual Israelites – to take the place of the broken-off branches of the fleshly house. – Rom. 11.

He contented himself with the bare statement of the truth, that in times past God had "winked at" or overlooked or disregarded and paid no attention to the idolatries of the world, but that now the time was come for a change of dispensation; – that now God was sending his

message to them, and to all who had ears to hear, commanding repentance from sin and turning from idolatries to true worship and righteousness. Quite possibly, though the account does not state it, the Apostle explained that the foundation or basis of this call to repentance was the fact that Christ had been a propitiation (satisfaction) for the sins of the whole world – clearing men thus from the original condemnation of death and alienation from God, and permitting the return to his favor of whomsoever would.

The word "because" commencing vs. 31 has a special significance which should not be overlooked. God calls upon all men to repent and reform, *because* he has appointed for them a day of judgment – a day of trial or testing. Not a trial for testing or judging whether or not they are imperfect and fallen, for this God already knows, even better than we do, and his Word expressly declares that "There is none righteous, no, not one." Such a trial, such a judgment day, therefore, to see if any were righteous, would be a farce. The object of the day of trial or judgment referred to by the Lord is totally different from this.

It is to be a trial day or judgment day to see, to test, to prove which of the world of mankind desire fellowship with the Lord, desire to be obedient to him, desire to walk in his ways. The Millennial Age is this trial day, and the Lord assures us that a full opportunity shall be granted to each and every member of the race to hear, to know, to comprehend his goodness, his love, his redemption of the world through Christ, and his willingness that they should come back into fellowship with him – back to a condition in which he could justly accord to them everlasting life. God could not reasonably command any to repent and return until the ransom was paid at Calvary, because it was his own law that had forbidden them to have fellowship with him, and that law must first be satisfied; and because he could not reward with life everlasting any **[R3140 : page 30]** who would seek his face, until he had made provision through the death of Christ for the payment of the death penalty against the race and through his resurrection for the times of restitution.

It is a further part of this blessed assurance that the judgment or trial of the world will be "in righteousness" – under a reign of righteousness when the besetments of the Adversary and his deceptions will be at an end, and when, therefore, a clear and explicit knowledge of the Lord and of the truth will fill the earth, as the waters cover the great deep. What a gracious gospel the Apostle had to preach! It was so good, indeed, that he had to be guarded in his expression of it; – too good for his hearers to appreciate, with their debauched ideas of the cruelty and perversity of the gods – even as it is too good to be appreciated today by those whose minds have been more or less confused by the horrible theological nightmares coming down to us from "the dark ages."

The Apostle was proceeding logically to show that the resurrection of Christ from the dead was God's assurance to all that he would ultimately carry out this great plan of blessing the world, by granting to each member of it an individual trial or judgment for life, under the favorable conditions of the Millennium; and that the resurrection of Christ was not only God's attestation to men that his sacrifice has been satisfactory, but was also necessary, that our Lord Jesus as the risen and glorified Son of God might exercise in due time "all power in heaven and in earth," and thus bring about the great Thousand-Year Judgment Day, or "times of restitution of all things which God hath spoken by the mouth of all the holy prophets since the world began." (Acts 3:21.) But with this his hearers, who must have been amazed with the logic of his argument, and must have wondered how their various disciples would be influenced by the new teacher, and to what extent they would lose caste, as being less logical or less lofty in their sentiments, found occasion for an expression of dissatisfaction, and of thus logically casting aside the entire argument – dismissing it as unworthy of further consideration.

Their objection rested on the resurrection, which the Apostle made so prominent, so indispensable to the carrying out of the entire plan of God; indispensable, **[R3140 : page 31]** first, as to the Redeemer, that



he must rise from the dead, ere he could be the agent of Jehovah in prosecuting the work of blessing the world; necessary to the world of mankind, that they might come forth from the tomb and be granted a knowledge and opportunity of restitution or resurrection to all that had been lost by Adam's disobedience. When the resurrection was mentioned the occasion for expressions of derision was furnished, as though they would say: We knew that there could be no thorough-going philosophy superior to our own; we were on the look-out for the weak point in the argument of this speaker who sets himself up to be a teacher, and now we have found it; – the resurrection! Nonsense! Whoever saw or heard of a resurrection from the dead?

Others of his auditors were less violent in their expressions, but agreed that they had heard enough for the present – implying that the argument was not very satisfactory when it needed to be supported by a resurrection hypothesis which, to them, seemed very much less reasonable than their own philosophies, – that a man never died, and that when he appears to die he really becomes more alive than he ever was before. From their standpoint of view there could be no resurrection of the dead, since there were none dead, – all being more abundantly alive from the moment of apparent death. This has been the point of contest between the Scriptures and those who hold to them as the Word of God, and all other theories advanced by and backed by the Adversary and in accordance with his original deceptive statement, "Ye shall not surely die." Those who would be on the Lord's side must accept the Lord's statement, "Ye shall surely die;" must admit that it is true; must admit that it was necessary that Christ should die, as our representative and substitute, to free us from the condemnation of death, and must admit also that only by a resurrection of the dead can we come back again to life, – to absolute perfection and full harmony with God.

However, one member of the Council of Mars' Hill (the Areopagite Society) had been deeply interested in the truth he had heard; also a woman of some distinction, and others with them; – for

although the Society alone occupied the place of prominence in such discussions, the people in general were privileged to surround the court. The Apostle's experience here, as elsewhere, like our own, demonstrates the fact that at the present time not many have ears to hear the Word of the Lord; not many are seriously "feeling after him if haply they might find him." The majority are blinded by the god of this world, Satan, through various traditions, heathen and Christian, so that they cannot discern the lengths and breadths and heights and depths of the true gospel. At the present time it is not given to all to see and to understand (Matt. 13:11; Mark 4:11), but we thank God that the time is coming when all the blind eyes shall be opened, and all the deaf ears shall be unstopped; and then the preaching of "Jesus and the resurrection" will mean a great blessing, and all shall come to the knowledge of the truth, from the least to the greatest, as the Lord, through the Prophet, has declared. – Jer. 31:33,34.

=====