

"THE LORD STOOD BY HIM."

– ACTS 23:11-22. – *MAY 10.* –

"The Lord stood by him and said, Be of good cheer."

AFTER the exciting experiences of our last lesson the Apostle must have felt somewhat depressed in spirit and discouraged. True, he had passed through equally great trials amongst the Gentiles, but here, amongst his own people, and in the City of the Great King, the opposition to the gospel would be much more inclined to make him heart-sore. Besides, he evidently had come to Jerusalem full of the thought that under the Lord's providence he might accomplish a considerable work amongst his kinsmen according to the flesh, and rescue some of them before the great overthrow which he realized was impending. It was in this time of great mental stress that the Lord so graciously communicated with him by a dream, [R3190 : page 141] as declared in the first verse of our lesson. What an encouragement it must have been! and the fact that it was given is an assurance that it was needed; for the Lord very rarely indeed interposes miraculously in the course of events unless there is special necessity. On two other occasions, when the Apostle was in straits, the Lord manifested his favor and encouraged him in like manner. – Acts 18:9,10; 27:24.

How much the Apostle must have felt strengthened by this vision, and assurance of divine care, we can well imagine. Nevertheless, the Lord was as truly with him and as fully caring for his interests as on other occasions, when no vision attested the fact: and he is with us, his followers of today, in like manner; and doubtless the visions granted to the Apostle were destined of the Lord to be an encouragement for "all who should believe on him through their word." The Apostle's visions serve us as they served him – assuring us also that the Lord is with his people, and is able to care for and protect and guide and bless our efforts today, as eighteen centuries ago. But to have the Lord thus with him and to feel good cheer in the Lord's presence implied the

fullest sincerity and zeal on the part of the Apostle to do and to be all that would please the Master; and similarly we can enjoy his presence and appropriate to ourselves the message, "Be of good cheer," only in proportion as our hearts can realize that, however imperfect our labors for the truth and for the brethren, they are done "as unto the Lord" and to the best of our ability.

The day before this vision, by order of the Roman commander, the Apostle was brought before the Jewish Sanhedrin, of which the high priest, Ananias, was president. The Apostle was permitted to address the Sanhedrin, and began by declaring himself a Jew, who had always lived in full harmony with the laws of his country – an honorable citizen. It was at this time, it will be remembered, the high priest, possibly thinking this language a reflection against himself (for he had an unsavory reputation), ordered an attendant to smite the Apostle on the mouth – an insult not at all uncommon in the East at that time, and, to some extent, even to this day. The Apostle, justly indignant, exclaimed, "God shall smite thee, thou whited wall; for sittest thou to judge me after the law, and commandest me to be smitten contrary to the law?" One who stood near him replied, "Answerest thou God's high priest so?" and the Apostle replied, "I wist not, brethren, that he was the high priest; for it is written, Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people." It is uncertain what the Apostle meant by this language. It may be his defective eyesight did not recognize Ananias. Or, possibly, he meant to be understood as questioning the right of Ananias to the title of high priest. Or, in view of the fact that the antitypical high priest is the Lord Jesus, and that the typical priesthood came to an end at the time of Christ's glorification, the Apostle may have had that in mind. However, he acknowledged the teaching of the law in respect to the officers of the government, to render honor to whom honor is due; and there is a lesson here for all of us in this day, when we find so many disposed to "speak evil of dignitaries," and bring railing accusations against them. The attitude of the Lord's people should be a very conservative one in such matters

– in harmony with Michael's words to the Adversary, "The Lord rebuke thee!"

Reasoning that he would have scant courtesy from such a tribunal, and knowing that its members were about equally divided as between Pharisees and Sadducees, and that the high priest was a Sadducee, the Apostle appealed to the Pharisees that it was a case in which the Sadducees were trying to do him injury because of his religious faith, much of which was shared in by the Pharisees; and that a Sadducee, in violation of the Law, had just caused a Pharisee to be smitten in the mouth. He thus to some extent gained the sympathy of the Pharisees by declaring that he was a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee, and that the real animus of the opposition against him was on the score of the resurrection of the dead – for the Pharisees believed in a resurrection of the dead, but the Sadducees denied it. Immediately there was a contention in the Sanhedrin, the Pharisees to some extent espousing the Apostle's cause, as against their adversaries, the Sadducees. The meeting broke up in disorder, the Roman commander, Lysias, rescuing Paul and removing him, and thus causing the excitement to abate.

The honesty and propriety of Paul's claim to be a Pharisee has been questioned by some, but we regard their contention as without foundation. The Apostle was a Jew; so were the Pharisees, and a Jew may have either more or less piety without its affecting his nationality. The Pharisees claimed to be strict believers of the Law of Moses – believers in all that Moses and the Prophets did write, the name Pharisee signifying holiness or completeness in the observance of the Law. Paul had all his life been zealous for the Law of God and for its complete observance, and he was no less so as a Christian. Indeed, he was more so, for, having realized his own inability and the inability of all men to keep the Law, he had laid hold upon Christ, the sent of God, as the one through whom alone he would be able to keep the Law perfectly, wholly: as he expressed it, "The righteousness [the full, whole, complete meaning] of the Law is fulfilled in us [holiness

people, complete in Christ] who walk not after the flesh, but after the spirit." All true Christians today could make a [R3190 : page 142] similar claim to that of the Apostle – that we are Pharisees – holiness people – keepers of the divine law – observers of it in every particular to the extent of ability, and with all shortcomings and deficiencies made up for us by our Lord Jesus. We are not under the Law Covenant, for it has given place to a better one, the original one; but as for the Law itself, it is God's Law, "holy, just, good," and can never pass away. It is recognized by us as much as it was recognized by the holiness people of old, and more so; for we discern, not only its letter, but its spirit – love for God and love for fellow-men.

The Jews must have realized that their case against the Apostle would appear very poorly in the eyes of the Roman commander, seeing that they were doing the rioting on both occasions, that the Apostle was the more sedate and willing to reason his cause, and that some of those supposed to be his accusers had turned to his defense. Meantime the sympathy of the Pharisees for Paul doubtless cooled off. At all events, during that night more than forty of the deluded religious enthusiasts bound themselves to God with a curse that they would kill Paul. Such an anathema was in effect, "May the divine curse be upon us if we do not effect the death of this man, whom we believe to be an enemy of God and of our religion, and whom we believe it to be our duty to destroy."

They laid a plot, as follows: They would have the high priest send word to the Roman commander that the Sanhedrin desired a fresh examination of the prisoner on some other charges, the intention being that while the soldiers would be bringing him these forty men would assault and risk their lives to assassinate Paul. The matter was evidently not kept as secretly as they supposed, for one of Paul's relatives learned the particulars. Indeed, we know that it is impossible to keep anything from God, and that the most secret engagements are, therefore, powerless to do injury to the Lord's people. Nevertheless, when the information reached the Apostle he did not say to himself,

God knows all about this matter and will take care of me, and, therefore, I have nothing to do in respect to it. On the contrary, he arranged matters so far as he could to defeat the plot – just as though the entire responsibility for his preservation rested upon himself. There is a lesson in this which many of God's dear people need to learn, viz., that each of the Lord's followers is a colaborer with the Lord in every good work. It is our duty to do all that we know how to do in proper self-defense and in protection of one another from the wiles of the Adversary and in the defense of the cause we serve; but, having done all in our power, having exercised all the wisdom and prudence we can command, we are to rest our hearts in the knowledge that the Lord will take care of all that is beyond our power to control, so that all things shall work together for good to them that love God.

There is another lesson for us in the fact that, although the Lord promised Paul that, as he had been faithful in testifying of him at Jerusalem, he must also preach the Gospel at Rome, nevertheless this latter prediction was long deferred of realization. It was over two years before he reached Rome, and then as a prisoner. We also need certain lessons of faith. We not only need to believe that the Lord is with us, and has the care of our affairs, but have need of patience and perseverance in faith and hope and love; and oftentimes with us, as with the Apostle, the Lord defers for a long time to complete our deliverance from adverse conditions – defers for a long time the opening of the desired door of opportunity in his service. We are to remember his wisdom as well as his love and power, and to rest contentedly therein after doing **[R3191 : page 142]** all within our power. In Paul's case it may be that conditions at Rome would be more favorable to his ministry later than they were at this time. It may be also that the Lord had a work for him to do in the interim as a prisoner at Caesarea, – amongst the Romans. And so in our affairs: we are to look for the opportunities of service as they come, and leave to our Lord the supervision of our life as a whole.

As a result of the communication of the plot to the Roman captain, he sent the Apostle under a strong military escort to the Roman capital of Judea, – Caesarea. There the Apostle, although kept a prisoner, was doubtless made comfortable, awaiting the trial before the Roman governor, Felix. The essence of this lesson as a whole, in its application to us, is expressed in the Apostle's words, "If God be for us who can be against us?"

