

PAUL BEFORE FELIX.

– ACTS 24:10-16,24-26. – MAY 17. –

"I will fear no evil: for thou art with me." – Psa. 23:4.

FIVE days after Paul's arrival a prisoner at Caesarea the Chief Priest, Ananias, accompanied by a public advocate and a deputation from the Sanhedrin, also appeared in the city to make charges against Paul, and the trial at once took place. The advocate, Tertullus, began his case by making very flattering allusions to the governor – very hypocritical allusions, as we know from secular histories of the time. "Both Josephus and Tacitus represent him as one of the most corrupt and oppressive rulers ever sent by the Romans into Judea."

Flattery of this kind, undeserved praise, is extremely reprehensible; totally contrary to the principles which govern the Lord's followers. It is dishonesty, hypocrisy. Nevertheless, flattery is a very powerful weapon, which the unregenerate have little scruple in using, and it frequently gives them a decided advantage in worldly affairs, in opposition to the Lord's faithful, who are restrained from such flatteries, being obliged to consider truth and honesty in all their words and dealings. Some of the Lord's people are, on the other hand, inclined to carry honesty in such matters to an extreme: many in Paul's stead would have felt it their bounden duty to have upbraided Felix roundly. It is no more obligatory upon the Lord's people to denounce every wrongdoer whom they may meet in the street than it is for them to tell all homely persons they may see of their lack along the lines of beauty. The Apostle's course in this case is an illustration of the possession of the spirit of a sound mind. When it came his turn to address the governor he neither upbraided nor reproved him, nor did he utter any words of flattery. The introduction to his defense was every word true in the fullest sense, and yet it was framed and presented in courteous and agreeable language.

Politeness is always a part of Christian character. In the world it may be polish, but in the Christian it is not merely a veneer, but represents the true sentiments of the heart, developed along the lines of the spirit of life – love. Love leads to gentleness, patience, [R3194 : page 154] kindness, etc., and even in the case of disobedience it will hesitate to utter an unkind word, and will avoid the same so far as duty will permit.

The advocate, or attorney, Tertullus, made serious charges against the Apostle. He would have him appear to Felix as more or less a conspirator against the Roman government – at least a raiser of tumults and seditions amongst the people. This charge was made broadly, applying not only to the present instance, the tumult at Jerusalem, but that everywhere, throughout the provinces of Rome, wherever he went, tumults arose amongst the people. It did not seem to occur to this attorney that the tumults might be caused by evildoers in their endeavor to stop the progress of righteousness and truth; the thought he endeavored to present to Felix was that whoever occasioned tumults, regardless of his plea, was to be considered an enemy to good government, law and order. The same arguments are powerful today with those who do not appreciate the true principles of justice and liberty. It will not surprise us at all if by and by the enemies of present truth take a similarly unjust stand against us, who are seeking to walk in the footsteps of the Apostle – seeking to present the truths of a new dispensation to our brethren in Babylon, who are not only themselves unwilling to hear, but are easily aroused to anger, vituperation and persecution, that they may prevent others from receiving the good tidings of great joy which shall be unto all people.

When the charges had been preferred, Paul was permitted to speak for himself, and did so to good effect. He showed (1) that he had but recently arrived in Jerusalem; that he had raised no riot or commotion, but that, on the contrary, at the time of his arrest he was quietly worshiping God in the Temple – disputing with nobody and interfering with nobody's rights. (2) He challenged his accusers to

produce proofs of the truthfulness of their charges – denying their ability to prove them; and thus in a most reasonable and legal way showed that the burden of proof was upon his accusers, and not upon himself. (3) He did confess, however, that there was some ground for the animosity manifested against him, and this was that his fellow-Jews charged him with believing and teaching heresy – a split-off from the Jewish religion. It was his answer to the charge that he was a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes; he denied that it was heresy against the Jewish religion, and a sect, or split-off party. It was his enemies who called Christianity heresy, and separation from Judaism, but their charges were false from the Apostle's standpoint. Christianity, instead of being split off from Judaism, was the natural outcome and proper development of it – the fulfilment of the promises of God upon which the hopes and prospects of Judaism were all built. The Apostle shows this matter most distinctly in his letter to the Romans (chap. 11), where he pictures the Jewish nation as the olive tree whose root was the Abrahamic promise, and whose branches were the people of Israel. He does not picture Christianity as another tree, nor yet as a new shoot out of this original olive tree, but he does picture it as the fuller development of this tree, representing all Jews refusing to progress and to accept of Christ, as branches that were broken off – all the true Jews who continued to be recognized of the Lord, – all the Israelites indeed, – were the Christians who from Pentecost onward have been known as spiritual Israelites.

Progressing, the Apostle justified the claim which he made at his hearing before the Sanhedrin; viz., that a serious part of the objection raised against him by his countrymen was his belief in the resurrection of the dead, which some of them also allowed, or believed, – "that there should be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust."

That the Apostle preached a gospel in many particulars different from the general belief of our day, is quite evident from this presentation of it – the making prominent of the doctrine of the

resurrection of the dead. True, some might claim that it is unnecessary to make this doctrine prominent, because there are few Sadducees today – few who deny the resurrection of the dead. We answer that there are few who believe that there are any dead. The vast majority of mankind, Christians as well as heathen, have adopted the theory that none are dead – that those who appear to die really become more alive than ever. Not believing in anybody's being dead it would be impossible for them to believe in the resurrection of the dead. Instead, another thought prevails now; viz., a resurrection of the *body* – the person or soul, it is claimed, does not die, but merely sheds the body as an old garment, and at some future [R3195 : page 154] time is to have it back. But it will be conceded that if this were all that the Apostle meant by the resurrection of the dead, – if he really meant a "resurrection of the body," his argument was a weak one. It would be foolish to waste much time or breath or energy in discussing such a proposition as would have no particular advantage or merit, even if it were proven.

The Apostle had a totally different thought: his preaching was to the effect that death is a real penalty for sin, and that there never could be life or consciousness, except by a resurrection of the dead, and that a resurrection of the dead could only come by divine favor in the accomplishment of a redemption of all that had been condemned to death. In preaching the resurrection, therefore, he was declaring not only his faith that Christ Jesus was not dead, but also his faith that God would in due time grant the world a resurrection. [R3195 : page 155] Thus Jesus and the resurrection constituted the sum and substance of the gospel hope from the Apostle's standpoint and – because we take his – from our standpoint also.

The question may occur to some – if resurrection (*anastasis*) means a full, complete raising up out of death conditions into perfection of life conditions, how could the Apostle here speak of the resurrection "both of the just and unjust"?

How shall we understand this, and harmonize it with other Scriptures which declare that only the justified shall attain full perfection of life? – that he that hath the Son may have life, and he that hath not the Son shall not see life – in its perfection? – that he that will not obey the great Prophet shall be cut off from amongst his people – cut off from life, in the Second Death?

We answer that the Apostle is not carrying his argument down into the future, declaring that in the future the just ones shall attain to the full perfection of life and the unjust ones also; he is merely referring to those who in the present time are just and unjust. The just of the present time are "justified by faith," and if faithful to the conditions of the call are to have part in the First Resurrection. The unjust of the present time are the unjustified, the unbelievers, and the Apostle explains that they believe not because the god of this world hath blinded their minds. (2 Cor. 4:4.) However, as the Scriptures distinctly show, it is to be the special work of the next age to open all the blind eyes and to unstop all the deaf ears, and to cause the knowledge of the Lord to fill the whole earth, to the intent that those now unjustified, unjust, may be just before God, and thus share in the resurrection which is provided for all, and which will accomplish the resurrection of all except as its gracious provisions are individually rejected.

Having stated thus his belief in a future life, by a resurrection, the Apostle declares that his present life was being used in accordance with that hope of a future life – with a conscience that controlled his thoughts and words and deeds in relationship to God and men.

Can we wonder that Felix, perverse though he was, himself felt disinclined to yield so noble a prisoner to death, even to accommodate and please the flattering attorney and the influential high priest, whose favor he would undoubtedly prefer to hold? The record leads us additionally to infer that Felix considered that in Paul he had a good opportunity for receiving a bribe for the performance of justice; for in

his narrative the Apostle proceeded to show that so far from seeking to do injury to his fellow-creatures, he had brought with him from foreign cities large sums of money. Felix thus perceived that the prisoner, who had liberal education and talent and Roman citizenship, had friends not only in Jerusalem, but abroad. He doubtless concluded that they would be quite willing to make him a handsome present to effect the Apostle's release. This is the suggestion of the 26th verse.

Apparently Felix was considerably interested in his prisoner, and mentioned him to his wife, a Jewess: he was called before them, that they might know further respecting this new teaching. His curiosity was evidently soon more than satisfied, as the Apostle proceeded with his subject, showing the plan of God, the righteousness of the Law, the inability of fallen man to fully meet its requirements, that Jesus became the Redeemer of those condemned by the Law, and that now salvation and life eternal are open to as many as will obey the gospel – forsake sin and lay hold by faith upon the Redeemer. The Apostle proceeded to show that righteousness was the reasonable requirement of the divine Law, and that the acceptance of God's favor in Christ led to self-restraint and opposition to natural tendencies, and that there is a judgment day to come, in the which all deflections from righteousness will be rewarded with stripes proportionate to knowledge. The governor trembled; his own wicked life and licentious course stood out before his mental gaze, and he realized that, according to the standards presented, he would have many stripes to bear in the future. His wife, Drusilla, was really the wife of King Azizus; but her conscience, evidently more seared than his, seems not to have been in the least agitated. Felix suggested that at a more convenient season he would hear further of the gospel; but we doubt if ever he called for any further explanations – he already had enough, more than he was willing to obey. His course is one too frequently imitated since. Many who tremble as they think of their sins, hope that a more convenient time for breaking off may come to them; but a convenient season for abandoning sin – when sin indulged in our members will make no objection to being ousted – will never come.

He who would become a follower of the Lord Jesus, must courageously accept of Christ, the power divine for the breaking of the shackles of his slavery to sin – must first love the liberty wherewith Christ alone can make us free. Those who have not this craving will remain slaves of sin until the glorious Millennial morning shall break, until after the completion of the election Church of "overcomers" – until the dawning of the Millennial morning, when the overcomers, with Christ at their head, shall break all the shackles of sin and set all prisoners free, and command all to render obedience to the laws of the Kingdom of God, inflicting stripes of punishment proportionate to their present wilfulness in sin, with a view to their recovery, **[R3195 : page 156]** and for restitution to all that was lost in Adam and redeemed with the precious blood.

A good lesson may be learned from the Apostle's method of presenting the truth to Felix. He did not attack the governor's character, nor berate him for his sins. He did better than this. Ignoring the individual entirely, he lifted the mirror of the perfect law of love and liberty and righteousness before the governor, and let him see for himself how far short he came of the perfect standard which alone God can approve. Would that all of God's children could learn thus to reprove sin – by letting the light of truth and the corroboration of the same in their own conduct shine out – their words, and no less their conduct, being epistles of the grace of God and his gracious arrangements, both for rewarding those who seek him and for chastening and correcting those who require it!

The courage of the Apostle in holding up the truth before one who so largely had to do with the decision of his own case is remarkable and commendable. It is in full agreement with the declaration of our Golden Text. Those who are on the Lord's side, and who, therefore, have the Lord on their side, in all of life's affairs, need fear no evil. This absence of fear, however, should not in us, any more than in the Apostle, lead to bravado or discourteous manner or language. The

divine rule is, as expressed by the Apostle, that we should speak the truth in love. – Eph. 4:15.

Another lesson taught us by the Apostle's experiences, yea, by all of the Lord's notable children, from the Master down, is that the assaults of calumny, slander, etc., can do them no lasting harm. Look at the Captain of our salvation, against whom all manner of evil was said and done falsely, even to the extent of calling him the prince of devils, and crucifying him as a blasphemer of God. How those assaults of the great Adversary, through his deluded children of disobedience, serve now to make the Lord's character and conduct the more transparent and resplendent! So also it is in respect to the Apostle Paul's experiences – they all reflect grandly upon his character today. Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress" gives a scene which illustrates this feature of our lesson and encourages all of us to disregard the slanders and evil speakings of the present time, if so be that we can continually realize the divine favor and blessing with us and upon our efforts to serve the Lord. We give an extract from Bunyan's writings as follows: –

"Then the shepherds had the pilgrims to another place, called Mount Innocence, and there they saw a man clothed all in white, and two men, Prejudice and Ill-will, continually casting dirt upon him. Now behold, the dirt, whatsoever they cast at him, would in a little time fall off again, and his garment would look as clean as if no dirt had been cast thereat. Then said the pilgrims, 'What means this?' The shepherds answered, 'This man is named Godly-man, and this garment is to show the innocency of his life. Now, those that throw dirt at him are such as hate his well-doing; but, as you see, the dirt will not stick upon his clothes; so it shall be with him that liveth innocently in the world. Whoever they be that would make such men dirty, they labor all in vain; for God, by that a little time is spent, will cause that their innocence shall break forth as the light, and their righteousness as the noon-day.'"

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