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"ALMOST THOU PERSUADEST ME."

– ACTS 26:19-29. – MAY 24. –

"Having therefore obtained help of God, I continue unto this day."

PAUL remained a prisoner at Caesarea two years – until the recall of Felix to Rome. According to history, the latter had given ground for much complaint by the use of his office, and in order to placate the Jews, and to avoid further animosities, he left Paul a prisoner, instead of doing him the justice of acknowledging that he had committed no crime and, therefore, had full right to his liberty. It is impossible for us at this distance even to surmise with any accuracy what may have been the Lord's object in permitting his faithful representative to be thus isolated, and debarred from the privileges of service. On the one hand, it may have been to give the Apostle rest, quiet, opportunity for further study of the truth. On the other hand, it may have been to teach him a lesson of patience, submission and confidence in God; – that his services were not indispensable; that while the Lord had not let go of him, and would ultimately deliver him, he was not indispensable to the divine plan. These are important lessons for all of God's people to learn, and particularly all who are in any prominent way identified with his service.

On the other hand, it may be that the Lord had a work for the Apostle to do at Caesarea, where possibly he had contact with the officers of the garrison – and where they would have opportunities for observing the man and appreciating the power of God to uphold him in his adversities. We may be sure that the Apostle let his light shine on every proper occasion, and we may be sure also that his labor was "not in vain in the Lord," whatever it was, and however it was accepted or made useful in the interests of others. If, even, he had no opportunity for serving others, and the work of grace were accomplished in his own heart, it was not [R3196 : page 157] in vain,

and faith commands us to accept the matter without doubt respecting the wisdom of the arrangement.

Festus, the successor of Felix as Roman governor, was of a totally different character from his predecessor. The Apostle styles him "noble Festus," and history confirms the appellation. The Jewish rulers, taking advantage of the fact that a new governor would naturally desire to make a favorable impression in respect to prompt dealing with prisoners charged with sedition, rioting, disloyalty, etc., quickly brought Paul's case to the attention of Festus. Doubtless their charges were the same as those made before Felix, coupled with suggestions, perhaps, that Felix had been rather lax in his dealings, and that they doubted not that the new governor, appointed by the emperor as a more capable person, would, on the contrary, show his thoroughgoing character by bringing all such offenders to justice. Apparently, however, they realized that it would be useless to attempt to try the case before the governor, since they had no witnesses to any wrong-doing which he could recognize as against Roman law or the privileges of a Roman citizen. Apparently their explanation was that the Apostle's conduct had been an assault upon their religion, along lines which the Roman governor, unacquainted with their religion, would not be prepared to appreciate. They therefore asked that the prisoner be tried before the Sanhedrin. The governor acknowledged his ignorance of the religion of the Jews, and made no objection to the trial of the prisoner by the religious court of his countrymen; but the Apostle was a Roman, and since he claimed Roman citizenship it was not permissible to turn him over to his countrymen for trial unless with his consent. The matter, therefore, was appealed to the Apostle: was he willing to be released as a Roman prisoner, and to be turned over to his countrymen for trial, according to their usages in religious matters? The Apostle promptly replied that he would not consent to this; that as a Roman citizen he had a right to Roman privileges, and therefore appealed his case to Caesar's court at the capital city. He well knew the animosity of his countrymen, and that those who were ready to assassinate him two years before were probably still unchanged in

heart. The Apostle's course furnishes a good example for all of the Lord's people in similar circumstances. It is a mistake, made by some well-meaning members of the Lord's family, to suppose that the Master's teaching of nonresistance means that they should put forth no efforts on their own behalf. It is our privilege to avail ourselves of every right granted to us by the laws of the country in which we live. It is proper for us to appeal to higher or better courts if we can, to obtain that justice which might not be obtainable in lower courts. But having exhausted all such legal resources and remedies, [R3197 : page 157] the Lord's people are to be submissive to the results – not anarchists, not grumblers, not resisters of the decisions of the law. Another matter worthy of notice is that, so far as the records show, the Apostle did not berate or calumniate his people, the Sanhedrin or others associated as his prosecutors and persecutors. The lesson for the Lord's people today is to speak evil of no man; take advantage of every legal right and privilege and opportunity, and accept the final results as the providence of God.

Festus was placed in a peculiar position; in sending the Apostle to Rome, as he was obliged to do in the case of appeal of a Roman citizen, he must of necessity send some charges, and being a just man he desired that the charges should be truthfully stated. Confessing himself to be ignorant of the Jewish religion, he asked King Agrippa and his wife, Bernice, who were nominal Jews (really Edomites), to hear the Apostle's explanation of his case, that he might advise him respecting how serious were the divergencies between Christians and Jews in doctrine.

The invitation was accepted, and the Apostle began his address before the king and queen and the Roman governor, and, doubtless, quite a retinue of officers and soldiers. Here was an opportunity for preaching the Gospel to the people, whom the Apostle could otherwise never have expected to reach. He appears to have appreciated the occasion thoroughly, and made a stirring address, his text being the circumstances of his own conversion – narrated here for the third time.

We cannot doubt that he was guided of the Lord in the matter, and it offers the suggestion to all ministers of the truth that nothing is apt to appeal more quickly to others than those things which have appealed to ourselves. Every minister of the truth, to speak heartily and forcefully, should speak from conviction, and the conviction should be backed by reasonable and positive evidences. Nothing could appeal to his hearers more strongly than the fact that he admitted that he had been a persecutor of the Christians himself, before he saw the way of the Lord more perfectly, and that now, seeing the Lord's way, he was sacrificing all that man could hold dear in his service of the truth.

The fact that the Apostle was addressing royalty did not hinder him from bringing out the salient features of the gospel, and these are, we fear, too frequently forgotten by many. (1) Repentance from sin; (2) turning to God to seek his favor, to know and to do his will; (3) the doing of good works, and thereby showing that repentance was sincere. Because our present work is very largely that of "reaping" rather than "sowing," we have less need to appeal to those who are living in sin and alienation from God, and needing **[R3197 : page 158]** reformation of life; but whenever we have occasion to present the message of the Lord to some or to any whom we have reason to believe are not living in harmony with the requirements of the gospel along these lines, we should be careful, as the Apostle was, to leave no room for misunderstanding – no room for thinking that the gospel of Christ is sympathy with uncleanness, impurity of heart or life, sin, selfishness or evil deeds.

We are here informed, though not elsewhere, that the Apostle had at some time in his experience preached the gospel throughout all the country of Judea – evidently before he went to Antioch and engaged in the general work amongst Gentiles – possibly during the two years prior to his first going to Antioch. The Apostle thus showed his auditors that his work had not been exclusively to the Jews nor exclusively to the Gentiles, but to both according to opportunity. It is for this cause, he declares – because realizing the change of

dispensation by which God's grace was not confined any longer to the Jews only – that the Jews specially hated him and seized him in the Temple, and attempted to kill him. It was the selfishness on the part of the Jews that made the Apostle specially obnoxious to them. They were opposed to Jesus, but specially opposed to the giving of his gospel to the Gentiles – the teaching that the Gentiles might now, in any sense of the word, enjoy equal privileges with the Jews in respect to God's favor, etc.

In referring to the preservation of his life, the Apostle does not give credit to Lysias, the commander of the garrison at Jerusalem, but declares that he obtained help of God, by whom he had been sustained to the time of his speaking. Doubtless on a proper occasion the Apostle would have been quite willing to have given Lysias full credit for promptness in preserving his life; but speaking from the highest standpoint of his own appreciation and ours, he gave the credit for his deliverance to the Lord. There is a good lesson in this for all of the Lord's people. How apt many are to give credit to "luck" or "chance" or human instrumentality, overlooking the fact that the Lord's saints are the special objects of his care, and that the angel of the Lord encampeth round about them and delivereth them.

The next sentence intimates that during the two years of the Apostle's imprisonment he had been witnessing, preaching the gospel, both to small and great – such of the soldiers or servants or commanders of the camp as seemed to have a hearing ear undoubtedly were communicated with. We may be sure that the Apostle slackened not at any time his endeavors to serve the great Master, the Captain of our salvation, as a true soldier and faithful servant. So, too, should we continue to serve, even when apparently the most favorable opportunities are withheld from us. "Thou knowest not which shall prosper, either this or that." – Eccl. 11:6.

We should notice what the Apostle specially testified, and consider it a clue to our most favorable testimonies in the interest of

the same cause. He doubtless presented the subject from various standpoints at different times; but the essence, the substance, of his message on all occasions was the death and resurrection of Christ, as the one in whom were fulfilled the types of the Jewish Law and the declarations of the prophets. He did not stop with declaring the death and resurrection, but pointed to the ultimate legitimate results of these – that they meant that eventually the true light should shine unto all the Jewish people and also to the Gentiles – "This is the true light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world." It is in vain that we attempt to preach any other gospel – no other will be considered acceptable by him whom we would serve. We find, on the contrary, some today preaching a coming blessing of a new age and its light and favors to mankind, but denying the Scriptural foundation for such hopes – the death of Christ as our redemption price, and his resurrection, that he might be our Helper and Deliverer. Others, too, state the matter from a different standpoint, claiming that the favor of God and the blessing of forgiveness through Christ is to extend even to the heathen – but without light; that they will be saved in their darkness and heathenism. Let all who would ultimately hear the Master's words, "Well done, good and faithful servant," be careful to preach the same gospel that the Apostle proclaimed; viz., the one based upon the ransom sacrifice of Christ, attested by his resurrection, on account of which the Lord is yet to be (during the Millennial age) the true light that will lighten every man, every member of our race, and bring to each and to all not only the blessings of opportunity but also tests and proportionate responsibility.

King Agrippa was evidently considerably informed along the lines of the teaching of the Law and the Prophets, for the Apostle appealed to him as able to corroborate his presentations respecting the Law and the Prophets; but Festus the Gentile, who had no knowledge of Jewish hopes and promises, was astounded as he heard the Apostle's line of argument – doubtless much more extended than is presented in the record. Interrupting the Apostle by speaking still louder than he, Festus cried, "Paul, thou art beside thyself! Much learning doth make

thee mad!" – your head is turned; you are painting fancy pictures when you tell us of a great God, our Creator, and that he cares for us, his creatures, and has provided for our redemption through the sacrifice of his Son, and that **[R3197 : page 159]** he has raised him from the dead, and is ultimately to send a blessing to every member of our race. Surely this is your own imagination! It is a wonderful picture, astounding to me who, as a Gentile, never had so connected a presentation respecting any of the deities of whom I have heard by the thousand.

Truth is stranger than fiction, and it is no wonder that some today, like Festus of old, find it hard to believe in the goodness and wonderful provision that our heavenly Father has made for his creatures. Today, if some of our worldly friends note our enthusiasm for the Lord, his brethren and his truth, it all seems very different from any religious sentiments or feelings, hopes or ambitions they have entertained, and they are inclined to say of us also that our heads are a little turned. They think it not strange if men become enthusiastic about politics or money-making, because such enthusiasm is common to men; everybody is more or less excited and interested in money-getting and in politics. But when it comes to religion, they say to themselves, no one knows anything about this matter; it is all pure speculation, and these people must be crazy when they think of their religion as being tangible, worthy of self-denial and the enduring of persecutions. We admit that no romance of earth ever equaled this one of the divine arrangement for man's salvation: – the fall; the calamity of death and disease, mental, physical and moral; the sending of God's own son; his offering of himself as the sin-offering on our behalf; his resurrection and ascension to glory, honor and power; the gathering of a little flock to be his Bride and joint-heir in the Kingdom; and, by and **[R3198 : page 159]** by, the establishment of a Kingdom for the blessing and enlightenment of all the families of the earth. No novel, no plot of human concoction, could ever equal this one. It is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes. We cannot wonder if those who see from the outside – who do not see the strength and beauty and

consistency and harmony from the inside standpoint – consider that we who see matters from the right standpoint are too much enthused. They cannot appreciate the fact that we accept gladly the privilege of self-sacrifice, in order thereby to attest our love and devotion to the Lord and to be accounted worthy a share with him as members of his Church, his Bride.

The time will come, and it is not far distant now, when many who are now highly esteemed amongst men for their wisdom, will be seen to have been foolish, and many who are now esteemed fools for Christ's sake and for the gospel's sake, will be seen to have been truly wise in choosing the heavenly things and in being willing to surrender the earthly things for the attainment of the heavenly, because it is impossible to serve God and Mammon.

The Apostle's answer to Festus was not flattery, but Christian courtesy. Festus was a noble man, and it is not improper to speak the truth in reasonable language, and to give a merited compliment. "I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak forth words of truth and soberness." So, when we answer the world, let us remember the difference of standpoint, and that our privilege of seeing the deep things of God is the result of our having been accepted of him through consecration and obedience, receiving the spirit of the Anointed, whereby we can know the things freely given unto us of God.

The Apostle appealed to the king for corroboration of the things he declared, evidently well assured that the declaration of the gospel had created so much commotion amongst the Jews that the king had heard thereof repeatedly. The thing was not done in a corner; it was a public matter of general knowledge, and had Festus been living in the country he would not question the facts.

The Apostle appealed to Agrippa in a most earnest and dignified tone. "King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest." The intimation is that the Apostle had in this discourse set forth the fulfilment of the prophecies so fully, so explicitly, that

anyone believing them to be inspired could not doubt that Jesus was the Messiah. This led to the notable words of Agrippa, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian."

The New Testament revisers evidently considered this language ironical, but it does not so seem to us. The Apostle's rejoinder seems to contradict that thought, "I would that thou wert not only almost but altogether such as I am – except these bonds." It is presumed upon reasonable grounds that, although Agrippa did not become a Christian, this knowledge of the principles underlying Christianity remained with him and influenced him during the remainder of his life. History tells us that in the subsequent persecutions that arose in connection with the trouble coming upon the Jewish nation Agrippa received and kindly entreated the Christians who fled to him for protection.

How many there are in Christian lands who have heard the gospel message more or less distinctly, and have been "almost persuaded" to lay hold of the grace of God, but neglect opportunities of action and have lost the appreciation of the privilege. These, like Agrippa, will have comparatively small conception of the wonderful things they came so near to grasping and yet missed. When they shall come forth from the grave and enjoy the great privileges of the Millennial Kingdom it will amaze them to know what great opportunities they had to become members of the little flock, the Lord's associates on the throne.

