

## "FIGHTING AGAINST GOD"

– ACTS 5:17-42. – FEBRUARY 14. –

**Golden Text:** – "Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven."

– Matt. 5:10.

"WHOM the Lord loveth he chasteneth," is a doctrine peculiar to Christianity. Until the principles of Divine government are somewhat understood, it seems absurd to claim that Christians are the special objects of Divine love and care and, at the same time, to admit that generally they have a larger proportion of trials, difficulties, persecutions, etc., than others. The philosophy of this is the interpretation of the Divine Plan of the Ages. From no other standpoint can the matter be reasonably understood in all its details. From any other standpoint the question would arise, Why not have made mankind perfect and have preserved him from undue temptations and have granted him enlightenment that he might always choose the good and refuse the evil? Why not have protected those loyal to the Lord and thus have published the Truth, its Author and its servants? Why not have overwhelmed the evil, instead of allowing the evil in so many ways to vanquish the good – as at the cross, and in all of life's experiences?

## "SO IT SEEMED GOOD IN THY SIGHT"

The philosophy of why God permitted the evil to triumph now, as beautifully stated in the SCRIPTURE STUDIES, Vol. I ("The Plan of the Ages"), we can but briefly suggest here. The permission of evil is but one feature in the Divine program, according to which our Creator purposes that all of his intelligent subjects shall be free moral agents, and that each of them, angels and men, shall be fully tested in respect to their love and loyalty to him and to the principles of righteousness, which he personifies.

Additionally we have the special development and testing of character, having been invited to be Joint-Heirs with Jesus in the Millennial Kingdom and properly required to be "more than conquerors" – loyal in the very highest degree, in thought and word and deed. The testing of such for so high a position in the Divine purpose justifies most crucial tests. When it is perceived that this Gospel Age is the period for the selection of this Royal Priesthood for the spiritual plane, and that the Jewish Age was the period for the selection of the earthly representatives of the Kingdom, it can be seen at a glance why the way of the called, chosen, faithful, elect, has been made so narrow; why so few have found it and why still fewer have had the faith and courage and patience to walk therein to the end of life's journey.

### **OPEN THE PRISON-DOORS**

Our lesson is a sequel to the preceding one, which tells of the healing of the lame man in the temple by Peter and John, and of the wonderful opportunity thus afforded the disciples to preach the Gospel to the people and to the rulers. The result of their hearing before the officers was their commitment to prison for a further hearing on the next day, since it was contrary to the Jewish Law that the trial should proceed after dark. Verse 17 in brief space tells us that the high priest, Annas, was a Sadducee, which signifies that they were agnostics and higher critics, who believed nothing respecting the Divine Revelation, nothing of a future life by resurrection, or otherwise. Josephus informs us that most of the upper class of his day were skeptics, Sadducees, though the mass of the people were Pharisees. It will thus be seen that there is a close correspondency between the ecclesiastical conditions in the end of the Jewish Age and those which now prevail in the end of this age. Today, both in pulpit and pew, the more learned from a human standpoint have very slight belief in anything beyond the present life. Their faith has gradually given way under the attacks of Higher Critics and Evolution, because already undermined by

the errors of the dark ages, prominently the teaching that nearly everybody is enroute to eternal torment, either because of Divine inability to prevent it or because of Divine foreordination to that effect.

The teachings of the apostles reflected specially against the Sadducees, because the basis of it was the declaration that Christ had risen from the dead; and secondly, because this very high priest and his associates had been leaders in the conspiracy which led to our Lord's crucifixion. Our text says that they were "filled with indignation" (revised version, "jealousy.") The Greek word seems to signify that they were hot with indignation, and anxious to have them convicted before the Sanhedrin and disposed of. Under these circumstances they were sent to prison.

During the night, however, the angel of the Lord led them forth miraculously while the keepers of the prison slept, and bade them go to the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life. Thus did God intersperse evidences of his Divine care and protection with other experiences which seem to be contrary, and thus were the apostles and the early Church and we, who read the account, strengthened and encouraged to have good confidence in the Lord; that greater is he who is on our part than all they that be against us, and that even the adverse experiences are of Divine permission. As our Lord said to Pilate, "Thou couldst have no power at all against me, except it were permitted of my Father."

Note the expression of the angel's message (v. 20), "All the words of this life." There is a sermon for us in those few words. They remind us that our message consists of "wonderful words of life" – life from the dead, secured for us and ultimately for all, through the death of the Redeemer, and through his resurrection, and to be actually brought to us and to all at his second advent. The words remind us also that we who believe do now, by faith, enter into this newness of life – the resurrection life, in a figurative

sense, and that our resurrection, our life, if we are faithful, will come to us as our final "change," in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.

## **TEACHING THE PEOPLE**

Obedient to God's message, the apostles went early to the temple, and began, as before, to teach the people, to explain to them the Old Testament Scriptures and types, which foretold that Messiah should first suffer before he would enter into his glory, and they identified him as the Messiah. They explained his sacrificial death, his resurrection and his sending forth upon believers his holy Spirit, and that this also was foretold in the prophecies. They pointed out that the Gospel message was for the selection of the faithful "Israelites indeed" to be Messiah's Bride and Joint-Heir in his Kingdom later to be established for the blessing of Israel and all the nations of the world. This message still has an attraction for the common people, and would have also for the more educated had not their philosophies and traditions turned their hearts away from the simplicity of faith in the Lord's Second Coming and Kingdom to a belief that they themselves, without the Lord, are to convert the world – by which they mean civilization. **[R4325 : page 39]**

Meantime the Sanhedrin, or senate, met at the appointed hour, but the officers sent to bring the prisoners found them not – though the prison was every way secured – until it was learned that they were teaching in the temple and evidently having considerable influence with the people; so the officers wisely arrested them quietly, for fear they should create an uproar and be themselves the sufferers.

## **"BRING THIS MAN'S BLOOD UPON US"**

The Sanhedrin acted as the court, the high priest as the prosecutor. Thus, inquiring of the apostles if they were not

violating strict orders already given them respecting preaching in the name of the Crucified One, they claimed that he had risen from the dead; that he was Messiah, etc. Not waiting for an answer, the high priest proceeded to show the Sanhedrin the logical effect of their being permitted to continue this teaching – they were filling Jerusalem with their teaching, bringing upon them (the high priest and the Sanhedrin, which had condemned Jesus) this man's blood – that is to say, responsibility for his unjust death. This shows that they appreciated the position, and that the apostles also appreciated it and had told the truth on the subject unsparingly.

The answer of the Apostle Peter and others is given in brief form, but is a model answer in every sense of the word. Not rudely, yet forcefully and logically, they set forth seven points:

(1) That, uncontrovertibly, where the command of God and the command of men conflict, the Divine authority must be recognized as supreme.

(2) That they were loyal to the God of their fathers, whose power in the resurrection of Jesus was being attested.

(3) That it was true that Jewish rulers were responsible for Jesus' death.

(4) That God has honored him, raised him from the dead and taken him to heaven.

(5) That he was the Prince and Saviour of Divine appointment.

(6) That they were not preaching vengeance, but mercy – not penalty for the crucifixion, but forgiveness of sins to all Israel, on condition of repentance.

(7) That they personally were witnesses, and that the power of the holy Spirit in them and in all believers corroborated these facts.

This is a wonderful testimony, and no doubt the experiences of the apostles in being delivered from the prison on the previous night helped to give them the courage so necessary at this moment. No doubt also the knowledge of that incident, coming to Gamaliel, led him to offer the moderate advice which the Sanhedrin [R4326 : page 39] followed. He advised them, "Take heed what ye do to these men. If this teaching be of God, ye cannot overthrow it. If it be of men, it will come to naught." The result was that the apostles were again charged not to preach in the name of Jesus, and, by way of showing the authority of the Court, it was ordered that they be whipped, scourged. The apostles, realizing the power of the Lord, endured the chastening with thanksgiving that they were accounted worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus. Thus the Lord blessed them in their hearts with his peace and grace, while he did not shield them from the scourging. In this, also, we learn a lesson respecting Divine providences.

### **FOR THEIRS IS THE KINGDOM**

Our Golden Text applies the general principle enunciated by our Lord, "Through much tribulation shall ye enter the Kingdom." This is not because Divine power is not able to shield us from the tribulations, nor because our Lord is not interested in our welfare, but, quite the contrary, because, according to Divine tests placed upon the Church, the New Nature can be developed, educated, crystallized, only through the tests and trials it will endure through its earthly members in the flesh, through loyalty to the Lord. These testings will come along various lines – faith, obedience, endurance, love, etc. And it is only to the overcomers that the reward is promised. But, thank God, grace to help in time of need

is promised us. If our hearts are loyal and we do our best, the Lord will see to the remainder.

The Golden Text reminds us that we are to expect persecution, and Bible history shows us that these are to be expected from the church, as much or more than from the world. Indeed, when our Lord speaks of the world, he evidently refers to "Churchianity." He says, "Marvel not if the world hate you. Ye know that it hated me before it hated you." The world that hated Jesus and crucified him was the Jewish world, or nominal Israel; and the world from which we may look for persecution, similarly, would be the so-called Christian world – Christendom. Not only so, but sometimes the persecution comes from those who once were brethren in the Truth – those who once dipped with us in the dish of Divine nourishments at the table of the Lord. The trial is all the more severe when it comes from this quarter. Yet was it not so with our Lord, and does it not seem to have cut him to the quick that Judas kissed him at the very moment that he betrayed him?

But as none of these things moved the Master away from confidence in the Divine providence shaping affairs in the interest of the Church, and as he returned not railing for railing, neither must we. And such experiences rightly received will no doubt make us more and more copies of his dear Son.

Our Lord declares that the blessing for persecution endured is for righteousness' sake, and the Apostle, in line with this, declared, "Let none of you suffer for evil-doing, nor as a busybody in other men's matters." This, of course, will not hinder us from being misrepresented and charged with evil-doing, even as our Lord himself was so charged. Was he not crucified under the charge of blasphemy, which, in his day, was esteemed to be the worst of all offenses? Similarly in our day we must not think it strange if the Adversary shall seek to misrepresent the facts and put light for darkness and darkness for light. It is for each of us to

preserve a conscience void of offense towards God and men, that, like the Apostle of old, we may be able to call upon all men everywhere to witness whether or not we have coveted their silver or their gold, or done aught to their injury, or left undone any good toward them that was within our power.

In this connection let us remember also that the decision in each of our cases is with God. As St. Paul declares, "It is a light thing that I should be judged of you or of any man. Yea, I judge not mine own self, but he that judgeth me is the Lord."

