

UNWORTHY OF EVERLASTING LIFE

– ACTS 13:13-52. – MAY 9. –

Golden Text: – "The Word of the Lord was published throughout all the region." – V. 49.

ALTHOUGH the missionary journey was only beginning, this lesson starts with the statement of what "Paul and his company did," whereas previously the narrative was respecting Barnabas and Paul. Barnabas was still the "Son of Consolation," still loved and approved of the Lord, but Paul was his "chosen vessel to bear his name to the Gentiles," and the special power of God upon him and through him promptly manifested itself. If, thereby, any spirit of jealousy awakened in the bosom of Barnabas, it was a great mistake. We trust that there was not – that he still realized that his special talent for Divine service was in being a "Son of Consolation" – now privileged to help, to encourage, to comfort St. Paul. To so do would be to properly recognize the Lord's oversight of his own work, and to rejoice to have his will done. Similar testings come to all of the Lord's brethren to this day – testings of humility, of brotherly love, of full submission to the Lord – of faith in his guidance of his own work. These testings are specially severe upon brethren of prominence in the Church. Hence the Apostle's exhortation, "Be not many of you teachers, brethren, knowing that the man (who is a teacher – in any failure) shall receive the greater condemnation." (Jas. 3:1.) Nor can we complain against the providence which thus tests us; rather we must concede the propriety of it; that those being selected for the glorious privileges of the future must fully demonstrate to the Lord humility and absolute loyalty to his will, even in our secret thoughts. Let us each apply the lesson, remembering the Apostle's words, "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." (I Cor. 10:12.) And again,

"Humble yourselves, therefore, brethren, under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time." – I Pet. 5:6.

The same verse briefly states that John Mark departed from the missionaries, returning to his home at Jerusalem. What led him to this course is not stated. Faintness of heart, lack of faith, lack of courage – some arrows of the Adversary evidently smote him. This is evidenced by the fact that St. Paul was unwilling to accept him as a companion on a future missionary tour. Evidently he learned a valuable lesson, however, since we find that eventually he was restored to the Apostle's favor, as indicated by Col. 4:10 and 2 Tim. 4:11. While rejoicing in this recovery it is well that we resolve that such a course will not be ours, but that, as our Lord suggests, after having put our hands to the plow we will not look back, but press forward to the goal.

Another lesson is that those who are unfaithful under such conditions should not be received back again, just as though they had been faithful. Doubtless it was to Mark's everlasting advantage that St. Paul rebuked him and declined his further companionship for work until he had shown evidences of more developed character. The lesson of reconciliation is valuable, too. We should remember Gladstone's remark that "No man ever became great or good, except through many and great mistakes"; also Wayland's remark, "I saw a man last week who has not made a mistake for four thousand years. He is a mummy in the Egyptian Department of the British Museum. The only people who make no mistakes are dead people."

A NOTABLE SERMON BY A NOTABLE MAN

The next prominent stop of the missionaries was at Antioch of Pisidia, a great city, though not such a metropolis as the Antioch of our last lesson. (There were in all sixteen Antiochs.)

The first Sabbath day found Paul and Barnabas in a Jewish synagogue, according to their custom; because the Jews who had been waiting for the fulfilment of the Messianic prophecies were the best prepared soil for the Gospel message; at least so far as their heads were concerned. Entering with the others they took seats and, after prayers, listened to the reading of a portion of the Law, a selection from the prophets by the Elder of the congregation, styled the "angel [R4364 : page 102] of the synagogue." Then came the time for addresses by the rabbis or other learned persons. The officiating Rabbi recognized Paul and Barnabas as intelligent and cultured men and sent them word that they would be pleased to have them use the liberty of the synagogue, and give the people an address, if they felt so disposed. Then Paul stood up in his place, not going to the public stand. Saluting with his hand, St. Paul began his address, saying that he had something that should be heard by all Israelites and by others who revered God. He proceeded in a wonderful discourse, which in some particulars reminds us of Stephen's address – which St. Paul had doubtless heard and rejected. His argument was: –

(1) That God, having a great blessing to bestow upon mankind, had chosen the nation of Israel as a channel for the blessing; and that his care for that nation, ordering its affairs for centuries, was in line with this original purpose.

(2) He showed that, by and by, in that nation of Israel God had further indicated the choice of a special family through which the blessing should come. Messiah was to be the offspring of David. And "the sure mercies of David," to be accomplished in Messiah, would mean God's sure mercies to Israel as a nation, because Messiah would come to them as their King.

(3) Finally, after centuries of waiting, Messiah did come in this very line of descent – of the house of Israel – of the family of David – Jesus of Nazareth. – V. 23.

(4) The Messiahship of Jesus had already been recognized to a considerable extent. – Vs. 24-26.

(5) The Jewish nation as a whole, however, represented by their rulers, heedless of the testimony of the prophets, and ignoring Jesus' manifest purity, had accomplished his death through the Romans. – Vs. 27-29.

(6) The Messiahship of Jesus was proven by his resurrection from the dead. This accorded with the prophecies of the Scriptures and was attested by numerous witnesses. (Vs. 30-37.) Note the absence of cant and rant in this discourse. Note the appeal to reason, the logic of the argument – fact upon fact, each in its proper place and order. However, the mere recitation of these facts might have accomplished little. The Apostle proceeded to draw from the facts a great lesson, most important to his hearers, namely, that

(7) All were sinners, and that Jesus, the Messiah, through his death, had become the Saviour of sinners. Whatever his future work, he was already doing work for all those who would hear the message and give hearty response.

Here is still the test of the right preaching of the Gospel. It must recognize sin and not claim, as Evolutionists do, that "If man fell at all he fell upward"; that instead of being condemned of God as a sinner, man is being approved of God for his evolving endeavors and successes. The Gospel of Christ recognizes Original Sin and the fall from God's likeness, the need of a Ransom sacrifice, the fact that Christ is our Redeemer and that "by his stripes we are [to be] healed"; that through his death our reconciliation was made possible; and that reconciliation means the covering of the sins of the believer from God's sight now, his privilege of entering the School of Christ and being prepared for heavenly glory. The Apostle briefly showed how justification from sin and alienation from God has thus been made possible –

a justification far greater and more thorough than that which the Jews had enjoyed for centuries under their Law Covenant; for theirs was only for a year and the "Law made nothing perfect," while the blood of Jesus, applied on behalf of believers, is effective for all of the various kinds and degrees of sin traceable, directly or indirectly, to the original sin of Adam, under which condemnation passed upon all.

THE WARNINGS OF THE GOSPEL

Notice carefully that the Apostle did not say to his hearers that a rejection of his message would condemn them to eternal torment. Not a word of that. But he did quote them an Old Testament Scripture which said, "Behold, ye despisers, and wonder, and *perish*; for I work a work in your days, a work which ye shall in no wise believe, though a man declare it unto you." – Acts 13:41.

Nor does the Apostle say that his quotation declares absolute hopelessness for the despisers when they perish. The prophecy merely states that God's Plan would be declared and that all who despised it would nevertheless wonder at it and would perish without availing themselves of the blessings of salvation. God knows, not we, how many of these despisers who wonder, while perishing, have sinned against a sufficiency of light to hinder them from ever having any further opportunity during the Millennium. The Apostle does assure us that "Satan, the god of this world, hath blinded the minds of them which believe not," and the Scriptures assure us that the time is nearing when Satan shall be "bound" and deceive the people no more. (2 Cor. 4:4.) The same Apostle assures us that when the New Covenant shall be sealed and its beneficent arrangement inaugurated, God "will have all men to be saved, and to come to a knowledge of the truth." – I Tim. 2:4.

In the older manuscripts the 42nd verse reads differently and indicates that the Apostles, after having delivered their address,

did not stop (as was the usual custom) in the synagogues to hear and answer questions. Having delivered their message they preferred that it should take effect upon the hearts and that the discussion sure to follow might thus be delayed for a time. The people present, both Jews and proselytes, exhorted the Apostles that they might hear more of these things. One version implies that they desired this further information during the week; another, that they would expect it on the following Sabbath. In the synagogue there were quite a number who were devout, and, of course, a still larger number who were merely formalistic in their worship. [R4365 : page 102] The devout ones, as usual, were interested in the Truth. They followed the missionaries, who exhorted them "to continue in the grace of God," to realize that they had already been recipients of God's grace through the Law and the prophets and that they should go on and attain to the full fruition of their hopes, through the Lord's continued guidance, indicating that our Lord's advent and work were but a further part in the grace of God, in which they had already become sharers, and that to reject this would be to reject all the favors hitherto bestowed upon them.

ENVY, EVIL-SPEAKING, CONTENTION, BLASPHEMY

The next Sabbath there was a great concourse to hear the Apostles. Whether they spoke inside the synagogue or from its steps to people gathered in a broad plaza, we are not told. However, they had not proceeded far in their discourse until there were interruptions, contradictions, anger and blasphemy from some of the prominent Jews. Envy was at the bottom of all this. *Their* preaching had never drawn such crowds, and besides, the message given by these Apostles claimed to be something better than Judaism offered, something better than the Law and its sacrifices and feasts and fasts. Behold, how the Truth is a searcher of the heart! How it draws some and repels others! What a foe to Truth is the spirit of ambition, of jealousy, of envy! How it leads the natural man to anger, malice, hatred, strife, envy! And how the interests of the New Creature are

endangered from this same quarter! How pertinent St. Paul's exhortation that all who name the name of Christ shall put off anger, malice and strife and works of the devil and be clothed with meekness, patience, love, if we would fight the good fight and gain the great prize!

The effect upon the missionaries was to embolden them. They had spoken most gently, avoiding everything to arouse prejudice and opposition; but now, when, in spite of all, the opposition arose and threatened the efficacy of the Truth, they must be bold. They must state plainly the facts. They must show the envious, evil-speakers just where they stood. The people in general, dominated by these leaders, needed also to be shown the line of Truth. Now the Apostle declared, "We have done our duty in giving you Jews the first opportunity to hear of this grace of God, but seeing that you thrust it from you and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, we turn to the Gentiles."

JUDGE YOURSELVES UNWORTHY

What a force there is in these words! God has so arranged matters during this Gospel Age that his Word of **[R4365 : page 103]** Truth and grace judges, tests, the honesty, the sincerity of those who profess to be his. It was not that the Apostle was judging their hearts and saying, You are not worthy of this message. The rejection of the message showed that the hearer was unworthy at heart. Each one who thus decided added to the count or list of those not worthy of eternal life under present conditions, under the present offer to faith and obedience. How many of them will have any further opportunity, and whether or not the further opportunity would avail them anything, is not for us to say. They are in the Lord's hands. Whatever he shall do for them will be entirely satisfactory to all who have the mind of Christ. We are sure of the

"Love Divine, all love excelling," and that it will give every member of Adam's race a full, impartial trial for life eternal, as a result of the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.

Similarly today some who hear the message reject it with anger and malice and hatred and strife. They little realize that they are passing judgment upon themselves and proving by their prejudicial course and lack of harmony with righteousness that they are not worthy of life everlasting. And alas! some who had tasted of the good Word of God and the powers of the age to come and been made partakers of the holy Spirit and been fellowshipped as disciples and fellow-heirs of the same Body – some of these, Judas-like, at times have withdrawn themselves in similar anger, hatred, malice, strife, bitterness, blasphemy, evil-speaking. Alas! we fear that their case is hopeless as respects a future trial.

We shall be glad for anything that God may have for them, but we are reminded of the words, "*It is impossible to renew them again unto repentance,*" if they fall away from the Truth, after once having seen and enjoyed it. It is notable, too, that such, as a rule, lose all fear of Second Death. Their eyes of understanding on this, as well as on other features of the Plan, grow dim. Our sorrow for them would be unspeakably deep, were it not that we realize that "The Lord will judge his people" and that we are in the day of which he has foretold us – when the sifting and shaking and purging of his people is due to take place. When we realize that "he doeth all things well," and makes no mistakes, it convinces us that we might have greatly erred in the past respecting heart condition, or that changes of character can be *speedily* effected under the bite, the poison, the sting, of pride, envy, slander, etc.

Then the missionaries quoted from the prophecies the Lord's Word, to the effect that the light which was to first shine to Israel was also to be to the Gentiles, and that the salvation which was first offered to the covenanted people was yet to extend to the uttermost parts of the earth. How consoling! How satisfying! We are reminded that but very few realize the length and breadth of this great salvation through the only name; that it is yet to extend to every creature, even though it requires the Millennial Kingdom to bring this widespread knowledge and glorious opportunity.

When the Gentiles heard this they were glad and honored the Word of the Lord. "And as many as were ordained to eternal life believed." This does not signify ordained of God to have eternal life, but literally so many of them as were of the class and character which God proposed should have eternal life – these believed. There is a good thought here which applies as a general principle, namely, under the Divine arrangement, the Truth and the believing of it, are so related that only those of a certain cast of mind can believe, under present conditions. This includes the thought that they must have a certain harmony with God and righteousness, and that they must submit their minds to the Lord, that they may be taught of him through the channels he may be pleased to use.

The result of these efforts was a widespread recognition of the Truth – of the message of God – "The Word of the Lord was spread abroad throughout all the region."

"On! Fear not, nor falter,
But give of your best;
It is all that an angel can do;
Leave the rest unto God; he is sure,
And he loves more your flags
When the powers of darkness have rent them to rags.
The law of the soul is eternal endeavor,
And bears the man onward and upward forever."

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