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THROUGH MUCH TRIBULATION ENTER THE KINGDOM

– ACTS 14:1-28. – MAY 16. –

Golden Text: – "All the gods of the nations are idols; but the Lord made the heavens." – Psa. 96:5.

NOTWITHSTANDING the success which attended the message at Antioch in Pisidia, the spirit of the Adversary was aroused in the Jews, who stirred up devout and honorable women (Greek proselytes to the Jewish religion). They worked upon their prejudices, slandering the apostles and their work and their motives. These women in turn exercised influence with the chief men of the city, until finally the missionaries were expelled. Their next stop was at Iconium, about seventy-five miles southeast. Here again they first preached in the synagogue to the Jews, and a great multitude, both of the Jews and also of the Greeks (Jewish proselytes), believed. But again the unbelieving Jews worked upon the Gentile population by calumnies. Hence the apostles remained there a "long time," probably several months, because there were many converts needing instruction and because it was an excellent field of labor every way. Finally, however, the chief Jews of the synagogue and the Gentiles whom they influenced, formed a plot for the stoning of the missionaries and alleged blasphemers. Learning of this the apostles followed our Lord's injunction of Matt. 10:23, to flee from persecution. Their next stop was at Lystra, twenty miles further to the southeast.

How human nature repeats itself! As it was God's covenanted people – yea, and the chief of the synagogue who opposed the Gospel and maltreated its servants who sought merely to do them good – so all through the age the professed servants of God have been the persecutors of their brethren! And

so it is today! The slanders, the misrepresentations, come not from the politicians and the worldly, but from the Lord's professed followers, some of them of large influence. [R4369 : page 107] It is still true that there are "perils amongst false brethren" and a Judas spirit is to be expected now, as well as then. How shall we receive these things? If they discourage us or turn us aside in fear, it would prove that we are not worthy of the Kingdom privileges and honors, which are to be granted only to those who come off, by the Lord's grace, "more than conquerors"; to those who willingly, gladly, take the spoiling of their goods, their good names, earthly reputation, etc., rather than prove disloyal to the Lord and his brethren. Nor must we render railing for railing, nor slander for slander. We must take maltreatment patiently.

NO SYNAGOGUE – BUT A MIRACLE

Lystra was the capital of what was called Wolfland. Its people were less civilized than in other places visited. Evidently there were few or no Jews there and no synagogue. The preaching to the people was in the forum.

While St. Paul was preaching he perceived amongst his auditors a man lame from birth, giving close attention and, perceiving that he had faith to cooperate with healing, he commanded him, "Stand upright on thy feet." The miracle astonished the people, who, in their amazement, began to speak to each other, no longer in the Greek language, but in the Laconian, which the missionaries did not understand, saying that these were gods in human form. The apostles evidently retired to their own dwelling apartments after the miracle and were astonished when, a little time afterward, the people came together to offer sacrifices to them, calling Barnabas Jupiter, and Paul Mercury. The people had certain traditions about the gods coming

down to earth as men and these doubtless led up to their remarkable treatment of the missionaries.

One of these tales was to the effect that Jupiter and Mercury once visited this very city of Laconia. The people took them to be vagrants and refused to entertain them, and ridiculed and maltreated them. At last two peasants received them into their hut with hospitality, giving them their best. In return the gods transformed their hut into a glorious temple, over which they were set as the chief ministers of earth, while their neighbors were overwhelmed in a flood. The statue of Jupiter stood before Lystra's gate, and it was supposed that this story was repeated annually in the hearing of the people. Thinking of Paul and Barnabas as later manifestations of these same gods, they determined that now was their opportunity to show them reverence and hospitality.

Now came a temptation to the missionaries – such temptations as in one form or another are apt to come to all who engage actively in Christian work. Would they receive the homage of the people and then, as gods, seek to instruct them respecting Christ as the true Son of God come from heaven, who had died for the world's redemption, etc., or would they stop the procedure forthwith? Such temptations are very forceful with many: "Let us do evil that good may follow." Similar temptations of the present time might be suggested. A minister might sail under false colors, under denominational name, which misrepresented his heart and which he misrepresented. He might seek thus to do God service and to advance the Truth, but would it be wise? Would it please God to have us thus do evil that good might follow? We think not. The Truth may be presented as kindly, sympathetically, harmoniously as possible, but it can never fight a good fight under a cloak of hypocrisy.

The same principle applies to others; the business man may put his light under a bushel for the sake of trade and with the promise to himself that he will use money gained in forwarding the Truth. But would such a course be acceptable to the Lord? We believe not. Some affect ignorance of the Truth or disdain for it, that they may retain social position, and persuade themselves that there are more than compensating advantages favorable to the Lord, the brethren and the Truth, in the course which they pursue. We believe that they prove themselves unworthy of a position in the "little flock" of overcomers. The principle is of broad application, and it is the principle each of the Lord's people should see, and fix clearly in his judgment, that he may guide himself accordingly.

HONESTY REWARDED WITH STONES

The missionaries ran in amongst the people, dissuading them from sacrifice and assuring them that they were ordinary men like themselves. They informed them that their very mission was to turn them from such works of ignorance and superstition and to indicate to them the true God, his true character, and his proper worship. They said to them, "We bring you good tidings, that ye should turn from these vanities unto the living God, which made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are therein." Wisdom from on high guided them to know that it would be useless to quote the Old Testament Scriptures to these people, who had no knowledge of them. They discoursed, therefore, what the people could understand and appreciate, and thus they set a grand example to all who should ever speak as messengers of the Lord. Much of the preaching is far over the heads of the hearers. **[R4369 : page 108]**

They introduced to their attention the God who made the heaven, earth, sea and all the contents of these. They explained that although this great God was interested in his creatures

always, yet hitherto he had permitted all the nations to walk in their own ways untaught, unrestrained. Nevertheless he did give them certain evidences of his constant care, in the sunshine and the rain, with the fruitage of earth and its seasons, thus providing mankind with food and occasion for gladness and appreciation of life.

Only a scrap of the discourse is given. We may suppose that the Apostle here, as elsewhere, proceeded to explain that the times of this ignorance of the past, which God had winked at or paid no attention to, were now ending; that a new phase or turn of his great Divine Plan had come. And now all men everywhere are admonished to repent, to turn from sin, to strive to come near to God in reverence and obedience, and to hope for eternal life in his provision. Doubtless he explained that the foundation for these hopes and these commands to repent were laid in the great fact that God had given his Son to be man's Redeemer, and by and by man's Restorer. No doubt he explained to them that every effort toward righteousness and Truth and godliness would have its reward, while every wilful sin would surely, at some time, have its punishment, either in the present age or in the age to come. No doubt also he showed the people that the Divine call of the present time is intended merely to call out of the world a "little flock" of saintly followers of Jesus to be his Bride in the Kingdom.

However, it was probably only a few days after this that some other Jews came to Lystra, zealous as Paul of Tarsus himself had been to oppose the message respecting the Nazarene. The benighted people, who one day were ready to do sacrifice to St. Paul as a god, shortly afterward, under the envious slanders stirred up by the Adversary, stoned him and then dragged him out of the city and left him to be devoured by beasts and birds. But evidently some disciples had been made, for as we read, "As the disciples stood around about him, he rose up, and came into the city; and the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe." Such a man with such a spirit was necessarily a force wherever he went; a force for good, as he had once been a force for evil, because now the spirit which

energized him was a consecrated one, a holy one. There is a lesson and example here for all of us which we must not miss. He wisely determined that it would be unwise to do more public work at Lystra, so long as the public mind was in such a ferment. To have done so would have been merely to bring needless persecution upon the disciples who, young in the faith, might not so well have been able to stand it.

DERBE, THEN HOMEWARD BOUND

Evidently some Divine power, some supernatural strength, was accorded the Apostle, else he never could have so quickly recovered after the stoning. The explanation is, first, St. Paul's own indomitable will, which mastered his body and made it his servant; and secondly, Divine cooperation assisting him so to do. And will it not be considerably so with us? Will not faith and courage and zeal and determination effect much as to our ability to stand and withstand the trials and difficulties of life? And will not the Lord's grace be sufficient for us? And whether he permit us to be smitten down with the literal stones or the symbolic arrows, the bitter words, is he not able to succor us, that we be not overwhelmed?

Apparently the preaching at Derbe resulted in making many disciples. Then the apostles turned their faces homeward – toward Antioch, the Ecclesia which sent them forth as its representatives. Seeking not merely return, but braving return by the same way as they went, they had the opportunity of meeting with the disciples at the various places and strengthening them and encouraging them in the good way, the "narrow way." Nor was there any deception in their preaching. They did not tell believers that shortly they would find themselves prospering in their business interests by becoming disciples of the Crucified One. They did not tell them that they would find Christianity the passage way into the social circles of the wealthy and refined. On the contrary, their message was in harmony with our Lord's words, "In the world ye shall have tribulation. These things have I spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace." (John 16:33.) Again, "Marvel not, my brethren,

if the world hate you;" (I John 3:13.) "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you, falsely, for my sake." – Matt. 5:11.

So we read that, as they journeyed, they "confirmed the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith and explaining to them that through *much tribulation* we must **[R4370 : page 108]** enter into the Kingdom of God" – that this is the Divine arrangement for the perfecting of our characters and for our testing as respects our fitness for joint-heirship with our Lord. Let us not forget, dear friends, that the present evil world (age) has not yet closed; that Satan is still its Prince, and that tribulation is still the cost of a place in the Throne! Expecting this, persecution will not disappoint us when we receive it. As with our Lord, we may find that "A man's foes shall be they of his own household" – his own people, his own nation.

"Be strong!

We are not here to play, to dream, to drift;
We have hard work to do and loads to life;
Shun not the struggle – face it; 'tis God's gift.

"Be strong!

It matters not how deep entrenched the wrong;
How hard the battle goes, the day how long;
Faint not – fight on! Tomorrow comes the song."

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