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THE WRATH OF MAN OVERRULED

– ACTS 22:30; 23:25. – OCTOBER 10. –

Golden Text: – "I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge, and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust." – Psa. 91:2.

THE day after the riot and St. Paul's rescue by the soldiers the Roman Commandant, Lysias, perplexed, called together the Jewish Sanhedrin, that they might pass upon Paul's case; for by this time he had recognized that the point of dispute was a religious one, and that his only duty was to preserve peace. Thus Paul was afforded another opportunity to witness the Gospel to the Jews – to their most learned body, to their most influential Court of Seventy. Perhaps the Apostle began to realize by this time [R4486 : page 296] that his trying experiences were furnishing him with superior opportunities as a herald of the Gospel. Looking back with the eye of faith we can realize that this is always so; that the Lord is, as from the first, supervising his own work. But only in proportion as we know what the Lord's work is, can we have and use the eye of faith. We must see that the Divine program is not to attempt the conversion of the world at the present time, but to leave that for the future, to be accomplished by Christ's Millennial Kingdom. We must see that his work during the present age is merely that of selecting or electing the Church, to be his Bride-Consort in his Kingdom – his associate in the great work which will then be accomplished for the world in general.

As St. Paul realized the opportunity granted him of addressing the leaders of his nation, he sought to make wise use of it. Hence the earnestness of his countenance. "Looking steadfastly" at his audience, he began by reminding them [R4486 : page 297] of his faithfulness as a Jew. He had been ever a model citizen, never lawless. He addressed the council as "Brethren," thus putting himself on an equality with them, both in respect to religious zeal

and general learning. Indeed, it is quite generally supposed that at the time of the stoning of Stephen, Paul, then Saul of Tarsus, was a member of the Sanhedrin.

"THOU SHALT NOT SPEAK EVIL"

The address which St. Paul had planned to deliver was interrupted by the High Priest's saying, "Smite him on the mouth!" This was a special mark of indignity and a protest against the words uttered. Our Lord declares, "The darkness hateth the light." It is not unfair to assume that the High Priest felt his own course in life specially condemned by St. Paul's words. Josephus charges Ananias with having been a hypocritical grafter of the baser sort, but so crafty that the public in general esteemed him. Suddenly checked in his speech the Apostle shouted, "God shall smite thee, thou whited wall!" The prophecy came true. Within two years Ananias was deposed, within six years he met a horrible death, his own son being associated with his assassins, who drew him from his hiding place in a sewer and slew him.

The term "*whited wall*" was applied to ordinary graves which were covered with a stone slab bearing the inscription. These were whitewashed frequently, so as to be easily discernible, lest any traveler should tread upon them, and, according to Jewish ritual, be defiled. The pure, glistening white of the stone was beautiful, but beneath was corruption. The strength of the symbol as representing hypocrisy is manifest. Some who heard the Apostle replied, "Answerest thou God's High Priest so?" St. Paul rejoined, "I wist not, brethren, that he was the High Priest; for it is written, Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people." It will be remembered that the Apostle never fully recovered his eyesight after being struck blind on the way to Damascus. Imperfect vision as a "thorn in the flesh" the Lord refused to relieve him of, but assured him that in compensation he should have the more of Divine grace, which answer to his prayer the Apostle gladly

accepted. It is possible, therefore, that he did not discern the High Priest, or that he did not know that the indignity was suggested by him. It is claimed by some that Ananias had usurped his office and hence the Apostle's words may have meant that he did not recognize that the true High Priest was present. The latter view is implied by the fact that St. Paul did not apologize for his words, but merely showed that he fully recognized the Divine Law that rulers should not be slandered.

This is a good rule for every one today. The tendency to speak evil of dignitaries, to belittle them, to caricature them, is a prevalent sin, which is doing much more to undermine good government than the funmakers seem aware. Undoubtedly there are times and ways for protesting against things and methods with which we do not fully agree. But the people of God should pre-eminently stand for law and order, with as much justice as may be obtainable, waiting for absolute justice until the King of kings shall take his Millennial Throne. His command to us meantime is that we "be subject to the powers that be" and "follow peace with all men, so far as lies in us" – so far as is possible.

Incidentally we remark that some are even disposed to speak jestingly of the Lord and the Scriptures. This is a dangerous practice. "The *reverence* of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;" and it must continue in us and increase as the years go by, if we would make our calling and election sure to the glorious things which God has in reservation for them that love him and reverence him.

ST. PAUL AS A GENERAL

The smiting of the prisoner, and his retort, interrupted at its beginning the hoped-for presentation of the Gospel. The Apostle perceived that the prejudice against him was such that no speech of his could affect his hearers. They were dominated by the high priest, whose lack of justice had found so early a manifestation.

Like a general, finding his front attack useless, he wheeled his forces and, by a flank movement, captured the sympathies of fully one-half of his auditors; and at the same time he secured an opportunity for showing that the doctrine he preached was the logical outcome of the faith of all of the large sect called Pharisees. He did this by shouting out, "I am a Pharisee; the son of a Pharisee; and I am being persecuted because of my belief in the doctrine of the resurrection." This was all strictly true. The word Pharisee signifies a person professing entire sanctification to God. And St. Paul had never ceased from this attitude. His experiences on the way to Damascus had changed his course of conduct, but had not changed his attitude of heart, which, from the first, was loyal to God "in all good conscience."

The Apostle well knew that the Sanhedrin was about equally divided between the ultra-orthodox, holiness-professing Pharisees and the agnostic and higher-critical Sadducees, who numbered amongst them many of the most prominent Jews, including priests. The effect of his shout was instantaneous. The Pharisees took his part as one who believed in some respects as they did, although they could not endorse all of his teachings. As between the infidel Sadducees and an out-of-the-way Pharisee they promptly espoused the cause of the latter. A tumult ensued, some seeking to take his life and others to protect it. Again Caesar's soldiers needed to intervene between warring factions of the people of God. How sad a scene! How pitiable that those who possess much advantage every way as Jews under Divine instruction should so sadly neglect the lessons of the Divine Law in respect to justice and each other's rights, not to mention the instruction, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself!" How pitiable it is that the same is sometimes true amongst Christians possessed of still higher appreciation of the Divine standards and under covenant vows to lay down their lives for the brethren, and indeed exhorted that they cannot win the prize they seek unless they reach the point of loving their enemies!

True, fisticuffs are not popular in our day amongst civilized people, but cannot even greater cruelty be accomplished by the tongue than by the hand? And is it not true that many, even amongst those who have named the name of Christ and taken upon them consecration vows to do his will, bite and devour one another under the influence of the Adversary's spirit – "anger, malice, hatred, envy, strife." As we see these things shall we not learn a valuable lesson, which will enable us the better to glorify our Father in heaven?

Back at the castle in safety the Apostle was doubtless wondering in what manner the Lord had been glorified by his latest experience. Often it is thus with ourselves. But where we cannot trace the Lord's providences and see the outcome we have all the better opportunity for experiencing the faith which can firmly trust him, come what may. The castle Commandant was evidently learning that his prisoner was no common character, one who was calm and alert, dignified and humble and self-possessed, while his opponents were the reverse of all these, thus evidencing to the unprejudiced mind that the Apostle was probably in the right of the controversy. This change in his attitude towards St. Paul was manifested by his kindly treatment of the latter's nephew, who had heard that forty professed religionists, forgetful of the Divine Law, "Love thy neighbor as thyself," had bound themselves to each other by an oath that they would neither eat nor drink until they had killed St. Paul, a man who had done them no harm, but who, on the contrary, had merely endeavored as wisely as possible to do them good. At the instance of his mother, St. Paul's sister, the lad had gained access to the castle and explained the plot to his uncle, who sent him to Lysias, the Commandant. The latter took the boy by the hand to a private place, heard his story and dismissed him, telling him to keep the matter quiet. He perceived that he was in conflict with at least one-half of the influential of Jewry, and that his wisest course would be to put his prisoner under the protection of the governor, Felix, at Caesarea. Accordingly that very night at

9 o'clock two hundred infantry, two hundred spearmen and seventy cavalry took the Apostle [R4486 : page 298] to new quarters, where as an ambassador in bonds he would have fresh opportunity for representing his great Master.

Lessons for us are God's providential care, and how this operates towards his faithful ones, such as the Apostle and all who have "made a covenant with him by sacrifice." The incident shows how God prefers to use natural means rather than supernatural agencies, and how all should be on the alert to serve the Lord's cause at any moment and every moment. God's purposes will be accomplished, but happy is the man or woman or boy or girl accounted worthy of the privilege of any service to the Lord or to the least of his disciples. Let us, then, be continually on the lookout, in an inquiring attitude of mind, desirous of knowing the mind of [R4487 : page 298] the Lord in every matter. As for the Apostle, he doubtless learned a lesson which we all may profitably consider; namely, that while having full confidence in the Divine will, it is ours to reasonably and properly protect our own lives and interests, as well as those of others.

The Golden Text is very impressive in connection with this lesson. Whether they and others recognize the fact or not, those who have the Lord for their refuge and fortress have a superhuman care and protection.

