

THE CRIPPLE AT LYSTRA

– *MAY 21. – ACTS 14:8-20. –*

HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF – ST. PAUL AND BARNABAS PERSECUTED – SLANDERED AND MALTREATED BY PROFESSEDLY RELIGIOUS LEADERS – A NOTABLE MIRACLE – HONESTY REWARDED WITH STONES – HOMEWARD BOUND – VISITING THE CITIES WHERE THEY HAD BEEN PERSECUTED – TRIBULATION NECESSARY FOR PERFECTING OF THE SAINTS.

"He giveth power to the faint; and to him that hath no might He increaseth strength." – Isaiah 40:29.

LEAVING Antioch of Pisidia, St. Paul and Barnabas went to Iconium, about one hundred miles distant. There also they preached the Word faithfully; and there also opposition was aroused and persecution threatened. The record is that "when there was an assault made, both of the Gentiles and also of the Jews, with their rulers, to use them despitefully and to stone them, they were aware of it, and fled unto Lystra." They did not permit fear to hinder them from preaching the Gospel with courage, neither did they fear threats; but when the persecution took a positive form, they fled. In so doing, they were following the Lord's instructions. He did not say, "Be fearful of persecution, withhold your Message and put your light under a bushel"; but He said the very reverse. Nor did He say, "Be fearful, and flee when there is no danger." On the contrary He said, "When they persecute you in one city, flee ye to another."

Arriving at Lystra, they began afresh to preach the Gospel, as courageously as though there had been no previous opposition. Amongst the auditors was a cripple, presumably a Jew or a proselyte, who manifested much interest in the Apostle's words. Perceiving that the man had faith, St. Paul stopped in his sermon and

called out to him, "Stand upright on thy feet!" This was a thing that the man had never before done; but he had the necessary faith and obeyed the Apostle's command. Thus a miracle resulted, evidently to the astonishment of the entire congregation. The effect upon the people was electrical; and they shouted in their own dialect, "The gods have come down to visit us!"

The city of Lystra figured as the scene of a mythological event. The tradition was that Jupiter and Mercury, two of the gods of mythology, had once come to Lystra in the form of men, and had been refused lodgings everywhere until they came to the lowly hut of a poor man, who entertained them to the best of his ability. The gods rewarded him by turning his hut into a gorgeous temple, and punished the remainder of the citizens with a flood. This tradition was very old, and was perpetuated by a statue of Jupiter at the city's gate as its protecting god.

It is easy to discern how a comparatively ignorant and superstitious people might jump to the conclusion that the visit of St. Paul and Barnabas was a repetition of this visit of Jupiter and Mercury, handed down to them through tradition. St. Paul they called Mercury, because in their tradition Mercury was the orator, the speaker; and Barnabas they called Jupiter. Forthwith the priest of Jupiter prepared to offer a sacrifice of oxen before the statue of Jupiter at their city gate, in honor of the supposed gods present with them as men, in the persons of Barnabas and St. Paul.

NOBILITY OF THE MISSIONARIES

The missionaries were probably quietly conversing with some of the more interested ones, when they heard of the commotion in the city and of the sacrifice about to be offered. Not for a moment did they think of taking advantage of the superstition of the people to make of themselves some great ones. Nor did they attempt to turn the event to a service of the Truth by claiming that God was Jupiter,

that our Lord Jesus was Mercury, and that they themselves represented the Father and the Son.

On the contrary, most earnestly and simply did they entreat the people to desist, explaining that they were nothing but imperfect men like the populace themselves – "men of like passions" – that their mission was the very reverse of what the Lystrians supposed, and that Jupiter and Mercury were only products of imagination, ignorance and superstition. The two ran in amongst the excited populace while the latter were preparing for the sacrifice; and even then with difficulty, amidst protests of their own nothingness, did they restrain the people from sacrificing in their honor. Noble men they were; and their faithfulness to the Lord and to the Truth attested the wisdom of sending them on this missionary tour.

From this incident we may draw a lesson, helpful to all of the Lord's people who are to any extent His ambassadors, representatives, teachers of the Truth. The Truth itself, especially in the light of our day, is so wonderful, so brilliant, that it naturally reflects some of its brilliancy upon those who represent it, causing men to marvel and to say, as of old, "Whence hath this man this wisdom?" (Matthew 13:54.) In some instances it might lead to an undue deference, to an ascription of undue honor, and to a subserviency which would not be proper for the Lord's ambassadors to receive, and which they should as promptly and as thoroughly repudiate as did St. Paul and Barnabas refuse the honors which the Lystrian populace were about to bestow upon them.

From the worldly viewpoint, however, this would be an unwise course. Those who will accept flattery, adulation [**R5891 : page 135**] and honor more than is due are likely to be prospered in this course to some extent by the Adversary, and are apt to find that the worldly spirit likes to worship worldly heroes. The only wise course for the Lord's servants, therefore, is that followed by these missionaries of our lesson – to repudiate the entire matter, to confess

that they are men of like passions with others, and to hold up the Word of God, hiding themselves behind it and ignoring self altogether.

Not alone will this course be profitable as respects the finding and the development of the true children of God, whom He is now gathering out of the world, but it will be profitable also for the Lord's ambassadors! for in this way they will grow in the Lord Jesus' grace and character-likeness, of which humility was a prominent trait. Thus they will best abide in the love of God.

TRUE SOLDIERS OF THE CROSS

In pointing out to the Lystrians the fact that their ideas were vanities, the Apostle well knew that this could not bring him the favor of his hearers; for it is not human nature to appreciate being told of our follies. To work his way into their good graces he would have needed to tell them a lie – that they were very wise, that their course was a very proper one, etc. Therefore in his endeavor to be candid and to serve the Truth, he risked their disappointment and displeasure. Undoubtedly, as God's mouthpiece, he shunned not to declare the whole Message of God, whatever its results might be.

Here are good lessons for all of the Lord's people. It requires comparatively little courage to be a soldier of the Cross and faithful to the Truth amongst those of like precious faith and obedience. But it requires great courage to resist improper honor of men when we know in advance that this resistance will not only deprive us of their honor and friendship, but make us ignoble in their sight, and turn them into enemies. True soldiers of the Cross still have the same trial; and it requires hardness – a hardening campaign of experience in the Lord's service – to endure these things and come off joyful in them.

The babes in Christ, the weak, the untried, those who have not passed through trials and experiences, and developed character, are

not hardened, and could not stand such experiences. Hence it is that the Apostle advises the Church that even proper exaltation to a position of service in the Church should not be accorded to a novice, lest he should be puffed up, and thus be injured himself, as well as be injurious to others. (1 Timothy 3:6.) It requires time and seasoning either to rightly accept and appreciate honors and dignities along proper lines, or to decline those along improper lines.

St. Paul pointed out to his hearers that in times past God had been permitting all nations to walk in their own ways, and had interfered particularly in the affairs of only the one nation – Israel. All other nations had been permitted to take their own course, except in so far as they might cross some feature of the Divine Plan. Thus the Prophet had expressed the matter to Israel: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth." (Amos 3:2.) The Apostle's reference to "times past" (Verse 16) implies the change of dispensation which had just occurred in connection with the death of our Lord Jesus, the cutting off of Israel from any special favor, and the throwing open of the Gospel Call to all who have ears to hear – "to the Jew first and also to the Greek."

Now God was sending a Message of instruction to all nations, in order that they should turn from such vanities and should recognize the only living and true God and His Son, the world's exalted Redeemer whom the Father had ordained to become its Ruler in due time, to put down sin and death and to bless with His Reign of Righteousness all the families of the earth. The Apostle also pointed out that although God had left the nations without the instructions of the Law Covenant and the prophecies, He had given them some indications of His care, in making provision for their necessities – causing the sun to shine and the rain to fall upon the just and the unjust, upon the evil and the good.

STONED FOR SPEAKING THE TRUTH

The sudden change of public sentiment which resulted from the Apostle's plain statements of the Truth led the Lystrians to look at the missionaries with very different eyes, now that, according to their own declarations, the two were only common men like themselves. We may even suppose that they felt rather humiliated that their superstition had aroused them to do reverence to men who repudiated it and acknowledged their unworthiness of it.

While the populace was in this spirit, certain Jews came thither from Antioch and Iconium, explaining to the Lystrians that the missionaries were imposters, working upon the credulity of the people, "turning the world upside down," raising questions about theology, and disturbing the minds of the people. The populace was ready for just such leading in the reverse direction, and disposed to feel that somehow, if these two men were not really Jupiter and Mercury, they were pretenders and falsifiers, who had deceived the people and who should be put to death. As a result, St. Paul was stoned, dragged outside the city, and left for dead.

How erratic is the fallen human mind, in its condition of superstition and ignorance! How easily the priest of Jupiter could lead the ignorant to make gods of men, and how readily he could lead them in an opposite direction, equally wrong! But although the greatest of all the Apostles, and one of the most remarkable orators and logicians which the world has ever known, was in their midst, how few, comparatively, could he influence in the right direction – for the Truth and righteousness, in obedience to God!

In many respects the world is the same today as it was then, although civilization and general intelligence have done much to lift it out of that abject benightedness which leads to idol worship, although Mohammedanism, Confucianism, Churchianity and a certain kind of Christianity have put a veneer of respectability, reason and common sense upon it. Nevertheless, under this veneer

the masses are still in a very unsatisfactory condition. They are still disposed to be humbugged, disposed to appreciate those who are boastful and pretend to be great, disposed to worship that which demands worship rather than that which is worthy of it, disposed to misunderstand God and His Plan and to consider these from a devilish standpoint rather than to appreciate the lengths, breadths, heights and depths of the Love of God.

A REMARKABLE EXPERIENCE

But God was not through with the Apostle Paul. He was not stoned because of God's indifference, nor because of the Almighty's lack of power to protect His servant. On the contrary, it is quite probable that the Lord was teaching the Apostle some great lesson, valuable both to himself and to the Church to whom he ministers even today in the matter of these experiences. Quite probably the Apostle, while being stoned, remembered afresh the death of St. Stephen, to which he had consented. Quite probably, too, the result was a fresh realization of his own unworthiness to be so prominent a representative of the Lord and of His Truth.

Had the incident of the sacrificing not been thus **[R5891 : page 136]** followed by some trying experience, who knows but that the Apostle might have felt a little of self-gratulation, such as would be natural to any man who had renounced voluntarily honors thrust upon him. He might have been disposed to glory in his strength of character; but his experiences led him in an opposite direction, as he himself subsequently wrote. (Romans 5:3-5.) All of the Lord's faithful ones may learn good lessons here – learn to trust in the Lord's providences in all of their affairs, not only in those which seem favorable, but also in those which are apparently working disadvantage and disaster. Concerning St. Paul the Lord had said, "I will show him how great things he must suffer for My name's sake." (Acts 9:15,16.) From this lesson we may infer that when the Lord's servants are permitted to suffer for His name's sake – not for wrong-

doing, not for anger, malice, hatred, strife, evil speaking, etc., but for His sake – it is an attestation of the Lord's favor, in the acceptance of their sacrifice, as in the type Abel's sacrifice was accepted with fire.

As the disciples stood about the prostrate form of St. Paul, supposing that he was dead, the Apostle arose and returned to the city.

HOMEWARD BOUND

Their entire public preaching at Lystra was at an end; and the next day the missionaries went to Derbe, a distance of thirty-five miles. This implies that the Lord wrought a wonderful miracle in St. Paul, in that he was able to continue his journey on the very next day after having received so severe treatment as a stoning unto apparent death. The Lord sometimes works marvelously for His people, as in this instance. At other times He leaves them to the general vicissitudes of life as other men.

No particulars are given regarding the ministry of the Truth at Derbe. We may presume that it was without special incident. Having gone thus far, the missionaries determined to retrace their steps, instead of proceeding and returning homeward by the nearer route – via Tarsus, St. Paul's home city. Apparently their motive in so doing was their realization that the little groups of believers at Lystra, Iconium and Antioch in Pisidia would by this time need some encouragement and establishment in the Truth; that because of the fierce opposition in these places there would probably be more or less contention and trouble, and questions would arise which the new converts would not be competent to answer.

This was pastoral work; and in the homeward journey there is no intimation that the missionaries attempted further mission work. They had no expectation whatever of converting all the people in these cities. They understood the Plan of God too well to have any

such expectations as modern mission workers seem to have. They knew very well that the mission of the Gospel was not to convert the world, but to select out of the world a special people for His name. (Acts 15:14.) They had witnessed the Truth to these people, and had confidence that the Lord was with them and that only such as had the hearing ear would be reached, either by the missionaries or by those who had already been enlightened.

Accordingly the two contented themselves with the work of upbuilding the "little flock," encouraging them to make their calling and election sure to a place in the Millennial Kingdom which, in God's due time, the Age to come, shall be used of the Lord in the world's blessing, the world's conversion, the world's uplift.

Doubtless the brethren in these various places were surprised that if the Gospel were of God, its servants, its ministers, should be so at the mercy of the forces of evil. This may have tended to shake their confidence considerably; for the natural expectation would be that God would protect His servants. St. Paul explained this to the believers, declaring that tribulations are necessary for the perfecting of the saints, for the trial of faith, for the testing and the preparing of those who would be joint-heirs with Christ in the Kingdom; and that after the permission of evil shall thus have served its purpose of keeping the "little flock" separate from the world and of polishing and refining them for the Kingdom, then the time will come when Satan shall be bound, and when the righteous shall no more be persecuted, but shall reign as joint-heirs with their Lord and Head in His Kingdom.

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