

ST. PAUL AT CORINTH

– *JULY 23. – ACTS 18:1-11. –*

LESSONS FROM ST. PAUL'S EXPERIENCES – CORINTH A BETTER FIELD FOR THE GOSPEL THAN WAS ATHENS – AS USUAL, THE MESSAGE WAS OPPOSED AND BLASPHEMED BY THOSE WHO PREFERRED "THE TRADITIONS OF THE ELDERS" – ARRIVAL OF SILAS AND TIMOTHY – ST. PAUL ENCOURAGED AND COMFORTED.

"Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace." – Verse 9.

ATHENS did not prove to be a very successful field for the Apostle Paul's labors. He quickly perceived that, although its citizens were chiefly engaged in hearing new things and in philosophizing on every subject, nevertheless the tendency of science and philosophy, falsely so-called, occupied their attention and so satisfied their minds that they were not as ready for the Truth as were some others less highly educated and less philosophical. The Apostle's experience in this respect coincides with that of all who in sincerity preach the Gospel of Christ stripped of all human invention and philosophy, and also illustrates his declaration that God does not choose many wise or great or learned, according to this world's standard, but chiefly the poor of this world – poor socially, philosophically and financially – to be the heirs of the Kingdom; for this class is more inclined to receive the faith and to become rich therein.

Leaving Athens, St. Paul journeyed about forty miles to Corinth, a prominent commercial city of Greece, noted for its manufactures, architecture, paintings, bronzes, etc. It was much less moral than was Athens, much less refined, but nevertheless a better field for the Gospel. Where religious forms and ceremonies become popular, they are apt to have correspondingly the less weight and force. But where sin, immorality and irreligion are popular, those minds which have a religious trend are apt to be more free, more open for the Truth.

Unsatisfied by formalism, this class more keenly recognize righteousness because of its sharp contrast with the sin abounding.

Similarly today, the Truth is likely to receive a cooler reception amongst those whose religious sensibilities are to some extent satisfied by forms and ceremonies. The heart most ready for the Truth is the one which is not satiated and stupefied with religious formalism, but which realizes to some extent the exceeding sinfulness of sin and longs for the righteousness which is of God. Like the Apostle, we are to discern the most fruitful fields and to spend our energy upon them, leaving the other fields for a more convenient season, whether it shall come during the present Age or during the Millennium.

LESSONS FROM ST. PAUL'S EXPERIENCES

Apparently the Apostle was considerably cast down at this time. His first letter to the Corinthian Church, written later on, clearly implies his discouragement and possible sickness. He wrote, "I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling." His rough experiences at Philippi, his small success at Athens, the slenderness of his purse and his need of fellowship – all contributed to make him downcast; and he informs us that the Lord encouraged him with a vision.

Soon after his arrival at Corinth St. Paul found Aquila and Priscilla his wife. They were tent-makers; and this being the Apostle's trade, he abode with them and labored. It was customary at that time that the sons of all the upper class of people should learn a trade, however well educated otherwise. St. Paul's trade stood him now in good place, enabling him to provide for his necessities while preaching the Gospel of Christ. From his own explanation of the matter we learn that even after a considerable number of believers had been gathered at Corinth as a Church, the Apostle maintained himself by his trade. His reason for so doing was not that it would have been a sin for him to receive money and support from the

believers there, but that he hoped that the Gospel would commend itself the more to many if its chief expounder were seen to be laboring not for the meat which perisheth, nor for wealth, but preaching the Gospel without charge – laying down his life for the brethren.

Of this period the Apostle wrote to the Thessalonians, "Therefore, brethren, we were comforted over you, in all our affliction and distress, by your faith." (1 Thessalonians 3:7.) Later, he wrote of his experience to the Corinthians, saying, "Even unto this present hour we both hunger and thirst, and are naked, and are buffeted, and have no certain dwelling place, and labor, working with our own hands; being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, **page 202** we suffer it; being defamed, we entreat; we are made as the filth of the world, and are the offscouring of all things unto this day." – 1 Corinthians 4:11-13.

Many of us can find a lesson in St. Paul's experiences. If God permitted him to be in want, to be traduced, slandered, oppressed – if he needed such experiences in order to bring out the best that was in him and to make his epistles the more useful to the Church – possibly the Lord's dealings with us at times may be with the same end in view – our preparation for further usefulness in His service.

ST. PAUL "PRESSED IN SPIRIT"

Notwithstanding all of his discouragements and the fact that his tent-making labors barely sufficed to provide for him things decent and honorable, the Apostle never forgot that his chief mission in life was the preaching of the Gospel. If the earning of his daily bread hindered his preaching during the week he at least took his Sabbath days for the more important work whenever he could reach a congregation of the Jews. We read that he reasoned with them in the synagogue every Sabbath day. But apparently he was under a measure of constraint and did not speak with his accustomed boldness and vigor, perhaps because of the lack of moral support, which is an important factor with all and an essential with many.

Finally Silas and Timothy arrived, bringing with them not only good fellowship and encouraging news from Berea, Thessalonica and Philippi, but also a gift, as the Apostle himself tells us – quite probably from Lydia, the seller of purple dyes, supposed to have been comfortably circumstanced. The effect of these encouragements is intimated. St. Paul "was pressed in spirit" – he felt a fresh vigor urging him to present his Message more zealously and to bring matters to a focus at the synagogue.

After testifying with great boldness and finding that his Message was repelled by the majority of the synagogue, the Apostle forced the crisis himself by shaking his garment as if he would not take from them even the dust, saying to those who had opposed and blasphemed, "Your blood be upon your own heads. I am clean. From henceforth I will go unto the Gentiles."

There are times when positiveness is absolutely necessary, even though it cause a division amongst those who profess to serve the same God. There are times when much more good can be thus obtained than by a continuance under disadvantageous conditions. Oil and water will not mix; and time spent in trying to blend them is altogether wasted. When positive bitterness and hatred are manifested, as in the case under consideration, it is better to withdraw.

But neither the Apostle nor we would recognize as proper or at all allowable that the Lord's people should quarrel and take offense one with the other over trifles unworthy of consideration. The shaking off of the dust not only was what our Lord had suggested (Matthew 10:14), but was a custom of the time – a warning, as it were, that the Apostle felt that he had discharged his entire duty and now left the responsibility upon their own shoulders.

The effect was good in two ways: **(1)** It helped Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, to take a decided stand; whereas otherwise he might have been stunted in his spiritual development. Crispus

decided for the Lord Jesus, and took his stand with the Apostle and a few others (2) The fact that the Jews had repudiated the Apostle and his Message would draw the attention of the Gentiles more particularly to his Gospel. Some of these Gentiles already believed. The new meetings were held in the home of Justus, a reverent man who resided near the synagogue. Thus as the Jews attended the synagogue worship they would be continually reminded of St. Paul's Message in the synagogue, which would be an incentive for them to enter the house of Justus and hear more respecting the fulfilment of the prophecies in Jesus.

ST. PAUL ENCOURAGED

The result was that a considerable number of the Corinthians believed and were baptized, thus symbolizing their consecration to do the will of the Lord. Thus we see that opposition is not necessarily an injurious thing to the Lord's Cause. On the contrary, it is safe to say that a most dangerous condition is stagnation.

Evidently the Lord saw that His servant Paul needed some special encouragement at this time. Hence another vision was granted, in which the Apostle was told, "Be not afraid, but speak and hold not thy peace; for I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to harm thee, for I have much people in this city."

What an insight this incident gives us as to the Divine supervision of the Gospel Message and its servants! How these words remind us of the promise that the Lord will not suffer us to be tempted above what we are able to bear, but will with every temptation provide also a way of escape! (1 Corinthians 10:13.) That vision and its message, we may be sure, were not for the Apostle merely, but for all the Lord's people from that time until now. The same God is rich unto all that call upon Him, and able both to shield and to deliver all of His servants. Therefore He will permit only such experiences as His infinite Wisdom sees will be advantageous to His

Cause and will work out for His servants a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.

The Lord's statement that He had much people in Corinth teaches us a lesson also. It shows that the Lord knows the hearts of all, and that He has a care not only for His saints, but also for those who have not yet heard His message, but whose hearts are in a favorable attitude of honesty, sincerity. A further lesson comes to us in this connection: We are to remember that the Lord is His Own Superintendent of Missions, and that He is able to guide His consecrated servants, not only as to direction and place of service, but also as respects the time they shall remain to accomplish His will and as respects the character of the experiences necessary for them in order best to accomplish His purposes.

The more firmly our faith can grasp this situation, the more we can rely upon the Lord and use His wisdom instead of our own, the more successful shall we be as His servants, and the more happy and contented; for we shall realize that all things are working together for good to all who are His, to all submitted to His guiding care.

EIGHTEEN MONTHS OF TEACHING

Corinth was nicknamed the Vanity Fair of the World; for it was a center of frivolity, pleasure-seeking, etc. It is said to have been one of the most licentious and profligate cities of its day. At first the thought may seem very strange to us that this vilest of the great cities should yield larger spiritual results than did any other, so much so that the Lord would especially declare that He had "much people" there, and would providentially detain His ambassador there for a year and a half, while in other places he had been permitted to remain only a few days or weeks.

The philosophy of the matter seems to be this: Outward morality frequently leads to a pharisaical spirit of self-righteousness, which is a most pernicious and deadly foe to true righteousness. On the other

hand, where sin stands out glaringly it has a repulsive effect upon the pure in heart, upon all who love righteousness; and this repulsion **page 203** from the evil seems to prepare such hearts the better for a genuine consecration to the Lord and to enable them to receive His Message. This theory holds good, at least in the missionary work at Corinth, as in contrast with that of places much more respectable in reputation.

The lesson for us in this connection is that we should ever be on guard in our own hearts against this self-righteous spirit of outward observance, which lacks true holiness, true sanctification. It is along this line that our Lord found fault with one of the seven Churches, saying, "Because thou art lukewarm, I will spew thee out of My mouth. Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased in goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked." (Revelation 3:16,17.) This is our Lord's charge against the present state of the nominal church – so rich in earthly advantages, so self-satisfied. Let us be on guard lest in any manner or to any degree such a lukewarmness should come over us and we should lose the Divine favor.

