

A PLOT THAT FAILED

– *OCTOBER 1. – ACTS 23:14-24. –*

THE WRATH OF MAN OVERRULED – ST. PAUL BEFORE THE SANHEDRIN – THE HIGH PRIEST REBUKED – ST. PAUL AS A GENERAL – THE SANHEDRIN DIVIDED IN OPINION – DISSENSION AMONGST THE MEMBERS – THE APOSTLE TAKEN BACK TO THE CASTLE – ENCOURAGED BY A VISION – THE CONSPIRACY AGAINST HIM – INFORMATION CONCERNING THE PLOT GIVEN TO COLONEL LYSIAS – ST. PAUL SENT TO CAESAREA FOR SAFE-KEEPING.

"They shall fight against thee; but they shall not prevail against thee; for I am with thee, saith Jehovah, to deliver thee." – Jeremiah 1:19.

IN THE morning after the riot and St. Paul's rescue by the Roman soldiers, Colonel Lysias in perplexity called together the Jewish Sanhedrin, in order that they might pass upon the Apostle's case; for by this time he had recognized that the point of dispute was a religious one, and that his duty was merely to preserve the peace. Thus St. Paul was afforded another opportunity to witness the Gospel to the Jews – to their most learned body of men, their most influential Court of Seventy. Perhaps by this time the Apostle began to realize 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 perceive that this is always so; that, as from the very first, the Lord is supervising His own work. But only in proportion as we know what constitutes the Lord's work 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 work for the future, to be accomplished by Christ's Millennial Kingdom. We must see that during the present Age His work 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 whole world.

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 of his faithfulness as a Jew. He had ever been a model citizen, never lawless. He addressed the Council as "Brethren," thus putting himself on an equality with them, in respect to both religious zeal and general learning. Indeed, it is quite generally supposed that at the time of the stoning of St. Stephen Saul of Tarsus – afterwards St. Paul – was a member of the Sanhedrin.

"SPEAK EVIL OF NO MAN"

The address which St. Paul had planned to deliver was interrupted by the high priest, who commanded those who stood by the Apostle to smite him on the mouth. This was a special mark of indignity and a protest against the words uttered. It is not unfair to assume that the high priest felt his own course in life especially condemned by St. Paul's words; for, as the Master declared, "the darkness hateth the light." 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 Ananias 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 frequently whitewashed, so as to be easily discernible, lest any traveler should tread upon them and, according to Jewish ritual, be defiled. (Numbers 19:11-16.) The pure, glistening white stone was beautiful; but beneath it was corruption. The strength of the symbol as representing hypocrisy is manifest. **[R5952 : page 267]**

Some of the bystanders who heard the Apostle asked, "Revilest thou God's high priest?" 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." (Exodus 22:28.) It will be remembered that the Apostle never fully recovered his eyesight after having been struck blind on the way to Damascus. (Acts 9:8, 9.) Of his imperfect vision, his "thorn in the flesh" (2 Corinthians 12:7-10), the Lord refused to relieve him, but assured him that in compensation he should have the more of Divine grace. This answer to his prayer the Apostle gladly accepted. It is possible, therefore, that he did not discern the high priest, or else did not know that the indignity was suggested by Ananias.

A COMMON, BUT DANGEROUS PRACTICE

It is claimed by some that Ananias had usurped his office, and that 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 fun-makers seem to realize. 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 preeminently stand for

law and order, with as much justice as may be attainable, 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 possible. – Romans 13:1; Hebrews 12:14.

Incidentally we remark that some are disposed even 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. – Job 28:28; Psalms 111:10.

ST. PAUL'S READY TACT

This incident had interrupted in its beginning the hoped-for presentation of the Gospel. St. Paul perceived that the prejudice against him was such that no speech of his could affect his hearers; for they were dominated by the high priest, whose lack of justice had found so early a manifestation. Like a general who, finding his front attack useless, wheels his forces and, by a flank movement, captures the enemy, so St. Paul captured the sympathies of fully one-half of his auditors. At the same time he secured an opportunity for showing that the doctrine which he preached was the logical outcome of the faith of the large sect of Pharisees.

The Apostle did this by shouting, "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 statement was strictly true. The word Pharisee signifies a person who professes entire sanctification to God. St. Paul had never ceased to maintain this attitude. His experiences on the way to Damascus had changed his course of conduct, but not his attitude of heart, which from the first was loyal to God – "in all good conscience."

St. Paul well knew that the Sanhedrin was about equally divided between the ultra-orthodox, holiness-professing Pharisees and the agnostic, 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 in some respects believed 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. **[R5953 : page 267]**

A tumult ensued, some seeking to take the Apostle's life, and others endeavoring to protect him. Again Caesar's soldiers needed to intervene between warring factions of the people of God. How sad a scene! How pitiable that those who possessed much advantage every way, as did the Jews under Divine instruction, should so sadly neglect the lessons of the Divine Law in respect to justice and to one another's rights, not to mention the Divine instruction, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself"! (Leviticus 19:18.) How pitiable it is that this is sometimes true of 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 which they seek unless they reach the point of loving their enemies!

True, fisticuffs are not so popular today amongst civilized people. But cannot even greater cruelty be accomplished by the tongue than by the hand? Is it not true that even amongst those who have named the name of Christ and who have taken upon themselves a consecration vow to do His will, many bite and devour one another, under the influence of the spirit of the Adversary – anger, malice, hatred, envy, strife? As we see these things, shall we not learn a valuable lesson, one which will enable us the better to glorify our Father in Heaven?

A CONSPIRACY EXPOSED AND FOILED

Back in safety to the castle, the Apostle doubtless wondered in what manner the Lord had been glorified by this, his latest experience. Often it is thus with ourselves. But where we cannot trace the Lord's providence and see the outcome, we have all the better opportunity for cultivating the faith which "can firmly trust Him, come what may."

Meanwhile, Colonel Lysias was evidently learning that his prisoner was no common man; for one who could remain calm, alert, dignified, humble and self-possessed, while his opponents were the reverse of all these, evidenced to an unprejudiced mind that he was probably in the right of the controversy. This change of the Roman officer's attitude toward St. Paul was manifested in his kindly treatment of the Apostle's nephew, who had brought word to his uncle that a band of forty men were plotting to take his life.

These conspirators, forty professed religionists, forgetful of the Divine Law, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," had bound themselves to each other by an oath that they would neither eat nor sleep until they had killed St. Paul – a man who had done them no harm, but who had, on the contrary, merely endeavored as wisely as possible to do them good. At the instance of his mother, who was the Apostle's sister, the lad had gained access to the castle and had explained the plot to his uncle, who sent him to 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.

Perceiving that he was in conflict with at least one-half of the influential of Jewry, the commandant concluded that the wisest course for him to pursue would be to put his prisoner under the protection of Felix, the Roman Governor, at Caesarea. Accordingly, at 9 o'clock that very night, two hundred infantry, two hundred spearmen **[R5953 : page 268]** and seventy horsemen took the

Apostle to new quarters, where as an ambassador in bonds he would have fresh opportunity for representing his great Master.

This Study shows us that God prefers to use natural means rather than supernatural agencies; and that all of His children should be on the alert to serve His Cause at any and every moment. God's purposes will be accomplished. But happy is he who is accounted worthy of the privilege of any service to the Lord or to the least of His brethren. Let us, then, be continually on the lookout, in an inquiring attitude of mind, desirous of knowing the mind of the Lord in every matter. As for the Apostle, doubtless he learned a lesson which we might all profitably consider; namely, that while having full confidence in the Divine will, it is ours to protect reasonably and properly our lives and interests as well as those of others.

