

ST. PAUL'S DEFENSE BEFORE KING AGRIPPA

– *OCTOBER 22. – ACTS 26:1, 24-32. –*

PREACHING CHRIST TO THE RULERS – ST. PAUL GIVES A STIRRING ADDRESS ON HIS OWN EXPERIENCES – THE SALIENT FEATURES OF THE GOSPEL EMPHASIZED – THE HOPE OF ISRAEL – THE SELECTION OF ABRAHAM'S SPIRITUAL SEED – THE LONG-PROMISED MESSIANIC KINGDOM – ISRAEL TO BE FIRST BLESSED – THEN ALL MANKIND – KING AGRIPPA DEEPLY IMPRESSED – ST. PAUL, THE PRISONER, HAPPIER THAN ANY WHO HEARD HIM.

"I was not disobedient unto the Heavenly vision." – Acts 26:19.

OUR last Study showed us that St. Paul's appeal to Caesar's Court afforded the Apostle an opportunity of preaching the Gospel before people of prominence whom he could otherwise never have expected to reach. He seems to have appreciated the occasion thoroughly; for he made a stirring address, the theme of which was the circumstances of his own conversion, narrated here for the third time. We cannot doubt that he was guided of the Lord in the matter. Thus does God mysteriously work the counsel of His own will and cause the wrath of men to praise Him; and thus does He put before His faithful servants fresh opportunities to serve His cause. How much every faithful follower of Jesus should be encouraged by this to continued faithfulness, to singleness of heart, to the improvement of every opportunity, realizing the Lord's supervision of His work!

As a true gentleman, St. Paul opened his speech by complimenting King Agrippa, as much as he truthfully could, on the fact that he would be heard by one who was expert in all Jewish matters. He pointed to the fact that his course of life from youth was well known in Jerusalem and throughout the Jewish nation. If his countrymen would, many of them could witness to his strictness as

a religionist. "And now," he declared, "I am standing on trial for my hope in the promise which God made unto our fathers – a promise which all Jews are hoping will have fulfilment. Nevertheless it is for this hope's sake that I am accused by the Jews."

THE HOPE OF ISRAEL

The hope of Israel centered in God's Oath-Bound Covenant to Abraham: "In thy Seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed." (Genesis 12:3; 22:15-18.) St. Paul was preaching that this Promise was in process of fulfilment; that Jesus of Nazareth, as the Son of God, by obedience to the Law and by His sacrifice of His earthly rights, had become the Head of this promised Seed of Abraham by His resurrection to the plane of spirit glory, honor and immortality. Moreover, the Apostle was teaching that since Pentecost the Lord was selecting from both Jews and Gentiles a "little flock," to be Messiah's Bride and Joint-heir, members of the Spiritual Seed of Abraham; and that when this selection shall have been accomplished, The Messiah, Head and Body, in glory will set up the long-promised Kingdom of God, through which blessings will come first to Natural Israel for their restitutional uplift, and subsequently will extend through Israel to all the families of the earth. – Galatians 3:8, 16, 29; Romans 11:7-15.

Surely St. Paul pointed to the prophecies which tell of the sufferings of Messiah and of the glories that will follow! All the Jews knew of the sufferings of Jesus and His followers; but they disputed His resurrection to glory and the hope that His followers would by and by share His resurrection change. The whole dispute between himself and the Jews was in respect to whether or not Jesus arose from the dead. If He did not arise, the Jews were right. No valid hopes could be built upon a dead man, however good he might have been. If He arose, St. Paul and the followers of Jesus were right; for his resurrection to glory should be considered a

demonstration of Divine approval and of the Messiahship which He had claimed and of His Kingdom to come at the time appointed.

St. Paul explained how once he also had opposed Jesus and had persecuted His followers, shutting them up in prison and giving his vote with others for their death. He had even compelled them to blaspheme Jesus to escape sufferings; and in his madness he had extended his energies from Jerusalem to outside cities. He described the revelation of the Lord given him near Damascus – the light above the brightness of the sun, and the voice saying, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me?...I am Jesus, whom thou persecutest."

Then he explained the commission he had received from the Lord on that occasion – that he was to preach to the Gentiles, as well as to the Jews, the resurrection of Jesus, the gathering of His elect members and, in due time, the establishment of His Kingdom; and that he was to declare that all should repent and turn to God. It was for these things that he was in bondage and his life in jeopardy, until he was obliged to appeal to Caesar's tribunal. He pointed out that the sufferings of Christ had been foretold by the Prophets; and that Jesus acknowledged persecution of His followers as being persecution of Himself – His members. **page 284**

"THOU ART BESIDE THYSELF!"

Governor Festus heard with amazement the Apostle's recital. Then, interrupting the speaker, he said, "Thou art beside thyself! Much learning doth make thee mad." But St. Paul replied, "I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak forth the words of truth and soberness. King Agrippa knoweth of these things."

Thus it is still. From the worldly standpoint the true follower of our Lord Jesus is branded a fanatic, a fool, unbalanced. But from the Christian's standpoint the view is reversed – the worldly are unwise and money-mad. The worldly see merely the earthly things, the transitory. The Christian sees with the eye of faith – sees glory,

honor, immortality and a share with the Redeemer in the privileges of the Millennial Kingdom, which is shortly to bless the world with a Reign of righteousness, in fulfilment of the Lord's prayer, "Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth, as in Heaven."

St. Paul appealed to Agrippa: Did the king not believe the prophecies cited? The king's reply is a matter of dispute – whether he said, "With a little more time and eloquence you might persuade me to be a Christian"; or whether he said, "Do you think that in so brief an argument you could make of me a Christian, with all of discredit which that word means?" St. Paul's reply favors the former interpretation: "I would to God that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were almost and altogether such as I am, except these bonds."

A nobler sentiment, a broader spirit of charity, in a prison, falsely accused and unjustly restrained, cannot be imagined. Only those who have been with Jesus and have learned of Him could thus exemplify the sympathy and moderation which He taught. Oh, that all of Christ's disciples might learn also to be meek and lowly of heart, and thus find rest for their souls! For who can doubt that St. Paul, the prisoner, with his glorious hopes, was happier every way than were any of those who heard him?

MANY WILL BE AMAZED AT OPPORTUNITIES NEGLECTED

The time will come, and it is not far distant now, when many who now are highly esteemed amongst men for their wisdom, will be seen to have been foolish; and many who are now esteemed fools for Christ's sake and for the Gospel's sake will be seen to have been truly wise in choosing the Heavenly things and in being willing to surrender the earthly for the attainment of the Heavenly, because it is impossible to serve God and Mammon.

It is presumed upon reasonable grounds that, although King Agrippa did not become a Christian, this knowledge of the principles underlying Christianity remained with him and influenced him during the remainder of his life. History tells us that in the subsequent persecutions that arose in connection with the trouble coming upon the Jewish nation King Agrippa received and kindly entreated the Christians who fled to him for protection.

How many there are in Christian lands who have heard the Gospel Message more or less distinctly and have been "almost persuaded" to lay hold of the grace of God, but who neglect opportunities of action and have lost their appreciation of the privilege! These, like King Agrippa, will have comparatively small conception of the wonderful things which they came so near grasping and yet missed. When they shall come forth from the grave and enjoy the great privileges of the Millennial Kingdom, it will amaze them to know what great opportunities they had to become members of the Little Flock, the Lord's associates on the Throne.

