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BY

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PAUL BEFORE AGRIPPA.

BY THE REV. T. D. WITHERSPOON, D.D.

March 13.—Acts 26 : 1-18.

It is a festival day in Cæsarea, the city that Herod has adorned with so much magnificence, whose very wharves he has constructed of marble. Festus, the Roman procurator, has but recently assumed the reins of government in Felix's room. Herod Agrippa II., the young Jewish king, the last and least odious of the Herodian line, is on a visit of state to Festus. Accompanied by Bernice, his beautiful but depraved sister, he has come to pay respect to the newly-appointed procurator, the especial representative in Judea of the imperial authority of Rome.

Festus, the princely host, is desirous to do all that he can to enhance the pleasure of his royal guests, and, amongst other things, recounts to them the story of Paul, the strange prisoner whom he had found in custody, awaiting transportation to Rome, whom neither bonds nor imprisonment could intimidate, and who had that marvellous story to tell of "one Jesus which was dead, whom Paul affirmed to be alive." It was not the first time that Agrippa had heard these strange tidings of the crucifixion and resurrection, and for this cause, as well as because the prisoner was of his own nation, he expresses a strong desire to see him and to hear him for himself.

It is therefore arranged that on the following day, when a public reception is to be accorded to King Agrippa,

Paul, the imprisoned apostle, shall be introduced and shall plead his cause before the Jewish monarch. The scene is one whose impressiveness we can readily conceive. In the midst of the splendid amphitheatre upon which Herod had lavished such wealth of architectural adornment, seated upon the golden throne upon which Herod was sitting when the people worshiped him as a god, is Festus, in all the splendor of royal state. To his right, in the post of honor, sits Agrippa, and to the right of Agrippa is Bernice. Around them are the centurions and captains, the prefects and lictors, and all the representatives of Roman power, whilst filling the vast amphitheatre from centre to circumference is the promiscuous assemblage of Jew and Gentile Greek and barbarian, soldier and civilian, high and low, gathered, some to do honor to Festus, some to bid welcome to the young Jewish king, more through idle curiosity to behold the splendid pageant—a few at least, we may reasonably hope, through intelligent sympathy with Paul, the “prisoner of the Lord.” Taken for all in all, it has seldom been the privilege of any minister of the gospel to address such an audience as that which greeted the apostle as, in obedience to the mandate of the governor, he entered the judgment-hall.

There is no more remarkable instance than here in all the life of this wonderful man of his characteristic forgetfulness of self and absorption in his great work and theme. Summoned before Agrippa to plead for his life, he makes his own imprisonment and its causes simply the groundwork upon which to build his masterly argument for the truth of Christianity; and then, forgetful of his own personal peril, concerned only for the salvation of his hearers, and particularly of King Agrippa, he turns his plea into a sermon, and with all the earnestness of his nature presses the claims of religion upon his young and royal hearer.

Looking upon this address before King Agrippa, therefore, not as the plea of a prisoner, but as the sermon of an apostle, let us consider some points of interest connected with it.

I. And first let us look at the pulpit from which the sermon was preached. Paul had stood in the Areopagus at Athens, in the temple at Jerusalem, in the synagogues of many cities, but never in circumstances apparently more unfavorable than those by which he found himself surrounded to-day. A prisoner at the bar of justice, his arm chained to that of a Roman soldier, so that every gesture caused a clanking of the iron chains which told of his incarceration, it might be supposed that no circumstances could be more unfavorable to the presentation of the message of salvation. And yet the apostle makes that prisoner's stand a pulpit from which with unrivaled energy and power he proclaims Christ as the Saviour of men. Nay, the very clanking of the iron chains that bound him became eloquent as he lifted his manacled arm, saying, "Except these bonds." So around us every day and everywhere are God's imprisoned preachers, his "shut-in band"—men and women upon the arm of whose efficiency are the gyves of poverty, physical weakness, etc., and yet who preach from the couch of the pale invalid and the wan sufferer, from the bare garret and the lonely hovel, and whose sermons carry with them the matchless eloquence of lives that are "as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things."

Who does not know of these glorious witnesses for Christ, imprisoned by manifold infirmities, yet rejoicing that "the word of God is not bound"? Their example teaches us that there are no circumstances in life so unpropitious that a loving consecration may not find in them

opportunity for witness-bearing for Christ, and that oftentimes the most adverse circumstances are the very ones in which the testimony is most eloquent and effective.

II. Let us look, secondly, at the apostle's audience. This, in a certain sense, consisted in the vast concourse of people, Jews and Gentiles, Romans and barbarians, patricians and plebeians, citizens and soldiers, who thronged the amphitheatre. But in a more special sense the apostle's audience consisted of but a single soul. His burning words are addressed particularly to Agrippa. The address, repeated over and over again, "O king," "O King Agrippa," etc., shows how intensely absorbed he is in the salvation of the young Jewish ruler. And no wonder, for, though he is, on his father's side, of Idumæan stock, his mother is a devout Jewess, and so he is one of Paul's "own kindred after the flesh"—one of those for whom, as he calls God to witness, he "could even wish himself accursed from Christ." Not only so, but from his exalted position and his peculiar relations to the covenant people, his conversion would set in motion influences for good the measure of which it would be impossible to foretell. We can but speculate as to what would have been the blessed results for Christianity and for the chosen people if Agrippa had been not only almost but altogether persuaded that day to become a Christian—if he had come down from the throne and in the presence of that vast multitude taken the imprisoned apostle by the hand and publicly avowed himself a disciple of the crucified but risen Redeemer. There is many a patient, prayerful teacher who, as he looks Sabbath after Sabbath into the face of the one or two boys who come regularly to his class, grows disheartened at the smallness of the audience to which he makes known the great truths of redemption; but let him remember Paul's interest in Agrippa, and let him bear in mind the

fact that one of those boys may be a Spurgeon or a Moody, or some chosen instrument through whom he will bring thousands into the kingdom. A single lever in one of our great exposition halls, when itself moved, sets in motion whole acres of machinery, and so a single soul, inspired through your agency with a love of Christ and a love of souls, may become a factor in the world's conversion whose value neither you nor I can ever estimate. Be it ours, then, to toil always as if our hand were upon that unseen lever, and to give each impulse in faith and prayer, not knowing "whether shall prosper either this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good."

III. And now, having seen the pulpit and the audience, let us look into the sermon. It has many striking characteristics as to method, such as its directness, its gentleness, its fervor, and the masterly skill with which, by a system of gradual approaches, the apostle besieges the citadel of Agrippa's heart. But it is to the matter and not to the manner of the address that I would call your attention.

(1) And first notice how the whole sermon centres in Christ. Christ is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. The apostle seems to realize at every step the fact that the very purpose for which Christ had appeared to him was that he might "be his witness unto all men." His great aim is so to present Christ that men may be persuaded to believe on his name.

(2) Notice also the prominence given to the subject of the death and resurrection of Christ. It is evident that the apostle is not presenting him to King Agrippa as some great religious instructor founding, like Mohammed or Buddha, a system of religious belief, nor yet as some great exemplar wooing us by the beauty of a living example to the paths of righteousness and truth. Teaching that goes no further than this must always fall short of any saving influ-

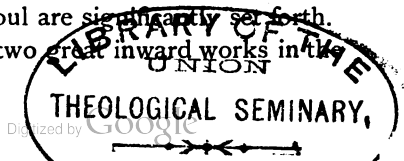
ence upon men's consciences and hearts. No; the apostle dwells upon the thought of the priestly atoning work of Christ as consummated in his death and resurrection from the dead. It was this resurrection from a sacrificial death, this being "raised again for our justification" and as the earnest and pledge of our own glorious resurrection, which the apostle so beautifully calls (verses 6, 7) "the hope of the promise made of God unto our fathers; unto which promise our twelve tribes, instantly serving God day and night, hope to come." It was this glorious promise of God, that he would not "leave his soul in hell," neither "suffer his Holy One to see corruption," which supported the faith and inspired the courage of God's ancient saints. It was this hope of Christ's resurrection, linking itself with the future resurrection of his people, of which it is the earnest and pledge, which enabled the patriarch Job to look forward in the midst of bodily disfigurement and anguish to the time when his Redeemer should "stand at the latter day upon the earth"—which gave him rest in the implicit faith that "though worms should destroy his body, yet in his flesh he should see God." It is in these great facts of the death and resurrection of Christ that the power of Christianity is found to-day. Let all our presentation of Christ find its keynote in those memorable words of the apostle to Agrippa: "Having therefore obtained help of God, I continue unto this day, witnessing both to small and great, saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come; that Christ should suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should show light unto the people and to the Gentiles."

(3) Notice, in the third place, that the apostle presents these great verities, not simply as historical facts, but as inwoven into all the meshes of his own religious experi-

ence. They are the objects of his own implicit trust. He has felt the power of them in his own soul. The life which he daily lives he lives by the faith of this crucified and risen Son of God. There is no estimating the importance of this inward experience of "Christ and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings" to him who would be a religious teacher and would win souls for Christ. No other learning can compensate for the lack of this. No other preparation for teaching is so valuable, so indispensable, as that which consists in bathing the soul, by prayer and communion with the word, in this sweet experience of the power of Christ in the heart. When we come to our work with this kind of preparation our words have power, and men take knowledge of us, as of the disciples of old, that we "have been with Jesus."

(4) Notice, finally, in reference to this preaching, Paul's estimate of its power: "To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them that are sanctified by faith that is in me." Here we have an admirable summary of the whole practical work of redemption. That regeneration which lies at the basis of all spiritual life is signified by the words "to open their eyes," the blind eyes being those not of the understanding merely, but of the whole soul. That thorough conversion which attends upon regeneration, and is the exercise by the soul of the new life which the Holy Spirit in its regenerative touch has imparted, is represented by the terms "to turn them," or, more literally, "that they should turn from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God," where the voluntary renunciation of sin and the voluntary acceptance of Christ as the ruling power in the soul are significantly set forth.

And as we have thus the two great inward works in the



transformation of the soul, so we have in the remainder of the verse the two great processes by which the outward or objective relations of the soul to God are changed. The first, justification, is expressed by the words, "that they may receive forgiveness of sins," forgiveness, which is only a part, being in this brief summary made the representative of the whole. Then we have adoption, expressed under the term "inheritance among them which are sanctified;" the purely gratuitous character both of the justification and of the adoption appearing in the closing words, "by faith that is in me."

For the achievement of this fourfold work, regeneration, conversion, justification, adoption, the apostle recognizes the ministry of the word as the divinely appointed, and therefore divinely efficacious, instrumentality.

But it is time that we should turn for a moment to the results of Paul's preaching before Agrippa. As far as the visible results are concerned, they were not of a character to afford the apostle much encouragement. Of all the audience, Agrippa was the only one who gave any evidence of conviction, and his convictions only led him far enough to say, "Almost thou persuadest me." Yet who can tell what harvest may have afterward come from the seed sown that day apparently in most unfriendly soil? Who can estimate the vaster number since whose consciences have been aroused and whose dallying resolutions have been quickened by thought of the melancholy fate of him who was "almost, but lost"?

Let the faithful worker for Christ take courage. The seed which falls on the most unlikely soil often proves in the end most fruitful, and the promise is oftentimes fulfilled that "he that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him."