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WITH THE LESSONS OF 1884

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PAUL AT CORINTH.

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March 9.—Acts 18:1-17.

FROM the summit of the Acropolis at Athens, looking toward the west, one could plainly see through the clear atmosphere of Greece, at a distance of forty-five miles, the lofty Acro-Corinthus, the temple-crowned mountain at whose base lay the wealthy and luxurious city of Corinth. Thither the apostle Paul now directs his course. As a great commercial centre from which the light of Christianity, once enkindled, will naturally radiate along all the lines of commerce and of trade, he recognizes the importance of establishing at the earliest possible moment a church in this city.

But a strange depression of spirit comes over him as he enters the great metropolis—a depression such as we do not find him experiencing anywhere else. The evidences of it are manifold. Writing afterward to the Corinthian church, and referring to this early period of his ministry, he says, "For I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling." The testimony of the historian in the passage which we are studying to-day is that when Silas and Timotheus came to Corinth they found him "pressed in spirit." But the chief evidence is in the vision which was accorded to him, and the words of encouragement it brings. The "Be not afraid, but speak, and hold

not thy peace," tells of a state of despondency from which the heavenly vision was intended to arouse him. The words of the Golden Text which follow give a clue both to the elements of discouragement and to the divine corrective, whilst the body of the lesson for to-day shows the working out under the Divine Providence of the very conditions which were needful to the realization of the Lord's promise and to the success of the apostle's work.

I. Let us, then, guided by the Golden Text and in a careful study of the peculiar circumstances in which the apostle was placed, endeavor to ascertain, first, what were the sources of the apostle's discouragement, and what the elements of encouragement in reference to them afforded in the vision of the text. And whilst our study of to-day will have practical interest for all Christian workers everywhere, it will have peculiar significance for those called to labor in the great commercial cities and trade-centres of our land.

(I.) The first element of discouragement with the apostle no doubt was the sense of personal loneliness and isolation that came over him as he approached the gay, worldly, dissolute city. Entering the little port of Cenchræa through the multitude of ships of every clime, he came to land amidst bales of merchandise, throngs of merchants, trains of porters and beasts of burden. From the warehouses and the shipping around him he looked upward to the temple of Venus that crowned the citadel, and entering the city over which she presided he saw that the hearts of the people were divided between the acquisition of wealth on the one hand and the pursuit of pleasure on the other. Between him and this gay, worldly, frivolous people there was no sympathy, no congeniality. He felt that sense of loneliness, want of sympathy, lack

of spiritual communion which many a faithful servant of God has felt in the midst of the worldliness and dissoluteness of a great city. To add to this, he was almost, if not entirely, alone. He had sent for Silas and Timothy (Acts 17 : 15) to come to him at Athens, but they seem in some way to have been hindered, and did not reach him until some time after his settlement in Corinth, so that during the earlier part of his ministry he was without the companionship and counsel which would have cheered him in his solitude.

In this state of loneliness that which he needed to cheer him, that which every Christian worker needs, is just the message contained in the first clause of the text: "For *I* am with thee." *Jesus*, that same divine One who had said for the comfort of the Eleven when he was about to depart, "Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end the world," now appears in person to his discouraged servant and reminds him of this promise, assuring him of his personal presence with him now. In our times of depression—and what faithful servant of God is without them?—there is nothing that can cheer us as does the assurance that Jesus is spiritually present with us, his eye of love upon us, his arm of friendship around us, his ear of sympathy open to us. Our joy is that he has said, "I will never leave thee nor forsake thee."

(2.) The second element of discouragement in entering such a city as Corinth would arise from a view of the lawlessness and liability to popular tumult and violence of a community held together merely by the love of pleasure or the greed of gain. In Jerusalem, where the priestly power was dominant, and in Athens, where the memory of the great lawgivers of Greece still held sway over the hearts of the people, there was some reverence for law, some due maintenance of order, some security

of person and of life. But in volatile, mercurial, licentious Corinth there was no knowing at what moment some enemy of the Cross might fire the passions of the turbulent mob, and no forecasting to what extent of personal violence the populace might be carried where the magistrates would likely be in sympathy with the rabble, and disposed, like Pilate, for popularity's sake to carry out their will.

To meet this element in the apostle's discouragement what could have been more suited than those gracious words, "No man shall set on thee to hurt thee," bringing, as they did, the assurance that the hearts even of these fickle and lawless multitudes about him were "in the hand of the Lord as the rivers of water" (Prov. 21 : 1), so that he could turn them "whithersoever he will"? In this doctrine of God's sovereign control over the hearts of wicked men the missionaries of the Cross in heathen lands have found comfort. In the midst of great cities, surrounded by inflammable elements that needed but a spark to set them on fire, these servants of God have walked serenely, knowing that One walked with them having power to extinguish the spark ere it should fall or to hold in complete subjection the wrath that would otherwise kindle into a consuming flame. It is the joy of every worker for Christ to know that the great Head of the Church has all power in heaven and upon earth. "Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee; the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain."

(3.) But the third element of discouragement, and the chief one, no doubt, was found in Paul's apprehension that the preaching of the gospel to such a people would be utterly unacceptable and barren of results. With hearts immersed in business or intoxicated with sensual pleasure, what effect could the preaching of the

gospel produce? Amidst so much gayety and frivolity where could the precious seed take root? He had come with the determination "not to know anything among them save Jesus Christ, and him crucified." How would such preaching be received by this wealthy, luxurious, pleasure-loving people? Many a servant of God, since called to minister in some centre of wealth and affluence, of luxury and fashion, has felt this same chill of despondency creeping over him, and has asked in the agony of his soul, "Who is sufficient for these things?"

What is the comfort which the Lord gives to his discouraged servant? He bears him back to the great foundation-truths of that system which men call Calvinism, and which it is so popular in certain quarters now-a-days to ridicule or to travesty: "I have much people in this city." His, not in the sense that they had already believed on him, for they had not, but his in the sense that they had been chosen by him before all worlds; his in the sense that they had been given to him by the Father in the councils of eternity; his in the sense that they belonged to that elect people whom he had covenanted to redeem; his in the sense that he had shed his blood for them on the cross, and that they were part of the purchase of his sufferings and death. He knew them individually, had called them by their name, and had sent Paul to set in motion the instrumentalities by which they should be brought to repentance and to a saving interest in his blood.

How could Paul fail, then? He had only to do his work faithfully, and the Holy Spirit, the purchase of Christ's blood, would be sent to seal upon the hearts of his hearers a salvation which had been made theirs in covenant before the foundation of the world. Cheer

up, O desponding servant of God! The Master has an elect people here, and your feeble instrumentality has behind it the unchanging sovereignty and mercy of God.

It is not strange that in the unrenewed heart there should be opposition to the doctrine of God's sovereign, electing love. But it is strange that many devout Christians manifest such antagonism to these doctrines of grace. They are full of most precious comfort. In the eternal purpose of an unchanging God, in his covenant-gift to the divine Redeemer before all worlds, in that unrelaxing hold by which "all that the Father hath given him he keeps," and in that immutable love by which, "having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them to the end," there is strength for the tired and discouraged worker, there is hope for the anxious and careworn parent, there is cheer for the timid, doubting intercessor at the throne. May not God have placed you where you are as pastor, Sabbath-school teacher, parent, guardian, employer, even as he placed Paul in discouraging Corinth, that you may be the instrument in his hand in saving some of the "much people" whom he has in the city or community in which you labor? Cheer up, brother! God's eternal purpose of love can never fail.

II. Let us now, in a brief review of the body of the lesson, study the interweaving of God's providence with his purpose of election, arranging all the conditions necessary to Paul's success in gathering into the Church the elect people in Corinth.

(1.) The first condition, manifestly, is that Paul shall have the means of subsistence whilst he is preaching the gospel. The wonderful providence of God in arranging

for his support in this respect is narrated in verses second and third of the lesson. Long before he came to Corinth, God had brought to that city, from Rome, Aquila, a tentmaker, with Priscilla his wife. They were Jews, living at Rome because of its advantages as a centre for their trade in sails and tents. Claudius having issued a decree banishing all Jews from Italy (as Suetonius, the Roman historian, says, because of a tumult occasioned by Christianity), Aquila and Priscilla were forced to leave Rome, and, seeking the next best centre, came to Corinth; and so when Paul came he found employment with them, and thus his support was providentially arranged in the way most agreeable to him, as he had a home in their house and remunerated them by his labor for their care. In this first provision, then, we see God's providence running through years of preparation and along varied lines of adjustment, leading to the settlement of Aquila and Priscilla in Rome, the decree of Claudius, the removal to Corinth, Paul's connection with Aquila, and all the circumstances of the case.

(2.) The second condition is that he shall have efficient helpers in his work. To secure these we have first the acceptance of the gospel by Aquila and Priscilla, whose intelligence and zeal made them invaluable workers, and whose services Paul again and again acknowledges with thanksgiving. In their society he had delightful Christian companionship, and in their co-operation needed help. Then, also, Silas and Timotheus (v. 5), who had failed in some way to reach the apostle at Athens, were brought to him at the most opportune moment by the blessing of God, so that he had valuable ministerial help after long and unexpected delay.

(3.) He must have some suitable place for holding religious services. This, too, is in the providence of

God most agreeably arranged. For all informal services through the week the large room in which the tents and sails are stitched, and which, out of business hours, would be at his disposal, would amply suffice. So long as he directs his ministry to the Jews he has the use of the synagogue, in which, as a Jew and a former master of the law, he would have the privilege of speaking. When he turns to the Gentiles, and is of course excluded from the privileges of the synagogue, the Lord inclines the heart of one Justus (v. 7), a Gentile proselyte, "whose house joined hard to the synagogue," to throw open his dwelling as a place of worship; and so Paul has the twofold advantage of a hall free to Gentiles as well as Jews, and yet next door to the synagogue, so that it is easily accessible to such attendants at the synagogue-service as may desire to hear him.

(4.) He must have protection from the violence of his enemies and liberty to speak boldly in the name of Jesus. He has been so often taken before magistrates, and scourged, imprisoned, expelled or forbidden to speak, that without some special interposition in this regard his work may be seriously interrupted or completely hindered by some complication with the civil authorities. Provision has been made for this also by a train of providential arrangements (vs. 12-17) as remarkable as those we have already studied. Just as this crisis is approaching, when so much depends upon the character of the Roman governor in Corinth, the Senate at Rome sends out to Achaia as proconsul Gallio, the brother of Seneca, the celebrated Roman moralist. Like his brother a thorough skeptic in all matters of religion, he is nevertheless a great student and admirer of Roman law, and, in theory at least, an ardent advocate of a high tone of public

morals. Being, as we know from profane history, a man of very gentle and apparently pliant disposition, the enemies of Paul think that by raising a public disturbance, and by a clamorous appeal to his tribunal for the punishment of Paul as the occasion of the tumult, they may intimidate him, as the Jews at Jerusalem did the vacillating Pilate, and so secure the execution of their innocent victim. But God in his providence has put a very different man from Pilate in power. Gallio, undisturbed by the clamor, and moved neither by favoritism nor by love of popularity, looks at the whole question from the standpoint of Roman law and public morals, and, finding neither of these involved, dismisses the case contemptuously and without a hearing, and drives the persecutors from his presence. Nor is this all, but whilst he thus holds Paul under the protection and security which the law gives, he sits quietly by whilst a disturbance takes place amongst the persecutors themselves; and when Sosthenes, who had been made chief ruler of the synagogue after the conversion of Crispus (v. 8), and who was no doubt the prime mover in the arraignment of Paul, is beaten by the Hellenistic party in the synagogue, who had most probably opposed the resort to the civil power, Gallio looks on with perfect indifference, so that it becomes manifest to the Jews that they can expect no sympathy from him in any future attempts to interfere with the apostle's preaching; and so he is able afterward to speak the word of God boldly, no man hindering him.

Can any one look upon these independent and yet closely-interwoven threads of divine providence, all leading to the same result in the successful planting of the Church at Corinth, and not see the Lord's hand bringing to fulfillment purposes all unknown to those through whose agency they are being wrought out? Is there not

something full of comfort in this thought of a sovereign purpose of grace working itself out through all the tangled threads of human purpose and passion? And with such a power working with us and in us may we not joyfully resolve, like the apostle, to "know nothing among men save Jesus Christ, and him crucified"? May we not have faith in the power of the "old, old story" amidst all the worldliness and sensuality even of the gayest and most pleasure-loving metropolis in which any of us may be called to labor?