

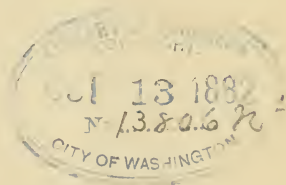
HALF HOURS

WITH THE LESSONS OF 1883

CHAPTERS ON THE BIBLE TEXTS CHOSEN FOR
SABBATH-SCHOOL STUDY DURING 1883

IN CONNECTION WITH

THE INTERNATIONAL LESSON SERIES



PHILADELPHIA
PRESBYTERIAN BOARD OF PUBLICATION
1334 CHESTNUT STREET.

BV1560
H35

COPYRIGHT, 1882, BY
THE TRUSTEES OF THE
PRESBYTERIAN BOARD OF PUBLICATION.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

WESTCOTT & THOMSON,
Stereotypers and Electrotypers, Philada.

THE SANHEDRIM AND THE COLLEGE OF THE APOSTLES.

BY THE REV. S. J. NICCOLLS, D. D.

March 4.—Acts 5:17-32.

THE word "Then," with which this passage begins, points to the occasion for the prompt action and hot indignation of the high priest and his counselors. The work of the Lord was prospering mightily in Jerusalem through the ministry of the apostles. On account of their powerful testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus multitudes believed, and "great grace was upon them all." Added to this, there were signs and wonders wrought by the apostles. The sick were healed by them, and unclean spirits cast out. Multitudes from the neighboring cities and villages came to hear the wonderful tidings, and brought their sick with them. They even carried them into the streets and laid them on beds and couches, that as Peter came by his shadow at least might fall on some of them; and they were healed, "every one." It was indeed a most extraordinary state of affairs, but certainly not such as ought to have excited the indignation and alarm of wise and good rulers. There was no mob violence, no thieving, no wild revelry; there was nothing tending to produce distress or disease; but, on the contrary, everything indicated the presence of a new, holy and divine life which had taken possession of men. There was a power present that cured disease, drove out evil

spirits, brought men to repentance and turned them from sin to righteousness. It produced the highest exhibition of practical beneficence the world had yet seen. The rich shared their goods with the poor, and the disciples "had all things in common." It was a time of peace and gladness among the people, such as Jerusalem had not witnessed since the days of Solomon.

Yet it was this state of affairs that filled the high priest and his friends with indignation, and moved them to take prompt action to arrest, if possible, the growing power of this new movement. So they laid their hands on the apostles and put them in the common prison.

There is a little parenthetical clause in the narrative which explains, though it does not excuse, their malignant opposition. All who were acting with Annas, the high priest, were of "the sect of the Sadducees." They were the rationalists of those days, and believed neither in angels nor in spirits, nor in the resurrection of the dead. Hence their special dislike for the preaching of the apostles. It is recorded in the preceding chapter that when Peter and John were preaching in the temple the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, "being grieved that they taught the people and preached through Jesus the resurrection of the dead." They well knew that if the doctrine preached by the apostles prevailed, their influence as religious teachers and leaders of the people would be utterly destroyed. They were also enraged by the fact that the apostles had disregarded their command not to teach in the name of Jesus. So, pride, envy and bigotry move them to begin a religious persecution. What they cannot overthrow by argument must be suppressed by force. A prison, or, if need be, death, can silence these fearless witnesses of the risen Jesus.

There are men to-day who are grieved and indignant when the gospel is proclaimed with saving power and the fruits of the Spirit are manifested on every hand. They assail it as if it were a personal enemy and its triumph their condemnation. It is worth while, in view of the present efforts of rationalism and materialism, to ask what would have been the effect on the world's history if the Sadducees had succeeded in their attempt to exterminate the Christian faith. If instead of being the heirs of all that Christianity has wrought in the past we had as our inheritance the results of eighteen centuries of Sadducean doubt, despair and worldliness, what pen or tongue could describe the contrast?

In considering the lessons to be drawn from this history we see—(1.) *How God overrules persecution and opposition for the good of his Church.* It seemed indeed a dark hour for the cause of Christ when all of the apostles were shut up in the common prison, and left, apparently, in the power of their bitterest enemies. Their situation was one of extreme peril, for it was the evident purpose of the high priest and his party to condemn them to death by the vote of the Sanhedrim. What a memorable night that was when the entire college of the apostles was shut up in the common prison! They were now beginning to realize the truth of their Lord's words: "They shall lay their hands on you, and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues, and into prisons, being brought before kings and rulers for my name's sake." But they had no reason for despondency, for in that same prediction concerning their trials was also the promise of help: "And it shall turn to you for a testimony." Certainly they had a warrant for believing that their present distress and danger would be overruled for the furtherance of the cause they represented; and in this faith they waited on

the Lord. Nor did they wait in vain. That very night his angel opened the prison-doors and brought them forth. It was a marvelous deliverance, but still most admirably adapted to the time and occasion. It was a triumphant answer to the teaching of the Sadducees, who denied the existence of angels, and it was also calculated to instruct and elevate the faith of the Church. It taught believers to look to the living Lord Jesus for help, and not to man.

Nor was the lesson lost. As mercies granted and remembered make us bold to ask for more, so, we may believe, this deliverance was remembered and mentioned on a subsequent occasion, when the disciples met together to pray for the release of the imprisoned and imperiled Peter. But more especially was this event blessed to the apostles themselves. The angel of the Lord who delivered them said, "Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life." Their trial and deliverance, after all, increased their qualifications to preach. Satan defeated himself. He thought by imprisoning and persecuting these disciples to intimidate and silence them; but instead he has made them better and bolder preachers than ever. Their divine call to preach is renewed by the angelic message. So it has ever been in the experience of God's faithful ministers. Many a sore trial or dark night of sorrow has fitted them to proclaim more clearly and positively the words of life. Out of their own experience they could testify to the goodness and faithfulness of God. The whole college of the apostles in prison, Paul in Nero's dungeon and John Bunyan in Bedford jail, are events which show how God can make the trials and persecutions of his servants advance his glory and turn to them "for a testimony."

The direction given the apostles by the angel is worthy

of a master of the art of homiletics. It is a short yet comprehensive rule for good preaching. They were not to teach secretly the new faith. The gospel method of extending the truth is in direct opposition to Jesuitical propagandism. They were to "stand and speak"—that is, boldly and openly declare their message. They were to go to the temple, where the people were gathered for worship. It was, at that time, the appropriate place for religious teaching, and especially could its ordinances and arrangements be used to point the people to Christ. They were to speak to the people, not to a select class; and the matter of their preaching was to be "all the words of this life," the complete gospel of the grace of God. No part was to be left out or blurred over. They were to tell of sin and its condemnation, as well as of pardon and life; of Christ the King and Judge, as well as of Christ the Saviour; they were to say "He that believeth not shall be damned," as well as "He that believeth shall be saved."

We cannot but admire the prompt and faithful obedience of the apostles. To stand in that public place and teach in the name of Jesus was to expose themselves again to danger and death; it would be to invite the repetition of the arrest and imprisonment of yesterday, and increase the wrath of their enemies. Carnal prudence might say, "You are now delivered; hide yourselves until this storm of indignation has swept by." But no; these were men who thought more of Christ than of their personal safety. The message which they had received from the angel was enough for their decision; they will obey God rather than the promptings of their own flesh or the will of men. Fresh from their experience of God's saving grace, how earnestly and with what power must they have taught! We may know that

our trials and deliverances are sanctified to us when they lead us to a prompt and cheerful obedience to the will of God.

(2.) *This history shows us rationalism confounded.* The high priest and his council slept that night in peace, or at least undisturbed by the visits of angels. They had the satisfaction that they had taken vigorous measures for suppressing the new fanaticism which was threatening to carry all before it. On the morrow the senate of the children of Israel, the great Sanhedrim, was to assemble and pass sentence upon these disturbers of the peace. There could be no doubt about the verdict. The troublesome leaders would soon be in their graves, beyond the hope of a resurrection. But instead of their anticipated triumph came their discomfiture. Evil is never so near its defeat as when it seems to be in the hour of its triumph. The morrow came; the high priest, his council and the Sanhedrim were assembled, and officers were sent to bring in the prisoners. As this was not the only time that men in power have arrogantly presumed that they had the disposing of Christ's cause in their own hands, we can easily gather from subsequent scenes in history how the members of the senate justified themselves in what they had determined to do. But soon their arrogancy and self-complacency give place to anxiety and consternation. The officers return, with their faces proclaiming their amazement, saying, "The prison truly found we shut with all safety, and the keepers standing without, before the doors, but when we had opened we found no man within." The circumstances of the escape were such that it could not be accounted for by the action of the prisoners themselves, or secret friends, or treachery on the part of the guards. Here was something that confounded all their plans and put a new

phase on the matter before them. Just when rationalism thought to put down the supernatural, lo! it appears in a new manifestation before them. There was evidently a power working for these apostles which prison-walls, bolts, bars and guards of soldiers could not restrain. The perplexity of the council is further increased when one came saying, "Behold, the men whom ye put in prison are standing in the temple, and teaching the people." When men escape from prison it is to hide themselves from those who imprisoned them, but these prisoners go at once to repeat their offence, and stand in the temple preaching to the people in the presence of their enemies. It was this conduct, as much as the strangeness of their deliverance, that impressed the senate. Then, as often since, men were made to see that there is a hidden, spiritual force about the gospel which cannot be accounted for, save on the ground that the life of Christ is in it.

(3.) *We can also learn from this that the enemies of the gospel are made to fear and respect those who are fearless in proclaiming it.* The high priest and his council have now heard where their former prisoners are, but how were they to arrest them? A short hour before they deemed it enough to send the ordinary officers to drag them from the common prison to their tribunal, without ceremony and with the usual violence and insult shown in Eastern countries to supposed criminals. But now these arrogant judges show a striking change in the manner of their acting. The record significantly says, "Then went the captain with the officers, and brought them without violence: for they feared the people, lest they should have been stoned." They were compelled to show special consideration to the apostles, and the latter are set before the Sanhedrim with something of honor and deference. The providence of God has so ordered it that the whole

college of the apostles is brought before the highest court of the old dispensation. The meeting between them is most significant: it presents one of those striking contrasts between the old and the new which history now and then furnishes. On the one side is a court of venerable and august authority, composed of men of the highest rank and influence in the nation; on the other is the highest earthly tribunal of the new dispensation, a body of men without rank or reputation for learning. On one side are men of this world, who have no aims or hopes beyond the grave—men of policy and self-interest, controlled in their actions by “fear of the people;” on the other side, men who are living for eternity, and who through the risen Christ have seen the glorified life beyond the grave—men whose conduct is shaped only by the fear of God. The issue between them is the struggle of the ages; they represent the parties of to-day.

The words of the high priest as he addresses the apostles have a form of superior authority, but there is that in them which betrays his inward fear and anxiety. With something of official pride he demands of them why they have disregarded the injunctions of the council and continued to preach in “this name.” But soon he unconsciously betrays his anxiety by charging them with the design of avenging the death of Christ: “Behold, ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrines, and intend to bring this man’s blood upon us.” Here is a manifestation of that dreadful irony in history which comes to mock guilty consciences. These were the men who, but a few months before, had boldly assumed the responsibility of the crucifixion of Jesus, and had joined in the cry, “His blood be upon us and our children!” Now, as if an awakening conscience was apprehending coming vengeance, they say anxiously, “You intend to bring this

man's blood upon us." In their guilt and hardness of heart they were far from understanding the true nature of the gospel. The doctrine with which the apostles had filled Jerusalem was not one of vengeance upon the murderers of Christ, but of pardon and salvation to all through his shed blood. The gospel comes to guilty and sinful men crying, "Fear not." The only thing they need fear is their rejection of its grace, for then indeed it becomes a "savor of death unto death."

(4.) *Finally, we have in this history, Peter's address to the Sanhedrim.* It is the jewel of which all the rest is only the casket. The chief value of this historical narrative is, that it helps us to a better understanding of those great truths which Peter utters in the name of the apostles. The Lord Jesus had once said to his disciples, "But when they deliver you up, take no thought how or what ye shall speak: for it shall be given you in that same hour what ye shall speak. For it is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father which speaketh in you." Certainly that promise was fulfilled in this case. As a defence nothing could be more admirable and to the point than the words of Peter. The specifications in the indictment against the apostles were two: First, that they had disobeyed the lawful authority in continuing to preach after they had been strictly charged to speak no more in the name of Jesus; Second, that by their preaching they were stirring up the people to avenge the crucifixion of Jesus upon the Sanhedrim. To the first Peter replies, "We ought to obey God rather than men." This was their justification for the disobedience charged. In answer to the second he fearlessly tells the Sanhedrim their guilt, and charges upon them the death of Jesus. He tells them to their faces that they slew Jesus and hanged him on a tree. But, instead of seeking to avenge that death through their

blood, he has glad tidings for them. That same Jesus God has raised up "to be a Prince and a Saviour for to give repentance and forgiveness of sins." He and his brethren were there to witness this to them, and to offer them pardon and salvation in the name of Christ. This was their only intent. Was there any murderous purpose in this? Did such doctrines savor of vengeance? How completely the tables are turned! The prisoners stand before their judges offering them pardon and life in the name of Jesus. So to the world that persecutes and hates it the gospel is ever offering mercy and forgiveness.

But the words of Peter have an application far beyond the hour and circumstances of their first use. Never did statesman or philosopher speak more wisely or utter more significant truth in behalf of freedom and just government than did this Galilean fisherman. In the declaration, "We ought to obey God rather than men," we have the great charter of civil and religious liberty, the true declaration of independence for all men. It is the solid principle that lies at the foundation of all true liberty, and, as wrought out and applied to human affairs, it has brought to us all the blessings of free government which the world to-day enjoys. Prompt and loving obedience to God is true liberty for men. Conscience must first be emancipated before there can be a free man. "If the truth shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed." In Peter's immortal saying we have the short yet expressive creed of true liberty. It has proved itself a revolutionary power in the world, and tyrants and oppressors, both civil and ecclesiastical, have hated and feared it. The greatest struggles of the past have been those made in its defence, and the most significant and glorious triumphs for oppressed humanity are those that have vindicated and upheld this same principle. But the gospel, which eman-

cipates man from human tyranny and ennobles him by setting forth and demanding his supreme allegiance to God, does more for him. It comes with a revelation of God's wondrous love. It tells of Jesus his Son freely "delivered for our offences and raised again for our justification." It reveals him to us, who deserve death on account of sin, as a Prince and Saviour, reigning at God's right hand, and having all power to give repentance and forgiveness of sins to us. Surely there is nothing in this to make us dread it as an enemy, and yet how many misapprehend its true meaning and turn from it with aversion!

It is most significant that in the defence which Peter makes, as indeed in all apostolic preaching, special prominence is given to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. The apostle well knew that the larger portion of the Sanhedrim was of the sect of the Sadducees, yet he does not hesitate in his testimony. Face to face with the very body of men that had condemned Jesus to death, these calm, earnest, fearless witnesses repeat their testimony to Christ's resurrection. They are there to be examined further if the senate wished. It was indeed a masterly position. On the reality of the resurrection everything turned; if it was true, then beyond all question Jesus was the Son of God, the long-expected Messiah. This was the time, if ever, to have disproved the testimony of these men and to have shown them to be impostors or self-deceived. But it could not be done.

There are three great indestructible facts that have remained all through the ages as witnesses to the reality of the resurrection. The first is the testimony of the apostles; the second is the Christian Church; the third is the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The proof which they furnish is conclusive, and we may rest assured that our holy faith, so glorious in the hopes which it inspires and so

wonderful in the destiny which it opens for sinful men, is founded upon the ROCK.

In conclusion, the whole passage suggests an urgent personal question: On which side do you, to whom this message comes, stand? The day was when men seeking greatness and happiness would have counted themselves honored could they have been numbered with the Sanhedrim. But time brings some striking reversals of human judgment. The judges and wise men are now in disgrace, and the despised prisoners are exalted in imperishable glory. Seen in the light of the judgment of history, you cannot hesitate as to the wise choice. But the judgments which God has written in history are only foreshadows and types of the great final judgment which shall be affirmed by the risen Saviour. You must take your stand for or against him, and be judged accordingly. Will you, then, join yourselves to the company of the apostles and the noble army of martyrs and confessors, who, through the ages have borne witness for him, or will you stand with men who, blinded by pride or deluded by worldly wisdom, reject him?