

HALF HOURS

WITH THE LESSONS OF 1884

CHAPTERS ON THE BIBLE TEXTS CHOSEN FOR
SABBATH-SCHOOL STUDY DURING 1884

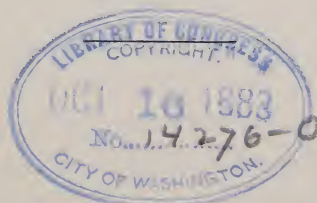
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THESSALONIANS AND BEREANS.

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

Feb. 24.—Acts 17: 1-14.

THIS passage forms part of the history of a most wonderful missionary enterprise by which the gospel was planted in Europe. Paul and his three companions, crossing over from Asia, had first preached at Philippi. After some time their work in that city was hindered, and bitter persecution compelled at least two of this little band, Paul and Silas, to seek a new field of labor. Following the course of the great Roman road which led through Greece, they passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, and came to Thessalonica, one hundred miles from Philippi. Thessalonica was the chief city of the rich and populous province of Macedonia, a centre alike for trade, culture and political power. Paul, like a wise commander, determined to occupy it as a strategic point, in the conviction that a church planted there would speedily spread the knowledge of the gospel far and wide. His wisdom in selecting this place as his next field of labor was fully justified by the results. In his first letter to the church founded in this city he writes: "From you sounded out the word of the Lord, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to Godward is spread abroad."

There was another reason which doubtless had its influence with Paul in deciding him to tarry in Thessalonica. There was a certain preparation in it for the reception of the gospel. A large number of Jews had been attracted to it by its flourishing trade; they had built a synagogue, and "not a few" Greeks, both men and women, were joined with them as proselytes. Among these Jews was a kinsman of Paul, one Jason, who subsequently became a Christian, and at whose house Paul and Silas lodged for a time. Such was the field which the apostle entered to found the second church of Europe.

We are not informed how long Paul remained in Thessalonica. For three weeks he preached in the synagogue to the Jews, and after this to the Gentiles, from whom he gathered the larger part of the converts. It is altogether probable that his stay lasted two or three months. But, short as it was comparatively, it was a period of intense activity and incessant labor to the apostle. From the two Epistles which he wrote to the Thessalonians some months later we can gather much both as to the character and manner of his ministry while with them. It was here that he practiced the trade which he had learned when a boy in Tarsus, in order that he might not be burdensome to the brethren, and at the same time set an example to certain idlers who were disposed to depend upon the charity of others for their support. Here also he carried on his work in the gospel through many afflictions and painful struggles. From the brief account here given of his ministry in this city, and also from his letters to the Thessalonian church, we can easily see—

First: The subject-matter of his teaching and the manner in which he taught. As his custom was from the beginning of his ministry, he went into the synagogue, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with the Jews

out of the Old-Testament Scriptures in order to present their testimony concerning the promised Messiah. His countrymen were everywhere, upon the authority of the word of God, looking for a Messiah who should come to deliver Israel and reign in great glory. But they strangely overlooked the testimony of the Scriptures to his sufferings and death. This was the new view which Paul specially set before them in the synagogue. He "opened" the word, as though it had been a casket, in order that they might see the truth which it had always held like a precious jewel. He had no difficulty in finding the doctrine of the atonement in the Old Testament. Its types and sacrifices and prophetic testimonies all pointed to a suffering Saviour, who should die for the sins of his people and be raised again for their justification.

It was precisely the same course that Christ himself followed with his disciples when he would remove their doubts and establish their faith after his resurrection: "Then said he unto them, O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory?" If the Scriptures, which they received as the infallible word of God, were fulfilled, it must needs be that the promised Messiah should suffer and die, and rise again from the dead. Then came the apostle's testimony: "Jesus, whom I preach to you, and who was crucified at Jerusalem, and who rose again from the dead, is the Christ." Paul sought to gain the faith of his hearers, not by working miracles, but by presenting that divine testimony to Jesus Christ which is contained in the Scriptures. The ground and warrants for our faith are to be found in the word of God. So it is written, "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." It is one thing to reason with unbelieving men *about* the

Scriptures, but another and a more important matter to reason with them, as did Paul, *out of* the Scriptures. Opening the Scriptures to men so that they shall see clearly Christ crucified for their sins and raised again for their justification is the true and only method of teaching so as to produce saving faith. The one object of saving faith, which is the Lamb of God, must be presented to the soul in order to create faith.

Second: This lesson shows us the twofold results of the apostle's preaching. "Some of them"—that is, of the Jews—"believed," and openly avowed their faith by joining themselves with Paul and Silas. More, however, of the "devout Greeks"—that is, of the proselytes—believed, and especially "of the chief women not a few." It is very suggestive to observe that in the account of the establishment of the Church in Europe particular mention is made of the fact that women are among the converts. Christianity brought a new day and a glorious deliverance for womanhood. In addition to these converts from the adherents of the synagogue there was a still larger ingathering from the Gentiles. Many "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead."

We have also the apostolic testimony to the power of the word preached, as seen in the changed lives of those who believed. He writes: "We give thanks to God always for you, making mention of you in our prayers, remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labor of love, and patience of hope, in our Lord Jesus Christ; for our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance. And ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with

joy of the Holy Ghost; so that ye were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia" (1 Thess. 1:2-8). Such were the joyful and sanctifying effects of the word of God when it was honestly received and obeyed; and such miracles of transformation it can still work.

With others the preaching of Paul had an opposite effect. Instead of being to them "a savor of life unto life," it was that of "death unto death." It stirred up their hatred and envy; it moved them to deeds of violence and to the spreading abroad of wicked calumnies. Prejudice, pride, self-righteousness, carnal desire, bigotry and religious fanaticism make a dreadful audience for the faithful preacher of the gospel. They are certain to go out to plot for his overthrow and to lie about his doctrine.

We read concerning the Jews which believed not that "they took unto them certain lewd fellows of the baser sort, and gathered a company, and set all the city in an uproar, and assaulted the house of Jason [where Paul and Silas were lodging], and sought to bring them out to the people." Their conduct reveals their character. First, their baseness is revealed by their unreasonableness. Paul reasoned with them out of their own Scriptures; he affirmed that the word of God was on his side. As reasonable men they should have answered his arguments or else admitted the truth of what he taught. But instead they let passion and prejudice control them, and raised a mob against him. Beaten in arguments, they resorted to violence. They were determined not to yield to the truth, even though it was in the inspired word of God. Next, we see their bigotry and fanaticism. They were "moved with envy" because so many of the Gentiles believed. It gave them no joy to see multitudes turning "to God from idols to serve the living

and true God." All they cared for was their own synagogue. Paul was teaching the godless and licentious Gentiles to walk "holily," "justly," "unblameably" and "worthy of God;" and yet they were filled with rage and denounced him as a public enemy. They said, "These that have turned the world upside down, have come hither also." The charge which they meant as a reproach was indeed true in a better sense. The gospel is revolutionary in its character. It comes to turn the world upside down in order that it may set it right side up. Its teachings and precepts are the very opposite of those of the world. Take, for example, the great principles of Christ's kingdom as set forth in the Beatitudes, and what a turning upside down of the ways of the world would their general application to human conduct produce! It reveals a most malignant and ignoble condition of mind when the success of the gospel enrages men.

Third: We see how unprincipled and base these unbelievers were, in that they lied about the apostle and his doctrine.

They asserted that he was disloyal to Cæsar, and was fomenting a rebellion by preaching that "there was another king, one Jesus." Such a statement was especially calculated to produce a great excitement in Thessalonica, for it was one of the free cities of the Roman empire, and any suspicion of disloyalty attaching to it would have caused the taking away of its privileges by the imperial power. It was the charge of all others that would soonest array the rulers of the city against these missionaries of the cross, and cause their expulsion. This charge was not proven, for even the city magistrates could see that it was a gross misrepresentation of the preaching of Paul and Silas. But the general excitement produced by it was so great that Jason and his

friends were compelled to give bail to keep the peace, and so, in order to prevent further riots, Paul and Silas were sent away by night. Doubtless, these unbelievers rejoiced in the success of their evil policy, but, as their conduct stands revealed in the light of the centuries, who would wish to be in fellowship with them? Their judgment is written. They show themselves to be unreasonable, prejudiced, evil-disposed and false to the claims of truth. And yet there are men to whom the same gospel is offered and the same proofs presented that Paul proclaimed, and they will not believe.

In striking contrast with this is the account which follows of a different class of hearers. About sixty miles west of Thessalonica was the city of Berea. Thither the two persecuted but undaunted missionaries made their way, and again, according to Paul's custom, went into the synagogue. In one respect, at least, it was a repetition of the scene in the synagogue at Thessalonica. There was the same sermon, the same reasoning out of the Scriptures, and the same statement "that Christ must needs have suffered and risen again from the dead." But in another respect it was strikingly different. The Jews there "were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the Scriptures daily whether these things were so." Here were hearers open to reason, eager to know the truth, and willing to search the word of God and abide by its decision. For all time the commendation of the Holy Ghost is sealed upon them. Their patent of nobility is beyond dispute. They "were more noble than those in Thessalonica." This manner of expression does not imply that there was some degree of nobility in the latter. According to the idiom of the

Greek language it simply asserts a comparison in which all the nobleness belongs to the Bereans.

It is well that we should know the marks of a noble hearer of the gospel as he is measured by the Holy Ghost. True nobility in this respect is not something determined by rank, dress, wealth, intelligence or culture. It belongs to the soul. The disposition a man has toward the claims of holiness, truth, purity, love and righteousness furnishes the index to the nobility of his soul. These noble Bereans were, first of all, unprejudiced. They showed themselves to be genuine seekers after truth, in that "they received the word with all readiness of mind." They were willing and attentive listeners. There is often a strange indifference to be found in many who are accustomed to hear the gospel preached from Sabbath to Sabbath, which acts as an effectual barrier to the entrance of the truth. Prejudice or worldliness, like some hard dry crust over the soil, prevents the reception of the good seed of the word. Certainly, such a condition of mind is to the dishonor of the hearer. The statements of the gospel are so profoundly important that they deserve a fair, honest and attentive consideration at our hands; and when men, on one pretext or another, refuse to give it, they display an ignoble spirit. If, while some one was speaking of the imminent peril of his country and the true method of deliverance, there should be found among his hearers a man not only utterly indifferent to the message, but at the same time manifesting great anxiety about procuring some dainty food or a certain new style of dress, would not he be judged by all as an ignoble soul? Such trifling in view of such great issues is unworthy of a man. Yet how many hear the gospel message concerning a greater ruin and a greater deliverance, and never raise their thoughts above the trifling and transitory affairs of

time! Or if the truth is more urgently pressed upon their attention, they become indignant and take sides against it.

It is a good sign when men show a readiness to consider the claims of the gospel. Such was the spirit manifested by the Bereans. Their nobleness was also revealed in another way: "They searched the Scriptures daily, whether these things were so." Some minds are exceedingly impressible. Like lakes lying open to every wind that blows from any quarter, they respond to the last doctrine preached to them. They are never fixed and settled in their convictions. But these Bereans had an unchanging and infallible standard of truth—the Scriptures. Like wise men they acted in accordance with the direction which Christ gave to his countrymen: "Search the Scriptures, for in them ye think ye have eternal life, and they are they which testify of me." Instead of answering the arguments of the apostle with indifference or persecution, they examined for themselves whether he spoke according to the testimony of prophecy or not.

The fact that they did this "daily" showed their profound interest. The gospel does not appeal to our ignorance nor demand a blind, unreasoning faith, nor yet are we called upon to believe on the authority of the Church or of preachers and teachers. The revealed word of God is for every man, that he may search it and consider its testimony. Unlike the Romish Church, the Holy Ghost encourages the examination of the Scriptures on the part of those who hear. A genuine spirit of inquiry is not opposed by the word of God. By it we must try every doctrine that we hear, and if it is contrary to its testimony we must reject it. "Beloved," writes John, "believe not every spirit, but try the spirits, whether they are of God." The Bereans showed their nobleness by their loyalty to the truth.

III. The result of their investigation is briefly recorded: "Therefore many of them believed; also honorable women which were Greeks, and of men not a few."

This was to be expected, for "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." Not only then, but ever since, the careful, honest and prayerful study of the Scriptures has brought multitudes to the full and clear persuasion of the truth of the gospel. If men would be rid of their doubts and brought into the clear light of saving truth, let them come to the word of God and search it honestly and reverently. Let them manifest a noble spirit in hearing and obeying its precepts, and they will not be wanting in faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The rule which is to be drawn from the commendation of the course of the Bereans has a double application. Its observance would undoubtedly increase the number of believers. It might also cause the vacating of many pulpits in these days. It was an apostle who preached, yet the Holy Ghost commends the conduct of the Bereans in testing his doctrine by the Scriptures before they received it. No matter with what pretence of authority or with what eloquence or plausibility a man teaches, his ministry is to be rejected if it does not accord with the Scriptures. A popular preacher may have a childish and ignoble people, because they refuse to test his doctrine by the only infallible standard, the word of God. Instead of being the free men of truth, they are the slaves of a man.