

Sabbath School Lesson #13 – Journey to Rome – 22-28 September 2018

Christ assured Paul that He was leading him, and He so assures us today if we like Paul acknowledge Him as our Lord. As Paul was being transported on the Journey to Rome, came the assurance: "Saying, Fear not, Paul; thou must be brought before Caesar: and, lo, God hath given thee all them that sail with thee" (Acts 27:24).

Sunday: Sailing to Rome – Whilst sailing to Rome, Paul had faith in Christ. What is faith? "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). Faith is active; it is keenly alive to all the dangers that surround, yet is confident, because it has a clear perception of certain evidence. Here is the case of Paul on his sea-voyage to Rome. Among two hundred and seventy-six souls on board the vessel, Paul alone was calm and unmoved amid the terrible tempest. Could it be that he was insensible to the danger? By no means. He had many times been on the sea, and he realized the danger of the situation better than any-one else did. When the sailors thought the prospect was very favourable, Paul had told them that the voyage would end disastrously (Acts 27:9-12). What was the source of his courage? Hear his words to the passengers and crew: "There shall be no loss of any man's life among you, but of the ship. For there stood by me this night the angel of God, whose I am, and whom I serve, Saying, Fear not, Paul; thou must be brought before Caesar: and, lo, God hath given thee all them that sail with thee. Wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer; for I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me" (Acts 27:22-25).

Paul's belief in the promise of God, however, did not keep him from putting forth every possible effort for the safety of himself and his fellow passengers. He exhorted them to eat, that they might retain their strength, and he hindered the sailors from leaving the ship, declaring that if they should leave, the rest could not be saved. The sailors were needed on board the ship, to do all that they could towards managing it. It is worthy of note, also, that because these people were saved in answer to his prayers, Paul did not set up in the life-saving business, and advertise that he would deliver from shipwreck all sailors who would take him along to pray for them. Often what is called faith is only blindness or negligence. For instance, there are professed Christians who pray for their children, and who therefore have, as they think, faith that their children will be saved. Yet they do nothing more than pray occasionally for their children, and yet leave them practically without restraint. Now is it a manifestation of faith for parents to believe that their children will be saved? Not at all; for the "evidence" is all against such a result. "A child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame" (Proverbs 29:15). Self-deception and careless security are altogether different from faith.

Monday: The Shipwreck – It is the will of God that we should be delivered from this present evil world (Galatians 1:4). It is the "good-pleasure of his will" that He has made us accepted in the Beloved. It is the will of God that Christ should save us, and raise us up at the last day (John 6:39). Paul expected "a prosperous journey by the will of God" (Romans 1:10), to visit the church at Rome. Indeed Paul visited the church at Rome, although he was shipwrecked on the way; but he knew that "all things works together for good to them that love God" (Romans 8:28). If people who talk so solemnly about submitting to the will of God, whenever some affliction occurs, would talk also about submitting to His will in the sunshine, the showers, the food, and the fruits of the earth, they would soon learn that God is not always trying to make it unpleasant for His children; and they would soon be able to say, "I delight to do Thy will, O my God; yea, Thy law is within my heart" (Psalms 40:8).

Tuesday: In Malta – When on his way to Rome as a prisoner, Paul was shipwrecked and cast upon the island of Malta. Putting some wood upon the fire at the island, "there came a viper out of the heat, and fastened on his hand." Seeing "the venomous beast" hanging upon his hand, the people at once concluded that he was an escaped criminal whom "vengeance suffereth not to live." And so they expected to see him fall down dead, or at least to show some sign of distress, but "he shook off the beast into the fire, and felt no harm" (Acts 28:5).

This was in direct fulfilment of the Lord's promise to the believers, "They shall take up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them" (Mark 16:18), and it contains also a practical lesson for us. Of course it illustrates God's power to keep those

who put their trust in Him, but the way in which this power is exercised, and the part which we have to act in connection with it, are not always so clearly understood as they should be.

God does not in an arbitrary way impart this gift to some and withhold it from others. "For there is no respect of persons with God." There is only one power in the universe and that is God's power. Even the power of that old Serpent is simply a perversion of the power of God. But God's power is the inherent power of His own goodness, His righteousness, and in the revealing of His character is the revealing of His power. It is therefore clear that the giving of His power as simply the giving of His own righteousness in Jesus Christ "the power of God;" and the receiving of this power is simply the receiving of Jesus Christ. Paul had faith which saved the lives of all the ship's company. God gave them to him, and he accepted the gift through his faith in the Word of God; "I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me." Thus was it possible to avert the destruction which the enemy was attempting to bring upon them. And the experience with the viper was simply the same thing in another form. And the same faith which saved his life and the lives of the others from "the prince of the power of the air," who worked through the storm, now saved him from the same power working through the viper. And so "he shook off the beast into the fire, and felt no harm." But the faith which made such results as these possible did not come in a day, and that was not the first time that the apostle had shaken off the viper and felt no harm. The fundamental principle in all his experience as a Christian was this: "It is no longer I that live, but Christ liveth in me: and that life which I now live in the flesh I live in faith" (Galatians 2:20). This it was which gave him the power over all the attacks of that old serpent, in whatsoever form they were made. And so having by his faith shaken off that old Serpent whenever he had fastened himself upon him, he was prepared for that experience, on the island of Malta that day.

The lesson for us is plain enough. So long as we are in this world of sin we are exposed to the attacks of the enemy, yet the Lord's presence will keep us in the way, and even if "that old serpent, called the devil and Satan" should fasten himself upon us, we shall be able to shake off the venomous beast and feel no harm, provided that our faith keeps the channel of power open to us. "These signs shall follow *them that believe*." And as the lack of faith in the earth and the refusal to accept Jesus Christ are opening the way more and more for "the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders," those who would be preserved from the perils of these last days must be putting into constant use the faith which works by love. The power of an indwelling Saviour will hold in check "all the power of the enemy." "Thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Wednesday: Paul in Rome, Finally – In the days of Paul, Christians were seen as a "sect ... that every where it is spoken against" (Acts 28:22). Later, in the great empire of Rome, that filled the world, "Christians" were so many that the crafty and worldly-wise Constantine saw that it would be greatly to his advantage to favour them rather than his pagan subjects. So "the church" was "recognized" by the civil power. Thus the sect, which in the days of Paul was "everywhere spoken against," now sat in the high places of the earth, and all nations were flowing unto it (see Isaiah 2:2-3). Sadly, long after the days of Paul, the voice of the people that Constantine mistook for a voice of God, led to that great apostasy of which Paul had written (2 Thessalonians 2:1-8), which culminated in the establishment of the Papacy.

Thursday: The Victory of the Gospel – Speaking of the interview that Paul had with the Jews in Rome, the evangelist says: "And when they agreed not among themselves, they departed, after that Paul had spoken one word, Well spake the Holy Ghost by Esaias the prophet unto our fathers, saying, Go unto this people and say, Hearing, ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing, ye shall see, and shall not perceive: For the heart of this people is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they closed; lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them" (Acts 28:25-27). Although these recorded words hardly seem like 'the victory of the Gospel', Paul in reality preached the Gospel, the words he spoke were good news for all who would hear, since they made known the flimsy character of the barrier that kept the people from healing. It is no different today. If people would use their senses, hear with their ears, see with their eyes, and understand with their hearts, the result would be that they "should be converted, and [Christ] should heal them."