**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**ACTS-055. JEWISH REJECTERS AND GENTILE RECEIVERS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"44.* *And the next Sabbath day came almost the whole city together to hear the word of God. 45. But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy, and spake against those things which were spoken by Paul, contradicting and blaspheming. 46. Then Paul and Barnabas waxed bold, and said, It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you: but seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles. 47. For so hath the Lord commanded us, saying, I have set thee to be a light of the Gentiles, that thou shouldest be for salvation unto the ends of the earth. 48. And when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad, and glorified the word of the Lord: and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed. 49. And the word of the Lord was published throughout all the region. 50. But the Jews stirred up the devout and honourable women, and the chief men of the city, and raised persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them out of their coasts. 51. But they shook off the dust of their feet against them, and came unto Iconium. 52. And the disciples were filled with joy, and with the Holy Ghost.."*

*Acts 13:44-52*

*"1. And it came to pass in Iconium, that they went both together into the synagogue of the Jews, and so spake, that a great multitude both of the Jews and also of the Greeks believed. 2. But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles, and made their minds evil affected against the brethren. 3. Long time therefore abode they speaking boldly in the Lord, which gave testimony unto the word of His grace, and granted signs and wonders to be done by their hands. 4. But the multitude of the city was divided: and part held with the Jews, and part with the Apostles. 5. And when there was an assault made both of the Gentiles, and also of the Jews with their rulers, to use them despitefully, and to stone them, 6. They were ware of it, and fled unto Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and unto the region that lieth round about: 7. And there they preached the Gospel."*

*Acts 14:1-7*

In general outline, the course of events in the two great cities of Asia Minor, with which the present passage is concerned, was the same. It was only too faithful a forecast of what was to be Paul's experience everywhere. The stages are: preaching in the synagogue, rejection there, appeal to the Gentiles, reception by them, a little nucleus of believers formed; disturbances fomented by the Jews, who swallow their hatred of Gentiles by reason of their greater hatred of the Apostles, and will riot with heathens, though they will not pray nor eat with them; and finally the Apostles' departure to carry the gospel farther afield. This being the outline, we have mainly to consider any special features diversifying it in each case.

Their experience in Antioch was important, because it forced Paul and Barnabas to put into plain words, making very clear to themselves as well as to their hearers, the law of their future conduct. It is always a step in advance when circumstances oblige us to formularise our method of action. Words have a wonderful power in clearing up our own vision. Paul and Barnabas had known all along that they were sent to the Gentiles; but a conviction in the mind is one thing, and the same conviction driven in on us by facts is quite another. The discipline of Antioch crystallised floating intentions into a clear statement, which henceforth became the rule of Paul's conduct. Well for us if we have open eyes to discern the meaning of difficulties, and promptitude and decision to fix and speak out plainly the course which they prescribe!

The miserable motives of the Jews' antagonism are forcibly stated in vs. 44, 45. They did not contradict and blaspheme, because they had taken a week to think over the preaching and had seen its falseness, but simply because, dog-in-the-manger like, they could not bear that the whole city should be welcome to share the message. No doubt there was a crowd of Gentile dogs thronging the approach to the synagogue; and one can almost see the scowling faces and hear the rustle of the robes drawn closer to avoid pollution. Who were these wandering strangers that they should gather such a crowd? And what had the uncircumcised rabble of Antioch to do with the promises made to the fathers? It is not the only time that religious men have taken offence at crowds gathering to hear God's word. Let us take care that we do not repeat the sin. There are always some who--

Taking God's word under wise protection,

Correct its tendency to diffusiveness.

It needed some courage to front the wild excitement of such a mob, with calm, strong words likely to increase the rage.

Lo, we turn to the Gentiles. This is not to be regarded as announcing a general course of action, but simply as applying to the actual rejecters in Antioch. The necessity that the word should first be spoken to the Jews continued to be recognised, in each new sphere of work, by the Apostle; but wherever, as here, men turned from the message, the messengers turned from them without further waste of time. Paul put into words here the law for his whole career. The fit punishment of rejection is the withdrawal of the offer. There is something pathetic in the persistence with which, in place after place, Paul goes through the same sequence, his heart yearning over his brethren according to the flesh, and hoping on, after all repulses. It was far more than natural patriotism; it was an offshoot of Christ's own patient love.

Note also the divine command. Paul bases his action on a prophecy as to the Messiah. But the relation on which prophecy insists between the personal servant of Jehovah and the collective Israel, is such that the great office of being the Light of the world devolves from Him on it and the true Israel is to be a light to the Gentiles. These very Jews in Antioch, lashing themselves into fury because Gentiles were to be offered a share in Israel's blessings, ought to have been discharging this glorious function. Their failure showed that they were no parts of the real Israel. No doubt the two missionaries left the synagogue as they spoke, and, as the door swung behind them, it shut hope out and unbelief in. The air was fresh outside, and eager hearts welcomed the word. Very beautifully is the gladness of the Gentile hearers set in contrast with the temper of the Jews. It is strange news to heathen hearts that there is a God who loves them, and a divine Christ who has died for them. The experience of many a missionary follows Paul's here.

As many as were ordained to eternal life believed. The din of many a theological battle has raged round these words, the writer of which would have probably needed a good deal of instruction before he could have been made to understand what the fighting was about. But it is to be noted that there is evidently intended a contrast between the envious Jews and the gladly receptive Gentiles, which is made more obvious by the repetition of the words eternal life. It would seem much more relevant and accordant with the context to understand the word rendered ordained as meaning adapted or fitted, than to find in it a reference to divine foreordination. Such a meaning is legitimate, and strongly suggested by the context. The reference then would be to the frame of mind of the heathen, and not to the decrees of God.

The only points needing notice in the further developments at Antioch are the agents employed by the Jews, the conduct of the Apostles, and the sweet little picture of the converts. As to the former, piously inclined women in a heathen city would be strongly attracted by Judaism and easily lend themselves to the impressions of their teachers. We know that many women of rank were at that period powerfully affected in this manner; and if a Rabbi could move a Gentile of influence through whispers to the Gentile's wife, he would not be slow to do it. The ease with which the Jews stirred up tumults everywhere against the Apostle indicates their possession of great influence; and their willingness to be hand in glove with heathen for so laudable an object as crushing one of their own people who had become a heretic, measures the venom of their hate and the depth of their unscrupulousness.

The Apostles had not to fear violence, as their enemies were content with turning them out of Antioch and its neighbourhood; but they obeyed Christ's command, shaking off the dust against them, in token of renouncing all connection. The significant act is a trace of early knowledge of Christ's words, long before the date of our Gospels.

While the preachers had to leave the little flock in the midst of wolves, there was peace in the fold. Like the Ethiopian courtier when deprived of Philip, the new believers at Antioch found that the withdrawal of the earthly brought the heavenly Guide. They were filled with joy. What! left ignorant, lonely, ringed about with enemies, how could they be glad? Because they were filled with the Holy Ghost. Surely joy in such circumstances was no less supernatural a token of His presence than rushing wind or parting flames or lips opened to speak with tongues. God makes us lonely that He may Himself be our Companion.

It was a long journey to the great city of Iconium. According to some geographers, the way led over savage mountains; but the two brethren tramped along, with an unseen Third between them, and that Presence made the road light. They had little to cheer them in their prospects, if they looked with the eye of sense; but they were in good heart, and the remembrance of Antioch did not embitter or discourage them. Straight to the synagogue, as before, they went. It was their best introduction to the new field. There, if we take the plain words of Acts xiv. 1, they found a new thing, Greeks, heathens pure and simple, not Hellenists or Greek-speaking Jews, nor even proselytes, in the synagogue. This has seemed so singular that efforts have been made to impose another sense on the words, or to suppose that the notice of Greeks, as well as Jews, believing is loosely appended to the statement of the preaching in the synagogue, omitting notice of wider evangelising. But it is better to accept than to correct our narrative, as we know nothing of the circumstances that may have led to this presence of Greeks in the synagogue. Some modern setters of the Bible writers right would be all the better for remembering occasionally that improbable things have a strange knack of happening.

The usual results followed the preaching of the Gospel. The Jews were again the mischief-makers, and, with the astuteness of their race, pushed the Gentiles to the front, and this time tried a new piece of annoyance. The brethren bore the brunt of the attack; that is, the converts, not Paul and Barnabas. It was a cunning move to drop suspicions into the minds of influential townsmen, and so to harass, not the two strangers, but their adherents. The calculation was that that would stop the progress of the heresy by making its adherents uncomfortable, and would also wound the teachers through their disciples.

But one small element had been left out of the calculation--the sort of men these teachers were; and another factor which had not hitherto appeared came into play, and upset the whole scheme. Paul and Barnabas knew when to retreat and when to stand their ground. This time they stood; and the opposition launched at their friends was the reason why they did so. Long time therefore abode they. If their own safety had been in question, they might have fled; but they could not leave the men whose acceptance of their message had brought them into straits. But behind the two bold speakers stood the Lord, Christ Himself, the true Worker. Men who live in Him are made bold by their communion with Him, and He witnesses for those who witness for Him.

Note the designation of the Gospel as the word of His grace. It has for its great theme the condescending, giving love of Jesus. Its subject is grace; its origin is grace; its gift is grace. Observe, too, that the same connection between boldness of speech and signs and wonders is found in Acts 4:29, 30. Courageous speech for Christ is ever attended by tokens of His power, and the accompanying tokens of His power make the speech more courageous.

The normal course of events was pursued. Faithful preaching provoked hostility, which led to the alliance of discordant elements, fused for a moment by a common hatred--alas! that enmity to God's truth should be often a more potent bond of union than love!--and then to a wise withdrawal from danger. Sometimes it is needful to fling away life for Jesus; but if it can be preserved without shirking duty, it is better to flee than to die. An unnecessary martyr is a suicide. The Christian readiness to be offered has nothing in common with fanatical carelessness of life, and still less with the morbid longing for martyrdom which disfigures some of the most pathetic pages of the Church's history. Paul living to preach in the regions beyond was more useful than Paul dead in a street riot in Iconium. A heroic prudence should ever accompany a trustful daring, and both are best learned in communion with Jesus.