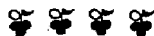


pages some months ago by Chancellor Lias. Let us meet for friendly conference. Specially let us meet for spiritual communion; and I doubt greatly the value, meanwhile, of such projects as the exchange of pulpits. All premature attempts at Reunion are apt to accentuate disunion. "Saving common sense" is a mighty factor in this momentous matter.

Surely it is blessed that men should cherish such a dream as that of Reunion on a greater or a smaller scale. Such visions may be our salvation as Churches.

As an individual Wesleyan, I have touched on but a few items of this great discussion. No one is more conscious of the difficulties than I am, but I believe no one is more sensitively alive to the splendour of the ideal; and I think that I have the Spirit of God when I say no one is more prepared to do all that in him lies towards the accomplishment of the ideal. May the spirit of Christian unity "mix with men and prosper"!



The Church and the World-Power.

A STUDY IN ACTS XII.

BY THE REV. W. S. HOOTON, B.A.

THIS chapter comes in as a parenthesis in the ordinary course of the history. No doubt its position is chronologically intentional, in order to bring up the general history¹ to the date at which the events occurred at Antioch, which are, at this point in the narrative, the main subject of consideration. But it is just one of those sections which can be taken entirely out of its surroundings and examined by itself. And, at first sight, it even appears to break the thread of the description of the rapidly ripening crisis at Antioch. We are brought back from this digression by the note added in ver. 25, which provides a link with Antioch again, in preparation for the following chapter. But, indeed, closer examination will show

¹ See ver. 1.

that the digression itself is not only chronologically correct, but also most appropriate to the historian's purpose.

Our object is principally to trace this special fitness. But first we will briefly review some of the spiritual lessons of the passage which lie outside the scope of that main inquiry.

1. We are not to be discouraged by the loss of workers, nor to question why such losses are allowed. The providence of God was over James as well as over Peter. His effectual purposes were served as fully by the martyrdom of the one as by the deliverance of the other. James's death, no doubt, brought glory to God in itself, and with equal certainty we may be sure that he was called to a higher sphere of service, having accomplished his earthly witness, and now crowned it by a martyr's death.

2. Another reflection arises as the complement of this. "The Christian is immortal till his work is done." It is a true saying, and Peter's deliverance is the illustration of this fact, as James's martyrdom was of the other. No servant of God has ever been more desperately placed. But such deliverances have been known in the experience of many of God's servants in later ages. They can be read in the records of Church history, and of present-day missionary work. No power can hurt us while there is work for us to do here. God varies His methods of deliverance; but our interests, as also His interests through us, are safe in His hands.

3. Following naturally upon these two thoughts is the lesson that a miraculous deliverance will only be given under two conditions; it must be for God's glory, and it will only be granted so far as is necessary. The first condition appears from the fact that James's martyrdom was allowed; the second is plainly indicated in ver. 10. Peter could not bring himself out of prison, and God sent His angel to strike off iron chains and open iron doors; but when Peter was out in the street the angel left him.¹ He was now free to follow his Master's

¹ A somewhat similar thought has been drawn from an interesting comparison of Mark xvi. 3, 4 with John xi. 39. The angel rolled away the stone,

injunction, which had been left for guidance under such circumstances, and he obeyed it by departing to another place.¹

May we not somewhat extend the lesson? We are often too much in a hurry. Not only do we seek for miraculous interpositions where none are needed, but sometimes even in opposition to the will of God. Patient endurance of trial must be learned, as well as faith in the possibility of deliverance. Particularly is this the case when the trial has arisen through our own fault, though even here God's deliverances are often wonderful, beyond our deserts.

4. The most fruitful lessons of all which can arise from our present detached consideration of the incident are connected with prayer. Most evidently prayer is the resource of the Church at all times.² It is the weapon which prevailed here. Never let us lose sight of the power that individual Christians, and the Church at large, *can* use if they *will*.

“That power is prayer, which soars on high
Through Jesus to the throne,
And moves the hand, which moves the world,
To bring salvation down.”

How extraordinary is the slowness of believers to use so real a power!

A good deal has been made of the strange unbelief which seems to have been exhibited by the group of praying disciples when their prayer was answered. Certainly it is true to human nature, if such a lesson is really intended to be drawn without limitation. Only too often, nothing is a greater surprise to the Christian than the answer to his own prayer; and there can be no stronger rebuke to our unbelief, and no clearer explanation of at least one hindrance to the answer. The marvel is that we receive so much. Yet it is only fair to observe that they

which had been so great a cause of depression to the women, just *because* it was too great for them to move (ver. 4), and when they looked up (R.V.) they saw their fears were needless. But in the other case the hindrance, which could be removed by human agency, had to be taken away before the deliverance could be wrought.

¹ Cf. ver. 17 with Matt. x. 23.

² Cf. iv. 24-31.

are not said to have been praying for Peter's deliverance, but only for Peter.¹ Comparing the tone of the prayer in Acts iv. 24-30, we might even think it likely that they chiefly sought on his behalf a faithful witness—perhaps unto death, as in the case of James—but at any rate the grace to be faithful. The deliverance may thus have come in the light of a glad surprise to those who had already surrendered their leading Apostle into God's hands. But, even so, we may fairly say that they were strangely dull of faith not to accept his actual deliverance as a possibility in answer to their prayers;² and at any rate there is no doubt about our own dulness and unbelief.

Is it lawful to go a step further? It may savour somewhat of speculation with regard to things not written if we do so; but is it possible that if they had prayed for James as they prayed for Peter (though we do not know that they did not), a like deliverance might have been granted? Or, may it be that after James's martyrdom they had already given up Peter too much for lost? Such matters are too deep for us; but the former possibility at least opens the way for solemn searchings of heart as to our use of this all-prevailing weapon. How far can our unfaithfulness, either in prayer or effort, hinder God's cause? We dare not say; but we know enough to realize the tremendous responsibility which rests upon us, and the sobering fact that *it makes a difference* whether we pray earnestly and obey fully.

It is interesting to observe the informal character of the gathering for prayer which is here described (ver. 12). Few ought now to need to be persuaded of the lawfulness or of the helpfulness of prayer-meetings. Yet it is good to have the direct Scriptural sanction, of which this is one instance. In such a case of dire distress, it may be said, it was only natural. But is the exercise of prayer to be limited to periods of distress and peril? And is not the Master's assurance of His special

¹ Ver. 5: *περὶ αὐτοῦ*. Even the reading *ὑπὲρ αὐτοῦ* need imply no more.

² Ver. 15. They thought it was the guardian angel which Jewish belief assigned to every man. Possibly some allowance should be made for their distracted sorrow.

presence with groups of praying believers¹ a pledge of the efficacy of united prayer at all seasons? And does not the Church of our day stand in need of the power required and used by the Church of old?

But let us turn now from these detailed reflections upon the lessons of the incident, and examine its *typical significance*, which is full of instruction with regard to its position in the history.

It may be said with confidence that the Herods stand in Scripture as representatives of the world-power. As it was their policy to court the favour of Rome, to which they owed all their authority, this symbolical reference is most appropriate. At any rate, in the case of the three members of the line who are actually called by the name in Scripture,² the deadly opposition of the world to Christ is plainly seen. It is impossible to mistake the significance with which we meet, at the very outset of the Gospel story, with the attempt of Herod the Great to destroy the infant Saviour in the massacre of the Innocents. The relations, again, between Herod Antipas and John the Baptist are those of open conflict between the good and the evil, and that conflict is further illustrated by the share which the same king afterwards had in the condemnation of the Lord Himself. And now we have Agrippa I. brought before us under this name, which bears with it such terrible associations, and the evidences of the same eternal conflict are as clearly marked as ever. May it not, then, be said, without any fantastic distortion of Scripture, that the name "Herod" stands for the world in its pride of power, and in its relentless opposition to Christ and His Church and His truth?³

¹ Matt. xviii. 19, 20. It is by no means certain that the meeting of Acts xii. 12 was only held privately because public services were dangerous. Indeed, the expression in ver. 5 has been taken to imply that the Church continued to meet as usual (as in ver. 12), in spite of persecution.

² Agrippa II., the last of the line, though mentioned, is not actually called "Herod" in Acts xxv. and xxvi.

³ It is, further, remarkable how close a resemblance is to be found between the three leading Jewish parties named by the Evangelists and some of those in the Christian Church now. With some limitations, the Pharisees represent the exclusive spirit of ceremonialism and formality; the Sadducees

With all this in view, how exactly does this episode fit into its position in the narrative! At the juncture when all is ready for the great advance which is planned at Antioch, it is but natural that we should read of a great effort on the part of the power of the world to assert itself.¹ It is, in fact, quite likely that this new persecution was stirred up by the Jews on the ground of what they had heard concerning the action taken by leaders of the Church about this time in the reception of Gentile converts without Jewish rites. If so, the free opening of the door to all the world would have an even closer connection with this ferocious attempt to put special hindrances in the way of the proposed advance. And the futility of the outbreak of enmity is made plain in preparation for the coming records of progress.

The special encouragement which such a narrative gives to the Church of all ages will appear when we consider closely the result of this crisis. Could anything be apparently more hopeless than the position of Peter at the outset of the story? The prison doors, the iron chains, the relays of guards—above all, the relentless king upon the throne—were seemingly insuperable obstacles to deliverance. The tyrant had been allowed to work his will upon another Apostle. What reason was there to think it would be otherwise now? It would appear that the prisoner was sleeping his last earthly sleep,² the relief being delayed almost till the last moment, as is so frequently the case in God's good providence, for His greater glory and our purer faith and truer thankfulness and joy. To Peter in the prison, or to the believers in Mary's house, what hope of deliverance, humanly speaking, could there now be? Yet see how things

are those who, under a cloke of broad-mindedness, cover practical unbelief in spiritual verities and an irreverent criticism of Holy Scripture; and the Herodians correspond to such as would compromise between the Church and the world, and rely upon worldly influence to support spiritual work.

¹ Cf. the special outburst of demoniacal energy which seems to have coincided with our Lord's earthly ministry.

² Ver. 6. Peter's calmness is an example of Christian restfulness in the face of danger, if, as is possible, he knew the end seemed so near. Cf. Dean Plumtre in Bishop Ellicott's "Commentary."

stand after a few more vivid sentences. Herod is not upon the throne at the end of the chapter. He dies a loathsome death, smitten for his blasphemous pride and self-sufficiency. It is the prisoner who goes free; the king is bound in the chains of a miserable disease, and, above all, the work prospers. That is the main consideration—not Peter's deliverance, but God's glory. "Immediately an angel of the Lord smote him . . . and he . . . gave up the ghost. But the word of God grew and multiplied" (vers. 23, 24, R.V.). This collocation of contrasted ideas must be intentional,¹ and the intention of so vivid a contrast, especially in view of the complete turning of the tables from the position as related in vers. 1-3, must be to represent the victory of God over all seemingly successful combinations against His cause.²

It is instructive to note the same kind of ultimate result in the case of the other Herods. Herod the Great slays the Innocents, but his own end speedily follows,³ and the infant Saviour (by a similar contrast) grows and prospers all the while. Herod Antipas slays John the Baptist, but cannot quiet his own conscience⁴; he enjoys the seeming triumph of having the King of kings at his bar, but the positions will be reversed one day. All history and all prophecy confirm the lessons which are so strikingly presented in the vivid contrasts of Acts xii. The world often seems to triumph—momentarily and partially⁵—but God gives His Church in His Word sufficient ground of assurance that He rules over all, and that the ultimate destruction of the powers of evil and the firm establishment of His own kingdom are beyond doubt. He cheers them, by the recorded experiences of His servants in past ages, with the

¹ Another remarkable contrast is provided by the language of vers. 7 and 23. An angel, in each case, "smote" Peter for deliverance, and Herod for death. May not this also be intentional?

² The repetition of the lesson so manifest in Acts iii.-v. is very plain. No power avails to hurt or hinder when God's finger is stretched forth to work and to deliver.

³ Matt. ii. 19, 20.

⁴ Mark vi. 14, 16.

⁵ As at Calvary itself, where its devices were even made subservient to the destruction of its own power.

certainty that, though they may have to pass through afflictions and death, it will only be so if His glory may be the better secured thereby; while He inspires them with the confidence that no power in earth or hell can restrain His working here and now, if it be His will to deliver. With this present assurance, and certain future triumph, nothing remains but to go forward in the conflict with a good hope, a thankful courage, and an ever-ready use of the weapon of prayer which we have seen He provides for the special relief of His Church militant here in earth.



New Year's Hymn.

"I will not fail thee."—*Joshua* i. 5.

BY THE REV. A. J. SANTER.

I.

THE love of God can never fail,
 As ocean's depths it doth abound;
 Unweared on the wand'rer's trail
 It seeks till erring souls are found.¹

2.

The strength of God can never fail,
 To Him all power and might belong;
 We know ourselves as weaklings frail,²
 Then in Omnipotence are strong.

3.

The truth of God can never fail,
 His word, unchanging, never dies;³
 "The Lord hath spoken" shall prevail
 O'er man's conceits and Satan's lies.

¹ Luke xv. 2.

² 2 Cor. xii. 10.

³ 1 Pet. i. 23.