

Sabbath School Lesson #3 – Life in the early Church – 14-20 July 2018

Christ would have us learn lessons from the early church, especially how the church grew. We read of them, “And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved” (Acts 2:26-27). Another rendering of verse 47 says, “And the Lord added to them day by day those that were being saved.” Here is a wonderful condition of things revealed. There were no hypocrites in the church at that time. None joined except those who were in the way of salvation. Why was this? – Because the Lord added the people to the church. It was not the work of men. It is a good deal better that the Lord should bring additions to the church than that new members should be brought in by this or that minister. That which the Lord does is done right. What were the believers doing? – They were praising God, not alone with their voices, but by their lives. They were, with voice and life, showing the power and goodness of God. This is the way that God wants His people to work for Him. David said: “I waited patiently for the Lord; and He inclined unto me, and heard my cry. He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings. And He hath put a new song in my mouth, even praise unto our God; many shall see it and fear, and trust in the Lord” (Psalms 40:1-3).

Sunday: Teaching and Fellowship – The disciples were able to teach and fellowship because they were united to Christ. To thus be united to Christ and by the means of Christ’s life to each other, means to accept Christ in the fullest sense. To accept Christ as a Saviour, a redeemer, a way of life, an example, or a teacher, will not suffice. He declares, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (John 14:6). To accept Jesus Christ as *the* Way is to give up all our ways and yield all, willingly (for He will never compel), to His way. “Whosoever he be of you that forsaketh [renounceth] not all that he hath, he can not be My disciple” (Luke 14:33). The disciples taught the truth, for they first accepted Christ as the truth. To accept Jesus Christ as *the* Truth, means to accept the Word of God, as God’s message through Christ to this world. For Christ is the Word, the one through whom all the Word was given (John 1:1-3; 1 Cor. 8:6). It was His power that created all things; it was His Spirit that spake through the prophets (Col. 1:16; 1 Peter 1:10-11). He it is who has in all times and ages declared the Father to the children of men, whether as the Angel of the Covenant, the Pillar of Cloud and Fire, the exhaustless Rock-fountain in the desert, the Man Christ Jesus in Judea, the Inspirer of the Holy Writings, or the Sender of the Comforter – His own Spirit. The Holy Word, Christ in you the hope of glory, the one law and one Gospel, is the message of eternal salvation from God to the sons of men. So Christ prays for those whom He would make one, “Sanctify them through Thy truth; Thy Word is truth;” for by that Word was He sanctified, “that they also might be sanctified through the truth” (John 17:17-19). He who truly accepts Christ will take the Word of Christ into his heart, and there let its vital principles live and grow, fashioning him day by day like the Master. That Word will be the Christ revealed in writing. And Christ will be that Word revealed in character. Thus it was with the early church, accepting Jesus Christ made the early apostolic church what it was, united in heart and purpose, in word and doctrine, in worship, in life. “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship;” “and the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul; . . . and with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus; and great grace was upon them all.” Thus it was in that early church. How precious to them were the truths and hopes of the resurrection, the second coming of Christ, the atonement in its fullest and strongest sense, the power of the Spirit of Christ working in them in those days!

Monday: The Healing of a Lame Man – The healing of this man (Acts 3:6-8) was an illustration of the power of faith to deliver from bondage. This notable miracle on one whom all had seen caused a wonderful excitement among the people, and when Peter saw their astonishment, he proceeded to tell how the wonder had been performed, saying that it is in the name of Jesus, and that, “*through faith in his name hath made this man strong, whom ye see and know; yea, the faith which is by him hath given him this perfect soundness in the presence of you all*” (verses 12-16).

“The man was lame from his mother’s womb,” unable to help himself. He would gladly have walked, but he could not. We likewise can all say, with David, “Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Psalms 51:5). As a consequence, we are by nature so weak that we cannot do the things that we would. As each year of the man’s life increased his inability to walk by increasing the weight of his body, while his limbs grew no stronger, so the repeated practice of sin, as we grow older, strengthens its power over us. It was an utter impossibility for that man to walk; yet the name of Christ, through faith in it, gave him perfect

soundness and freedom from his infirmity. So we, through the faith which is by Him, may be made whole and enabled to do the thing which hitherto has been impossible. For the things which are impossible with man are possible with God. He is the Creator. "To them that have no might he increaseth strength." One of the wonders of faith, as shown in the cases of the ancient worthies, is that they "out of weakness were made strong." God delivers from bondage those who trust in Him.

Tuesday: The Rise of Opposition – It is a question of what to do with commands of the powers that be. "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God; the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God; and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation" (Romans 13:1-2).

That inspiration does not teach that men are in duty bound to obey every edict of earthly powers, but that they are to disobey every enactment which conflicts with the law of God, is very plain. Take the case of the three Hebrew children at the court of Nebuchadnezzar. They were as truly bound to be subject to him as ever any men were to an earthly ruler, for Nebuchadnezzar was king by God's own appointment (Jeremiah 27:4-7), and they had by the same power been placed under him. Yet when the king commanded them to worship an image which he had set up, they absolutely refused to do anything of the kind. For their stubbornness, as the king doubtless thought it, they were cast into a fiery furnace; yet the Lord who commands us to be subject to the powers that be, showed His approval of their course in the most marked manner. The example of the apostles afford another case in point. An express injunction was laid upon them by the Jewish Sanhedrim "not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus" (Acts 4:17-18). The apostles, however, refused to keep silence, saying, "We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard" (verse 20), and they went right on teaching as though the rulers had said nothing. When they were again brought before the council, and reminded of the injunction which had been laid upon them, they boldly replied, "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). All these cases, and especially this last, show that the command to be subject to the powers that be, does not mean that we should obey them when that obedience involves disobedience to God.

Wednesday: Ananias and Sapphira – There are probably few who really comprehend the crime for which Ananias and Sapphira were punished. It is a fact that simply lying is not the sin for which these unfortunate persons suffered. Their sin was hypocrisy of the worst kind. They wished to have a reputation for generosity and benevolence, without the necessary self-denial. Premeditated lie it was; Ananias and his wife had agreed together to practice this deception, and they dared to persist in it even in the place of solemn prayer. If Peter had not questioned them, they would have simply handed in a part of the money and said nothing; but their sin would have been the same. Their lying words to Peter were wicked, but the enormity of their crime consisted in their desire to appear better than they really were. From this we may learn how God regards the hypocrite. There are many ways in which we act the same part. God does not punish every case of this sin as He did in this instance, but He takes notice of it none the less, and at the last day, "will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts" (1 Corinthians 4:5).

But even hypocrisy was not the whole of their crime. The text says they "kept back" part of the price of the land. The original word occurs elsewhere but once in the New Testament, Titus 2:10, where it is rendered "purloining." It was understood that those who at that time sold property, did it not for gain, but for benevolent purposes. Whether they had made a formal vow or not, the act of selling the land was evidence of at least an outward consecration of it to the cause of God. And yet so lightly did they regard their vow that they dared to appropriate a portion of the property to their own use. But this was simply stealing, for as soon as the decision was made to devote the proceeds of the sale to the cause, the land belonged to God. Then we may also learn from this how serious a matter it is to vow to the Lord and then neglect to pay our vows. It is a terrible thing to refuse to help support God's cause, but it is still worse to vow and not pay. No wonder the question is asked in astonishment, "Will a man rob God?" Let each one ask himself this question.

Thursday: The Second Arrest – More and mightier miracles were wrought through the apostles in answer to the threats of the rulers, who at last rose up in their indignation, and seized all the apostles, and put them in the common prison. Foolish men! to think that prison doors could hold men filled with the Spirit of Him whom the gates of the grave could not confine. Read Acts 5:19-24. Here is the lesson for us. It shows us the power of the truth, which is a shield and defence to all who accept it. Let the truth find lodgment in your heart, and it will root out every evil. That truth which persecution cannot crush out will be your protection in time of persecution. God has from the beginning chosen us to salvation "through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth" (2 Thessalonians 2:13); and the power of the truth to resist the destructive rage of leaders is the manifestation of its power to save us. With truth, Christ in us, there is plenteous redemption.