

Mr. Bryan's Bible Talks

I WAS NOT DISOBEYED UNTO THE HEAVENLY VISION

By WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN

BIBLE TEXT—LESSON FOR NOV. 20

(Acts 26: 19-32)

Whereupon, O king Agrippa, I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision:

But shewed first unto them of Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the coasts of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance.

For these causes the Jews caught me in the temple, and went about to kill me.

Having therefore obtained help of God, I continue unto this day, witnessing both to small and great, saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come:

That Christ should suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should shew light unto the people, and to the Gentiles.

And as he thus spake for himself, Festus said with a loud voice, Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad.

But he said, I am not mad, most noble Festus; but speak for the words of truth and soberness.

For the king knoweth of these things, before whom also I speak freely; for I am persuaded that none of these things are hidden from him; for this thing was not done in a corner.

King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest.

Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.

And Paul said, I would to God, that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were both almost, and altogether such as I am, except these bonds.

And when he had thus spoken, the king rose up, and the governor, and Bernice, and they that sat with them:

And when they were gone aside, they talked between themselves, saying, This man, doth nothing worthy of death or of bonds.

Then said Agrippa unto Festus, This man might have been set at liberty, if he had not appealed unto Caesar.

For two years and longer Paul the Apostle had lain in a Roman prison in Cesarea, in Judea. Before Felix, the governor, and Festus, his successor, his enemies had sought his life.

Sitting on the judgment seat, Festus commanded Paul to be brought before his accusers, who "laid many and grievous complaints against Paul, which they could not prove."

"Wilt thou go up to Jerusalem," asked Festus, "and there be judged of these things before me?"

Then said Paul, I stand at Caesar's judgment seat, where I ought to be judged. . . . I appeal unto Caesar.

Then Festus, when he had conferred with the council, answered, Hast thou appealed unto Caesar? unto Caesar shalt thou go.

And after certain days king Agrippa and Bernice came unto Cesarea to salute Festus.

And when they had been there many days, Festus declared Paul's cause unto the king.

Then Agrippa said unto Festus, I would also hear the man myself. Tomorrow, said he, thou shalt hear him.

And now Paul had appeared before the Roman king, Agrippa, and there made a plea which, from an oratorical standpoint, ranks high among the great speeches of history. As a religious challenge it stands alone. His courage compelled respect.

PAUL'S HEAVENLY VISION

He began with a graceful compliment to the king; he esteemed himself fortunate to answer before him, especially because of the latter's large acquaintance with the subjects under consideration. Then, after briefly reviewing his early life, he recounted his activity against the Christians, and described the events connected with his own conversion.

Whereupon as I went to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests.

At midday, O king, I saw in the way a light from heaven, above the brightness of the sun, shining round about me and them which journeyed with me.

And when we were all fallen to the earth, I heard a voice speaking unto me, and saying in the Hebrew tongue, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.

And I said, Who art thou, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest.

One cannot read the record of his speech as presented in the early verses of the chapter of our Talk without being thrilled by the earnestness and the eloquence of the speaker. His enthusiasm gives to the printed page a warmth that centuries cannot chill. His commission, received direct from the Master as he journeyed to Damascus, was the great thing in his life;

those who listened to him could not doubt that he spoke from the most intense conviction. God consecrated a great brain and a great heart to a transcendent work.

AN EXALTED UTTERANCE

Paul's mission, he told the king, as given him in the words of the Master, was to "Open the eyes of the Gentiles, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me." The text for today's Talk begins with the next verse, wherein Paul utters one of the most exalted sentiments that ever fell from the lips of man: "Whereupon O king Agrippa, I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision."

The words give an explanation of Paul's whole life: God had opened before him a field of labor, pointed out to him a course to be pursued, supplied him with reasons unanswerable and set before him a glory beyond description. From that day forth obedience to this vision was his supreme passion. Nothing could shake his purpose, no discouragements were too great, no dangers too threatening. His trust was in God, from whom he obtained help.

WHY PAUL SEEMED MAD

Little wonder Festus interrupted him, exclaiming in astonishment, "Paul, thou art beside thyself, much learning doth make thee mad." If Paul had been an unlearned man his seeming unreasonableness would have been attributed to some other cause, but Paul was a scholar and so the blame was laid upon his learning. There must be SOME reason for such conduct, and any reason would seem more plausible than the real one.

Some years ago in Jamestown, New York, I heard a preacher interpret this charge made against Paul by Festus. He said that the world could not comprehend the zeal which Paul displayed in an altruistic cause. Had he devoted himself to money making, he would have seemed a normal man. Had he been thinking of himself only he could have avoided giving offense and remained respectable, but to talk as he did before a king was certainly shocking.

PAUL PRESSES HIS CAUSE

The king thought that he was there to defend himself, but Paul forgot all about the charges against him when he saw an opportunity to present the cause that was on his heart. He might never have another chance and he could not afford to let this opportunity go by unimproved. Even the loud voice of Festus did not irritate or disconcert him. "I am not mad, most noble Festus," he replied, "but speak forth the words of truth and soberness."

He brushed aside the interruption as one would a fly and—amazing audacity—called King Agrippa as a witness on his side. He assumed that his majesty was not uninformed as to his (Paul's) conversion—"for this thing was not done in a corner." In his enthusiasm, he dared to question the king himself. "Believest thou the prophets," and, without waiting, he answered for him, "I know that thou believest."

Even the king's effort to turn the matter off with a facetious remark—if we are to accept the Revised Version in place of the older text—could not swerve Paul from the line of his argument. His response was ready and so impressive that the king was compelled to admit that the accused had done nothing worthy of death or bonds.

THE POWER OF VISION

The lesson for us of today can be summed up in three thoughts: the vision, the misinterpretation, and the impression made. The first is necessary to great achievements, the second is natural, and the third the logical result.

No one can accomplish anything of consequence in life without a vision. As the engineer must have in mind the constructed line before he begins building it, so those who accomplish great things must know the work that lies before them and be prepared for the task. The purpose may be purely selfish, but it must be a real purpose backed by willingness to do anything necessary to accomplish it.

A young man may leave college with a determination to be rich; he may make the pre-

paration which he deems necessary and be willing to sacrifice all else to accomplish the end that he has in view—and he is more likely to succeed in making money than the man with another purpose, even though that purpose is higher. So with the merchant, the lawyer, the physician, the teacher, the public man—each may succeed with a definite business plan, but the vision that leads to GREAT things is from heaven.

THE WORST OF SINS

Between the selfish purpose and the heavenly vision which inspired Paul there is an infinite distance; many stop at intermediate points. Each, other things being equal, will SUCCEED in proportion to the intelligence and industry that he puts into his work, but in proportion as the end is worthy will the result bring satisfaction.

Disobedience to the vision is a common sin—the worst of sins. Obedience is the one great virtue; whenever one catches a vision of unselfish things to be accomplished he may know that it is from God.

He may not, like Paul, be blinded by light from above; the circumstances attending the communication of the vision may not be as dramatic as those that attended the revolution in the great apostle's life, but it is the turning point. Old things pass away and life from that time on is entirely new. Materialists may scoff at the supernatural—they cannot understand how one can be born again—but nothing less than the supernatural can account for a man like Paul. Spiritual things are spiritually discerned—those who deal only with the physical senses cannot comprehend them.

THE PRICE OF LOFTY VISION

In proportion as the vision is a lofty one and the work to be done far-reaching in its extent there will be misconceptions and misinterpretations even among friends. The answer must be in line with Paul's answer—not indignation or irritation, but PROOF. He lived what he thought; he convinced by the irresistible logic of deeds.

Every Christian who has been endowed with spiritual power can trace it to an experience that brought him into contact with the exhaustless reservoir of God's love, and gave him a sense of responsibility for the use of that power. Christ in the life is the unanswerable argument, the argument that conquers.

THE FAITH THAT MAKES US STRONG

By WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN

BIBLE TEXT—LESSON FOR NOV. 27

(From the description of Paul's shipwreck, Acts 27)

And as the shipmen were about to flee out of the ship, when they had let down the boat into the sea, under colour as though they would have cast anchors out of the foreship.

Paul said to the centurion and to the soldiers, Except these abide in the ship, yet cannot be saved.

Then the soldiers cut off the ropes of the boat, and let her fall off.

And while the day was coming on, Paul besought them all to take meat, saying, This day is the fourteenth day that ye have tarried and continued fasting, having taken nothing.

Wherefore I pray you to take some meat: for this is for your health: for there shall not an hair fall from the head of any of you.

And when he had thus spoken, he took bread, and gave thanks to God in the presence of them all; and when he had broken it, he began to eat.

Then were they all of good cheer, and they also took some meat.

And we were all in the ship two hundred threescore and sixteen souls.

And when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship, and cast out the wheat into the sea.

And when it was day, they knew not the land; but they discovered a certain creek with a shore, into which they were minded, if it were possible, to thrust the ship.

And when they had taken up the anchors, they committed themselves unto the sea, and loosed the rudder bands, and hoisted up the mainsail to the wind, and made toward shore.

And falling into a place where two seas met, they ran the ship aground; and the forepart stuck fast, and remained unmovable, but the hinder part was broken with the violence of the waves.

And the soldiers' counsel was to kill the prisoners, lest any of them should swim out, and escape.

But the centurion, willing to save Paul, kept them from their purpose; and commanded that they which could swim should cast themselves first into the sea, and get to land:

And the rest, some on boards, and some on broken pieces of the ship, and so it came to pass, that they escaped all safe to land.

Would you like to read the most famous and dramatic account of shipwreck ever written?

Then turn to the twelve hundred words of the twenty-seventh chapter of Acts. It is the story of the adventure that befell the Apostle Paul in the Mediterranean, on his way to Rome to appear before Caesar as a Roman citizen in ap-