

Teachers' Department.

Sabbath School Scripture Lessons.

DECEMBER 20th, 1857.

Subject.—PAUL PREACHETH CHRIST TO FELIX AND HIS WIFE, DRUSILLA.

For Repeating. For Reading.
Acts xxiv. 14-15. | Acts xxiv. 17-27.

DECEMBER 27th, 1857.

Subject.—PAUL APPEALS TO CESAR, AND IS BROUGHT BY FESTUS BEFORE AGRIPPA.

For Repeating. For Reading.
Acts xxiv. 24-25. | Acts xxv. 1-27.

THE QUESTIONER.

Mental Pictures from the Bible.

Reader, you need but "search the scriptures,"
To comprehend our Mental Pictures.

[No. 43.]

In the stillness of night a company of cavalry and infantry, amounting to near five hundred men, have been marched to the gates of a nobleman's mansion, in the neighbourhood of an ancient city. After waiting a few moments a civilian is brought out, with all speed, and placed in their midst, as if for protection. A roll of parchment is handed to the commander, who immediately gives the order to advance, and they move off with as much of caution and haste as possible,—all seeming interested only in securing the one man who is apparently confided to their care.

SOLUTION to Picture No. 42.

The Apostle Paul saved from a scourging by claiming his privilege as a Roman citizen.—Acts xxii. 25-29.

The Sunday morning's Dream.

My first day of returning health, after many weeks of severe illness, was a bright Sunday in June. I was well enough to sit at an open window in my easy chair, and as our house stood in a pleasant garden in the suburbs of London, the first roses of the year scented the soft breeze that fanned my pale cheek and revived my languid frame. The bells of our parish church were just beginning their chimes, and the familiar sound awakened in me an intense longing to be with my family once more, a worshipper in the house of God. I took up my Bible and Prayer Book, which had been placed ready on the table beside me, intending to begin to read when the hour of the eleven o'clock service should be announced by the ceasing of the bells; and in the meantime closed my eyes, and soothed my impatient wishes by picturing to myself the shady avenues of blossoming limes that led to our church, and the throngs that would now be entering it for the public worship of the day.

All at once I seemed to be walking in the beautiful churchyard, yet prevented from gratifying my eager wish to enter the church by some irresistible though unseen hind. One by one the congregation, in their gay Sunday dresses, passed by me and went in, where I vainly strove to follow. The parish children, in two long and orderly trains, defiled up the staircases into the galleries; and except a few stragglers hurrying in, as feeling themselves late, I was left alone.

Suddenly I was conscious of some awful presence, and felt myself addressed by a voice of most sweet solemnity in words to this effect: "Mortal, who by Divine mercy has just been permitted to return from the gates of the grave, pause before thou enterest God's holy house again; reflect how often thou has profaned his solemn public worship by irreverence, or by inattention, which in his sight is irreverence: consider well the great privilege, the unspeakable benefit and blessing of united prayer, lest by again abusing it thou tire the patience of thy long-suffering God, and tempt him for ever to deprive thee of that which hitherto thou hast so little valued." Seeing me cast down my eyes and blush with conscious guilt, the gracious being continued in a milder tone,—"I am one of those angels commissioned to gather the prayers of the saints, and form them into wreaths of odorous incense that they may rise to the throne of God. Enter thou with me, and thou shalt, for thy warning, be able to discern those among the devotions about to be offered which are acceptable to him, and to see how few in number, how weak, and unworthy they are."

As he ceased speaking I found myself by the side of the angel still, but within the church, and so placed that I could distinctly see every part of the building.

"Observe," said the angel, "that those prayers which come from the heart, and which alone ascend on high, will seem to be uttered aloud. They will be more or less audible in proportion to their earnestness; when the thoughts wander

the sounds will grow faint, and even cease altogether."

This explained to me why the organist, though apparently playing with all his might, produced no sound, and why, presently after, when the service began, though the lips of many moved, and all appeared attentive, only a few faint murmurings were heard.

How strange and awful it was to note the sort of death-like silence that prevailed in whole pews, in which, as was thus evident, no heart was raised in gratitude to heaven. Even in the Te Deum and Jubilate, the voices sometimes sunk into total silence. After the creed there was a low murmuring of the versicles, and then distinct and clear above all other sounds, a sweet childish voice softly and reverently repeated the Lord's prayer. I turned in the direction of the sound, and distinguished among the parish children a very little boy. His hands were clasped together, as he knelt; his eyes were closed, his gentle face composed in reverence, and as the angel wrote on his tablets the words that fell from those infant lips, his smile, like a sunbeam, illuminated the church for a moment, and I remembered the words of holy David, where he says, "Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected praise."

Presently I was again reminded of a Scripture passage—the prayer of the publican. A wretched looking man, who swept the crossing near the church, lounged into the centre aisle during the reading of the lessons, his occupation being for the hour suspended. The second lesson was the 24th chapter of St. Matthew. Some verses attracted his attention. He listened with more and more seriousness, until he at length put his hand over his face and exclaimed aloud, "What will become of me at the day of judgment? Lord, have mercy on me a sinner." That prayer was inserted on the angel's tablets. Oh, may it not stand alone, but be an awakening of better things. May God indeed have mercy on such poor neglected ones as he, and raise up some to teach them, and care for their immortal souls.

After this, growing accustomed to the broken murmurings and interrupted sounds, I followed many a humble christian through large portions of the Litany: though often, while I was listening with hopeful attention, a sudden and total pause showed but too plainly that the thoughts of the kneeling suppliant had wandered far away, and that he who had appeared so earnest in his devotions had become languid and silent like the rest of the congregation.

"Thou art shocked at what thou hast observed," said the angel. "I will show thee greater abominations than these. God is strong and patient; he is provoked every day. Listen now, and thou shalt hear the thoughts of all these people; so shalt thou have some faint idea of the forbearance God continually exercises towards those who draw near to him with their lips, while their hearts are far from him."

As the angel spoke my ears were deafened with a clamour which would have been shocking in a public meeting, but which here, in God's holy house, was awfully profane. The countenances remained, indeed, as composed and serious as before, the lips moved with the words of prayer, but the phrases they uttered were of the world and its occupations.

"How shamefully late Mrs. Slack always comes," said one woman, who, looking over the edge of her Prayer-Book, saw her neighbour and a train of daughters bustle into the next pew. "What an example to set to her family; thank goodness no one can accuse me of that sin." "New bonnets again already!" exclaimed the comer, returning the neighbourly glance from the other seat, ere she composed herself to the semblance of devotion.

"How they can afford it heaven only knows, and their father owing all his Christmas bills yet. If my girls look shabby, at least we pay our debts."

"Ah, there's Tom Scott," nodded a young man to his friend in the opposite gallery, "he is growing quite religious and respectable, I declare. He has been at church two Sundays running. How much longer will the devout fit last?"

These were shocking and striking examples of irreverence; there were happily not many such, the involuntary wanderings of thought were more common.

I was much interested in a young couple near me, whose attention for a considerable part of the service had been remarkable. From the dress of the young man I judged him to be a clergyman. The lady wore deep mourning. They were evidently betrothed—they read out of one book. Gradually he forgot the awful presence in which he stood, his eyes wandered from the Bible to her gentle face, and fixing

there, called off his thoughts from heaven. "How good she is," he began to say, "how attentive to her prayers, as in all other duties! What a sweet wife she will make! How happy I am to have won her love." By this time the countenance of the young girl wore an expression which showed that she felt the earnestness of his gaze; her eyelids trembled,—her attention wavered, and though she looked at the book some moments longer she too began to murmur of earthly things, and I heard her say, "Oh, how he loves me—even here he cannot forget that I am beside him." It was many minutes before either of them returned in spirit to their devotions.

As the service proceeded the attention of the congregation flagged more and more—the hubbub of worldly talk increased. One man composed a letter he intended to send, and even altered whole passages, and rounded elegant periods, without one check or recollection of the holy place where he stood. Another repeated a long dialogue which had passed between himself and a friend the night before, and considered how he might have spoken more to the purpose. Some young girls rehearsed scenes with their lovers—some recollected the incidents of their last ball. Careful housewives planned schemes of economy, gave warning to their servants, arranged the turning of a gown, or decided on the most becoming trimming of a bonnet.

To me, conscious of the recording angel's presence, all this solemn mockery of worship was frightful. I would have given worlds to rouse this congregation to a sense of what they were doing; and, to my comfort, I saw that for the involuntary offenders a gentle warning was provided. A frown from the angel, or the waving of his impatient wings, as if about to quit a place so desecrated, recalled the wandering thoughts of many a soul, unconscious whence came the breath that revived the dying flame of his devotions. Then self-blame, tears of penitence, and bitter remorse, of which those kneeling nearest knew nothing, wrung the heart, shocked at its own careless ingratitude, wondering at and adoring the forbearance of the Almighty; while more consecrated thoughts, and I trust more fervent prayer, succeeded to the momentary forgetfulness.

In spite of all these helps however, the amount of real devotion was small; and when I looked at the angel's tablets I was shocked to see how little was written therein.

Out of three hundred christians, thought I, assembled after a week of mercies to praise and bless the Giver of all good, are these few words the sum of what they offer!

"Look to thyself," said the angel, reading my inmost thoughts. "Such as these are, such hast thou long been. Darest thou after what has been revealed to thee, act such a part again? Oh, could thy mortal ears bear to listen to the songs of the rejoicing angel before the throne of the Almighty, thou wouldst indeed wonder at the condescending mercy which stoops to accept these few faint wandering notes of prayer and praise. Yet the sinless angels veil their faces before Him, in whose presence man stands boldly up with such mockery of worship as thou hast seen this day. Remember the solemn warning, lest hereafter it be counted to thee as an aggravation of guilt."

Suddenly the sweet, solemn voice ceased, the glorious angel disappeared, and so oppressive seemed the silence and loneliness that I started and awoke. My watch pointed to the hour of eleven; it must have been the stopping of the bells that interrupted my slumbers, and all this solemn scene passed before my mind in the short space of a few minutes.

May the lesson I learned in those few minutes never be effaced from my heart; and if this account of them should recall one wandering thought in the house of prayer, or teach any to value more highly, and cultivate more carefully, the privilege of joining in the public worship of our church, it will not have been written in vain.*

Backbiting.

If Christians would generally conform to the following rules, drawn up by the shrewd and pious Charles Simeon, for the government of his own conduct, much mischief might be saved in churches and communities. The influence of many excellent people is undermined, and the reputation of ministers often sacrificed by idle habits of gossip, without any intention of doing harm:

The longer I live, the more I feel the importance of adhering to the following rules, which I have laid down for myself in relation to such matters:—

1. To hear as little as possible what is to the prejudice of others.
2. To believe nothing, of the kind till I am absolutely forced to it.
3. Never to drink into the spirit of one who circulates an ill report.
4. Always to moderate, as far as I can, the unkindness which is expressed towards others.
5. Always to believe that, if the other side were heard, a very different account would be given of the matter.

* The dream above related refers to the Parish Church at— Would it be altogether unsuited to the Baptist Chapel at—?

Congregational Union of Great Britain.

The Annual meeting of this body was held at Cheltenham in October as last. Several days were occupied with the various subjects which come before the Union.

The Rev. Newman Hall read a paper on "the methods of preaching the gospel best adapted to the age." He considered that preaching must be intelligible, forcible, natural, earnest, practical, and evangelical. "Speech," he said, "was useful only as it was intelligible. As it was necessary to use the English language in England, so they must use the English language of their own day, and not go to their wardrobes for antiquated forms of speech, but must use the language of the community—the language of common life, not of theological cant. Why should the language be used of a theological school? However eloquent and forcible, it must be clear, if they wished to interest; they must not 'shoot over the head,' as South said, if they would reach the heart. . . . A liberal employment of those terms most likely to command attention, and influence it when gained, must be a cardinal point, else the penny prints of the day, dilating on the commonest thoughts, would rise up to condemn them. To say that the truth itself should obtain the homage of the ear was but the plea of indolence. The stronger the light the more vivid appeared the picture to the eye. Then, again, illustration might be used with advantage. A picture would obtain attention and impress very forcibly the statement sought to be confirmed. To be adapted to our own day, it should be drawn from passing events. Thus they might give an air of novelty to everything. Thus they might introduce those great truths against which the citadel of the mind was to keep guard. Our Lord taught in parables, and while Scribes and Pharisees wondered at his wisdom, 'the common people heard him gladly' . . . Another essential quality was earnestness. Dissertations of a philosophical character might be the better, as they betrayed no feeling; but want of earnestness in preaching the gospel contradicted the words uttered. If the gospel was true, it infinitely transcended everything else. To preach the gospel coldly appeared to show that the speaker did not believe what he said, and a trembling whisper might go further than a trumpet blast. According to their individual temperament earnestness would rival itself. If not felt, the sooner they relinquished a business for which they were so manifestly unfit the better. . . . Special sins, and the special follies of the present day, must be noticed in the spirit of the apostles. Licentiousness flaunted in their streets, and men went from prayer meetings to cheat their customers. Many of the popular recreations were utterly incompatible with pure spirituality and true religion. Ought they not, as Christians, to lift up their voices against them? In concluding, Mr. Hall said that preaching, to be successful, must be evangelical. Christ crucified must be preached, not a formal, threadbare, repetition of doctrinal statements, but a living Christ."

Mr. Edward Baines, in thanking Mr. Hall for his address, spoke disparagingly of the reading of sermons, which had been referred to. In the senate and the bar, where earnestness was wanted, there was no reading. Then, again, let them look at the infidel's halls of science, there was no reading there. There were men the greatest of their time never read their sermons. Let them take Whitfield or Wesley. What effect would these have had if they had read discourses to the miners of Kingwood. For years he had felt it to be an exceeding great drag on the Church. He would not say that it should never be practised, but he would say it was deteriorating in its influence. No man who assumed to produce an effect read his sermons. Take the friars at Milan and Naples, they did not read."

The Rev. J. A. James spoke of the disadvantages of reading. He had not himself, for the first fifty years of his ministry, read a sermon, nor for a long period used a note. He implored them to guard against the habit which was creeping over the denomination. Still he knew there were men who read sermons with much greater effect than some who delivered them. Such instances were rare.

Mr. Mellor of Halifax defended the practice of reading, from the examples of Jonathan Edwards, Dr. Harris, and others, whose best sermons were their read ones. He expressed his high approbation of Mr. Hall's paper, ridiculed the idea of using antiquated or metaphysical language for earnest purposes, and passed a high eulogium on Mr. Spurgeon, whom he looked on—take him in all, although there were many points he did not like—as one of the first men latterly given to England. Many lessons might be learned from him, one of which was to speak in the good old Saxon tongue, which was the language of the land, instead of in Latin compounds.—*News of the Churches.*