

DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

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Forty-Fifth Week - Second Day

AN INTERVAL OF REST FOR THE CHURCHES

"Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied" (Acts 9:31).

The history of the Acts of the Apostles now leaves Saul for a time, and Peter again becomes the central figure. We are told, first, that the churches then had rest throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria. That they had rest implies that the Jews had ceased their persecution. One would like to know how this result was produced, seeing that the offense of the cross had assuredly not ceased and the doctrine of a crucified Messiah had not become less obnoxious to the Jews than it had been before.

History is silent on the subject; but history does record that circumstances about this time occurred which threw the Jews into such passionate excitement that they had no thought for other matters. A few evenings back¹ we showed that the condition of affairs which Saul had found at Damascus arose soon after the accession of the Emperor Caligula; and we will assume that this state of affairs in Damascus arose some time prior to Aretas' arrival there from Arabia, and that he thereafter remained in Damascus for a considerable time, how long we do not know. We also found it likely that the Romans under Caligula had come to terms with Aretas, thus preventing any new hostilities. Now if this "rest" for the churches can be placed some time subsequent, we arrive at a period of Caligula's reign that coincides with the circumstances to which we shall now call attention. To do this we must first look back at Egypt.

There were frequent differences on questions of privilege between the Greek and Jewish inhabitants of Alexandria in Egypt, and at this time the quarrel rose so high that each party sent three deputies to Rome to obtain the decision of the emperor. At the head of the Jewish deputation was the celebrated Philo, who has left an account of this affair. The leader on the other side was the grammarian Apion, who was not only a man of great literary reputation in his day but who also harbored an intense hatred for the Jews.

Overstepping the proper limits of his commission, Apion unscrupulously tried to arouse the same hatred he had for the Jews in the mind of the weak and wicked emperor Caligula. To this

1 See the excerpt of the 44th Week, Third Day, entitled "King Aretas."

end the cunning Apion accused the Jews of refusing the emperor the divine honors which he required, and which all his other subjects rendered him. Now other emperors had claimed the same honors, but in deference to the Jews they had not insisted that the Jews receive the images of the deified emperor. But when the matter was thus pointedly brought to the notice of Caligula, he became so highly incensed (as Apion had foreseen) that he offered nothing but insults to the Jewish delegates and ordered them to return home.

The matter did not end there. Caligula sent a new governor to Syria named Petronius (who superseded Vitellius) with orders to place the emperor's statue in the temple of Jerusalem; in case of resistance he was to compel submission at the point of the sword. But upon his arrival in Syria, Petronius soon learned it would be no easy task. Therefore he assembled such a force as he thought sufficient to deter or put down resistance. With this force he wintered at Ptolemais. But while there many thousands of the principal Jews came to him imploring him to desist from his purpose, declaring that they would sooner die than see the sanctuary of God thus profaned. Petronius had by this time acquired a manifest distaste for his task, but he appealed to the absolute orders of the emperor, which he dared not and could not disobey. To this they retorted that there was One greater than the emperor, whom they also dared not disobey; and confident of His approval if they suffered in a just cause, they would sooner die than submit to such a violation of their laws.

Petronius soon perceived that his mission could not be executed without much bloodshed. Therefore he crossed the country to Tiberias in order to learn what the nature of the public feeling was in that quarter. He was not long left in doubt, for multitudes of Jews came to him protesting even more fervently. The governor pointed to the impotency of any warlike resistance on their part against the force under his command. They replied that they by no means wanted to make war with Caesar, but still they would sooner die than see their sacred laws transgressed. Thereupon they cast themselves on the ground and stretched forth their necks as if to meet the knife. For forty days this continued, during which the utmost agitation prevailed throughout the country. And with this being the most critical season of the year, the urgent labors of the field were neglected and the agricultural prospects thereby brought into great peril.

At this juncture several very eminent Jews arrived at Tiberias, among whom were Hilkias, surnamed the great, and Aristobulus, the brother of King Agrippa, who was then at Rome and known to be high in the favor of the emperor. They suggested to Petronius that he suspend his measures until he obtained further orders from Rome, urging him to write the emperor and inform him of the firm resolution of the Jews, the inadvisability of driving them to despair, the disturbed state of the country, and the danger to the government's revenue from the neglect of tilling the land. Petronius at last consented, though fully aware of the danger he was incurring in doing so.

About this time, however, King Agrippa gave the emperor a great and costly supper, comprising everything suited to the imperial tastes (which he had studied well). Caligula was

ineffably pleased. When he had filled himself with wine and was in a tipsy good humor, he expressed his high satisfaction at the magnificent testimonial of affection which his old friend had now given. But not to be outdone in such proofs of regard, anything that might yet be needed for Agrippa's contentment and happiness he would freely give, to the utmost extent of his imperial master's power.

This was a critical moment, and Caligula fully expected Agrippa to ask for some large country in addition to the territories he had already received, or perhaps for the revenues of some flourishing cities. But Agrippa begged that he might decline such generosity, for he had already received from his imperial friend far more than his ambition had ever craved. This parade of humility, of course, made the emperor all the more eager to serve him; and at length Agrippa ventured--at the manifest peril of all the favor he enjoyed and even of his life--to say that nothing could be so acceptable to him than that the emperor should withdraw the orders he had given Petronius, hinting at the same time that this indulgence would materially promote his own popularity among his future subjects since it came through his intercession with the emperor.

Caligula, though taken by surprise, was struck by this response and felt some respect for the public spirit it indicated. The request was therefore granted and orders were sent to Petronius not to persist in putting the emperor's statue in the temple. However, if he had already done so, he was to let it remain.

But the messages of both Petronius and Caligula crossed in the sending, with the message of Petronius reaching the emperor first. Upon reading it, Caligula was greatly enraged. He wrote back to Petronius accusing him of having been bribed by the Jews, stating that he was now under the sovereign's deepest displeasure, and threatening to make him an example to this and future generations of the punishment due to those who dared to trifle with their obedience to the imperial commands.

However, before Petronius received this dreadful letter, intelligence reached him that Caligula had died. Otherwise he no doubt would have become his own executioner after the Roman fashion. With the death of Caius Caligula the whole matter fell to the ground. And it will be observed, indeed, that in the midst of the emperor's wrath with Petronius he did not retract the concession he had granted to Agrippa, with whose services the Jews always afterward retained the most grateful recollection.

This matter occupied the attention of the Jews for a considerable time and left them little leisure to concern themselves with the Christians; and when the storm finally had blown over, the habit of persecution was not resumed. Thus the churches found an interval of rest until the time when that Agrippa who has just been mentioned, and whom Luke calls "Herod the king," began a new persecution.