

## THE BIBLE CLASS.

## PETER AND JOHN IN SAMARIA.

(Acts viii. 1-25.—For Sunday Feb. 21th.)

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Previous to the visit of Philip, the Evangelist, Samaria had not been wholly without a knowledge of the Gospel. The two sunniest days in our Lord's earthly ministry were, perhaps, those spent in Sychar and its vicinity. The open-hearted Samaritans had not asked the Jewish Teacher to prove Himself by signs and miracles to be the Messiah. They had received Him on the strength of His own gracious and self-evidencing words. And yet His personal ministry, even in so receptive a soil as that of Sychar, remained comparatively unfruitful. The Holy Spirit had not yet been given, nor had the Church been founded through which the glorified Christ could operate with mighty and permanent effect. Left to itself the good seed of the kingdom was quickly choked by the thorns that grow up unrestrained on every hand.

## PREACHING CHRIST IN SAMARIA.

The persecution that followed the death of Stephen was intended to destroy Christianity. It became instead, the first step in its triumphant progress. The believers who fled from Jerusalem did not hope thereby to escape persecution. That it was not so much the fear of imprisonment or death that moved them, as the perception that favorable opportunities for Christian service no longer existed in Jerusalem, is clear from the fact that wherever they went they proclaimed the same message that had drawn down on them the murderous hatred of the Jews. Philip came to Samaria, and at once began preaching Christ. Not moral disquisitions, nor theological doctrines, but Christ's person and work His death and resurrection, His ascension and continued ministry on earth through the Holy Spirit. The person of Christ is the centre of Christianity. Christianity has its sacred books, as other religions, but unlike them it is not a book-religion which retains its vitality in virtue of a body of doctrines perpetuated from age to age. Mohammed and Gautama distinctly disassociated their own personalities from their teachings. Christ made all His teachings and revelations subordinate to the transcendent fact of His own person. He is not the dead founder of a great religion, but the risen and enthroned Christ who lives in His Church and operates through it with divine energy. Philip preached a Saviour, therefore, rather than a salvation. And the Lord confirmed the message of His servant by signs and wonders. The fact that the preacher's message is not confirmed by similar proofs is sometimes cited as evidence that Christianity has lost its early power. Such an assumption loses sight of the fact that miraculous bodily healings are only as shadows compared with the substantial results that attend the progress of Christianity. Indeed, one might more truthfully say that the necessity of appealing to miracles is a positive disadvantage, in the same sense that Christ's continued presence on earth would have been a hindrance rather than a help to the spread of His kingdom. A generation that accepts the Gospel without demanding signs stands on a higher spiritual level than one that seeks such evidence.

## THE GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

The sending of Peter and John to Samaria by the Church in Jerusalem shows that they were not the heads of the apostolic college, but members who claimed no official superiority. The fact that they were sent shows, however, that their pre-eminent personal capabilities and spiritual qualifications for the delicate task of inspecting this religious movement and of receiving the Samaritans into the Christian Church were fully recognized. Peter was fitted for outward action, for public leadership. But the profounder spiritual intuitions of John who seemed to play an altogether subordinate part were equally important and no less needed. None of the Apostles were better qualified for a mission to a people whom the Jews mortally hated than these two intimate friends of Christ, whose friendship for each other was cemented by a common love for their Master and enthusiasm in His work. They saw at a glance that the conversions were genuine, and that the water baptism needed only the confirmation and completion of the Spirit baptism. That this gift was withheld until the arrival of the apostles may have indicated that, in the divine mind, the religious movement was not to be regarded as independent of the Church in Jerusalem. The imparting of the Holy Spirit was never considered by the Apostles themselves as a peculiar apostolic function, any more than the working of miracles. This gift came in answer to prayer and by the laying on of hands, and was doubt-

less manifested by miraculous tokens like those on Pentecost. It was the divine attestation of the reception of these Samaritans into the fellowship of the Church. The same Spirit comes to believers now without the startling phenomena peculiar to the apostolic age, but with the same essential effect. He comes to the individual or to the church through prayer, and His coming means in every instance a sanctification of the inner life, and an endowment with power for Christian service.

## WORLDLINESS IN THE CHURCH.

The good work of Philip in Samaria came at once into deadly conflict with the superstitions of the age. Simon Magus, who had long exercised a baleful influence over the people by his incantations and juggleries, was no doubt angered at the ruin of his business, but at the same time he was amazed at the miracles wrought by Philip. In this he quickly perceived the operation of a power immensely superior to his own. He may have supposed that the preacher had in some way gained a deeper insight into the occult power of nature, or that he was a more skilful magician than himself. Whatever his interpretation of the phenomena, he determined to associate himself with Philip, in order to acquire his coveted power. Accordingly he professed belief and was baptized. But the coming of Peter and John, followed as it was by still greater displays of the Spirit's power, unmasked the pretended convert. His avarice was exposed to the light. He showed that he had joined the company of believers merely to further his own gains, and that though numbered with them he had no lot nor part in the kingdom of God. He was trying to juggle with God as he had habitually juggled with men. Desirous of making religion subordinate to business, he had failed entirely to recognize the spiritual motives which give direction and power to a religious life. Hence, too, when his fraud was exposed he exhibited no sense of sin, but only a cringing dread of punishment. He is a type of those in every age who have sought to use a profession of religion as a stepping-stone to influence, wealth or position.

## FOR THE SABBATH SCHOOL.

## International S. S. Lesson.

LESSON VIII.—THE FIRST CHRISTIAN MARTYR—FEBRUARY 21.

(Acts vi. 8-15; vii. 54-60.)

GOLDEN TEXT:—"Be thou faithful unto death," and I will give thee a crown of life."—Rev. ii. 10.

TIME AND PLACE.—A.D. 37. Jerusalem.

INTRODUCTION.—In one of our previous lessons we learned that the early disciples of Jesus provided a common fund, which was placed in the hands of the apostles, and by them distributed to those who were in need. Out of this sprang the first disagreement in the Church. There was a complaint of the Grecians against the Hebrews that their widows were neglected in this distribution, which took place daily. The result was that the apostles, burdened with the spiritual cares of the growing Church, felt that they could no longer attend to these temporal matters, and, under their advice, seven men were chosen from among the disciples, to whom the work of distribution was committed. They were men full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and at least two of them became preachers of the word. One of them was Stephen, of whose persecution and death we have the story in our present lesson.

VERSE BY VERSE.—V. 8. "Stephen."—One of those chosen to administer the funds of the early Church.

V. 9. "Synagogue."—The word corresponds to our word "church," and was sometimes used to signify an assembly of Jews, and sometimes the building provided for such assembly. "Libertines."—i.e., freedmen. They were most likely Jews who had once been slaves to the Romans and been set free, and who now formed one congregation in Jerusalem. "Cyrenians."—Inhabitants of Cyrene, a city in the province of Cyrenaica, North Africa. "Alexandrians."—Jews belonging to Alexandria, in Egypt. "Cilicia—Asia."—These were Roman provinces in Asia Minor.

V. 10. "Not able to resist the wisdom."—His skill and knowledge were far beyond their powers, and they felt they were defeated. "The Spirit."—Stephen was guided by the Holy Spirit. The word may, however, simply have reference to the manner in which Stephen spoke.

V. 11. "Suborned."—Induced to swear falsely. "Blasphemous words."—According to their interpretation of the law, blasphemy consisted in contempt of Moses and his institution, and was a capital offence.

V. 12. "Caught him."—That is, arrested him. "Council."—This was the Sanhedrin, before which Jesus had been brought and condemned.

V. 13. "False witnesses."—The falsity of the testimony probably consisted in a perversion of words which Stephen had actually uttered.