

PAUL: A SERVANT OF JESUS CHRIST

By

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE FURTHERANCE OF THE GOSPEL

(Philippians 1:12, 13)

My soul exults to dwell secure,
Thy strong munitions round her;
She dares to count her triumphs sure,
Nor fears lest hell confound her;
Though tumults startle earth and sea,
Thou changeless Rock! they shake not Thee.”
- Ray Palmer

THAT was the one thing Paul cared for. If only the Gospel of the love of God made progress, and the Lord Jesus were magnified, he was more than content to suffer to the uttermost. And now, as he reviews the things which had happened to him from the standpoint of the years, he rejoices with exceeding joy to be able to announce to his brethren at Philippi that they had fallen out to the furtherance of the Gospel.

Our space forbids us to tell in detail the story of his transportation from the lower platform of the Temple at Jerusalem to the hired house at Rome; but we may at least consider its successive stages beneath the light of the thought, which gave him such pleasure, that they had all conducted to the furtherance of the Gospel, partly by giving him an opportunity of manifesting the traits of a true Christian character, and partly by enabling him to give his testimony for Jesus before the highest tribunals in the world.

First, there was the awful riot in the Temple-court.

The Jews of Asia, perhaps led by Alexander the coppersmith, laid hold of Paul, under the impression that he had introduced Trophimus, whom they knew as an Ephesian, into the court reserved for Jews. They dragged him down the steps, furiously beating him the while, and with the intent of murdering him when they reached the bottom.

With the greatest difficulty he was rescued by Lysias and his legionaries, who rushed down from the adjoining Castle of Antonia, surrounded him with their shields, and bore him back on their shoulders from the frenzied vehemence of the mob. It was not simply the result of natural coolness and self-command, but because he was at rest in Christ, and desired to magnify his Master, that he was able to hold a brief conversation with his deliverer in the midst of the tumult, and obtain permission to address the people in their national tongue, weaving the story of the risen Jesus so ingeniously into his personal narrative, that they could do no other than listen.

There was a manly strength in his quiet remonstrance with those who were set to examine him by scourging, and avowal of Roman citizenship, which must have filled them with profound respect. Here was no common criminal!

Some have questioned the propriety of his behavior, when on the following day he was arraigned before the Sanhedrim. But Annas, who sat to judge him, had really been deposed from the High Priesthood by right, though, as a matter of fact, he exercised that office still. And as to raising the question of the Resurrection, that, after all, was the one point at issue between him and the Jews. The Pharisees professed to believe in the Resurrection, and yet refused to admit that Jesus had risen. Paul, on the other hand, sought to establish not only that there would be a Resurrection, but that there had been one.

That his efforts to use these trying scenes for the glory of his Master were appreciated and accepted was made abundantly clear by the vision of the Lord, who bade him be of good cheer, and assured him that the witness which he had given from the steps of the castle and in the halls of the Sanhedrim should be repeated in Rome herself, at the very heart of the empire, where all the Gentiles should hear.

There must have been something very noble and heroic in his bearing; or his nephew, who was evidently in the secrets of his foes, and must have passed as a bigoted Jew, would never have run the risk of being torn limb from limb for divulging the secret plot of the zealots, who had bound themselves by a solemn vow neither to eat nor drink till they had forever silenced the tongue that gave them more cause to fear than all the legions of Felix's escort.

His Judicial Trials.

He was presently hurried by a strong body of soldiers in a forced march, by night, to Antipatris, thirty-five miles distant, and twenty-five miles further, on the following day, to Caesarea, to undergo trial before Felix, the Roman Governor of Judea. But as on repeated occasions he stood before him, he seemed less eager for himself, and bent on snatching every opportunity of so public a position to explain the nature of "the Way," and to reason with his judge concerning the faith in Christ Jesus. Indeed, on one occasion he spoke so powerfully of righteousness, self-control, and judgment to come, in the presence of Felix and the woman with whom he was living in adultery, that Felix trembled as the prisoner compelled him to review a life of shameless infamy beneath the searchlight of an awakened conscience.

When Festus came in the room of Felix, who had been recalled in disgrace, the Apostle, within a few days, so far impressed the newcomer with his faith in Jesus, who had died, but whom he affirmed to be alive, that the Governor was able to state the case with wonderful accuracy to King Agrippa, who, with his sister Bernice, came to pay their respects to the new representative of the Emperor.

But perhaps Paul's greatest opportunity, and one of which he availed himself to the full, was that in which he was able to preach the Gospel to an assembly that comprised all the fashion, wealth, and distinction of the land.

Festus was there in state, and the Herods, brother and sister, seated on golden chairs; the officers of the garrison, and the principal men of the city. How great a contrast between the splendid pomp of that occasion and the poor chained prisoner at the bar! Yet, in truth, though bending under the weight of sixty years and many sorrows, he was the noblest and fairest decked of all the glittering throng.

How grandly he preached Christ that day under the guise of making his defence!

The story of the suffering and risen Lord; the fulfillment of the predictions of Moses and the prophets; the opening of eyes; the turning from darkness to light; the conditions of remitted sin and an inheritance among the saints such topics were recited with all the passionate earnestness of which he was capable, till the Roman thought him mad, and the Jew princeling needed all his courtly wit to turn aside the barbed dart of the prisoner's appeal.

CAESAREA

In one of the guardrooms of the old palace of the Caesars, for two whole years, Paul was kept a prisoner, but permitted to see, and receive help from, his friends. How gladly must the saints in Caesarea and from other places have availed themselves of the privilege! It is an old tradition that during this period Luke wrote the Third Gospel, in fellowship with his friend, and under his direction. If this were so, what an un failing source of interest it must have been to the two to trace the course of all things accurately from the first, as they delivered them, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word.

In another way that period of two years was very fruitful in the best sense. Paul's appreciation of the truth as it is in Jesus, was greatly ripened and deepened. Contrast the Epistles to the Thessalonians, Corinthians, Romans, and Galatians, with those to the Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians, and the advance is easily discernible. Less polemics and defence of his motives and actions, and more of the believer's vital union with his Lord; less doctrinal discussion of the work of Christ, and more absorption in his Person; less of the old covenant, more of the new, of the King, and of the life in heavenly places. Ah! those years spent within view of the dividing sea, restrained by the old castle walls, and the chain which he shook so pathetically before Festus and his guests, notwithstanding that the indomitable spirit was stayed from its incessant labors and journeys, were turned to good account, if only they enabled him to give the Church his priceless prison Epistles.

At last this term of confinement came to an end. The ecclesiastical authorities had never ceased to urge that he should be handed over to their jurisdiction, a claim which in God's good providence the Roman Governors steadfastly refused. They knew, and Paul knew, that to such a trial there would be only one end. But finally, when Festus showed signs of yielding, Paul claimed his right as a Roman citizen to have his case tried by the Emperor himself, partly because it would remove it from local prejudice, partly because he desired to secure for the Christian Church the same recognition as was awarded to the Jewish synagogue, and partly that he might fulfil his long-cherished purpose of proclaiming the Gospel in Rome.

To that appeal nothing to the contrary could be alleged. He had appealed to Caesar, and to Caesar he must go. As soon as possible he was placed under the care of a centurion for conveyance to the imperial city.

THEN CAME THE VOYAGE

At every stage of it the Apostle seems to have bent all his endeavors to use his opportunities, as far as possible, for the glory of his Lord. To him to live was Christ. He reckoned always and everywhere that he was a debtor to all men, and under obligation to repay to each some proportion of the momentous debt he owed for his redemption.

They set sail, first in an ordinary sailing vessel, then from Myra, in an Alexandrian corn ship, one of the great fleet perpetually engaged in provisioning Rome. Contrary to Paul's advice, who even at this stage of the voyage must have been considered as a person of distinction and experience, the captain attempted to cross the open bay from the Fair Havens to Phoenice, each on the southern side of Crete. But, when halfway across, the wind changed, and a sudden squall struck down from the mountains and carried the big ship out to sea.

In the brief respite afforded of sailing under the lee of the little island of Clauda, they hauled in the boat which had been tearing through the water behind them, and got ropes round the straining vessel to strengthen her. This done, there was nothing for it but to drift through the open sea. Three days after, all hands (even of the prisoners) were called in to lighten the ship, by casting out cargo and other movables; and after many days of storm, in which neither sun nor moon appeared, all hope that they should be saved gradually faded away.

It was then that Paul stood forth, calm, assured, with the message of God, to cheer and reanimate their fainting hearts. Like Peter before his execution, the servant of God had quietly slept amid the tumult. Like Peter, too, he had been ministered to by angels. Through the murky atmosphere one of these ministering spirits had found his way to his side, uttering a "**Fear not!**" fresh from the throne, and an assurance that he should yet stand before Caesar.

Evidently the deliverance of the crew had been previously the subject of the Apostle's prayer; for the angel added, "**Lo! God hath given thee all them that sail with thee.**"

Here was an opportunity of preaching faith in God, and belief in the power of prayer.

Always full of prompt common sense, he detected the attempt of the sailors, when the vessel struck, to get away in the boat; but with something above common sense, with a sense of the Eternal and Divine, he took bread, and as though he were presiding at the Lord's table in Corinth or Philippi, he gave thanks to God in the presence of all, and broke it, and began to eat.

When they reached the shore of Malta on that drear November morning, it seemed as though nothing more could be done to further the Gospel. But as the viper fell off Paul's hand, and the father of the chief man in the island was healed of dysentery through his prayer, and all else who had diseases throughout the island were cured by his touch, much was done to magnify Him, concerning whom Paul was proud to say, "**Whose I am, and whom I serve.**"

TO ROME

Did his heart misgive him as he at last approached the city, and signs of her splendor and teeming life multiplied at every step? He had often thought of this moment, and longed for it. Some three years before, writing to the Church at Rome, he said, "**I long to see you, that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift.**"

He confessed that he had often prayed and purposed to come to them. But he had never anticipated coming like this one of a knot of prisoners in charge of Roman legionaries. But almost certainly through his bonds he was able to effect very much more good than if he had been free. Had he been free, he might have gone from synagogue to synagogue, but the opportunity would never have befallen him of speaking to the Praetorian guard and Caesar's household.

It is thus that God answers our prayers in ways and methods we did not expect. We have set our hearts on realizing some project. For long years it has gleamed before us as an Alp through its long drawn valley. We have yearned, prayed, and wrought for it night and day. Assurances have been borne in upon our souls that one day we shall rejoice in a realization of our cherished desires. But when at last we come to our Rome, it is as prisoners, and our hands in fetters.

God fulfilled Paul's desire to see Rome in this way probably for two reasons. First, for safety's sake, and secondly for the wider audience that awaited him. And these two reasons may necessitate our being conducted to our Rome in chains. Were it otherwise, the very exuberance of our joy might intoxicate, or the gratification of our ambition might overbalance. It is best to have the chain. Not Rome without the chain, nor the chain without Rome; but Rome and the chain together.

Do not fret at the limitations and disabilities of your life. They are required as the makeweight, and constitute your opportunity. Storm and shipwreck, centurion and sea captain, soldier and fetter, Caesarea and Rome all are part of the plan, all work together for good, all are achieving God's ideal, and making you what, in your best hours, you have asked to become.

~ end of chapter 18 ~

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