

PAUL: A SERVANT OF JESUS CHRIST

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

MORE THAN A CONQUEROR

(Romans 8:36, 37)

Servant of God, well done! Well hast thou fought
The better fight, who single hast maintained
Against revolted multitudes the cause
Of Truth in word mightier than they in arms.”
- Milton

THESE are among the greatest words ever spoken by man, and are the more remarkable when we consider them as gathering up and recapitulating the experiences which immediately preceded their utterance.

It was towards the close of Paul's third missionary journey.

About three years before, he had left the Syrian Antioch for the third time, after a sojourn of some duration (Acts 18:23). His eager spirit could not rest amid the comparative comfort and ease of the vigorous church life which was establishing itself there, but yearned with tender solicitude over his converts throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia.

He therefore again passed the Cilician Gates, traversed the bleak tablelands of the upper or high land country, establishing all the disciples, and working towards the Roman province of Asia. This lay to the southwest, on the seaboard. He had been previously forbidden to enter it (16:6); but his steps were now as clearly led to it as they had formerly been restrained. Thus does our Sovereign Lord withhold his servants from the immediate fulfillment of their dreams, that they may return to them again when the time is ripe, and they, too, are more thoroughly equipped.

The experiences of Paul in Greece were of the utmost possible service in fitting him for his ministry in this thickly-populated and highly-civilized district; which resulted in a work of evangelization throughout the neighborhood, and in the ultimate formation of those seven churches, to which the risen Lord addressed his final messages.

It was to redeem a pledge he had solemnly made that the Apostle at last came down to Ephesus. He had spent one Sabbath day there previously, on his way from Corinth to Jerusalem. On that occasion his ministrations had so deeply interested the Jews, that they had urged him to abide for a longer period; but this being impossible, on account of the necessity of hastening to Jerusalem to fulfil his vow, when taking his leave of them he said, **“I will return again unto you, if God will.”** It was in fulfillment of that promise that the Apostle now visited the metropolis of Asia the Less.

A good deal had happened in the interval, in narrating which the evangelist probably gives us the clue to the former prohibition of the Apostle’s visit.

Apollos, the eloquent Alexandrian, had visited the city, had met there Paul’s friends, Aquila and Priscilla, who were awaiting their fellow-worker’s return. By them he had been led into a clear appreciation of the truth, in consequence of which his ministry had become more fruitful, both in helping them which had believed, and powerfully confuting the Jews. The strong ploughshare had turned up the heavy clods, and prepared the soil for Paul’s further labors (18:24-28).

But Apollos had now left for Corinth, and Paul arrived to take up and extend the work so auspiciously begun. He probably but dimly realized as he entered Ephesus how long he would remain, or the far-reaching results of his residence. It was enough for him to realize, as he afterwards wrote to the Ephesian converts, that there was a prepared path awaiting him; but whether it should be smooth or rough was known only to Him whose he was and whom he served.

As a matter of fact it was a conflict from first to last. **“I fought with beasts at Ephesus,”** was his comment after it was all over. And here, again, in enumerating his experiences, he compares them to a battlefield and himself to a combatant, crying **“We are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us.”**

In these words, written to Rome from Corinth, after the close of his work at Ephesus, and whilst his experiences there were yet fresh to his thought, he gives his own conception of the entire situation.

I. THE BATTLEFIELD

There were several difficulties to be encountered, which must be taken into account if we would estimate the greatness of the victory achieved through the grace of the living Saviour.

In the first place there was the pressure of the strange, eager mass of human beings, whose interests, aims, and methods of thought were so foreign to his own. No one has stood alone in the midst of Benares, surrounded by that vast heathen population, worshipping on the banks of the brown and muddy Ganges, or ascending the thousand stairs of the marble temples which extend along the river side, without a sense of loneliness and isolation. In the proximity of the great river, among those mighty and ancient pyramids of stone, beneath those facades and colonnades in which swarms the infinite life of India, how insignificant the life of the individual on-looker

appears!

What is he in the presence of that teeming mass! How can he hope to affect its habits of thought and life he might as well attempt to divert the course of the ancient stream. Did not Paul feel thus, as he spent his first weeks at Ephesus?

But, besides, there was the vast system of organized idolatry which centered in the temple of Diana. Her image was said to have fallen from Jupiter (possibly a meteorite), and it was enshrined in a temple, counted to be one of the wonders of the world. The magnificence of uncalculated wealth, the masterpieces of human art, the fame of splendid ceremonials, the lavish gifts of emperors and kings, the attendance and service of thousands of priests and priestesses, combined to give it an unrivalled eminence of influence and prestige. Sooner might some humble Protestant missionary working in a back street of Rome expect to dim the magnificence of St. Peter's, or diminish the attendance of its vast congregations, as Paul hope that his residence in Ephesus could have any effect whatever on the worship of Diana. Moreover, all the world knew that the city of the Ephesians was temple keeper of the great Diana, and of the image which fell down from Jupiter (19:35), and therefore keen to avenge the least slight.

In connection with the temple there throve a great trade in amulets and charms. Each individual in the vast crowds that came up to worship at the shrine was eager to carry back some memento of his visit, and the more so if the keepsake would serve as a preservative against evil omens and spirits, of which there was a great and constant dread. The trade in these articles must have been a large one, or the artificers in silver would not have been numerous enough to fill the city with confusion, and to necessitate the interference of the town clerk. What the trade in strong drink is among ourselves, that was the business in these miniature shrines manufactured by Demetrius and his fellow-craftsmen. How impossible it seemed that one man, in three years, employing only moral and spiritual weapons, could make any difference to this ancient and extensive craft!

But still further, like many of the cities of the time, filled with motley populations part Oriental and part Greek Ephesus was deeply infected with the black arts of the exorcist, the magician, and the professor of cabalistic mysteries. The renegade Jews were foremost adepts in such matters, calling mystic names over any who were possessed of evil spirits. Even the converts to Christianity found it hard to divest themselves of their former association with these practices, and treasured their books to the amount of at least £2,000. It is no child's play to turn a nation of savages from their confidence in witchcraft and medicine men to sane views of life and Divine Providence; but how much harder to neutralize such insidious poison as wrought through a great city like Ephesus! The people fixed the days of marriage and journeying, the engagements they should make, and the business transactions on which they should enter, after an appeal to the soothsayers and magicians; and it was a formidable task to combat their rooted prejudices and habits.

But perhaps Paul's most inveterate foe was the Jewish synagogue, entrenched in ancient prejudices and persistent disbelief. They were hardened and disobedient, speaking evil of "**the Way**" before the multitude. He also recalls, in his farewell address to the Ephesian elders, the trials which befell him by the plots of the Jews.

When the great riot broke out, they were only too glad to show their hatred of the Christians by putting forward Alexander to disavow all connection with them.

Such were the giant obstacles that confronted the humble tent maker, as he settled down to his trade in company with Aquila and Priscilla. But he looked far beyond the limits of his workshop to great victories for his Lord, much as Carey, who wrought at his cobbling with a map of the world in front of him. But greater was He that was for him than all that were against him, and in all these things he was destined to be more than a conqueror, through Him that had loved him.

LET US VERIFY THIS ASSERTION

Let us turn to the Acts of the Apostles, and ask if Paul were indeed more than conqueror.

The answer is unmistakable. After three months conflict with the Jews in their synagogue, the Apostle was driven to the course he was wont to adopt under similar circumstances he moved his disciples to the schoolhouse of one Tyrannus, and taught there daily, as soon as noon was past, and a pause put alike on the labors of the schoolmaster and the artisan.

In consequence of these ministrations, “**all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks**” a very strong statement, when we bear in mind the populousness of that crowded province. Even the silversmiths who caused the riot acknowledged that not only at Ephesus, but almost throughout all Asia, Paul had persuaded and turned away much people; and there was great danger that the temple would be depleted of its worshippers, and Diana deposed from her magnificence.

With respect to the trade in amulets and charms, it fell off so seriously that the craftsmen realized that unless they bestirred themselves their gains would be at an end.

With respect to the strongly-entrenched position of the magicians and exorcists, they were utterly baffled and confounded by the much greater miracles which were wrought through Paul; so much so that the handkerchiefs he used to wipe the sweat from his brow and the aprons in which he wrought at his trade, were made the medium of healing virtue as they were carried from his person to the sick and demon possessed.

So mighty was the impression that Christ had secrets superior to the best contained in their ancient books, that many of them that had believed came, confessing, and declaring their deeds.

And not a few of those who practiced magical arts brought their books together in one of the open squares and burned them in the sight of all. So mightily grew the word of the Lord, and prevailed.

With respect to the exorcist Jews, they, too, were silenced. It would appear that the name of Jesus, spoken even by those that did not believe in Him, had a potency over evil spirits such as no other name exerted; and it had been blasphemously used by strolling Jews, who had taken upon themselves to call that sweet and holy name over some that were possessed.

But in one notable instance the demon himself had remonstrated, crying, “**Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are ye?**” and he had leaped on them, and mastered them, so that they fled from the house naked and wounded.

LET US CONSIDER THE TALISMAN OF VICTORY

If we turn from his outward life to study the diary of this wonderful man, who seemed single handed in his conflicts and victories, we find a pathetic record of his sorrows and trials. Writing during these eventful months, he speaks of himself as a man doomed to death and made a spectacle to the world; for Christ’s sake, a fool, weak, and dishonored; suffering hunger and thirst, when work was scant and ill paid; having no certain dwelling place, because unable to hold a situation long together through the plotting of his foes; hated, buffeted, reviled, persecuted, defamed; made as the filth of the world, and the offscouring of all things (I Corinthians 4:9-13).

When he tells the story of the affliction which befell him during his residence in Asia, he says that he was weighed down exceedingly beyond his power, insomuch that he despaired even of life; that he was pressed on every side, perplexed, pursued, smitten down, groaning in the tabernacle of his body, and always bearing about the dying of the Lord Jesus.

In addition to all these things that were without, there pressed on him daily the care of all the churches. There was also his anxiety about individuals, as he ceased not to admonish every one of them night and day with tears (II Corinthians 1:8; 4:8; 11:27, 28).

There is nothing more pathetic in the records of human suffering and patience than the story of his Ephesian experiences, as he summed them up on the shores of Miletus, in his parting address to the elders of the church.

In this passage also he quotes the old words of the Psalmist, about being killed all the day long, and counted as fit for the slaughter; and enumerates tribulation, anguish, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword, as ingredients in his cup.

Added to this, there was the constant suffering caused by the thorn in the flesh.

As the result of it all we wonder how such a man, under such drawbacks and in face of such opposing forces, could be more than a conqueror. Evidently we are driven to seek the source of his victory outside himself. It was through Him that loved. He not only overcame, but he was more than an overcomer; he overcame with ease; he brought off the spoils of victory and this because he was in daily communication with One who had loved, did love, and would love him, world without end; and who was ever pouring reinforcements into his soul, as men will pour fresh oxygen air to their comrade who is groping for pearls in the depth of the sea.

The only matter about which the Apostle, therefore, felt any anxiety was whether anything could occur to cut him off from the living, loving Lord. “**Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?**” that was the only question worth consideration.

Taking the extreme conditions of Being, he carefully investigates them, knowing that they include all between.

- First he interrogates *the extremes of existence*, “**death, nor life**”;
- Next, *the extremes of created intelligences*, “**nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers**”;
- Next, *the extremes of time*, “**nor things present, nor things to come**”;
- Next, *the extremes of space*, “**nor height, nor depth**”;
- Lastly, *the extremes of the created universe*, “**nor any other creature.**”

Each of these extremes has thus passed in review, and he has eagerly peered into its depths. He is like a man proving every link of the chain on which he is going to swing out over the abyss. Carefully and fervently he has tested all, and is satisfied that none of them can cut him off from the love of God; and since that is so, he is sure that nothing can ever intercept those supplies of the life and strength of God that shall avail to make him more than a conqueror.

We strangely misjudge the love of God.

We think that our distresses and sufferings, our sins and failures, may make Him love us less, whereas they will draw Him nearer, and make his love exert itself more evidently and tenderly.

In the home, it is not the troop of sturdy children that so engross the mother’s care, as the puny withered life that has lain in the cot for the last eleven years, unable to help itself and reciprocate her love. And in the world, death and pain, disease and sorrow, failure and sin, only draw God nearer, if that be possible. So far from separating from his love, they bind us closer.

Oh, blessed love that comes down to us from the heart of Jesus, the essence of the eternal love of God dwelling there and coming through Jesus to us nothing can ever staunch, nothing exhaust, nothing intercept it! It will not let us go.

It leaps the gulf of space unattenuated, it bridges time unexhausted. It does not depend on our reciprocation or response. It is not our love that holds God, but God’s that holds us. Not our love to Him, but his to us. And since nothing can separate us from the love of God, He will go on loving us forever, and pouring into us the entire fulness of his life and glory; so that whatever our difficulties, whatever our weakness and infirmity, whatever the barrels of water which drench the sacrifice and the wood on which it lies, we shall be kept steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, gaining by our losses, succeeding by our failures, triumphing in our defeats, and ever more conquerors through Him that loved us.

~ end of chapter 16 ~

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