

PAUL: A SERVANT OF JESUS CHRIST

By

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

GATHERING CLOUDS

(Acts 20:22)

“I know Thee, who has kept my path, and made
Light for me in the darkness, tempering sorrow
So that it reached me like a solemn joy.”

- Browning

AFTER the great uproar excited by Demetrius was all over, Paul sent for his disciples to come to his place of hiding, and exhorted them; commending them to the grace of God, and taking a sad farewell. This done, he departed to go into Macedonia by way of Troas.

For the story of the next few months we must turn to the second Epistle to the Corinthians, which is the most remarkable of his Epistles for its revelation of his heart. Bengel calls it an itinerary, and Dean Stanley says that the very stages of his journey are impressed on it; while a third says that the strong emotions under which it was written make it more difficult to translate than any other.

At Troas, which he now visited for a second time, the Apostle expected to meet Titus, who had probably been the bearer of the first Epistle to Corinth - a letter elicited by the sad story of the dissensions and disorders of the Church there, which had been brought to Ephesus by members of the household of Chloe.

He had dealt with the whole situation in very stringent terms, and was intensely anxious to learn the result of his words. Often since writing he had questioned whether he might not have imperiled his entire influence for good over his converts, and driven them into defiance and despair.

The delay of Titus confirmed his worst fears; and, though a great door of ministry was opened at Troas, he could find no relief for his perturbed and eager spirit, but taking leave of them went forth into Macedonia (II Corinthians 2:13).

In all probability Paul made at once for the beloved Philippi; but even there, since no tidings of Titus were to hand, his flesh had no relief. He was afflicted on every side; without were fightings, and within were fears.

At last, God that comforteth the lowly comforted him by the coming of the overdue traveller. He was glad, not only to have his friend at his side, but to learn that the effect of his first letter had been wholesome, and had led to an outbreak of godly repentance and affectionate yearning to himself. It was after conference with Titus on the whole state of affairs at Corinth that he indited his second Epistle.

I. HIS MULTIPLIED SORROWS

Throughout the Epistle Paul speaks of the great anguish through which he was passing; and whilst he rebuts the many unkind and slanderous allegations made against him, he does so with pathetic references to his sufferings.

The treasure was in an earthen vessel. He was pressed, perplexed, pursued, and smitten down; always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus: the outward man was decaying; many groans escaped him, being burdened, and he often longed to be absent from the body, that he might be present with the Lord.

In one of the most extraordinary enumerations of antitheses in any language, he mentions, among other sources of anguish, his spells of sleeplessness, his repeated fastings, the blows, imprisonments, tumults, toils, and pressure of his daily life. But there must have been other and deeper reasons perhaps that he was being so persistently maligned, and his teachings so flagrantly misrepresented; or because the love of many was waxing cold; or that the infant churches, on which he had expended so many prayers and tears, were proving themselves unworthy. But, however these things might be, the sufferings of Christ seem almost to have submerged him. But the Father of mercies and God of all comfort drew near and comforted him.

There were many notes in that sweet and tender refrain that stole on the heart of his afflicted servant.

- The testimony of his conscience, that he had wrought in sincerity and holiness;
- The divine faithfulness, which never gave sign of fickleness or failure;
- The light of the knowledge of God that shone clear in his soul;
- The thanksgiving of many to God which arose through his sorrows;
- The vision of the eternal weight of glory;
- The earnest of the Spirit in his soul, and
- The sure anticipation of the building of God which awaited him in the heavens;
- The blessed sense of being an ambassador of Christ and a fellow-worker with God.

God knows how to comfort; and fountains of divine consolation arose from unknown depths for him, as they will for thee and me. And thus, though the outward man decay, the inward man will be renewed day by day.

But in spite of all, this deeply suffering soul never abated for a moment its devoted labors for the cause of God. His letters abound with references to the offertory which he was raising for the poverty-stricken saints at Jerusalem from all the churches he had established. Now he stimulates Corinth by citing the example of Macedonia; and again he enumerates the precautions against the slanders of those who alleged that he was profiting by the contributions.

There are indications also of his labors, not only toward the churches that knew and revered him, but in new and unexplored regions. Being ambitious to preach the Gospel where Christ had not been already named, and unwilling to build on another man's foundation, he fully preached the Gospel even to Illyricum, on the Adriatic.

Oh, incomparable man, no weights could stay the flight of thy devoted spirit! Nay, as the child's kite must be weighted to make it soar the higher, so did thy sorrows give thee new yearnings over souls, new ambitions for thy Lord! Thou hast thy reward in the love of Gentile hearts, until the sundown of the present age, as thou hadst thy glorying in Christ Jesus in things pertaining to God. We magnify Christ in thee, for we fully realize that He wrought through thee, for the obedience of the Gentiles, by word and deed, in the power of signs and wonders, and in the power of the Holy Ghost.

II. HIS FRIENDS

Some men have a marvellous power in attaching men to themselves. They possess a kind of spiritual magnetism for others, who gather to their heart and follow their lead. Paul had this power in a preeminent degree. He was loved as few have been loved, and he loved in return. It must have therefore been a peculiar pleasure to him, as at last he came to Corinth, to find himself the center of a great assemblage of devoted friends.

There was:

- Timothy, his **“son Timothy,”** his **“own son in the faith”**;
- Tychicus, the **“beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord,”** who was with him in his last imprisonment;
- Titus, his **“partner and fellowhelper,”** his **“own son after the common faith”**;
- Luke, **“the beloved physician,”** who accompanied him to Rome, and was with him to the last;
- Trophimus, the Ephesian, who would have been with him to death had not sickness detained him at Miletus;
- Aristarchus and Secundus, the former of whom probably contrived to become his fellow-prisoner that he might minister to his illustrious friend;
- Sopater, his kinsman, well-known to the Roman Church;
- Gaius, a trophy of that first missionary tour which had taken him to Derbe; and
- The other Gaius, at this time his host; and
- Jason, who had sheltered him at Thessalonica at the risk of his life.

And these were only a sheaf of the great harvest of his friends.

Writing at this time from Corinth, he greets twenty-six persons by name in the closing verses of

the Epistle to the Romans. Priscilla and Aquila, who would have laid down their necks for him; his beloved Epsenetus; Amplias, his “**beloved in the Lord**”; “Persis, the beloved; and many others.

If he were more bitterly hated than most, he had a greater meed of love than most, and his course through the world was constantly gathering around it the wealth of human hearts. And what love in the annals of Love is comparable to that which unites souls in Christ?

“Hearts I have won of sister or of brother,
Quick on the earth or hidden in the sod,
Lo, every heart awaiteth me, another
Friend in the blameless family of God.”

What blessed fellowship these elect souls must have had at Corinth, during those memorable three months in which the Epistles to the Galatians and the Romans were being written! Probably those masterly arguments were first given in their reverent and rapt hearing. To them was uttered the first rough draft of Romans 5 and 8; or of Galatians 3 and 5. The conversations carried far on into the night on the destiny of Israel, the counsels of God, the method of dealing with the scruples of weak consciences, may have engaged eager and intense discussion.

At last it became necessary for the party to break up. Paul was eager to get to Jerusalem for the Passover, and a passage had been taken for him in one of the pilgrim vessels that started each spring from every port on the AEgean for Palestine.

Before his embarkation, however, a plot was discovered on the part of the Jews for his assassination, and he was compelled to alter his route, going with an escort of friends through Macedonia, and taking up a sailing vessel from Troas. He took advantage of this change in his plans to say another farewell to the endeared circle at Philippi, always nearest his heart; and then hastened to rejoin the little band that awaited him at Troas, sworn to care for him and the treasure which he had been at such pains to collect.

III. SAD FOREBODINGS

That journey from Troas, down the ragged shores of Asia Minor, sailing by day and anchoring by night, must in some senses have been sadder to the little band of devoted followers than to Paul.

He had no doubt as to its bourne. He went bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, sure that there, as in every other city, bonds and afflictions awaited him. Of this the Holy Spirit gave unequivocal testimony. He prolonged his speech at Troas till midnight, and sent for the elders of the Ephesian Church to meet him at Miletus, because he knew that all they among whom he had gone about preaching the Kingdom should see his face no more. He said farewell to the little groups, who waved their good-byes across the waters to his receding ship, as though it were his last. What the Spirit said through the disciples at Tyre only corroborated what He had said to the heart of Paul (Acts 20:23).

What Agabus foretold in striking symbolism, had been prognosticated already by that inward prophet whose voice cannot be bribed. Though he was quite willing to adopt any course of action which James might suggest, with the view of keeping him pent up in the upper platform of the Temple, away from the streets, filled at the feast time with excited crowds, he knew it would not avail; and it excited no surprise when he found himself the center of a frenzied mob, hurrying him down the Temple steps to the lowest court, where they meant to take his life without sacrilege to the holy shrine.

To those that loved him, the successive and unanimous prognostications of coming disaster were like the falling of the earth sods on a coffin containing the earthly remains of one's dearest friend.

Luke gives us a pathetic picture of the scene in the house of Philip, their host at Caesarea, with whom Paul must have exchanged tender reminiscences of Stephen. Agabus came there from Jerusalem, and unbinding Paul's girdle bound himself with it, speaking in the power of the Holy Ghost, and announcing that in like manner the Jews would bind its owner.

“And,” says Luke, **“when he had thus spoken, he kneeled down, and prayed with them all.”** They wept sore; enough, Paul said, to break his heart.

But he was marvellously sustained. It seemed as though he were going rather to a bridal than a funeral. Was not his spirit espoused to his Lord, and would not death land him in his presence, which was far better than the choice society of his friends? He was ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus. Indeed, he held not his life of any account, as dear unto himself, in comparison of accomplishing his course, and the ministry, which he had received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the Gospel of the grace of God.

“Yea thro life, death, thro sorrow and thro sinning,
He shall suffice me, for He hath sufficed;
Christ is the end, for Christ was the beginning,
Christ the beginning, for the end is Christ,”

~ end of chapter 17 ~

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