

The Companion of the Way

by

H.C. Hewlett

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE STRENGTH OF THE TOILER (Acts 26) - Paul

The path of testimony which Paul trod for so many years began with the experience wherewith that of Stephen ended, with the revelation of the Lord JESUS CHRIST in Heaven. Not only was the Lord pleased to answer the martyr's prayer by the conversion of one implicated in his death, but He raised up this very man to carry on and to amplify, both by his preaching and by his writings, the witness to CHRIST in glory. While Paul spent his days in the proclamation of this grand theme, there was given to him on a number of occasions such a special realization of the Lord's nearness that in this also, he was Stephen's spiritual heir. Taken in sequence, these present a rich unfolding of the great truths of the unchanging presence.

The SATISFYING Presence (Acts 26)

"At midday, O king, I saw in the way a light from heaven, above the brightness of the sun, shining round about me and them which journeyed with me. And when we were fallen to the earth, I heard a voice speaking unto me, and saying in the Hebrew tongue, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks. And I said, Who art thou Lord? And He said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest. But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared into thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee; . . . Whereupon, O king Agrippa, I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision" (Acts 26:13-19).

Three times in the Acts the record of Paul's conversion is given, two of these being in his own words. The last account is quoted because of the express words of the Lord JESUS, **"I have appeared unto thee."** Few men have ever hated the name of JESUS and the disciples of JESUS so fiercely as did the brilliant young Pharisee of Tarsus. His own confession is that he was **"exceedingly mad against them."** Intent on persecution, he was journeying to Damascus, when he was arrested by the shining of a light from Heaven surpassing the brightness of the noonday sun. He has told us little of what he saw in that moment when the rays of glory from CHRIST's face shone upon him. He did not speak of it: **"Am I not an apostle? . . . have I not seen Jesus**

Christ our Lord?" (I Corinthians 9:1). However the record is given largely in the impact of the vision upon his subsequent life.

While Paul lay prostrate, a voice from the intense light asked him, "**Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?**" Then the voice compared him to the ox that kicks back against the goad that would urge it forward. Had Paul been fighting inwardly against the accusings of conscience, and had the radiant face of Stephen and the grace of his dying words been often in his memory, challenging him to search out these things? Gazing upward, and realizing at once that he beheld the GOD of his fathers, for none else could bear such sublime majesty, he addressed Him as Lord. Trembling at the charge of persecuting Him, he asked, "**Who art thou, Lord?**" Was it the sight of manhood, even in that glory, that also drew from him the question? Then there came the words that shattered all his pride and obstinacy, words whose implications surely searched him hour after hour during the three long, sightless days that followed (Acts 9:9): "**I am Jesus whom thou persecutest.**" The hated Nazarene was the Lord of glory; the despised JESUS was the long-awaited CHRIST; the hunted sufferers were the saints of GOD.

From that moment Paul was the willing captive of the Saviour's love. His further words, "**What shall I do, Lord?**" (Acts 22:10) became the keynote of his life. He gave himself to be CHRIST's bondsman, utterly and forever. He had set out that morning with gifts of persons likely to make him an idol of his people, and with the garlands of earth's glory thick upon him. In that

heavenly sunshine

these poor things withered and died, and henceforth nothing was of value to him in comparison with that face which he had seen, bright with the majesty of the Godhead and beautiful with eternal love. In later years he wrote of it to the Philippians: "**What things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ.**" And if we venture to ask: "Were you not precipitate in your renunciation, brother Paul? Was it not just your impetuosity of eager youth?" he replies, "**I count** (i.e., I still count, after all these years of toil and privation) **all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord**" (Philippians 3:7-8). His soul was satisfied indeed.

Marvel not that CHRIST in glory
All my inmost heart hath won,
Not a star to cheer my darkness
But a LIGHT beyond the sun.

The SOVEREIGN Presence (Acts 22)

"**And it came to pass, that, when I was come again to Jerusalem, even while I prayed in the temple, I was in a trance; and saw him saying unto me, Make haste, and get thee quickly out of Jerusalem: for they will not receive thy testimony concerning me. And I said, Lord, they know that I imprisoned and beat in every synagogue them that believed on thee: And when the blood of thy martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by, and consenting unto his death, and kept the raiment of them that slew him. And he said unto me, Depart: for I will sent thee far hence unto the Gentiles**" (Acts 22:17-21).

It was Paul's first visit to Jerusalem after his conversion, and the Lord appeared unto him in a

trance to direct him away from the city and send him to the Gentiles. Paul pleaded that he should be permitted to stay, and advanced the most laudable reasons for this. He had been a leader in the persecution of the believers. Was it not then most fitting that he should take his place publicly as a disciple where once he had **"made havoc of the church?"** Again, there was his share in the death of Stephen, whose memory was so sadly dear to him. Ought he not by his testimony to make what amends might be possible for that grievous wrong? Ought he not to honor the Lord JESUS by confessing His name in the city where He had been crucified? Not only so, but there burned in his heart that love to his erring people of Israel which was later to find expression in the words, **"I could even wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh"** (Romans 9:3).

These were in themselves entirely worthy motives, but the will of CHRIST must take

precedence over the noblest choices

of the soul. CHRIST's presence will not be the constant realization of the heart unless His sovereignty be recognized and unless He be owned as Lord of the life and all its relationships. His will makes no mistakes but decrees all with unfailing love and unerring wisdom. He sees the end from the beginning and knows the purpose of every step in the path of His servant which may seem perplexing to human eyes.

It was thus with the service of Paul. He had been told at his conversion that he was to be a witness to all men, and to the Gentiles, but little could he have foreseen either then or in the visit to the Gentiles. Ahead lay the mighty ministry of his missionary journeys, wherein, for example, **"all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks"** (Acts 19:10). Ahead lay the planting of those lines of churches in Asia and Greece. Ahead lay the writing of those letters in which the doctrines of the Gospel and of the Church should be embodied, even to such amazing revelations as those to the saints at Ephesus. Beyond all these, but the result of them, was the impact which Paul was to make on the centuries to come. Today we owe an incalculable debt to him and to the Lord's dealing in his life.

The SUSTAINING Presence (Acts 18)

"Then spake the Lord to Paul in the night by a vision, Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace: for I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee: for I have much people in this city" (Acts 18:9-10). At Corinth the apostle met with much opposition and distress. There was the pain of the break with the Jews. To his witness to them that JESUS was the CHRIST they had responded with blasphemy, and he had left the synagogue. Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue believed, and all his house with him, but there was no abating of the relentless hostility of the Jews. Again, there was the constant problem of the Corinthian character, which led finally to the heartache of the apostle in his letters to the fickle and loose-living believers in that city. Just how he felt as he gave himself to win the Corinthians for CHRIST is seen in his words, **"I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling"** (I Corinthians 2:3). From a natural viewpoint there was much to discourage, and he might well fear that the hatred of the Jews would lead to some outrage like the stoning in Lystra.

In a night vision the Lord drew near to His tried servant and spoke those words of cheer which

so often came from his lips, "**Be not afraid.**" These words had been addressed to Jairus in the depth of his sorrow and to the terrified disciples when He walked across the sea to their help. These words were to be heavenly music to John in his exile in Patmos. To Paul they came as

rich encouragement to continue

his witness to the Corinthians. The secret of the Lord's message to him lay in the accompanying assurance of the perpetual presence, "**I am with thee.**" The Lord's interest in Corinth lay not in its vast commercial empire and in its wealth, but in the believers, and especially in the despised man named Paul. This man might indeed be weak in bodily presence, and in speech of no account to Grecian reckoning but he was the vessel chosen of CHRIST to bring salvation to that place.

No hurt should come to him from any man. No hand would be permitted to hurl a stone at him; no rod would be uplifted to leave its scar upon his back. The omnipotent presence would be his bodyguard to protect him from every ill. His fears were dispelled. CHRIST was his shield and his salvation. Later there was an uproar in the city, for the Jews took Paul before the tribunal of Gallio, the Roman governor, but Gallio indignantly dismissed both of them and their complaint, and the Greeks took Sosthenes, the chief ruler of the synagogue, and thrashed him there and then. Through all of this Paul was preserved unscathed, and he remained a good while in Corinth, until the time came for him to leave Greece. The Lord had much people in that city. Populous in itself, Corinth was strategically placed, with access to the Aegean and Adriatic seas. Through Corinth there flowed a constant stream of trade. The testimony for CHRIST was thus calculated to be carried far and wide by those who would come to Corinth, hear the message, and take it to their homes.

The SUCCOURING Presence (Acts 23)

"**And when there arose a great dissension, the chief captain, fearing lest Paul should have been pulled in pieces of them, commanded the soldiers to go down, and to take them by force from among them, and to bring him into the castle. And the night following the Lord stood by him, and said, Be of good cheer, Paul: for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome**" (Acts 23:10-11). It was an occasion of peculiar difficulty for Paul. He had come to Jerusalem -- though warned as to this (Acts 20:23; 21:4, 11), bringing to the believers the bounty of the Gentile churches, and with it that deep burden of love for his nation which ever characterized him. Nevertheless, nothing seemed to go as he might have wished. Though unto the Jews he became a Jew, that he might gain the Jews, and to them that were under the law, that he might gain those that were under the law (see I Corinthians 9:20), he met with grave trouble. Rescued from imminent death by the intervention of the Roman garrison, he appeared before the Jewish council, but was removed by the soldiers lest he should have been killed in the strife between Pharisees and Sadducees. He had gone far to meet the clamor against him, even reasserting for the moment his old life with the Pharisees, but to no avail.

In the darkness of the night following, a sad and weary man lay in the castle. From the Lord's words to him, "**Be of good cheer,**" it seems that he was disconsolate and disappointed. Perhaps with his sensitive heart, he was also reproaching himself for the scenes which had taken place.

Which of us has not known at least a little of the sting of self-reproach when we have searched ourselves, seeking reason for circumstances of difficulty and discouragement?

It was then that the Lord stood by him, the Lord who knew all the devotedness of Paul's heart, and prized dearly his life of service and suffering. With words reminiscent of scenes in His earthly path in which He had spoken in like fashion to other needy hearts

ministered His comfort

afresh. The paralytic lying helplessly at the feet of JESUS, the woman who touched the hem of His garment, the disciples on the lake, and again on the way to Gethsemane, had all heard those gracious words (Matthew 9:2, 22; 14:27; John 16:33). They had all known the peace given by that voice, for "**when he giveth quietness, who then can make trouble?**" (Job 34:29).

"**Thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem.**" It was the Master's own appraisal of what lay deepest in the longing of His servant. Amidst all the strange events of Paul's visit to Jerusalem had run the golden thread of his witness to the Lord JESUS. None who heard him could doubt his wholehearted allegiance to his Saviour and his conviction of the greatness of His Person and of His work. But Paul's service was not yet finished. His desire to go to Rome (see Acts 19:21) was to be granted, even though the manner of its fulfillment was hidden from his sight. In the seat of earth's power, and even before the proud Caesar, the ambassador of the enthroned CHRIST must bear his witness to the One before whom even kings must bow, and whom earthly monarchs need as Saviour as truly as do other men. There "**the prisoner of Jesus Christ**" would stand, and there would he proclaim the blessed name. The conspiracy of the Jews at Jerusalem, the lonely years at Caesarea, and the shipwreck on Malta, were all alike in the permissive will of GOD, but were not allowed to frustrate the promise. The Lord brought Paul to Rome by ways which he knew not. To human eyes the path must have seemed mysterious, but all along the way the sacred presence went also.

The SOLITARY Presence (II Timothy 4)

"**At my first answer no man stood with me, but all men forsook me: I pray God that it may not be laid to their charge. Notwithstanding the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me; that by me the preaching might be fully known, and that all the Gentiles might hear: and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion. And the Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me unto his heavenly kingdom: to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen**" (II Timothy 4:16-18). The apostle was in prison for the last time. His course was finished, and the time of his departure was at hand. Very soon he was to be "**with Christ; which is far better.**" Already he had stood before Nero and in the words quoted above, he described that first trial. Greatly he felt the loneliness of that scene. Asian brethren were turned away from him (II Timothy 1:15) and that Demas had forsaken him, having loved this present world (II Timothy 4:10), but that all forsook him. Not one friend could be found to stand beside the man who had experienced so much in suffering for the sake of his brethren. He wrote, "**Only Luke is with me**" -- Luke, the dear companion of his journeys, who was content in a self-effacing ministry of attendance on the apostle. Yet in Paul's loneliness there was no bitterness, only love. As the Lord had prayed for those who nailed Him to the Cross, and as Stephen in like manner prayed for his murderers, so Paul prayed for those who had deserted him.

We look back wonderingly to that trial, and try to picture in our thoughts the meeting of Paul and Nero. There they faced each other -- earth's best and earth's worst, the saint of blameless life and the monster of foulest sin. Even Nero was one for whom CHRIST died, and to whom the exceeding goodness of GOD willed to present the message of salvation. How great must be the guilt of that man with his load of fearful vice, with his hounding to death of the Christians, and with his rejection of the CHRIST of the Gospel!

Alone, and yet not alone!

"**Notwithstanding**," said Paul, "**the Lord stood with me.**" It was a solitary presence, but it was all-compensating. CHRIST had been with him through all his years, and He did not fail His servant in his last weariness. Indeed, all the characteristics of His nearness to Paul in earlier days were gathered up in this final scene. It was a *sustaining* presence, for the Apostle said, "**He strengthened me, that by me the preaching might be fully known.**" It was a *succoring* presence, for he said: "**I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion.**" It was a *sovereign* presence, for his heart was at rest in this certainty: "**The Lord shall deliver me . . . and will preserve me unto his heavenly kingdom.**" Then it was a *satisfying* presence, for he concluded his narrative with the last doxology of his writings, the glad tribute of a worshiping heart -- "**To whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen**"

Once more Paul's voice was heard. The closing greetings were to be added to his letter to the son in the faith who was so dear to him. What better thing could he wish than that which he, Paul, had known and proved so long? So he gave his last message, "**The Lord Jesus Christ be with thy spirit. Grace be with you. Amen.**" CHRIST had been sufficient for Paul. He would be so for Timothy. He is so for us today.

~ end of chapter 11 ~