

PAUL: A SERVANT OF JESUS CHRIST

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CHAPTER TWENTY

“IN A STRAIT BETWIXT TWO”

(Philippians 1:23)

“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
And for the testimony of Truth hast borne
Universal reproach.”

- Milton

THROUGH the providence of God, and probably by the kind intervention of the centurion who had conceived a sincere admiration for him during these months of travel together, and who, indeed, owed him his life Paul, on his arrival in Rome, was treated with great leniency. He was permitted to hire a house or apartment in the near neighborhood of the great Praetorian barracks, and live by himself, the only sign of his captivity consisting in the chain that fastened his wrist to a Roman legionary, the soldiers relieving each other every four or six hours.

There were many advantages in this arrangement. It secured him from the hatred of his people, and gave him a marvellous opportunity of casting the seeds of the Gospel into the head of the rivers of population, that poured from the metropolis throughout the known world. At the same time, it must have been very irksome. Always to be in the presence of another, and that other filled with Gentile antipathy to Jewish habits and Pagan irresponsiveness to Christian fervor; to be able to make no movement without the clanking of his chain, and the consent of his custodian; to have to conduct his conferences, utter his prayers, and indite his Epistles, beneath those stolid eyes, or amid brutal and blasphemous interruptions all this must have been excessively trying to a sensitive temperament like the Apostle's.

That must have been a hard and long schooling, which had taught him to be content even with this, for the sake of the Gospel.

But this, also, he could do through Christ that strengthened him. And it also turned out greatly to the furtherance of the cause he loved. Many of these brawny veterans became humble, earnest disciples. With a glow of holy joy, he informs the Philippians, that his bonds in Christ have become manifest throughout the whole Praetorian guard; and we know that this was the beginning of a movement destined within three centuries to spread throughout the entire army, and compel Constantine to adopt Christianity as the religion of the State. This was a blessed issue of that period of suffering which so often extorted the cry, “**Remember my bonds.**”

Three days after his arrival in Rome, Paul summoned to his temporary lodging the leaders of the Jewish synagogues, of which there are said to have been seven, for the sixty thousand Jews who were the objects of the dislike and ridicule of the imperial city.

At the first interview they cautiously occupied neutral ground, and expressed the wish to hear and judge for themselves, concerning the sect which was only known to them as the butt of universal execration.

At the second interview, after listening to Paul’s explanations and appeals for an entire day, there was the usual division of opinion. “**Some believed the things which were spoken, and some believed not.**”

His testimony having thus been first offered, according to his invariable practice, to his own people, there was now no further obstacle to his addressing a wider audience. The message of salvation was sent to the Gentiles, and these would certainly hear (Acts 28:28). We are not, therefore, surprised to be told that for the next two years, whilst his accusers were preparing their case, or the emperor was permitting shameless indulgence to interfere with the discharge of public business, he “**received all that came in unto him, preaching the Kingdom of God, and teaching those things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no man forbidding him.**”

It might be said of the Apostle, as of his Lord, that they came to him from every quarter.

- Timothy, his son in the faith;
- Mark, now “**profitable**”;
- Luke, with his quick physician’s eye and delicate sympathy;
- Aristarchus, who shared his imprisonment, that he might have an opportunity of ministering to his needs;
- Tychicus, from Ephesus, “**the beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord**”;
- Epaphras, from Colosse, a “**beloved fellowservant . . . a faithful minister of Christ,**” on the behalf of the church there;
- Epaphroditus, from Philippi, who brought the liberal contributions of the beloved circle, that for so many years had never ceased to remember their friend and teacher;
- Demas, who had not yet allowed the present to turn him aside from the eternal and unseen these,

And others, who are mentioned in the postscripts of his Epistles as being with him.

Members of the Roman church would always be welcomed, and must have poured into his humble lodging in a perpetual stream; Epsenetus and Mary, Andronicus and Junia, Tryphena and Tryphosa, Persis the beloved, and Apelles the approved, must often have resorted to that apartment, which was irradiated with the perpetual presence of the Lord. They had come to meet him on his first arrival as far as the Appii Forum and the Three Taverns, and would not be likely to neglect him, now he was settled among them.

Then what interest would be aroused by the episodes of those two years!

- The illness of Epaphroditus, who was sick nigh unto death;
- the discovery and conversion of Onesimus, the runaway slave;
- the writing and dispatch of the Epistles, which bear such evident traces of the prison cell.

There could have been no lack of incident, amid the interest of which the two years must have sped by more swiftly than the other two years spent in confinement at Caesarea.

It is almost certain that Paul was acquitted at his first trial, and liberated, and permitted for two or three years at least to engage again in his beloved work. He was evidently expecting this, when, writing to the Philippians, he said: **“I trust in the Lord that I also myself shall come shortly.”**

In his letter to Philemon also, he goes so far as to ask that a lodging may be prepared for him, as he hopes to be granted to their prayers. Universal tradition affirms an interspace of liberty between his two imprisonments; and without this hypothesis, it is almost impossible to explain many of the incidental allusions of the Epistles to Timothy and Titus, which cannot refer, so far as we can see, to the period that falls within the compass of the Acts.

Whether his liberation were due to the renewed offices of the centurion, or to more explicit reports received from Caesarea, history does not record; but it was by the decree of a greater than Nero that the coupling chain was struck off the Apostle’s wrist, and he was free to go where he would. That he should abide in the flesh was, in the eye of the great Head of the Church, needful for the furtherance and joy of faith to the little communities that looked to him as their father; and their rejoicing was destined to be more abundant in Jesus Christ by his coming to them again.

Once more a free man, Paul would certainly fulfil his intention of visiting Philemon and the church of Colosse.

Thence he would make his way to the church at Ephesus, to hold further converse with them on those sacred mysteries which in his Epistle he had commenced to unfold.

It was probably during his residence there that Onesiphorus ministered to him with such tender thoughtfulness as to elicit a significant reference in the last Epistle (II Timothy 1:18). Leaving Timothy behind him with the injunction to command some that they should preach no other Gospel than they had heard from his lips (I Timothy 1:3), he travelled onward to Macedonia and Philippi.

What a greeting must have been accorded to him there!

They were his brethren, beloved and longed for, his joy and crown, whom he ever held in his heart, and who in the defence and confirmation of the Gospel had so deeply partaken with him. Lydia and Clement, Euodia and Syntyche, Epaphroditus and the jailer, together with many other fellow-workers, whose names are in the Book of Life, must have gathered around to minister to that frail, worn body, to be inspired by that heroic soul. From Philippi he must have passed to other churches in Greece, and amongst the rest to Corinth.

Finally he set sail with Titus for Crete, where he left him to set in order the things that were wanting, and to appoint elders in every city (Titus 1:5).

On his return to the mainland he wrote an Epistle to Titus, from the closing messages in which we gather that he was about to winter at Nicopolis surrounded by several friends, such as Artemas, Zenas, Tychicus, and Apollos, who were inspired with his own spirit, and were gladly assisting him in strengthening the organization and purifying the teaching in these young churches, each of which had possibly to pass through some such phases of doctrinal and practical difficulty as are reflected in the mirror of the Epistles to Corinth (I Corinthians 3:12, 13).

This blessed liberty, however, was summarily cut short.

One of the most terrible events in the history of the ancient world - the burning of Rome - took place in the year A.D. 64; and to divert from himself the suspicion which indicated him as its author, Nero accused the Christians of being the incendiaries.

Immediately the fierce flames of the first general persecution broke out.

Those who were resident in the metropolis, and who must have been well known and dear to the Apostle, were seized and subjected to horrible barbarities, whilst a strict search was made throughout the empire for their leaders, the Jews abetting the inquisitors. It was not likely that so eminent a Christian as the Apostle would escape. The storm that sweeps the forest will smite first and most destructively the loftiest trees.

He was staying for a time at Troas, in the house of Carpus, where he had arrived from Nicopolis.

His arrest was so sudden that he had not time to gather up his precious books and parchments, which may have included copies of his Epistles, a Hebrew Bible, and some early copies of the sayings of our Lord; or to wrap around him the cloak which had been his companion in many a wintry storm. Thence he was hurried to Rome.

A little group of friends accompanied him, with faithful tenacity, in this last sad journey. Demas and Crescens, Titus and Tychicus, Luke and Erastus. But Erastus abode at Corinth, through which the little band may have passed; and Trophimus fell ill at Miletus, and had to be left there, as the Roman guard would brook no delay. So, for the second time, Paul reached Rome.

But the circumstances of his second imprisonment differed widely from those of the first.

- Then he had his own hired house; now he was left in close confinement, and tradition points to the Mamertine prison as the scene of his last weeks or months.
 - Then he was easily accessible; now Onesiphorus had to seek him out very diligently, and it took some courage not to be ashamed of his chain.
 - Then he was the center of a large circle of friends and sympathizers; now the winnowing fan of trouble had greatly thinned their ranks, whilst others had been dispatched on distant missions.
- “**Only Luke is with me,**” is the rather sad expression of the old man’s loneliness.
- Then he cherished a bright hope of speedy liberation; now, though he had successfully met the first impeachment, which was probably one of incendiaryism, and had been delivered out of the mouth of the lion, he had no hope of meeting the second, which would include the general charge of introducing new customs hostile to the stability of the imperial government.

It’s very vagueness made it so hard to combat, and it was inevitable that he should be caught within its meshes.

He was already being poured out as a libation, and the time had come for his loosing the anchor and setting sail. But it caused him no sorrow.

In earlier days he had greatly set his heart on being clothed upon with the body that was from Heaven, and on being suddenly caught up to be forever with the Lord. It seemed unlikely now that such would be the method of his transition to that rest of which he had spoken so pathetically. Not by the triumphant path of the air, but by the darksome path of death and the grave, would he pass into the presence of the Lord.

It was, however, a matter of small importance what would be the method of his home-going; he was only too thankful, on his review of his career, to say humbly and truthfully, “**I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith; Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness.**”

How characteristic it is to find him boasting of the great audience of Gentiles, to whom, at the first stage of his trial, he was able fully to proclaim the Gospel message. It is equally characteristic to hear him affirm that the ease and success of his witness bearing was due, not to himself, but to the conscious nearness of his Lord, who stood by and strengthened him.

- What were the following processes of that trial?
- How long was he kept in suspense?
- Did Timothy arrive in time to see him, and to be with him at the last supreme moment?
- What was the exact method of his martyrdom?

To these questions there is no certain reply. Tradition points to a spot, about three miles from Rome, on the Ostian road, where, at the stroke of the headsman’s axe, he was beheaded, and his spirit leaving its frail tenement, entered the house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

But how vast the contrast between that scene, which may have excited but little interest, save to the friends that mingled in the little group, and that other scene, in which an abundant entrance was ministered to this noble spirit, as it entered the presence of the Lord! If Christ arose to receive Stephen, may He not also have stood up to welcome Paul? Again he beheld the face that had looked down on him from the opened heavens at his conversion, and heard the voice that had called him by his name. His long-cherished wish of being “**with Christ**” was gratified, and he found it “**far better**” than he had ever thought.

- His was now the inheritance of the saints in light, of which the Holy Spirit had been the earnest and first-fruits.
- He had passed the goal, and had attained to the prize of his high calling in Christ.
- He had been found in Christ, not having his own righteousness, but the righteousness which is of God by faith.

No castaway was he!

As he had kept Christ’s deposit, so Christ had kept his. And as he gave in the account of his stewardship, who can doubt that the Lord greeted him with, “**Well done, good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.**”

What a festal welcome he must have received from thousands whom he had turned from darkness to light, from the power of Satan unto God, and who were now to become his crown of rejoicing in the presence of the Lord! These from the highlands of Galatia, and those from the seaboard of Asia Minor. These from Judaistic prejudice, and those from the depths of Gentile depravity and sin. These from the degraded slave populations, and those from the ranks of the high-born and educated. Nor have such greetings ceased; but through all the centuries that have succeeded there are comparatively few that have passed along “the Way to the Celestial City” who have not had to acknowledge a deep debt of gratitude to him who, of all others, was enabled to give a clearer apprehension of the Divine method of justifying and saving sinners.

What share the blessed ones within the vail may have in hastening the Second Advent we cannot tell. But, surely, among those who eagerly anticipate that hour when the Bridegroom shall present the Church to Himself, without spot or wrinkle, or any such thing, there is none more eager than he, who looked so constantly, even to the end, for the blessed hope, the appearance of the glorious Saviour, and who did so much to prepare the Church for her Lord! And, among the stones of the foundations of the New Jerusalem, on which are written the names of the twelve Apostles of the Lamb, will surely be found at last that of Saul, also called Paul, who was before a blasphemer, a persecutor, and injurious, but who obtained mercy and was counted faithful.

~ end of chapter 20 ~

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