

PAUL: A SERVANT OF JESUS CHRIST

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

FROM PHILIPPI TO ATHENS

(Acts 17, 18)

Whoso hath felt the Spirit of the Highest
Cannot confound nor doubt Him, nor deny:
Yea, with one voice, O world, tho' thou deniest,
Stand thou on that side, for on this am I."

- F. W. H. Myers

LEAVING Luke at Philippi, Paul and his companions travelled through Amphipolis and Apollonia to THESSALONICA, a name which lives forever in the inscriptions of his two earliest Epistles. The modern town is known as Saloniki. It may be that Paul was specially attracted to this city because of the synagogue and a weekly Jewish service there, in which he could prosecute his favorite work of opening and alleging from the Hebrew Scriptures that the Messiah must suffer, and that He had appeared in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. He did this for three Sabbath days, maintaining himself and his friends by the work of his own hands, and lodging with one Jason, who afterwards became a devoted disciple and follower (Romans 16:21).

At the end of that period the strong feeling raised among the Jews made it unwise to continue in the synagogue: he therefore removed his conferences to some neutral ground. How long he remained there we cannot tell; but it must have been long enough to give time for the formation of a healthy and vigorous church, towards which the Apostle bore himself with the gentleness of a nurse, and the encouragement of a father. There was something about these Macedonian converts which was immensely attractive to him. In after days he speaks of them as his joy and crown; and says that he was so affectionately desirous for their growth in grace, that he would gladly have sacrificed his own life to promote it. They were very poor, and he wrought day and night with his own hands, even to travail, that he might not be burdensome to them; but they were rich in faith, and love, and hope (I Thessalonians 2:6, 7, 11, 19).

More than in other cases, his teaching led them to anticipate the Advent of the Lord.

The pressure of the anguish that lay sore upon them all may have made them peculiarly susceptible to those radiant visions of the Lord's return that filled the Apostle's thought. They even outran his teaching, and fell into the error of supposing that that day had already come - an error which the Apostle by a second Epistle hastened to correct.

It was a great joy, however, to that harassed heart to realize that, amid the furious opposition of man, God was working with him, and accompanying his words with the demonstration of his Spirit. He recalls, with lively satisfaction, that the Gospel came to them in power and the Holy Ghost; so that they became ensamples to all that believed in Macedonia and Achaia, and the Word of God sounded forth from them in clarion notes (I Thessalonians 4; II Thessalonians 2).

Some months must have been occupied in this blessed ministry; and the strain on the Apostle was evidently greatly lessened by the gifts which came from Philippi, relieving him from the necessity of manual toil (Philippians 4:16).

At last, however, Thessalonica was closed against them. Paul and Silas were compelled to flee by night before the anger of the populace, incited by the Jews. The accusation laid against them was a strange one, considering the quarter from which it emanated. It was suspicious that Jews should be so eager to maintain the integrity of the Roman Empire, in opposition to the claims of the other King, one Jesus. But "any stick will do to beat a dog with"; and the Jews were not scrupulous about the means they employed, if only they could rid themselves of their powerful rival, who was probably thinning the crowd of Gentile devotees that gathered in their synagogue.

Fifty miles of night journey brought them to BEREIA; and there for a brief space they had respite, as the Jews were less bigoted, and more willing to search the Scriptures, to discover for themselves the reasonableness or otherwise of Paul's views. But his heart yearned for the beloved brethren whom he had left to stem the strong tide of hatred which his teaching had evoked; and more than once he would have returned had it not been for the fear of implicating Jason and others, who appear to have been bound over to prevent him from setting his foot again in Thessalonica. This was in his mind when he said Satan hindered him (I Thessalonians 2:18).

The project of Paul's return to Thessalonica was, however, rendered quite impossible by the rising of another storm, caused by Jewish emissaries from that city, who pursued his steps with relentless hate.

There was at last no help for it but to leave Silas and Timothy in Berea, to see what further could be done to keep the pathway to the rear open, and to hurry down to the harbor to take the first boat that was sailing. This happened to be for Athens. Those that conducted him hurried him on board, and we can imagine him standing on deck, and watching wistfully the receding heights of Mount Olympus slowly fading from view: behind, the dearest, truest friends he had ever known; before, what?

ATHENS

The messengers hastened back to Berea, bearing the charge of the lonely Lion-heart, that Silas and Timothy should come to him with all speed. While he waited for them and hoped they would assure him that he might return to the infant communities he had founded, he passed through the streets of Athens, surveying the monuments of their religion. On every side were the achievements of human genius. Temples which a Phidias had designed; statues which a Praxiteles had wrought. But Greece was living Greece no more. Her political glory had passed away a century and a half before, when she had fallen before Rome's all-subduing might. She prided herself still on her heroic traditions, and her custodianship of the greatest monuments of that or any epoch of human history. But it was the afterglow of sunset.

It is not clear that the heart of the Apostle was stirred with classic memories or artistic appreciation. To him the city was simply full of idols; and the innumerable multitudes suggested the confused notions that prevailed of the unity and majesty of the Deity.

He was greatly moved; and, not content with reasoning in the synagogue with, the Jews and proselytes, he went forth every day into the market place to reason with whomsoever he met, urging all and sundry to turn from these vanities to worship the only God.

It was his constant aim to be all things to all men; and at Athens he gave a conspicuous exhibition of his marvellous versatility. No ordinary Jew could have entered so thoroughly into the spirit of the place as the great Apostle did, or have excited sufficient interest among his philosophers to justify them calling a special assembly of the council of the Areopagus to hear a full statement of the new teaching he brought to their ears.

The evangelist indicates that the opinions formed about Paul were diverse and not entirely complimentary. Some compared him to a bird picking up seeds, others to a seeker after novelty; and perhaps there was more of hostility than friendliness in their taking hold of him and bringing him before their highest religious tribunal.

It was the greatest audience Paul had ever addressed. Before him philosophers, pedants, lecturers, and students, accustomed to discuss the loftiest themes within the horizon of human thought, and to make distinctions to which the delicate refinement of the Greek language lent itself with marvellous subtlety.

Epicureans were there to taste the flow of words, or criticize the style, the choice of images, the harmony of balanced sentences. Stoics, to study the theory of life, which this new theorizer, as he appeared, professed. For the whole crowd of Athenians and resident strangers were interested only in saying or hearing something new.

The address Paul gave on that occasion is quite unique.

For its grace, intellectual sequence, grandeur of conception and range, stately march of eloquent words, it stands alone among the addresses recorded for us by the evangelist.

It was probably the result of deep thought and prayer, or Paul had not so carefully passed it on to Luke, who was not then with him. It reveals the opulence of the Apostle's intellect and power of ready sympathy, which enabled him to adapt himself so easily to all sorts and conditions of men. We can only notice the contrasts between himself and his audience, that reveal themselves in almost every sentence. To them it was a new sensation, a shift in the kaleidoscope of religious thought; to him it was a matter of tremendous urgency, his spirit was pressed and provoked within him.

They confessed their ignorance of the Unknown God, who lay behind the world and all things therein; Paul withdrew the veil and declared Him unto them. They supposed that the temples around were not unworthy of the Divine abode; he told them, as he remembered Stephen to have said years before, that nothing less than Heaven's infinite dome could befit his supernal majesty, and that even this could not contain Him. They thought to propitiate the Deity with gifts; he insisted that He needed nothing at men's hands, and that their blessedness consisted in giving, not goats and calves, but broken hearts, contrite spirits, and empty, out stretched hands. They taught a dreary kind of Pantheism, as though God were no longer distinct from the matter of the world; he said that He was a Person, a Father to be sought after, as well as the atmosphere in which they lived, and moved, and had their being. It did not seem unbecoming for them to fashion the similitude of the Godhead in gold, and silver, and stone, graven by art and man's device; but he insisted that He was a Spirit, to be worshipped in spirit and in truth. Some held the immortality of the soul, as Socrates had proclaimed it on that very spot, but they had no idea of the resurrection of the body; he, however, unhesitatingly affirmed that spirit would mate again with body, not only that there would be a literal resurrection, but that there had been one, and that a day was coming in which God would judge the world by the Man who died in mortal weakness, but whom He had raised from the dead.

At this mention of the resurrection, many in his audience began to mock. The Greek found the perfect fruition and glory of life in the present, and had no idea of a future which should involve the reanimation of the body. So Paul departed from among them with comparatively small results. Dionysius, a member of the august tribunal before which he had stood; a woman, Damaris, who was probably the result of his more general work in the city; and a few others, clave unto him, and believed. The Gospel attracted the simple-minded merchants and artisans of Macedonia more readily than the educated literati of Athens.

So far as we know the Apostle never visited Athens again.

He went sadly on his way to Corinth, his heart filled with a tumult of thoughts, anxiety for the infant churches behind him, yearning to see Timothy and Luke, questioning what reception he might receive amid the cultured and eloquent Corinthians; but more than ever determined not to know anything among them save Jesus Christ and Him crucified, while steadfastly abjuring all attempts at wisdom or grace of speech, lest the Cross of Christ should be made void.

~ end of chapter 14 ~

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