

Paul's Good Fight of Faith

“I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith.”

—II Timothy 4:6,7

shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.”—II Tim. 4:8

WHEN THE APOSTLE WAS

near the end of his earthly course, he wrote the words of our theme text to his beloved Timothy from his prison cell in Rome. To these words, he then added, “Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.”—II

Years before this, Paul was on his way to Damascus carrying papers of authorization to persecute the Christians of that city, when the resurrected Jesus appeared to him. The account reads, “As he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord

said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks. And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do.”—Acts 9:3-6

Saul, or Paul as he was later called, was sufficiently acquainted with God’s dealings with his servants of past ages to realize that an experience of this kind could mean only that he was being apprehended by the Lord for some special service. In relating this experience to King Agrippa later, Paul quotes Jesus as saying, “I have appeared unto 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; Delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee, To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me.”—chap. 26:16-18

When the Lord appeared to Paul on the Damascus road, his immediate response was, “Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?” He further expressed his witness before Agrippa, saying to the king, “I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision.” (vs. 19) This spirit of obedience continued to be manifested in all of Paul’s experiences. Certainly obedience is one of the important characteristics of all soldiers, especially “good soldiers of Jesus Christ.” Paul was one of these.

Paul wrote to Timothy, “Thou therefore endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.” (II

Tim. 2:3) Paul knew from the beginning that fighting the good fight of faith steadfastly would result in suffering and thus call for endurance. At the time of his conversion, the Lord said to Ananias concerning Paul, "I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake." (Acts 9:16) It was not long before these sufferings began.

He preached the gospel in the synagogues in Damascus. Immediately, the religious leaders rose up against him and he was forced to flee from the city, the brethren letting him down over the wall in a basket. A short time later in Jerusalem, he also encountered persecution. Temporarily, he returned to his home city of Tarsus. It was here that Barnabas sought him out and invited him to participate in the ministry at Antioch. Again, Paul was quick to obey what he believed to be the leadings of the Lord. He accompanied Barnabas to Antioch. From that time forward, his life was one of continuous sacrifice and service for the Lord.

Writing to the church at Corinth, Paul lists some of the results of his faithfulness in terms of sufferings. Instead of complaining about them, he cites these experiences as evidence of God's blessing and of his apostleship. "In labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false

brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches.”—II Cor. 11:23-28

IN PISIDIA

The church at Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas on a missionary journey, and Mark accompanied them. One of the first cities visited was Antioch of Pisidia. Here a good witness was given by Paul in the synagogue on the first Sabbath they were there. The people of the city learned about this and the next Sabbath day there “came almost the whole city together to hear the word of God.”—Acts 13:44

“When the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy, and spake against those things which were spoken by Paul, contradicting and blaspheming.” (vs. 45) Additionally, “the Jews stirred up the devout and honourable women, and the chief men of the city, and raised persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them out of their coasts. But they shook off the dust of their feet against them, and came unto Iconium. And the disciples were filled with joy, and with the Holy Spirit.”—vss. 50-52

Here again, Paul realized what it would mean for him to continue being a “good soldier of Jesus Christ.” Their next stop was Iconium. Here also, they felt the cruel hand of persecution and were forced to leave the city, although not until after they had given a good witness for the Truth. This reminds us of an important facet of the good fight

of faith. Had Paul, when receiving that “vision” on the Damascus road, simply rejoiced in the fact that he now knew that Jesus was the Messiah and done nothing about it, he could have escaped a life of persecution. The fact that he did not choose this course is indicated by his experience in Iconium and most of the other places he visited. It was his bearing witness to the Truth that brought the persecution.

STONED AT LYSTRA

From Iconium, Paul and Barnabas went to Lystra, “and there they preached the Gospel.” (Acts 14:7) They found a man there who had never been able to walk. Through the power of the Lord, Paul healed him. Naturally, the people of the city were happy over this and had no inclination to persecute those who had performed such a wonderful miracle. In fact, they wanted to worship these two Christian soldiers, but Paul restrained them from so rash an action.—Acts 14:6-15

Then, however, “certain Jews from Antioch and Iconium” appeared on the scene and persuaded the people to stone Paul. Then they “drew him out of the city, supposing he had been dead,” (Acts 14:19) but Paul was not dead. As the disciples stood around him he rose up, “and the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe.”—vs. 20

Paul and Barnabas had not been intimidated by the persecutions which had come upon them in Lystra and Iconium and Antioch, for they returned to these cities and ministered to those who had become interested in the Gospel as a result of their first visit. Paul was an ardent evangelist who

faithfully proclaimed the Gospel to the public upon every possible occasion. He also was just as faithful in laying down his life for the brethren, building them up in the most holy faith.

The remaining visits made by Paul and Barnabas on this first missionary journey are mentioned, but no details given. They returned to Antioch and reported to the brethren who had sent them out. Not much information is given concerning this report. It simply states that “they rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles.” (vs. 27) We gather from this brief statement that their report dwelt more on the manner in which the Lord had blessed their ministry rather than on the persecution and other difficulties they had encountered. Already Paul realized that the way of the cross was one of weariness and suffering. He had learned by experience the truthfulness of Jesus’ words, “In the world ye shall have tribulation.” (John 16:33) He had learned also that he could maintain good cheer in his suffering, knowing that the Lord would help him in his every time of need.

THE MACEDONIAN CALL

It was on Paul’s second missionary tour that he received the call, “Come over into Macedonia, and help us.” (Acts 16:9) Responding to this call, he was used by the Lord to establish the first congregation of Jesus’ disciples in Europe. This was at Philippi. It was here that Lydia, the seller of purple, accepted the Gospel and was immersed. After that, it was in Lydia’s home that Paul and his companions stayed while in Philippi.

As in so many cases, though, the great joys experienced in the service at Philippi were accompanied by trouble. Paul and Silas, who was now his traveling companion, were haled before the rulers, and the charge was made, “These men, being Jews, do exceedingly trouble our city, And teach customs, which are not lawful for us to receive, neither to observe, being Romans.”—Acts 16:20,21

The reaction to this charge was swift and cruel both by the rulers and the people. We read, “The multitude rose up together against them: and the magistrates rent off their clothes, and commanded to beat them. And when they had laid many stripes upon them, they cast them into prison, charging the jailor to keep them safely: Who, having received such a charge, thrust them into the inner prison, and made their feet fast in the stocks.”vss. 22-24

Paul and Silas were not discouraged. Locked in that “inner prison” with their feet made fast in stocks, at midnight they “prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them.” (vs. 25) Here were Paul and Silas fighting the good fight of faith under most difficult circumstances. Probably their backs were bleeding from the beatings they had received. They were in a dungeon and their feet ached from the stocks. What did they do? Did they complain? Did they intimate that had they known that they would be subjected to treatment of this kind they would have stayed in Antioch? No, they held a prayer meeting!

“Suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken: and immediately all the doors were opened, and every one’s bands were loosed. And the keeper of the

prison awaking out of his sleep, and seeing the prison doors open, he drew out his sword, and would have killed himself, supposing that the prisoners had been fled. But Paul cried with a loud voice, saying, Do thyself no harm: for we are all here.” (vss. 26-28) The Lord had brought Paul and his companion through another trial and they rejoiced. As a result of this experience, the jailor accepted the Gospel as well as his family.

TROUBLES CONTINUED

Paul finished his third missionary tour at Jerusalem. Through all three of his journeys he experienced the fulfillment of the Lord’s word to Ananias concerning the many things he would suffer for the name of Christ. On his way to Jerusalem it was made plain to him by the Holy Spirit, through a brother by the name of Agabus, that he would be bound at Jerusalem and would be delivered into the hands of the Gentiles. (chap. 21:11) One less devoted to the Lord and to his cause might well have understood this as an indication that the Lord did not want him to go to Jerusalem. Rather, Paul was of the firm conviction that this was not so. Rather, he saw that it was the Lord’s will for him to go to Jerusalem on this occasion. He saw that the testimony of the Holy Spirit through Agabus was designed to test his faith and courage. He showed that he was willing to die at Jerusalem if this was what the Lord wanted.

He said this in so many words. “None of these things move me,” Paul said, “neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of

the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God.” And again, “What mean ye to weep and to break mine heart? for I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.”—Acts 20:24; 21:13

Paul was not killed at Jerusalem, but he did experience some very severe trials. He was seized upon by his Jewish brethren according to the flesh. He would have been killed by them except that he was rescued from their hands by Roman soldiers. Thus, true to the prophecy of Agabus, he found himself in the custody of Gentiles. Even this he knew was by the Lord’s design. Nor did the Lord withhold from Paul what his design was. We read, “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.”—chap. 23:11

This information served both as an encouragement and as a guide to Paul. As a prisoner of the Romans, he was taken from governor to governor. At the proper time, when they might have released him, he appealed his case to Rome. Under Roman law, this made it mandatory that he be taken to Rome at the expense of the Roman Empire and under the protection of Roman soldiers. It was necessary that he have this protection because the Jews, in essentially every area, were opposed to Paul. Except for the fact that he had the protection of Roman soldiers, it is doubtful that he would ever have reached Rome. It was the Lord’s will that Paul go to Rome, and the Lord had his own way of making the journey possible.

There were trials on the way to Rome, including a shipwreck. When it was apparent that the ship

on which they were traveling would be wrecked, Paul said to the crew and passengers, "I exhort you to be of good cheer: for there shall be no loss of any man's life among you, but of the ship. For there stood by me this night the angel of God, whose I am, and whom I serve, Saying, Fear not, Paul; thou must be brought before Caesar: and, lo, God hath given thee all them that sail with thee. Wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer: for I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me."—chap. 27:22-25

The ship was wrecked and there was a long wait on the Island of Melita—until spring. Then the company embarked on another ship. Arriving in Italy, Paul and Silas continued their journey to Rome on the Appian Way. Some of the brethren learned that Paul and his party were on their way to Rome and went out to meet them, "whom when Paul saw, he thanked God, and took courage." (chap. 28:15) It had been a long and wearisome journey. Nothing could have given Paul more comfort and encouragement at the time than to meet some of his brethren, those who had enough concern for him to travel a distance to meet him.

TO PRISON

For Paul to take courage under such circumstances was in itself no small accomplishment. He was not going to Rome to be honored by the Roman authorities. He was going there to be imprisoned until his turn for trial came up. He did not know what the result of his trial would be—whether he would be set free, or be convicted and executed. He took courage because he had the Lord's word which confirmed that he wanted him to go to Rome and

there to bear witness to the Truth. Under most hazardous conditions, the Lord had taken Paul to Rome. Now, this illustrious apostle could take courage and wait patiently as the further providences of the Lord unfolded.

As it turned out, Paul was treated a little better than some by the Roman authorities. He was held in custody, but he was not cast into the dungeons. He was allowed to live in his own hired house for two years. While his every move was doubtless supervised by Roman guards, he was given the privilege of receiving guests to whom he bore witness to the Truth. He used whatever opportunities came to him to witness also to those who were guarding him. Concerning this, the *New English Translation* reads, “Friends, I want you to understand that the work of the Gospel has been helped on, rather than hindered, by this business of mine. My imprisonment in Christ’s cause has become common knowledge to all at headquarters here, and indeed among the public at large; and it has given confidence to most of our fellow Christians to speak the word of God fearlessly and with extraordinary courage.”—Phil. 1:12-14

Paul knew that fighting the good fight of faith involved more than simply suffering for righteousness’ sake. He knew that it meant more also than preaching the Gospel to Jews and Gentiles, to Roman guards and fellow prisoners. He knew that to have the Lord’s approval in this sacrificing and suffering in his name, one must also have his mindset. From his prison home in Rome, he wrote to the brethren at Philippi, saying, “Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.”—Phil. 2:5-8, *Revised Standard Version*

Only if one carries on the good fight of faith in love and in humility before God can there be hope of attaining victory at the end. This is a humility that is manifested in obedience to all his righteous precepts. With such a victory, “a crown of glory that fadeth not away” is reserved in heaven for all those who endure hardness as good soldiers of Jesus Christ and endure in the strength and spirit of the Lord.—I Pet. 5:4

THIS ONE THING

In his own prison house in Rome, Paul wrote further to the brethren at Philippi. He admonishes them to “rejoice in the Lord” and adds, “To write the same things to you, to me indeed is not grievous.” (Phil. 3:1) According to the flesh, Paul had little in which he could rejoice. His years of hazardous service and persecution, though, had not dimmed his faith in the great Messianic cause for which he was laying down his life. It was not a hardship, as he says, for him to write to the brethren to “rejoice in the Lord,” for he himself was thus rejoicing.

Through his years of service, beginning with his conversion on the Damascus road, Paul had suffered and sacrificed much, especially his reputation and strength. His appreciation of the heavenly

vision had continued to increase, and he was now as determined as ever to be obedient to it. He wrote from prison, “Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith: That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead. Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.”—Phil. 3:8-14

Here was a soldier of the cross almost literally under the shadow of the executioner. He was in this precarious situation because he had been obedient to “the heavenly vision” given to him by the Lord. He had been faithful to a vision which called him into the service of the great Messianic cause. His obedience had cost him the loss of all things and untold sufferings. One with less faith and courage might well have decided that he would not continue in a way that offered, so far as the flesh was concerned, nothing but suffering.

Paul, however, was not this sort of person. He knew on whom he had believed and had recognized from the start that only by suffering and dying with Jesus could he hope to live and reign with him. So, in this final, crucial time of his life of sacrifice, "the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" was a great joy set before him. For the attaining of this, Paul was eager to press on and give up the last remaining impulses of his life. He was not weary in well-doing, but anxious to continue sacrificing in his great fight of faith.

When later Paul wrote to Timothy, evidently from a prison cell, he asked his beloved "son" to visit him and to bring his cloak. At this point, he seemed to know for a certainty that he would not be set free to continue his service of the Truth and the brethren, but was to soon be executed. Only now could he exult in the fact that he had continued to be faithful. He had fought the good fight and had finished his course. What a glorious and triumphant ending to the life of a good soldier of Jesus Christ. May his example encourage us to greater zeal in knowing and doing our Heavenly Father's will. ■