

Testifying to God's Grace

***“Now, behold,
bound in spirit, I
am on my way to
Jerusalem, not
knowing what will
happen to me
there, except that
the Holy Spirit
solemnly testifies to
me in every city,
saying that bonds
and afflictions
await me.”***

***—Acts 20:22,23,
New American
Standard Bible***

THESE SOBERING WORDS

were spoken by the Apostle Paul and were recorded by Luke, who was an historian and a companion to the apostle on his many journeys. Paul spoke these words to the Ephesian brethren who had gathered together to bid him farewell as his last pilgrim journey was drawing to a close.

He realized that troublous times were indeed awaiting him when he would leave his dearly beloved brethren at Ephesus and make his way to Jerusalem. Yet he willingly put his life and ministry in the hands of the loving Heavenly Father, and said, “None of these things move me, 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 now, behold, I know that ye all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, shall see my face no more.”—Acts 20:24,25

RECOLLECTIONS

The apostle then reflected on his ministry and labor of love, and reminded the brethren at Ephesus, “I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God.” (vs. 27) He then brought their attention to the fact that they had been given responsibility of being overseers in their new Christian life, and that they should help to further establish their fellow members in Christ Jesus. He also admonished them to be on guard against false brethren who would seek to draw them away from the Truth as they had been taught. “Yea, ye yourselves know, that these hands have ministered unto my necessities, and to them that were with me. I have shewed you all things, how that so labouring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, It is more blessed to give than to receive.”—vss. 34,35

THE PARTING SCENE

Luke has recorded the apostle’s departure, saying, “When he had thus spoken, he kneeled down, and prayed with them all. And they all wept sore, and fell on Paul’s neck, and kissed him, Sorrowing most of all for the words which he spake, that they should see his face no more. And they accompanied him unto the ship.”—vss. 36-38

These parting words of Paul must have been very sobering to the members of the church at Ephesus, but especially for the elders of the ecclesia. They realized that the responsibility for this congregation

of the Lord's people would now be on their shoulders. They could no longer look forward to any more future visits by Paul to help resolve any of their problems. They knew that the only strength they could derive from the apostle any more would be through his wonderful example of faithfulness under trial, and the depth of his teachings of the Truth.

VALUABLE EXPERIENCES

Preaching the glad tidings of the Truth provided Paul and his companions with valuable experiences which helped them all to become more faithful in their consecrated walk in "newness of life" with our Lord Jesus. (Rom. 6:4) We also see his wonderful Christian growth that is often reflected in the letters that he wrote to the various churches which he helped to establish. Many of these were written after he had gone through much suffering for the cause of Truth. We believe that all of his experiences were especially directed by the Heavenly Father.

This same spirit of love and care for the spiritual interests of his brethren is also shown when he wrote to the brethren at Thessalonica. He encouraged them by saying, "Furthermore then we beseech you, brethren, and exhort you by the Lord Jesus, that as ye have received of us how ye ought to walk and to please God, so ye would abound more and more. For ye know what commandments we gave you by the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication: That every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour."—I Thess. 4:1-4

SEEKING GOD'S WILL

As the apostle's ministry was drawing to a close, we believe that the Heavenly Father had already begun to prepare him for his final witness for the Truth, and one which would be accomplished under very different circumstances than any he had previously encountered. The events that were to occur, and the way in which he would respond to them would ultimately affect his growth as a faithful follower of Christ Jesus. He no doubt sensed that his life would be in danger in his service to the Heavenly Father and our Lord Jesus. We catch a small glimpse from the scriptural account that has been recorded. Luke wrote, "After these things were ended, Paul purposed in the spirit, when he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, to go to Jerusalem, saying, After I have been there, I must also see Rome."—Acts 19:21

The apostle knew through the Holy Spirit that his presence in Jerusalem would ultimately lead to his arrest, many fiery trials, and finally the end of his earthly life. The brethren would never see his face again. He knew perhaps more deeply than any of the other apostles that when the especially appointed leaders of the Early Church had all finished their courses in death, the Adversary would create many problems among them, and ambitious leaders would arise to draw them away with new and false teachings.

JOURNEY TO JERUSALEM

From the scriptural record, we learn some of the interesting details of Paul's journey. "It came to pass, that after we were gotten from them, and had

launched, we came with a straight course unto Coos, and the day following unto Rhodes, and from thence unto Patara: And finding a ship sailing over unto Phoenicia, we went aboard, and set forth. Now when we had discovered Cyprus, we left it on the left hand, and sailed into Syria, and landed at Tyre: for there the ship was to unlade her burden.”—Acts 21:1-3

When the ship docked for a seven-day layover at Tyre to unload its freight, Paul and his companions took advantage of the opportunity to meet with the disciples who lived in that city. When they learned that the apostle was travelling to Jerusalem, they tried to dissuade him from going there because they feared what would happen to him. The church in that city was composed mainly of Jews, many of whom had fled from Judea because of persecution, and they were keenly aware of the hazards that awaited them there.

STOPOVER AT TYRE

At the end of the seven-day stopover at Tyre, the entire congregation gathered to bid the apostle farewell. “When we had accomplished those days, we departed and went our way; and they all brought us on our way, with wives and children, till we were out of the city: and we kneeled down on the shore, and prayed.” (vs. 5) The whole group knelt down on the shore before the ship, praying, and embracing the travelers before returning sadly to their homes. It was truly a scene of loving concern, tender care, and the deep faith in our Lord. They had developed much in the fruits of the Holy Spirit and in the Truth.

VISITS AT PTOLEMAIS AND CAESAREA

Paul and his traveling companions traveled on to Ptolemais and stayed one day with the brethren there. The next day the apostle and his companions left for Caesarea where the group stayed with Philip. Several years earlier Philip had been selected by the church at Jerusalem to be one of seven deacons. (Acts 6:5) From the scriptural record, we learn that he was now married and the father of four daughters, all of whom were consecrated to the Lord and in active service for the Truth.

The congregation at Caesarea was originally composed of Jews only, but after God's exclusive favor to Israel ended, Cornelius and his family, as well as other Gentiles, were brought into the family of God. The account tells us that Cornelius lived in Caesarea (Acts 10:24), but no mention is made of him during this final visit of Paul. It is believed that Philip also made Caesarea his home.—Acts 8:39

AGABUS' MESSAGE

Paul and his companions stayed in Caesarea for several days, "As we tarried there many days, there came down from Judaea a certain prophet, named Agabus." (Acts 21:10) God used a prophet who delivered a clear message to Paul and the others as to what they might expect at Jerusalem. "And when he was come unto us, he took Paul's girdle, and bound his own hands and feet, and said, Thus saith the Holy Spirit, So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man that owneth this girdle, and shall deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles. And when we heard these things, both we, and they of that

place, besought him not to go up to Jerusalem.”—Acts 21:11,12

The reaction to Agabus’ proclamation was very emotional. The brethren of Caesarea, and those traveling with Paul, pleaded with him that he should not go to Jerusalem. They wept because of the difficult trials that lay ahead for the apostle. However, Paul knew that the Lord was arranging circumstances for his faithful servant. Those who were traveling with him now understood that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things.

“Then Paul answered, 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.” (vs. 13) His companions realized they could not change Paul’s plans. “And when he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, The will of the Lord be done. And after those days we took up our carriages, and went up to Jerusalem. There went with us also certain of the disciples of Caesarea, and brought with them one Mnason of Cyprus, an old disciple, with whom we should lodge.”—vss. 14-16

AT JERUSALEM

Paul and his traveling companions were warmly greeted by the brethren when they came to Jerusalem. Soon after their arrival Paul went to see James and the other apostles and elders in the local ecclesia. He presented his firsthand report in connection with the Lord’s blessing upon his ministry and extending the message of the heavenly call. The brethren glorified God when they heard this report. However, some Christians living in Jerusalem had

heard rumors about the apostle and that he was teaching that Jews should not observe the Law. Although the rumor was not true it had to be settled.—Acts 21:15-21

RUMORS ABOUND

Since the time of Pentecost, the church at Jerusalem had grown very much in size. The great majority were Jews who had been raised to observe the Law and to give it great respect. The apostles were concerned that the faith of many of these might be affected if they believed these false rumors about Paul's view concerning the Law. They suggested that Paul demonstrate his regard for the Law of Moses by joining with four brethren who had taken a Nazarite vow. "Them take, and purify thyself with them, and be at charges with them, that they may shave their heads: and all may know that those things, whereof they were informed concerning thee, are nothing; but that thou thyself also walkest orderly, and keepest the law."—vs. 24

The ceremony took seven days and was concluded by shaving the head and offering appropriate sacrifices. Near the end of the days of purification, some Jews from Asia came to the Temple to worship. "When the seven days were almost ended, the Jews which were of Asia, when they saw him in the temple, stirred up all the people, and laid hands on him, Crying out, Men of Israel, help: This is the man, that teacheth all men every where against the people, and the law, and this place: and further brought Greeks also into the temple, and hath polluted this holy place."—vss. 27,28

RESCUED BY ROMAN SOLDIERS

They incited still other Jews to seize Paul and charged that he was preaching against the Law. They said that he had defiled the Temple by bringing Gentiles into it, a charge based on erroneous conclusions that Paul had been seen with a Gentile. As the mob increased they began to beat him. Except for the intervention of the Roman commander and his soldiers, Paul might have been killed.

The scriptural account describes the scene. "All the city was moved, and the people ran together: and they took Paul, and drew him out of the temple: and forthwith the doors were shut. And as they went about to kill him, tidings came unto the chief captain of the band, that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. Who immediately took soldiers and centurions, and ran down unto them: and when they saw the chief captain and the soldiers, they left beating of Paul. Then the chief captain came near, and took him, and commanded him to be bound with two chains; and demanded who he was, and what he had done."—Acts 21:30-33

When Paul had been put in chains, the commander tried to learn who he was and what he had done. As the crowd cried "away with him" the apostle was taken to the castle in the custody of the soldiers to protect him. (vs. 36,37) As he was about to be taken into the castle, he spoke to the commander in Greek. He assured him he was not to be confused with a notorious rebel leader, but that he was a law-abiding citizen of Tarsus. He requested and was granted permission to speak to the people.—vs. 39

A MARVELOUS TESTIMONY

Paul appealed to the people as he stood on the castle steps. The mob grew quiet as he began to speak to them in Hebrew. He gave them a brief account of his background, emphasizing his zeal for the Law and his persecution of the first Christians. Then he proceeded to give a detailed description of his encounter with the glorified Jesus and how this had completely changed his life. He told how he had gone to Jerusalem, desiring to tell everyone of the great change that had taken place in his life.

A ROMAN CITIZEN

In spite of his bonds, the apostle had accomplished what he had never been able to do when he was free. He had been given the opportunity of witnessing to a multitude of Jews in Jerusalem. Whether any that heard him changed their course of life as he had done we are not told, but it is possible that a few may have been among the Lord's people who heard Paul speak on that day.

"They gave him audience unto this word, and then lifted up their voices, and said, Away with such a fellow from the earth: for it is not fit that he should live. And as they cried out, and cast off their clothes, and threw dust into the air, The chief captain commanded him to be brought into the castle, and bade that he should be examined by scourging; that he might know wherefore they cried so against him. And as they bound him with thongs, Paul said unto the centurion that stood by, Is it lawful for you to scourge a man that is a Roman, and uncondemned?" (Acts 22:22-25) When the chief captain heard this he asked Paul how he had acquired his

citizenship, and Paul answered him that he was “free born.” (vs. 28) The commander became fearful when he learned this. His earlier order to bind Paul was not lawful if he were a Roman, so he was set free.

However, the Apostle Paul was kept in custody for his own protection by the Roman governor for two years. As a Roman citizen, Paul had made an appeal for an audience before the Caesar in Rome, and it was necessary that he remain in custody until his case had been presented to Caesar and arrangements could be made for his departure from Jerusalem. It is interesting that he had earlier spoken of his intention to go to Rome after his visit at Jerusalem. (Acts 19:21) It is doubtful that he could have ever foreseen the circumstances that would make this journey possible.

JOURNEY TO ROME

Luke recorded the occasion, “When it was determined that we should sail into Italy, they delivered Paul and certain other prisoners unto one named Julius, a centurion of Augustus’ band. And entering into a ship of Adramyttium, we launched, meaning to sail by the coasts of Asia; one Aristarchus, a Macedonian of Thessalonica, being with us. And the next day we touched at Sidon.” (Acts 27:1-3) God’s wonderful providence was surely manifest to Paul and his companions when they arrived at Sidon. The centurion who was in charge of Paul and the other prisoners graciously allowed the apostle and his fellow travelers to visit a group of brethren who resided in Sidon. “Julius courteously entreated Paul, and gave him liberty

to go unto his friends to refresh himself.” (vs. 3) The apostle had been held in custody for two years, and it surely must have been a source of much joy to share fellowship again with the brethren at Sidon.

When it came time to continue on their way toward Rome it was getting too late in the season for travel in that part of the world. After a windy journey they arrived at the port city of Lycia where they boarded a ship that was headed for Italy. When they had made their way to Crete they took refuge at Fair Havens where they waited for the storms to cease. Paul warned the ship’s owner that it was too dangerous to continue, but they set sail again. The strong winds blew them off course, and it became necessary to toss cargo overboard to help lighten the vessel.

GOD’S ANGEL ASSURED PAUL

As the situation grew more desperate, the apostle spoke to those who were on board the ship. “After long abstinence Paul stood forth in the midst of them, and said, Sirs, ye should have hearkened unto me, and not have loosed from Crete, and to have gained this harm and loss. And now 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.”—vss. 21,22

The Heavenly Father had sent his angel to reassure the apostle that he would be delivered safely to Caesar, and that there would be no loss of life on the vessel. “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. Howbeit we must be cast upon a certain island.”—Acts 27:23-26

The situation grew increasingly desperate, and the ship ran aground, crashed into the rocks and broke up. However, all who were on board the stricken vessel made their way safely to shore even as the angel of God had said. They found themselves on the island of Melita, and they were treated very kindly by the local inhabitants. (chap. 28:1,2) Paul and his companions wintered on the island, during which time the apostle healed many who were sick and had a variety of diseases.

ARRIVAL IN ITALY

We learn about the final portion of the voyage from Melita to Italy from the scriptural record. We read, “After three months we departed in a ship of Alexandria, which had wintered in the isle, whose sign was Castor and Pollux. And landing at Syracuse, we tarried there three days. And from thence we fetched a compass, and came to Rhegium: and after one day the south wind blew, and we came the next day to Puteoli.”—vss. 11-13

Having arrived at Puteoli they were greeted by a group of brethren with whom they stayed for seven days of fellowship. They later traveled on to Rome where other brethren also came to meet him. The centurion then delivered the prisoners to the captain of the guard. (vs. 16) Soon after his imprisonment, Paul got in touch with Jewish religious leaders in the city and explained why he had

been brought to Rome. He also told them that he had been falsely accused by the Jews at Jerusalem.

A FINAL MESSAGE OF TRUTH

The Scriptures do not record the events as they unfolded in the final days of Paul's life. It is believed that he was brought before Nero and condemned to death. From his letter to Timothy, he wrote, "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: 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. Do thy diligence to come shortly unto me."—II Tim. 4:6-9

We do know that Paul used his declining physical strength in proclaiming the wonderful message of Truth to those who had an ear to hear the Heavenly Father's invitation and heavenly calling in Christ Jesus. The apostle was one of the most powerful voices ever heard during the Early Church era. His tireless achievements during the many years of his extensive ministry were centered around his activity in establishing new classes of consecrated followers of Christ Jesus in many widespread places. He served a critical role in sending forth the message of Truth to a small but select class of believers in Christ Jesus often under very difficult circumstances. As we contemplate his zeal and faithfulness to this great cause, an often overlooked but equally important work was also being

accomplished in the spiritual growth and development of his own consecrated walk in newness of life, and as a faithful member in the body of Christ.

“Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came in unto him, Preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him.”—Acts 28:30,31 ■