

Conclusion of Paul's Third Journey

***“I have not
shunned to declare
unto you all the
counsel of God.”***

—Acts 20:27

WHEN PAUL LEFT MACE- donia for the final time, he sailed to Troas, on the northwestern coast of Asia Minor, joining others in his party who had traveled there in advance. There he stayed for seven days. (Acts 20:5,6) On the last day of his visit, which was the “first day of the week,” the brethren in Troas came together in the evening, as was apparently their custom, to “break bread.” (vs. 7) This breaking of bread was not an ordinance of the church, but simply a custom some of the ecclesias in the Early Church followed in commemoration of the resurrection of Jesus on the first day of the week.—John 20:1,19

In the meantime, Paul's companions sailed on ahead to their next stop, Assos. After his meeting with the brethren at Troas, Paul journeyed by foot to Assos to meet up again with his fellow travelers.

(Acts 20:13,14) Just why this final meeting with the brethren at Troas seemed so important to Paul we can only conjecture. Although the subject of his message to the brethren there is not revealed, the apostle must have considered it vital, because he preached all night.—vss. 7,11

It was here also that a young man named Eutychus was sitting in a window and fell asleep while Paul was preaching. He fell three stories to the ground and was thought to be dead. Paul restored the young man, assuring the brethren that he would be all right, at which they were all greatly comforted. The apostle then continued with his sermon until daybreak.—vss. 9-12

As noted earlier, we are not told what the subject of Paul's sermon might have been. We do know that in Corinth, where he had recently traveled, there were some in the congregation who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. (I Cor. 15:12) It is possible that this blight of unbelief had reached some of the brethren in Troas, and that Paul used this opportunity, when they were assembled to commemorate Jesus' resurrection on the first day of the week, to help those who might be doubting. If this be the case, we need only to read the 15th chapter of 1st Corinthians to know some of the vital points of truth the great apostle may have presented that night to the ecclesia in Troas.

In any case, Paul considered it important enough to remain that night in Troas to serve the brethren to justify his walking more than twenty miles the next day over rocky, dusty roads in order to rejoin his companions at Assos. Such was the undaunted spirit of love and devotion which actuated this man

of God, this great apostle to the Gentiles. Since he preached all night, he would have had no sleep. We can imagine the apostle trudging along over those twenty long miles, weary of mind and body, yet rejoicing in heart as he recalled the blessings he enjoyed with those of like precious faith in Troas.

MEETING THE ELDERS OF EPHESUS

So far as this journey was concerned, Paul's ultimate destination was Jerusalem, and he wanted to arrive there by the day of Pentecost. (Acts 20:16) He knew that this would not be possible if he took time to visit all the ecclesias in Asia Minor, but he did want once more to see and fellowship with the elders of the Ephesus ecclesia. From Assos, where he rejoined his companions, the ship sailed on making a few incidental stops until it reached Miletus, which was about thirty miles south of Ephesus. From here Paul sent messengers to invite the elders of Ephesus to make the day's journey to Miletus to meet him, which they did.—vs. 17

The fact that the elders made this effort to see the apostle reveals the great confidence they had in him and their fervent love for him. One reason Paul was anxious to see these brethren is revealed in his statement to them, "Behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me."—vss. 22,23, *English Standard Version*

While Paul said that he did not know what awaited him, he seemed sure that, whatever it was, he would not be able to again visit the brethren in

Ephesus. Thus, he said to the elders that they would see his face no more. (vs. 25) It was in the shadow of this uncertainty, so far as his human life was concerned, that the apostle delivered his farewell message to the Ephesian elders. Under the circumstances, many would have been too unsettled to think of anything but their forthcoming troubles. Paul, however, testified, "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."—vs. 24

Paul had dedicated his life to the service of the Lord and the Truth. From the time the great vision of truth had come to him on the Damascus road, he had never tried to spare his strength nor save his life when the path of opportunity lay clearly before him. He knew that every time he witnessed to the Jews in their synagogues they would sooner or later rise up against him, but he did not hesitate to continue to witness. The fact that his ministry in the gospel would cost Paul suffering and perhaps death was never used by him as an excuse to cease serving his Heavenly Father.

It was no different now. A less ardent and self-sacrificing individual might well have reasoned that since it was the Holy Spirit that was bearing witness of the trouble he would encounter when reaching Jerusalem, the Lord was thereby giving warning not to go there. Paul, however, did not interpret the Holy Spirit's warning in this way. For reasons which the Scriptures do not reveal, Paul was convinced that it was the Lord's will for him to

go to Jerusalem. In the light of this conviction he interpreted the testimony of the Holy Spirit as a test of his faith and loyalty, and his willingness to die for the Lord Jesus.

In Paul's farewell message to the elders of Ephesus, he said that he had "kept back nothing that was profitable" for their spiritual growth, having taught them both publicly and in their homes. (Acts 20:20) Indeed, as stated in our opening text, he had not held back anything, but had declared to them "all the counsel of God." Paul was not satisfied simply to tell his hearers that through belief in Christ they could be saved. For example, we recall that it was at Ephesus, earlier in his third journey, that he found a group of disciples who had not heard about the Holy Spirit, and had not been taught true Christian baptism, so he instructed these brethren more perfectly in the ways of the Lord.—Acts 19:1-7

ADMONITION TO "TAKE HEED"

After reminding the elders of Ephesus of his own practice in declaring to them "all the counsel of God," Paul then admonished, "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Spirit hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood." (Acts 20:28) This admonition was in two parts. First, the elders were to take heed—that is, give attention—to their own conduct and course of life. Second, they were to watch over and feed the brethren, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Experience has proven that professed servants in the church who do not take heed unto themselves

first, are not qualified to watch properly and effectively over the spiritual welfare of others. For elders in the church to take heed unto themselves means, among other things, that they will not think of themselves more highly than they ought to think. Pride of mind and heart distorts spiritual vision, and makes ineffective what otherwise could be a blessed ministry of the gospel.

Taking heed to one's self also implies careful and prayerful study of the Word of God. One cannot minister to others what he does not understand himself. Paul had seen a vivid example of this in the ministry of Apollos. Seemingly, Apollos had great ability as a speaker, but regardless of this, until he was more fully instructed he was not able to impart knowledge to others which he did not himself possess. (Acts 18:24-26) To understand the Truth is important, as Paul later wrote to Timothy, saying, "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."—II Tim. 2:15

"GRIEVOUS WOLVES"

Paul's discernment enabled him to foresee that when his own personal influence was no longer felt among the brethren, they would experience severe trouble. "Grievous wolves" would enter in among the brethren, he warned, "not sparing the flock." Then he added, "Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them."—Acts 20:29,30

The church at Ephesus is one of the seven mentioned in the 2nd and 3rd chapters of Revelation. While these seven churches may be viewed as

symbolic of the entire church in its various stages of development throughout the Gospel Age, it is reasonable to assume that they were selected for this purpose because of special circumstances associated with them as local congregations in Asia Minor. Paul's prophecy that false leaders—"wolves"—would enter the church at Ephesus, seems to be reflected in the Revelator's record, which reads, "I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars."—Rev. 2:2

Paul, continuing his words to the elders of Ephesus, said, "Watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears." (Acts 20:31) Paul had set a good example for these brethren over a long period of time, and now he wanted them to emulate that pattern—to follow him as he followed Christ.—I Cor. 11:1

While he desired that they follow his example, Paul never lost sight of the fact that the direct responsibility of every true Christian is to the Lord, and that all such should look to him, not to any human source, for guidance and help in time of need. "I commend you to God," he said to these elders, "and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them that are sanctified." (Acts 20:32) This sentiment is the same as he wrote to the brethren at Philippi, expressing confidence on their behalf, "that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ."—Phil. 1:6

PARTING WORDS TO THE ELDERS

Paul was truly a sacrificing saint, and he set a notable example in the fact that he did not depend upon the brethren he served in spiritual things to care for his physical necessities. To the Ephesian elders, he said, “Ye yourselves know, that these hands have ministered unto my necessities, and to them that were with me.” (Acts 20:34) This is remarkable, for Paul had not only provided for his own physical needs as a tentmaker, but cared also for those who were traveling with him.—Acts 18:3

Paul felt blessed by thus giving all his time and strength. He said, “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.” (Acts 20:35) Paul had proven by his own experience that Jesus was right, and so has every Christian who has followed faithfully in his steps, remembering the Master’s words, “Freely ye have received, freely give.”—Matt. 10:8

Having finished his words of exhortation, Paul kneeled with all the elders, and they prayed together. The elders then bade the apostle farewell, in a scene which was very touching for them all. We read that “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.”—Acts 20:36-38

ON TO JERUSALEM

The ship on which Paul and his companions sailed from Miletus went by the way of Coos and

Rhodes, and then to Patara. There they changed ships, finding one that was sailing to Phenicia. This ship took them to Syria, and they “landed at Tyre: for there the ship was to unlade her burden.” They found disciples at Tyre, and “tarried there seven days.”—Acts 21:1-4

Little is said about the seven days with the disciples of Tyre except that they warned Paul not to go to Jerusalem. The warning was based on information received “through the Spirit.” Paul continued on his way, however, interpreting the message from the Lord as being intended merely as a test of his faithfulness. They had a farewell prayer with the brethren of Tyre, and then moved on.—vss. 4-6

There was a one-day stop at Ptolemais, where they greeted the brethren, and then “Paul’s company departed, and came unto Caesarea.” At Caesarea, Luke reports, “We entered into the house of Philip the evangelist, which was one of the seven [deacons]; and abode with him.” Philip had four daughters, apparently all consecrated disciples of the Master.—vss. 7-9; Acts 6:3-6

THE PROPHECY OF AGABUS

While they were still at the house of Philip, there “came down from Judaea a certain prophet, name Agabus,” who bound his own hands and feet with Paul’s girdle, saying, “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.” Luke then reports, “And when we heard these things, both we, and they of that place, besought him not to go up to Jerusalem.”—Acts 21:10-12

This placed Paul in a very difficult position. In numerous places he had received similar information. Notwithstanding, he was still determined to go to Jerusalem. Philip and his household, Agabus, and even his traveling companions, all urged Paul to heed the information given by the Holy Spirit and thus avoid the difficulties which he would certainly experience if, as they saw it, he insisted upon going to Jerusalem. He must have known that the brethren would consider him quite obstinate if he did not heed their advice.

Paul refused to reconsider. His answer was, "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) We cannot think of Paul as being a brother who would recklessly expose himself to danger, and yet, he knew that there was danger. We must assume, therefore, that in some manner not revealed in the record, the Lord had made it plain to him that he should take the risk which, through various ones, the Holy Spirit had pointed out, and that nothing would befall him unless permitted by the Heavenly Father.

In taking this course Paul must have been very conscious of the fact that he was following in the footsteps of Jesus in quite a literal manner, for Jesus also was confronted with the same test. Jesus also knew that by going to Jerusalem when he did, it would mean his arrest and death, and so announced to his disciples. Peter endeavored to dissuade the Master from thus exposing himself to danger. Jesus replied, "Get thee behind me, Satan."—Mark 8:31-33

It was the Holy Spirit which testified to Jesus, through the prophets, that he was to suffer and to die. However, the Holy Spirit had also revealed that it was the Heavenly Father's will for his Son to sacrifice his life as man's Redeemer. To Paul, the Holy Spirit had revealed that it was his privilege—and the privilege of all Jesus' disciples—to suffer and die with him. (Rom. 8:17; II Tim. 2:11,12) The fact that now the Holy Spirit had revealed that his work of sacrifice might be consummated at Jerusalem was to Paul a further test of the genuineness of his consecration to do God's will.

TESTS OF FAITH

Every truly consecrated child of God has these "Jerusalem" tests. They are tests of whether or not we will actually go where the Lord wants us to go, do what he wants us to do, and be what he wants us to be. In order to test us, as he did Paul, the Lord may let us see what appears to be a less costly manner of serving him. If, however, we keep in mind the great fundamental truth that we have been invited to suffer with Jesus, and that we have agreed to do so, even unto death, we will be given strength to meet every test in a manner pleasing to the Lord and to his glory.

When the brethren found that they could not dissuade Paul from carrying through with his plans to go to Jerusalem, they said, "The will of the Lord be done." (Acts 21:14) Their visit in the house of Philip completed, Paul and his companions continued on their way to Jerusalem. Some of the brethren of Caesarea, together with an "old disciple" of Cyprus named Mnason, joined them. (vss. 15,16) It must

have been quite a delegation who made the last lap of the journey with Paul to Jerusalem. It speaks well for the devotion of all these, for they must have realized that there was a certain element of danger in their being with Paul in Jerusalem.

Reaching the city, the brethren of Jerusalem, as Luke records, “received us gladly.” (vs. 17) Thus ended the Apostle Paul’s third missionary tour. Although changes would soon occur in his ministry, the search for God’s people continued. Paul’s part in this work would likewise continue, with new and different opportunities for spreading the message of the Gospel. ■