

463 Farewell at Miletus

Throughout the course of his ministry Paul came up against powerful, deeply-entrenched opposition at every turn – Jews, Greeks, Romans, idolaters, philosophers, business interests, false teachers, backsliders, evil spirits, corrupt governors and dodgy monarchs. Yet in last week's Reflection we saw how Paul was enabled to keep going because deep down he KNEW that Jesus Himself, along with all the claims about Jesus, were and are, quite simply, true. He drew on the promises from the Scriptures and learned in practice from his own lengthening experience that the Lord God can be totally trusted, so he carried on (egs., Galatians 2.19-20 / Philipians 4.11-13, 18a, 19-20).

To emphasise these lessons for us, as we follow the same path of Christ still with its trials and tribulations, we come this time to Acts Chapter 20.17-38, the record of Paul's poignant farewell to the Christians of Miletus with the Christian elders whom Paul had called down from Ephesus.

Paul starts by reminding them of his ministry in their midst, of which his hearers were of course well aware (v.18). He had served the Lord "with all humility of mind, and with many tears, and temptations, which befell me by the lying in wait of the Jews" (v.19, KJV). We can note two points from this: first, that Paul saw his serving of these, his fellow Christians, as being first and foremost his serving of the Lord; and second, the constant distress caused to Paul by his Jewish opponents, who were his own people (eg., Romans 9.1-5), yet many of whom remained "stiffnecked ... a rebellious house" in their frenzied rejection of Jesus as Messiah, and of Paul, Jesus' messenger (egs., Deuteronomy 9.13 / Ezekiel 3.26 / Acts 7.51 / Acts 9.22-25). Little has changed on that front – so far.

Paul had kept back "nothing that was profitable", showing them by his personal example and teaching the need for "repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (from 9.20-21); therein lies Paul's central, constant message, and just so still for us. He expected "trouble ahead" in Jerusalem, of no great concern for him (vv.22-24), and then told them that he would see them no more (v.25). Finally he asked them to acknowledge that he, Paul, is "pure from the blood of all [men]" for he had not "shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God" (from vv.26-27).

Paul's attention then turned to those he was leaving behind, in Miletus and Ephesus and elsewhere: "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood" (v.28). For "grievous wolves" would enter the flock from elsewhere, along with false teachers arising from within the flock, whose aim would be to "draw away the disciples after them" (vv.29-30). In response they were to hold on to Paul's teaching and example, remembering that Paul had always paid his own way, for he, unlike some false teachers who would follow, had never sought to gain from their riches and goods (vv.31-35).

Paul "commended them to God, and to the word of His grace ..." (from v.32). He "kneeled down and prayed with them all" – what a scene! Tears, hugs and kisses accompanied Paul on to the ship (vv.36-38).

Eventually this extraordinary Christian saint was martyred, which he must have known was a likely outcome for years beforehand, just as the Lord Jesus had also known for Himself, (egs., Matthew 16.21 / II Timothy 4.6-8). Paul accepted this fate for he KNEW from Scripture and personal experience that Jesus Christ really is the Resurrection and the Life, (long before John's Gospel appeared! – John 11.25). We see that in comparison with that saving knowledge and commitment, nothing else matters, including the manner and timing of our physical death.

We gain so much from such a passage. At one level Paul is just like us, a regenerate Christian applying his stock of spiritual gifts as he seeks to serve the Lord as faithfully as he can. For our part our Christian experience will be similar to that of Paul, albeit probably on a lesser scale, for we too will face hostility from different quarters at times, will become worn down, and will encounter trials and tribulations in various forms; and we too will keep going for, like Paul, we KNOW that Christ is true, and that repentance before God the Father and faith in Christ as Lord hold the key to salvation and peace with God - Romans 5.1-2, leading on to verses 3-5.

So in good heart, in spirit we join that gathering on the beach at Miletus, giving thanks to the Lord for Paul, and, following his example, we too "strive to finish our course with joy, and (to finish) the ministry which we have received from the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God" in Christ (from Acts 20.24).

Such labour is never wasted, for in these darkening days the light of Christ is needed more than ever (John 8.12 / I Corinthians 15.58 / Galatians 6.9).

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