

Through Much Tribulation

"But the Jews raised persecution against Paul and Barnabas . . . and the disciples were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit"—Acts 13:50-52.

How often it is that adversity dulls the cravings for worldly things and sharpens the pleasures of divine joy! We are many times told how the disciples found this unearthly joy in the midst of trouble and distress.

Those things which naturally seem to be blessings—ease, luxury, comfort, prosperity, and men speaking well of us—usually prove the greatest dangers and pitfalls and yield a large harvest of sorrow; while those things that are shunned and despised by men—toil, distress, persecution, necessity, and the opposition of the world—are rich, fruitful soil for the seeds of divine joy and peace.

Why is it so? Why is prosperity degenerating to us? Why are times of luxury always times of laxity? Why does it take tribulation, as Paul says, to work patience and godliness (Rom. 5:3)? Why must we *"through much tribulation enter the Kingdom of God"* as we read in v. 22 of this 14th chap, of Acts?

The answer lies in our very constitution. That which *gratifies* the flesh *stifles* the spirit. The more the flesh, with its lusts and ambitions and pleasures, is catered to, the more *sickly* the spirit becomes. In proportion as the eye of lust is satiated, the eye of faith is dimmed. The *more* we have, the harder it is to regard it as *nothing*, which we must do.

Therefore Christ said on one occasion, as he sorrowfully watched the rich young ruler depart,

"How hardly shall a man that hath riches enter the kingdom!"

Christ was not angry or bitter—rather he *loved* the young man (we are told) and was *sorry*, intensely sorry, for him. Only *one* thing he lacked! He had faith; he had an earnest desire to follow Christ; he tried to be righteous in all he did (Mark 10:20); he had enthusiasm and zeal. All this is clearly shown by the narrative.

A poor man with the same qualities would have had no difficulty in deciding. We are distinctly told that it was his *possessions* that stood in his way and were the basis of his only shortcoming. Therefore Christ was sorry for him.

The young man was no worse than many others. Doubtless he was far more earnest and honest than most, but his trial was great and he yielded to it. The flesh offered so much, so easily, and without delay—the present was so bright that the future was dimmed and obscured.

Therefore, says Paul, we must through much tribulation enter the Kingdom. It takes tribulation to wrench us out of spiritual indolence—to give us clear perceptions of the flesh and spirit—to turn our minds and hopes and aspirations to a higher, firmer level—to each of us the vanity and insecurity of present satisfactions. So we read, as the chapter closes—

"But the Jews stirred up the chief men of the city, and raised **persecution** against them . . . and the disciples were **filled with joy** and the Holy Spirit" (Acts 13:50-52).

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Acts 14:1—"and it came to pass in Iconium that they went **both** together into the synagogue."

Why is "*both together*" inserted here? Clearly our attention is deliberately drawn to the fact, and our thoughts are directed to the tremendous value of *companionship*; and conversely, the tremendously added burden of standing alone.

The Master, we recall, sent out his disciples *two* and *two* (Luke 10:1; Mark 6:7) and this is the usual course in Scripture.

Of course, many of God's servants have labored alone, as necessity has required. "*I, even I only, am left,*" said the prophet Elijah, "*and they seek my life to take it away*"—and the prospect appalled him. Not solely the imminent danger, for that was not new, but the feeling of utter isolation and desertedness.

Paul was often reduced to this condition, or close to it:

"All they which are in Asia be turned away from me . . . Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world. Only Luke is with me" (2 Tim. 1:15; 4:10-11).

Today all Christendom would be glad of the distinction of Paul's recognition, but during the period of his labors, many so-called "brethren" were ashamed or disdainful of his poverty, his unpretentious speech and demeanor, and his humiliating chains.

Doubtless they said he was a fool to be so outspoken when a little worldly wisdom and discretion would have so often eased his situation. *But a few there were who perceived the true values*, and for these Paul fervently thanked God. Without such, even he might have found the effort too great to sustain.

Jesus, too, during his supreme trial, was entirely alone—and not merely alone but forsaken by those he should have been able to count upon, but it was the will of God and he found God all-sufficient for his needs.

We can see, however, the value of the disciples to him during his ministry. True they were at times weak, often disappointing and sometimes quarrelsome. True too there was no comparison between his and their mental level and perception. These things must have often tried his patience sorely, but their earnest, intense, though dimly-perceiving devotion and companionship filled a void that might otherwise have been insufferable.

With the wise, the learned, the great men of his day, he had nothing in common. No fellow-feeling—no bond of communion. How often one looks, and looks in vain, for spiritual strength and help from those whose mental powers, it would seem, most qualify them to give it!

But we discover that it is the lowly, simple, earnest individual that seems to perceive things most clearly and who strikes a responsive chord within us. Why is it that those most capable and best informed in *worldly* matters speak with such limited perception about the things of God? The Scriptures tell us the answer—*no one can advance very far along two divergent paths*.

"The wisdom of this world is foolishness with God" (1 Cor. 3:19).

Paul was not superhuman. He was no mental wizard—no intellectual giant. That was not his secret. We are given no reason to suppose he was exceptional in this respect. Rather the reverse, for it is he who repeatedly emphasizes the fact that God chooses the *weak* things of the world to confound the things that are mighty (1 Cor. 1:27). His secret lay in his *singleness of purpose*—a burning and fanatical singleness of purpose.

"This ONE THING I do: forgetting that which is behind . . ."

—casting aside every other interest and consideration—counting all else but worthless rubbish—

". . . I **press forward** to the mark of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:13-14).

Burning earnestness and enthusiasm in spiritual things—that is what we must pray for and ceaselessly pursue! It is not easy to awaken in our sluggish pleasure-loving natures. It will not come of itself. It is contrary to our natural inclinations. It must be carefully grafted in and diligently cultivated.

It will not seize us and transform us as we go our normal course, so *very, very* busy with passing worldly things. There is no magic carpet to effortlessly transfer our interests to the things that will endure, and sweep us serenely through the gates of the Holy City. We all have the flesh to contend with every day of our lives, right up until the end.

We must be careful that our faith is not a spare time, easy-going compliance grounded on flesh with its roots in our own desires and inclinations . . . just a pleasant religious hobby. What happens in a time of trial to a shallow faith based on personal convenience and vague emotion? The parable of the seed tells us plainly enough. It is a fair-weather faith. It has no staying power. It gives no strength or comfort in time of need. The glare of the sun scorches and withers it because *IT NEVER TOOK THE TROUBLE TO DEVELOP ROOTS*.

It is all on the *surface*. We know what is represented by the roots. It means the knowledge, the perception, the grasp and insight and stability that is the result of constant study and application. We may deceive ourselves for a while and have no feeling of need for effort in this direction, but *there comes a time to each brother and sister when the roots are tried to the limit of their strength, with disastrous results to those which have been neglected*.

The importance of a firm foundation is illustrated very clearly in Acts 15. We sometimes ask ourselves why so much importance is attached to matters of belief and doctrine, which do not *seem* to have any bearing on conduct. The natural view is to regard discussions about points of creed and doctrine as bickering and dogmatism, at the expense of the far more important principle of the spirit of love, but that is not the apostolic *view*.

Paul views matters of belief in a very serious light, and he urges his hearers and readers to cling fast to what they have learned and contend earnestly for the faith as delivered to them. We cannot escape the fact that the Scriptures place very great stress on TRUTH—true belief, true hope, true doctrine, and we do not have to go very far to see why.

Without a concrete foundation of fact and truth we are at the mercy of every whim and fancy of the mind of man—every wild superstition that may be concocted or imagined. We would have no defence against "being tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine." We would have nothing sure or certain. We would be veered and turned from day to day as our emotions and imaginations buffeted us.

We must have a clear and well-defined platform of fact and hold tenaciously to it. True, such an attitude is regarded as narrow-minded and bigoted by the wise of this world. To say that a man has no chance of salvation unless he believes just certain things may seem unreasonable to many pious and broadminded people, but a careful consideration should show that there is *no other way*. Truth is truth. Facts are facts. If we do not act in agreement with them we suffer.

A false belief, a false viewpoint, a false conception is valueless and destructive. We know we can accomplish nothing in this life unless our opinions about how to do it are in accord with the facts. Divine things are no different. If a man does not see the necessity of believing that the rising tide will drown him unless he gets out of its way, that won't help him any. If he persists in his disbelief of truth in the face of facts he will surely drown.

God has made certain revelations concerning His purpose. What He has revealed is *truth and fact*, and He has revealed it so that man may have a necessary foundation of truth to guide him. It is sheer presumption to assume that it is superfluous. God alone is the judge. "Many false prophets have gone out into the world," says John (1 John 4:1), and the Word of God is the only defence against them. We must have the facts as surely as a ship's pilot must have a true chart of the course he is to follow. Otherwise we have no stability, no security, no assurance. We read (Acts 15:11),

"Certain men which came down from Judea said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved."

Here is a case in point. There are always men rising up and saying we must do this or that. To withstand them and follow a straight course, we must know the facts. Only the Truth can make us *free*—free from the shackles of self-deception and baseless imagination. The fuller our knowledge, the deeper our understanding, the keener our perception, then the freer and safer we are. *Truth* is precious above all things—not only truth in knowledge but in *life and character*—

"Thou desireth truth in the inward parts" (Psa. 51:6).

Returning to the original consideration—the blessing and comfort of true spiritual companionship, as illustrated by the co-labors of Paul and Barnabas—we find that there is much food for thought in the concluding verses of this 15th chapter.

Truly there is no greater joy than to take sweet counsel together with others who realize and appreciate divine values, and to work with them, but this blessing, like many others, must be subject to the best interests of the Spirit. There are times, as we have seen, where companionship must end and an individual course must be followed. There are times when higher considerations intervene.

We refer in this instance to the separation of Paul and Barnabas over the question of Mark. *For 10 years these two men had labored together in God's service*, through privation and hardship, in spite of severe physical abuse and often in imminent danger of death. Here each saw his duty differently and joint action was no longer possible.

Men like Paul were no special creation exempted from the weakness of the flesh. They worked under the same limitations as we do. Revelations from God and possession of the powers of the Spirit did not smooth or soften the rough road they trod. Paul, beside the physical handicap of his "thorn in the flesh," often felt and expressed the need of his brethren's prayers for courage.

Truly he was a rock and a pillar, but his strength was no foregone conclusion. Rather, as he says, did he *learn strength through weakness*—discovering among his own doubts and failures and misgivings the fact that of himself he was nothing but that through Christ who strengthened him (Phil. 4:13) he could steadfastly run his course and fight a good fight of faith. Paul was but a willing and devoted, though weak, vessel through whom this work was accomplished. He said, and it reveals much—

"Brethren, pray for me that I may open my mouth boldly."

According to *human* standards, he was an unsuitable vessel, as his remarks in various places indicate. His presence was not commanding—it required a spirit of understanding and forbearance on the part of his hearers, which at times he mentions thankfully.

His power was exclusively in *what* he said: the *way* he said it exercised no spell. His hearers, if moved at all, were *convinced*—not swayed with unstable sentiment and emotion.

"My preaching was not with persuasive words of **man's** wisdom."

—no eloquence or oratory—

". . . but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God" (1 Cor. 2:4-5).

"Ah, Lord God!" said Jeremiah (1:6), "Behold I cannot speak, for I am a child."

"Who am I," said Moses, "that I should go unto Pharaoh?" "*You are nobody*," is God's answer, "That is why you have been chosen, that no man should glory in men (1 Cr. 3:21). You are but a tool"—

"It is GOD which worketh IN you both to will and to do of His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13).

Until we realize our own intrinsic valuelessness and learn to submerge ourselves, we are of little value in God's work.

The issue upon which Paul and Barnabas divided was a matter of considered and legitimate difference of opinion. Barnabas wished to take Mark on their proposed circuit of the newly-established ecclesias: Paul objected to this because Mark had failed them on a previous occasion.

As to which of them was more justified in the viewpoint he took it is impossible to determine, though our sympathies would favor Paul's view. Paul's outlook was the more impersonal one. *To him the paramount consideration was the success of the work.* He was completely imbued with the inner conviction that he was a vital tool in the vast and eternal operations of the Spirit and he felt he dare not allow any personal motives to jeopardize the result.

Mark *had* failed them, and doubtless it had been a serious and discouraging handicap and inconvenience at the time. Paul felt that he could not knowingly take a chance of a similar occurrence again and that, for the dangerous and arduous work in hand, he must take someone with a record of resolution and steadfastness.

There is no evidence on Paul's part of personal feeling against Mark, and knowing Paul's loving and sympathetic character from his writings, we can be sure he found it very difficult to take the unpleasant stand that he felt it was his duty to maintain.

Barnabas, on the other hand, was moved by other considerations. It seems clear that he viewed the matter more from the angle of Mark's position and welfare. Mark, of course, was his sister's son. Barnabas would know his characteristics very intimately. He would feel able to judge his position much better than Paul could.

He must have had strong reasons for believing that Mark could redeem himself, and strong assurances from Mark that there would be no repetition of his earlier desertion. He doubtless felt that to refuse to give him the opportunity of offsetting his former failure would leave a permanent and unjustified stigma upon him and might discourage him to the extent of affecting his future.

That Mark *did* subsequently prove faithful and illustrate with what "hardness he could endure as a good soldier of Christ" does not necessarily prove that Paul was wrong. Paul's principle was that the work should come *first* and that *any* doubts should be resolved in its favor.

And he probably thought too that if Mark had the disposition and qualities that were required for the rigors of the proposed journey, then he would be able to see the reasonableness of Paul's stand, and would not be permanently deterred by this unpleasant but necessary setback.

Perhaps, furthermore, Paul's clear-cut attitude at this time, bitter though it may have been for Mark to receive, furnished the incentive for the faithful labors with which he later retrieved himself.

At least we have positive assurance (Col. 4:10-11; 2 Tim. 4:11; 1 Cor. 9:6) that a full reconciliation between these 3 men was later effected on the firm basis of mutual labor and respect in the work of the Lord. And so though a conscientious difference of opinion unfortunately separated them for a time, still an honest and God-fearing pursuance of steadfast endeavor finally reunited them in firmer and deeper companionship, for Mark was of much value and comfort to Paul in the end. God did not permit the incident to erect a permanent barrier or cause permanent damage, but rather "all things worked together for good" and "turned out rather unto the furtherance of the Gospel" by 2 parties setting out instead of one.

In Acts 14:21 we read: "When they had taught many," or as the margin gives it, "had made many disciples . . ." What was it that convinced these people of the truth of Paul's teaching when the great majority were hostile and unreceptive?

There was no *natural* advantage or incentive to belief in *those* days. It meant certain peril, persecution and ostracism from friend and kinsman. True, the apostles wrought miracles, but miracles of themselves do not convince. They did not convince the many others in these places who saw them performed. They invented other explanations for them.

But even in these outposts of the empire there *were* those who were receptive to revelation and instruction. Humble, simple people with reverent, God-seeking minds and a depth of spiritual perception which through the ages has distinguished the handful of chosen vessels.

To these, Paul's teaching was not foreign and unintelligible—it *was the divine answer to a long-felt search and need*. Their minds having long pondered the evidences of invisible divinity around them (as Paul describes in the opening chapters of his epistle to the Romans), they received with eager gratitude the God-provided explanation and solution.

These were no haphazard converts captivated by novelty and emotion. The present disadvantages of conversion would call for careful consideration and firm resolve. They had long sought for God if haply they might feel after Him and find Him (Acts 17:27). Therefore while the vast majority, as always, despised and ridiculed the uncouth and unattractive preacher, a few *prepared vessels* perceived and responded to the divine power of his message.

"As many as were ordained to eternal life, believed" (Acts 13:48).

Are we among such? Are we, in the sight of God as He scans the broad and turbulent expanse of human history, among those *very, very few who stand out* as His servants, His friends, His children? If we are, it is wholly on the basis of a vast difference between ourselves and the world—not just a difference of detail or circumstance or interest—that is not sufficient to mark us out where myriads are forgotten. It requires an *entirely different course of life*. We must directly reverse most desires, must be completely submerged in devotion to Him. The "living sacrifice" that He demands can mean no less than this.

Does this condition exist within and among us? Upon this—and this only—depends our union with these devout disciples of so long ago. Outward appearance—profession—long familiarity, mean nothing . . . absolutely *nothing*. God is no respecter of persons. His choice is made upon rigid and inflexible principles. The countless millions are allowed to die. The few who are chosen to life must be very, very different to justify the choice. Many are called but very few are chosen. What a tragedy to confuse the *call* with the *choice*!

Let us, above all things, avoid this tragic error—the error of the Jews. "We have Abraham for our father," they said (Matt. 3:9), "We are the chosen of God!" No error could be more fatal.

is "Think not to say to yourselves, We have Abraham to our father, for I say unto you that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham."

That which they counted on so highly meant *nothing* in the sight of God. They thought to ride into the Kingdom on the strength of their position and affiliations. Can it be that *we* suffer from this same delusion to some degree, forgetting that God plays no favorites and that acceptance is strictly an *individual* affair and responsibility—that only an outstanding handful are chosen?

"These things," said Paul, *"were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages are come . . . Wherefore,"* he continues, *"let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall."*

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