

THE END OF THE ROAD

by Ray C. Stedman

Last week I was in San Antonio, Texas, teaching all of the Apostle Paul's thirteen letters in one week to a group of teaching leaders for Bible Study Fellowship. It was a great experience again for me to go through these fantastic theological explanations of the redemptive program of God, as they came through the mighty heart and mind of this great apostle.

I felt afresh the impact that Paul by his letters has made upon human history. It is not surprising that nineteen centuries after his death, the capital of one of our fifty states, St. Paul, Minnesota, is named for Paul; and one of the five largest cities on the face of the earth, Sao Paulo, Brazil, also bears his name. Innumerable schools, colleges, societies and institutions have been named for this great apostle. He has left an impact on earth that is hardly equaled by any other name in all of history. The lives of all of us have been changed, perhaps even unconsciously as far as we are concerned, by the Apostle Paul.

Yet this last letter that comes from his hand, Second Timothy, finds him in a dank prison in Rome. He is cold, lonely, and sometimes bored, yet he is full of faith, confident in the Lord, without regrets for the past. He is aware, as he himself put it, that he has "fought the good fight," he has "finished the race," he has "kept the faith," {2 Tim 4:7}. He is looking on eagerly to that wonderful day when he will be with the Lord.

Bold I approach th' eternal throne,
and claim the crown, through Christ my own.

That is what the apostle is saying in this letter.

We sense Paul's deep loneliness in the final instructions he gives to Timothy, his son in the faith, found in Second Timothy 4, beginning with Verse 9:

Do your best to come to me soon. For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you; for he is very useful in serving me. Tychicus I have sent to Ephesus. {2 Tim 4:9-12 RSV}

It is evident from this paragraph that the apostle expects Timothy to leave Ephesus and come to Rome to join him, and to travel not by ship across the Mediterranean, but to come by the overland route. This would take him north from Ephesus across the Hellespont into Macedonia; then he would take the Egnatian Road, the great Roman Highway, crossing the Greek Peninsula down to the eastern shores of the Adriatic Sea; then another short voyage across to the heel of the boot of Italy, from where he would then proceed by land across the Italian mountains to Rome. Paul expects Timothy to come quickly. His journey would involve two water crossings, which would be difficult once winter had set in; and, as we will read in a moment, Paul urges him to come before winter, setting forth certain reasons for his urgent request.

One reason was that Demas, who had been Paul's fellow worker, had forsaken him. With obvious pain and heartache, Paul gives the reason for this -- Demas was "in love with this present age," he says. Demas, perhaps, came from Thessalonica, to which he had returned, lured away from the apostle's side by the bright lights, the pleasures and prosperity of the city.

Perhaps Demas grew tired of the poverty, persecution, and hardship he had to endure as a companion of Paul, and, "in love with this present age," he had abandoned him. We can quite properly read into this much heartache on the part of Paul. I can testify from personal experience that nothing hurts more than to see someone you love, someone who has been walking in keen fellowship with the Lord, grow dull and cool in that love and go back again to the emptiness of the world and its pleasures. This is what has happened to

Demas.

William Barclay, the great Scottish commentator, suggests that there may be some reason to believe, however, that Demas later returned to fellowship with the Lord. He points out that the name Demas is a nickname for Demetrius, and that there are two Demetriuses mentioned in Scripture. One was the silversmith in Ephesus who led the riot, recorded in the eighteenth chapter of Acts, that threatened the apostle's life. There is at least a slight suggestion that he may have been converted because of that encounter and became the Demas who accompanied Paul on some of his journeys. Paul refers to him in the letter to Philemon as, "my fellow laborer." Now that his love has cooled, however, Demas has returned to Thessalonica, where he perhaps originally came from, turning away, at least, from a forthright Christian testimony.

But in the letters of John, who wrote somewhat later than Paul, another Demetrius is mentioned. This man seems to be a very responsible, dependable Christian. Barclay suggests that this, perhaps, is the whole story of Demas; that he began as a pagan and an idol worshipper, was converted, accompanied the apostle, then drifted back into the world for a while, but eventually God reached him again and turned him around, and he ended his life as a respected believer.

I would add that that is highly speculative, however. There is very little evidence for that. As far as we know, this is the last picture we have of Demas. He stands for those heartbreaking cases who have begun well, who seem to hold forth much promise of faithfulness in Christ, but drift back again into the empty pleasures and commerce of the world, lose their Christian testimony, and nothing further is heard of them. This was a great heartbreak to the apostle; he writes these words with a tremendous sense of loss.

Crescens is mentioned as going to Galatia. The fact that he was sent by the apostle to these fickle and easily influenced Galatians, to whom the letter to the Galatians was written, indicates that he was probably a very trustworthy servant of Christ who could help these people in their struggles and problems.

Titus is a name we are familiar with; another of the pastoral letters is written to him. He is another whom Paul calls, "my own son." Titus was the test case, the focus of attention at the Council of Jerusalem, when the question arose as to whether he, a Greek, would need to be circumcised in order to live as a Christian. Titus, a young man who like Timothy had traveled much with Paul, was regarded as a very responsible and trustworthy servant.

Then Paul adds, "only Luke is with me." Faithful Luke, the beloved physician, had doubtless cared for Paul's "thorn in the flesh," which was probably a repetitive physical weakness. The fact that Luke was here in Rome in the last days of the apostle's life indicates something. Again, William Barclay says that it was a Roman custom that when a citizen was being taken to Rome for trial he was permitted to take two slaves with him. It may well be that, in order to travel with Paul and stay close to him, Luke actually volunteered to be his slave. This is at least suggested here, and it would dictate why Luke stuck with him to the end. What a faithful heart he proved to be.

Mark is another name familiar to all who know the New Testament. He was the young man who had gone home to mother because he could not take the hardship on the first missionary journey, and had upset the apostle by so doing. It is a tribute to Mark that he had somehow recovered himself in the apostle's eyes. Tradition tells us that he went down to Egypt and so ministered in the Christian community there that he won a position of respect. Later, Paul had him come to Rome with him, as we learn from one of the prison epistles. Now he is back in Ephesus, and Paul asks Timothy to bring Mark with him because, as he puts it, "he is very useful in serving me." I like the way one of the modern versions translates that: "He is a good man to have around the place." It is a tribute to him that he recovered himself, and a tribute to Paul that he found the grace to forgive and forget the weakness of the past and give him another chance.

Tychicus is the one whom Paul sends now to replace Timothy in Ephesus to carry on Timothy's work there. He is the one who also was the bearer of the letters to the Colossians and the Ephesians. He was well known in this area of Central Asia, so he would be a faithful replacement for Timothy.

We get Paul's further instructions to Timothy in Verse 13 and following:

When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments. Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will requite him for his deeds. Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message. {2 Tim 4:13-15 RSV}

It seems very likely that Paul was re-arrested by the Roman authorities in Troas. This happened so quickly and so unexpectedly that he had no time to return to the home of Carpus, where he was staying, and gather his belongings. Paul was dragged off, probably while Timothy looked on, the tears streaming down his face, as Paul said in Chapter 1 of this letter, "I remember your tears at our parting," {cf, 2 Tim 1:4 RSV}. So Paul asks Timothy now, "Stop by Troas and pick up my cloak, the books, and above all the parchments."

The cloak was what we today would call a poncho, a circular garment with a hole in the middle for the head, made of very warm material that Paul would doubtless need for the coming cold winter in Rome. "The books" would seem to be a reference to papyrus books. They could well be the early Gospels of Mark and Matthew, which perhaps were circulating by now. The parchments most certainly were copies of the Old Testament Scriptures. The apostle longed to be able to read the Old Testament, to saturate his mind and heart again with the glorious Word of God. Notice how he stresses that, "Above all bring the parchments." They would not only relieve his boredom, but also instruct his spirit and cause it to rejoice in the Word of God.

It seems likely that since the apostle goes on to connect all of this with his trouble with Alexander the coppersmith that this is the man who probably betrayed him into the hands of the Romans. "He did me great harm," Paul says; he opposed Paul's message. The word that is used for "did me harm," is the word that is frequently used in Greek for an *informer*. If this is the same Alexander who is mentioned in the first letter to Timothy -- there he is linked with the name Hymenaeus, and of both of them the apostle says, "I have delivered them to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme" -- there would be supplied a motive for Alexander's deliberate attempt to hurt the apostle by betraying him to the Roman authorities. Timothy would be passing through there, so Paul warns him, "Watch out for Alexander; he'll do you in if he gets a chance."

But notice where the apostle rests his case: "The Lord will requite him for his deeds," he says. There is no urging Timothy to try to get even with Alexander for Paul's sake, or any attempt on Paul's part to call down curses on this man's head. Rather Paul obeys his own injunction in Romans 12, reminding himself that the Lord has said, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay," {Rom 12:19}. There is an excellent example of how to deal with those who mistreat us.

Then we get a report on the situation in Rome. Verse 16:

At my first defense no one took my part; all deserted me. May it not be charged against them! But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength to proclaim the word fully, that all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory for ever and ever. Amen. {2 Tim 4:16-18 RSV}

Here is rather a sad note. When the apostle was brought up for his hearing -- we would call it the arraignment of the charges against him -- no one stood up for him; all forsook him. This was a very dangerous time in Rome. The Emperor Nero was noted for his vindictiveness. If anybody even appeared to be against him, Nero's assassins were all throughout the city, ready to take the man's life. Evidently no Christian was ready to risk his life by standing up for Paul, so he had to face this preliminary hearing all alone. But notice again Paul's lack of vindictiveness. "May it not be charged against them," he says; and he prays for those who forsook him in the hour of danger.

Actually, the fact that no one stood up for the apostle could have led to his immediate execution. But that did not happen because, as Paul says, "The Lord stood by me." He is the One on whom you can always count. Hebrews 13 tells us that God has promised, "I will never, never, ever, under any conditions (there are six Greek negatives thrown in there) leave you nor forsake you," {Heb 13:5}. The writer's response is, "What, then, can man do unto me?" {cf, Heb 13:6}. This too is Paul's experience.

The presence of Jesus with him and beside him, Paul says, accomplished two things:

First, it "gave him strength to testify." I wish we could all have looked in on that scene as this doughty apostle told the story of his own conversion. Paul is doing what he told Timothy to do in this very letter: "Preach the word in season and out of season, and faithfully set forth the truth," {cf, 2 Tim 4:2}. The Lord gave him the strength to do that.

Second, Paul says, "He delivered me from the lion's mouth." Some have read that to mean that Paul was afraid he was going to be thrown to the lions in the Roman Coliseum. The problem with that, however, is that the Coliseum was not built until three or four years later. Also, because Paul was a Roman citizen, the law required that he could not be executed by being thrown to the lions. He was facing death by beheading.

The "lion" here is very likely a reference to Satan, the malevolent schemer behind all the false charges that were laid against Paul, the one who had weakened the courage of the Christians so they dared not stand up along with the apostle. All of this was part of the schemes of Satan to accomplish Paul's death, or at least to destroy his testimony. Peter's warning, "Your enemy the devil goes about as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour" {cf, 1 Pet 5:8}, is still true today. Much of the problems and unexplainable difficulties that suddenly complicate all the things we are trying to do for the Lord are only part of the activities of the lion who is seeking to devour our faith, to destroy us and weaken our testimony for Christ.

But Paul was delivered from the lion's mouth. In this beautiful verse, he expresses his feeling that he is safe in the Lord's hands. Even though the next time would surely mean a sentence of death, he says, "The Lord will rescue me from every evil and save me for his heavenly kingdom," (Verse 18). Nero may put him to death on earth, but that will not in any way remove him from the kingdom of heaven and the opportunity to be with the Lord; in fact, it only will open the door for him.

We get Paul's final greetings in this last paragraph:

Greet Prisca and Aquila, and the household of Onesiphorus. Erastus remained at Corinth; Trophimus I left ill at Miletus. Do your best to come before winter. Eubulus sends greetings to you, as do Pudens and Linus and Claudia and all the brethren. {2 Tim 4:19-21 RSV}

We have seen some of these names before. Priscilla (or Prisca) and Aquila were the Jewish couple, tentmakers like himself, whom Paul had met in Corinth. Every time they appear in Scripture they have a church meeting in their home. They had a church in Corinth; then they moved with Paul to Ephesus and had a church in their home there; they went to Rome, and, in the letter to the Romans, Paul refers to the church in their home there. Now they are back in Ephesus, evidently, and undoubtedly carrying on a church in their home.

Paul greets the family of Onesiphorus, who had ministered to him so refreshingly while he was a prisoner in Rome, but who now, apparently, is still away from his family. Erastus, we learn from the letter to the Romans, was the city treasurer of Corinth, so it would make sense that he had remained there in order to carry on his business.

"Trophimus," Paul says, "I left ill at Miletus." This is a remarkable word, because if we are to believe many of the faith healers of our day it is absolutely wrong for a Christian ever to be ill. It is because of a lack of faith, they say. If that is so, why then does Paul leave Trophimus ill, especially when as an apostle he had had remarkable demonstrations of the ability to heal the sick? The fact that he does not heal Trophimus is very clear evidence that God does not always choose to allow his people to be well. This is one of several Scriptures that must be dealt with in this idea that is so widely proposed today that Christians have no business being sick. Paul himself had a "thorn in the flesh" {1 Cor 12:7}, and here he leaves a companion ill. (Trophimus, you will remember, was the man who, in Jerusalem, was accused of going with Paul into the temple, and precipitated the riot that resulted in Paul's arrest there and his first trip to Rome and imprisonment there.)

Then we have a mention of Eubulus, of whom we know nothing. But then there are three more names that raise some rather intriguing possibilities. Pudens and Linus and Claudia are all Roman Christians who greet

the brothers in Ephesus. Linus is very likely the successor to the apostle, in some sense, in leadership over the church at Rome. Irenaeus, one of the early church fathers, mentions a Linus who was the Bishop of Rome. He, very likely, was the same man.

Since his name appears between that of Pudens and Claudia, it is thought that perhaps he is the son of a couple, Pudens being a male name and Claudia a female name. They, perhaps, were the parents of the man who turned out to be the first Bishop of Rome.

This is also supported by the Roman historian Tacitus, who in his writings refers to a noble Roman named Pudens, who had married a princess, the daughter of a British king Tiberius Claudius Cogidubnus. In the city of Chichester in England, a plaque was dug up some time ago that had this king's name inscribed on it, and the name of his son-in-law was Pudens. So there has been some secular confirmation of this.

Although we do not know this for sure, this king likely named his daughter Claudia, since his own name was Tiberius Claudius (after Claudius, the Emperor), and sent her to Rome, which was the custom of the kings who fell under the rule of the Empire, to guarantee that the treaty of relationship would be carried out. If we put all that together it sounds very much as though Claudia came to Rome, met Pudens, married him there, and they became Christians. Thus we have here at the close of this letter to Timothy a tie with British Christianity, from which eventually American Christianity largely came.

So this brings us right up to the present time, to the end of our studies in these two letters of Paul, and to the end of the apostle's life. It is intriguing to wonder whether Timothy ever made it to Rome. He may have. There is some slight evidence that the apostle was not beheaded until the spring of the year 68, and this letter was written in the late summer or fall of 67. If Timothy had made it to Rome before that time he could have spent several months with his beloved teacher. Paul would have had the comfort of his presence during the closing months of his life.

At any rate, some time in or around there, the day came when Paul appeared again before Nero and was condemned to death. He was led out on the Ostian Way, he placed his head on the executioner's block, the axe flashed in the sun, and Paul found himself at that great Day when the Lord himself gave him the crown of glory, and along with him all people from all ages and time who have come to love the appearing of Jesus.

What a wonderful close to a marvelous life! How much the world owes to this mighty apostle; how much we owe to him. How he has taught us, instructed us and guided us!

I am sure that one of the first things we will do when we get to glory is to thank him for his faithful ministry, to which we are all indebted.

Paul's final word to Timothy is a most important word to all of us:

The Lord be with your spirit. {2 Tim 4:22a RSV}

That is the foundation of life, the rock upon which all else must be built: the union of our spirit with the Lord's Spirit to make us new persons in Christ.

The daily supply that we need to encourage, strengthen and feed that union is grace, the daily grace of our Lord.

So Paul concludes,

Grace be with you. {2 Tim 4:22b RSV}

"Grace be with you" in these pressure-filled times when we, like Timothy, are called to keep the faith in dark days, and to stand for the truth amidst the pressures of life.

Prayer

Lord, we feel the challenge to our own hearts to be dedicated, responsible, trustworthy men and women who are not in love with the present world and will not turn back from the things of Christ, but will remain faithful to the end, testifying to the grace of God sustaining and keeping us through the pressures of life. Thank you for these wonderful letters that encourage us to this end, until the Day dawns and every shadow flees away. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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