

## A Pattern Ministry

Acts 20: 19-27.

(Notes of an Address, South Norwood, S.E.)

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The apostle was inspired of God in thus reviewing his ministry in the midst of those elders of Ephesus who were gathered around him. He was reviewing the pattern ministry that he had exercised as a free man; free, I mean, to move about at the Lord's dictation. He knew full well that soon his period of free service was coming to an end. His ministry was not a perfect ministry. Only the Lord Jesus exercised a perfect ministry. But it was a pattern ministry, for he was a man of like passions to ourselves, and only in the power and grace and support of the Spirit of God could he have done what he did.

Now every word in this remarkable review of the apostle is full of meaning. May I just go over with you the verses which give the *spirit* in which the apostle was serving, and then the verses which give us the *subjects* of his ministry.

First of all, as to his spirit. Verse 18: "You know, from the first day that I came into Asia, after what manner I have been with you at all seasons." The first thing that marked him was the most extraordinary constancy. He could say, "You have found me from the first minute to be altogether what I was all through and all the time." Oh, how terribly condemned are we moderns in the presence of that! We go forward by fits and starts. How sweet we are in one direction, and how sour and bitter in another direction. It was not so with the apostle Paul. What he was he was everywhere and all the time. It was not a kind of surface veneer. He was what he was from the centre to the circumference.

Then he says, "Serving the Lord," not exactly, serving the saints. The Lord was before him, not serving humanity. If we serve according to this pattern we keep the Lord as the sole Object of our service, and we serve "with all humility" — not of behaviour, for a man may be only a hypocrite, humble on the exterior, but not that in mind. "Serving the Lord with all humility of mind."

The great mark of this pattern servant was a humble mind. He did not enter amongst the people of God with great parade and much flourish of trumpets. He did not come to advertise himself and to impress everybody with what a by man he was. He was unostentatious, quiet, with no pretension about him.

Further, he served "with **many** tears." Those tears were the expression of very deep and genuine soul travail and exercise, and if there were more of that spirit today it would be good. "Serving the Lord with all humility of mind, and with many tears, and temptations which befell me by the lying in wait of the Jews." A pattern ministry does not mean that it is one leading from success to success, and a continual round of triumph. There were all kinds of trials, temptations and obstacles. He was "cast down but not forsaken," for the Lord stood with him. We must not imagine because of the easy circumstances that surround us that Christian service is a kind of triumphal procession of large meetings and enthusiastic throngs. The pattern minister — this servant of Christ — was continually running into what appeared to be gigantic obstacles. He had all kinds of testings and trials; those very testings proved **the spiritual** stuff of which he was made. If you hear that somebody is serving and getting into innumerable difficulties, you need not always shake the head and say he is no good. He

may be good in extraordinary measure.

Then he tells us, "Testifying both to the Jews and also to the Greek repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ." The Jew would highly resent that message. He would say it was obvious that the Greek should be told to repent, but to come and tell them, the people of God, to repent was very objectionable. But Paul testified calmly and straightly in both directions what was the truth of God.

"Now," he has to add, "the Holy Ghost witnesseth in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions abide me." There was more trouble for the pattern servant, but he says, "None of these things move me." He was a man of extraordinary stability and faith. "Neither count I my life dear unto myself." Here was a man devoted unto death for the name and the service of the Lord. We know very little of it. The brethren in Jerusalem said in Acts 15 of Barnabas and Paul: "Men that have hazarded their lives for the name of the Lord Jesus." If you turn to another translation you will find an even more striking rendering: "Men that have yielded up their lives for the name of the Lord Jesus." There was no hazard about it at all. They had not an even chance. It was a foregone conclusion. They were men that would go into the breach and lay down their lives. In that spirit the apostle speaks here. He does not count his life dear that he might finish his course and the ministry he had received of the Lord Jesus. I think we might well say, when we review the life of this pattern servant: "No wonder that the work of God prospered in his hand. No wonder he could say that in a circuit from Jerusalem round to Illyricum he had fully preached the gospel of Christ."

Of what did he speak? Let me allude to this for a few moments. He testified of "the gospel of the grace of God." First and foremost the gospel, and the gospel of God's grace. As to that we have all heard much that is very profitable, and therefore I shall not enlarge upon it on this occasion.

He goes on to say, "Ye all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, shall see my face no more." Did you notice the rather smaller circle, for here is something that is preached amongst those that are converted. The apostle went amongst those who had believed the gospel of the grace of God and who had in truth been converted, and among them he preached the kingdom of God. Now someone may ask, "What does that exactly mean?" It does not mean that Paul went about preaching the millennium or giving prophetic addresses, expounding the day which is surely coming when this earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. It does mean that wherever he went among the people of God he was enforcing kindly, gently and lovingly on the consciences of the saints *the divine authority*. He was saying in effect, "You have believed the gospel. You are now enrolled amongst the people of God. As such you are subject to Christ and subject to the Word of God. You are brought into the kingdom, that God's authority as expressed in His Word may be dominant in your heart and life." He expounds the gospel in the Epistle to the Romans, but he does not finish without giving us Romans 12 to 15, which are sometimes "taken as read," and hence skipped over, instead of being diligently read, pondered and obeyed.

I have a feeling that of recent years we have been sadly defective, in not fully preaching the kingdom of God. Perhaps some of you would be rather angry if I were to try to do so. It is very easy to acquiesce in the spirit of the age, and to do what everybody is doing, but that is not what should govern us as Christians. We are brought under divine authority. Does the Word of God absolutely command the obedience of my heart and life? That is the kingdom of God, and everywhere the apostle went preaching the kingdom of God. May God give us grace to preach the kingdom more.

Now notice, in verse 24 he says, he preached the gospel of the grace of God; in verse as, the kingdom of God, and in verse 27 he says: "I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of

God." He says in effect, "You have got all this blessing. The gospel has brought you into this favoured place of nearness and relationship. The divine authority is established in your hearts. You are under the sway of God. You obey His word. But remember all that God has done He has done with certain great counsels or purposes in His mind." He has actually made those purposes known to us. They are not yet brought to fruition. They are not yet carried into effect as they will be in the ages to come, but they are made known to us that we may live our whole earthly lives in the light of what God purposed from before the foundation of the world.

Have you ever asked yourself why the apostle says here, "I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God"? We might say, "Why, Paul, using that word 'shun' **would make us** believe there was a kind of reluctance in your mind to speak about these things." Paul would have said: "Yes, there is. Nothing will bring me into more difficulty than expounding faithfully the whole counsel of God."

Why was this? Well, for one reason, it was just this faithful declaration of God's counsel concerning the bringing in of the Gentiles to church position and privileges that raised the furious hostility of the Jews and led to his imprisonment. Then again, there is nothing that really, after all, makes such demands on the hearts and consciences of God's people as the understanding of God's purposes. You cannot possibly with a sincere heart and conscience get any understanding of those great things God has purposed for His saints without finding yourself in this world responsible to walk according to the principles of another world. You cannot possibly entertain these wondrous revelations without being made uneasy if you walk in such a way as to flatly contradict them. The truth always makes demands upon us to walk in this world as men who have heavenly hopes and destiny.

Well, God help us to keep these things in view. We need the gospel. We need the truth of the Kingdom, and we need the counsel of God. When first we begin to entertain these things it is like eating the little book of which we read in Ezekiel and Revelation. It is in our mouth as sweet as honey. It is very inspiring and very delightful at first taste, but when you come to see the practical workings of it there is a bitterness about it. It makes demands. It gets at the conscience.

After all, *that is what we want.* **We want a little bit of the word of God that gets at our conscience, pulls us up, and positively alters our lives.**