

Outward Circumstances and Inward Grace

From Notes of an Address by F. B. Hole.

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There are many remarkable stories concerning the saints of God recorded for us in Scripture. Those in the Old Testament are often instructive because of their typical value. Joseph in his humiliation and then in dominion and glory is one of the most perfect types of our Lord Jesus Christ. But we shall all agree that there is no more extraordinary story than that of the Apostle Paul. In 2 Corinthians 11 we get his list of sufferings and trials, every one of them a great test. His outward circumstances were all against him; yet in 2 Corinthians 12 we discover he received a mighty compensation of such inward grace as made all these trials very much worthwhile.

Reading the whole Epistle at a sitting we find ourselves conducted on a geographical tour. We start with Asia in 2 Corinthians 1, where Paul refers to the great riot, recorded in Acts 19. His preaching at Ephesus was so truly in demonstration of the Spirit and of power that there was a pronounced overthrow of Satanic practices, and the devil became furious and stirred up his servants. In 2 Corinthians 11: 23 Paul speaks of being, "in deaths oft," and this was one of those occasions. God came in for his deliverance, but the whole episode brought home "the sentence of death" in his own experience. He realized indeed that he was a dead man, and all trust in himself was dissipated.

Acts 20: 1 records that, the riot having subsided, Paul departed for Macedonia, but it makes no mention of his stay at Troas on the journey, which is recorded in 2 Corinthians 2: 12. There he found himself in very different circumstances, but he did not escape trial.

He moved into an outward calm, but found himself plunged into conflict of an inward sort. He had written his First Epistle to the Corinthians and expected at Troas to meet Titus, who would bring him news as to the effect of that letter upon them. Titus failed to appear, and his anxiety as to them was such that he had no rest in his spirit. From the outward dangers of Ephesus he had plunged into inward distress of spirit, so much so that he was incapacitated for service in the Gospel there. This inward distress was as decisive in its effects as the outward. The one sent him off in haste from Ephesus; the other in haste from Troas.

We pass on to 2 Corinthians 7: 5, and we find ourselves with Paul in Macedonia, where still he was kept in suspense, waiting for the arrival of Titus. Things were getting worse and worse, rather than bettered by his leaving Troas, for he says, "our flesh had no rest but we were troubled on every side." At Ephesus the trouble was **outside**; at Troas it was **inside**; but in Macedonia it was **on every side**. It was like Ephesus and Troas rolled into one, as he says, "without were fightings, within were fears."

We may pause a moment to reflect that we are today in very different circumstances. For a couple of centuries now there has been little or no persecution in Britain. As a consequence we almost have to reverse the statement and say we have become soft and timorous, so that we have had fears without and fightings within. If we were hammered at more by the world without we should be less inclined to quarrel within.

In Macedonia, however, Paul's fears were alleviated by the arrival of Titus with good news as to the repentant state of the Corinthians as the result of his letter, so that he felt himself free to survey the state of things amongst them. Our thoughts are thus turned to Achaia the province in which Corinth was situated, though Paul himself was not actually there.

Although there had been a measure of recovery, things were still not too bright. In the matter of a collection, then being made for poor saints, they had made a promising beginning but it had not been carried to completion, and they had been quite outstripped by the Macedonians, who were far less enriched in worldly possessions. The Apostle was still fearful lest their minds were being corrupted from simplicity as to the Christ by the activities of men who were not true followers and servants of the Lord. He does not hesitate to use strong language as to such men. They were "false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ" (2 Corinthians 11: 13).

These false men magnified themselves by fording it over the saints. When Paul writes, "if a man bring you into bondage, if a man devour you if a man take of **you, if a man** exalt himself, if a man smite you on the face" (2 Corinthians 11: 20), he was describing exactly what these false apostles did. By way of contrast to this he is led to relate his own experiences, as we see in verses 23-33. And what a contrast it is!

We now in our thoughts leave Achaia and travel far round in that circuit "from Jerusalem and round about unto Illyricum;" to which Paul refers in Romans 15: 19. Trials, trouble and disaster seemed to be piled upon him mountains high. Five times of the Jews he received forty stripes save one — 195 stripes administered in five doses. Thrice beaten with rods; apparently at Gentile hands. Once stoned; that we know was at Lystra. Thrice he had suffered shipwreck, and when he wrote that he had not been taken prisoner and sent to Rome. So the shipwreck, recorded in Acts 27, must have been at least the fourth. And one of the shipwrecks was so desperate that for a night and a day he was being washed about in the sea. All this was enough to kill most men, but it was not all the story.

For there were things that affected his mind, as these had affected his body. There was "the care of all the churches." There were the weak, and those who gave and those who took offence; and these things pressed in upon him daily. The churches were not little paradises, even when Paul was among them. Too often nowadays when people find something not right in a meeting, they run away. Paul did not run away; he prayerfully addressed himself to meeting the difficulty.

As the Apostle ends his recital of these outward circumstances he brings us to Damascus. The incident he mentions happened, we suppose, at the close of his second visit to that city, which he referred to in Galatians 1: 17. Anyway it happened early in his history. The basket must have been a big one to contain a full-grown man — the sort that one often sees filled with dirty washing! A few years before he had been the proudest of the proud Pharisees of Jerusalem, and now he has descended to this! He himself writes, "in a basket was I let down." Yes, but do not miss the contrast that greets us directly we read on into 2 Corinthians 12. The man who was "**let down**" on earth was "**caught up**" to the third heaven.

But let us note how, in this connection, he speaks of himself. His own name, whether Saul or Paul, drops out entirely and he is simply "a man in Christ," — a description which applies to every true believer. Such an one has a new life, derived from a new Source — not Adam but Christ — and who in the power of that life stands before God in a new place, even Christ's own place. In the third heaven, which is Paradise, there was granted an abundance of revelations, and the hearing of unspeakable words, things that could not possibly be communicated to others in this lower realm.

It is stated that there are 700 languages or dialects in Africa alone, and perhaps 2,000 in the whole world; yet not one of them has the words in which could be communicated to others what was revealed to Paul. Until we have the thing or the idea the word to describe it is not needed. If someone could have invented the word "aeroplane" and used it in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, it would not have conveyed to them what it describes to us in the reign of Queen Elizabeth II. So Paul was introduced

into a region of things for which we have no words.

Yet there were revelations entrusted to Paul that he could and did reveal, such as the mystery concerning Christ and the church, that he alludes to in Ephesians 3: 3, and that concerning the rapture of the saints, of which he speaks in 1 Corinthians 15: 51, and 1 Thessalonians 4: 15-17. So the inference we may draw from these unspeakable revelations is that they were intended to convey to Paul personally an abundance of inward and spiritual grace, that would support him under the exceptional trials he had to face.

But again, when once more Paul found himself in the circumstances of earth trial came upon him. The flesh in him had not been eradicated by his sojourn in the third heaven. Its tendencies to pride and self-exaltation were still the same, so the "thorn in the flesh" was given to him. We understand that the word "thorn" is hardly strong enough, though we remember seeing in South Africa mimosa thorns five or six inches long and as hard as the hardest wood. The Greek word indicates a sharp stake. It was God's preventive discipline, and the exact form of it we do not know, and do not need to know. It was a "messenger of Satan," and yet it came permissively from the hand of God, on the top of all the trials that came upon him from the persecuting world and the defects and failures of the saints.

Though thrice he prayed for its removal it still remained, but it became the occasion for a fresh assurance of an abundant supply of inward grace in those immortal words, "My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness." It is not only grace, but MY grace, not only strength, but MY strength. The immensity of the grace and the strength can only be measured by the divine and eternal fulness of the One whose grace and strength it is. In the presence of this greatness how small was Paul, who was indicated by the "thee," — and we are even smaller than Paul. There is an infinitude of grace and strength with our Lord. It carried Paul to the finish, and enabled him to triumph with martyrdom just before him, as we see in 1 Timothy 4: 6-8.

So let us take courage, my brethren, and be assured that though there are outward circumstances that test us there is abundance of inward grace and strength to carry us through. When we get to glory, we shall all be saying we would not have missed any of the testings, which provoked the inflow of the grace and the proving of the strength. In our earthly circumstances we may be "let down" like Paul, but when our Lord comes again, with Paul we shall be "caught up."