

## "We glory in tribulations."

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The Apostle Paul wrote these words, which we have selected as a title, when engaged in the calm and reasoned setting forth of the Gospel of God. He did not declaim them in the midst of glowing oratory, when the best of men may be guilty of exaggeration. They were literally true. He did not look upon tribulation as an evil, necessary perhaps, but always to be avoided if possible. He rather regarded it as good and a subject for rejoicing, because, as he tells us in the succeeding verses (Rom. 5: 3-5), he knew the wholesome and desirable effects that it produced within.

Do we regard it in this light? Or have we fallen into the common snare of thinking that nothing is so desirable as that quiet and eminently respectable form of Christianity which, while diligently cultivating Bible knowledge and the gatherings of God's people, and avoiding worldly excesses, yet also carefully avoids everything that would offend worldly and carnal susceptibilities, or involve one in the conflicts which centre round the aggressive work of the Lord?

If, under this mistaken idea, we do make it our aim to avoid tribulation, we shall be great losers, and that probably in a twofold way.

First, we are not likely to escape tribulation. If we do not get it as a result of faithfulness to Christ we shall get it because of unfaithfulness in the way of chastisement. Secondly, we shall miss the very choicest of its beneficent results. We may indeed profit by the chastening of the Father's hand in a retributive way, but not so richly as we may and do when the tribulation comes because of our identification with Christ, and His interests.

Tribulation is to the soul what Exercise is to the body. Spiritual muscle and stamina are developed by it. Indeed, we commonly use the word *exercise* with that spiritual meaning; and nothing is more important for a Christian than to be maintained in this condition of healthy spiritual exercise. Moments of tribulation and pressure and difficulty when the path seems most hedged up, and decisions are most complicated and burdensome, and the situation seems most impossible, are invariably found to be ultimately — when gone through in communion with God — most upbuilding and enlarging after a spiritual sort.

In the second letter which the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians we get a very instructive sidelight on the working, in his own case, of this tribulation in which he gloried. The story falls naturally into three chapters.

1. ASIA: or, "*We despaired even of life.*"

2 Corinthians 1: 8-11 give us Paul's own allusion to this tremendous episode in his history. He brings it in, as he does also the other episodes to which we shall refer, in a quite incidental way.

At Ephesus, the capital of Asia, the gospel won some of its greatest triumphs through Paul's preaching. There "mightily grew the Word of God, and prevailed" (Acts 19: 20), and there also, and in consequence, the devil made one of his fiercest attacks as a roaring lion. He harnessed his chariot, as so often, to the cupidity and avarice of men. Demetrius, the silversmith, and his friends were his ready tools. The fierce riot, murderous in its spirit, in the Ephesian theatre was the result.

Paul's account of it in 1 Cor. 1 is that "we were pressed out of measure, above strength, insomuch

that we despaired even of life." He evidently found himself, as we should commonly say, in the jaws of death. A great experience this! It was, however, wholly pressure from without. We might at first sight be inclined to pronounce it the severest test to which a servant of the Lord could be subjected. We believe, however, that more careful reflection would lead us to consider it the least of the three cases that are coming before us.

Immense pressure lay on the apostle from without, but his own spirit was calm and sustained. He tells us that "we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead." He met the great crisis with the death sentence lying upon self, and God as the Object of his faith. Hence he was not only delivered, as verse 10 states, but spiritually enriched — so much so that he was filled with comfort and consolation to the point of being enabled "to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God" (verse 4);

### 2. TROAS: or, "*I had no rest in my spirit.*"

The Ephesian riot over, Paul departed "for to go into Macedonia," as Acts 20: 1 tells us; and he was minded to travel by way of Corinth (see 2 Cor. 1: 16). It appears, however, that he went first to Troas, where an unexpected door of gospel service opened, but that in spite of this great opening his time there was short. He changed his plans and hurriedly departed straight into Macedonia. That which induced this sudden change has been recorded for our instruction.

Not long previously, the apostle had written his first letter to the Corinthians and sent it by the hand of Titus. He wrote it "out of much affliction and anguish of heart . . . with many tears" (2 Cor. 2: 4), and having dispatched it waited with the utmost eagerness for tidings of its effect upon the Corinthians. At Troas he evidently expected to meet Titus on his return journey, and he did not come!

This plunged the ardent and loving heart of Paul into exercises of a different and even a deeper kind. At Ephesus there had been a fierce but brief moment of external tribulation. At Troas all was prosperous and encouraging without, and yet there was nothing but anxiety within. "I had no rest in my spirit," he tells us (ch. 2: 13). The very warmth of his love, and his care for Christ's glory in the assemblies, only made his anxieties the more acute. At last he could bear the suspense no longer. In spite of the open gospel door he took leave of them, and "went from thence into Macedonia."

Was he right in so doing? Did he miss a great opportunity that never recurred? These are questions it hardly becomes us to answer, seeing we know so little of the burning love and zeal that marked him, and are also ignorant of all the factors of the case. This we do know, that Paul himself could look back and trace that God was over-ruling in all, and leading him in triumph in Christ, and in that he could rejoice. This is shown by verses 14 to 17.

Many of us have known seasons of disquietude when we too have had no rest in our spirit, but it has been perhaps over matters of personal and worldly import. How many of us have been moved in this way solely out of solicitude for the interests of Christ?

### 3. MACEDONIA: or, "*Troubled on every side.*"

The apostle's story is arrested at 2 Corinthians 2: 13; but the dropped thread is picked up again at 2 Corinthians 7: 5. It appears that his hurried departure to Macedonia from Troas only heightened his troubles and exercises, for there his "flesh even had no rest." He was "troubled on every side; without were fightings, within were fears."

We do not know what these "fightings" were; but remembering the happy spiritual condition of the Macedonian saints, as recorded in 2 Corinthians 8, we are safe in assuming they were endured in

connection with the persecutions of the world. They were evidently of a particularly pertinacious kind and gave Paul no rest. In contrast to the Ephesian trouble, which was short and sharp like an acute attack, this was prolonged in a more chronic fashion. To make matters worse, instead of the calm trust in the God who raises the dead, there were all these fears within. He was still filled with anxieties as to the spiritual state of the Corinthians and the effect of his letter, and, we venture to think, also filled with fears as to whether he had failed the Lord in thus hurriedly departing from Troas.

Here was indeed a climax of trouble! - trouble which he had never known at all had he not been so wholeheartedly identified with Christ's cause and interests. Do you think he regretted it? Or should we regret it if we tasted such exercises even in much smaller measure?

The Lord watched over His faithful servant, and at length relief was granted. Titus arrived. He brought good news. The first epistle had been signally owned of God. The situation had been saved! The apostle was comforted, and his heart burst forth in the succeeding chapters into touching expressions of joy. Indeed, his joyful words in 2 Corinthians 2: 14-17 are penned in view of this. Christ had triumphed and he felt himself to be like a captive — a joyful willing captive — in Christ's triumphant procession.

Does some Christian reader say, "Well, I have never had such a transporting experience as that"? The reason is not far to seek. You have never known the tribulation and exercise which precedes it. It is as we are "partakers of the sufferings" that we shall "be also of the consolation" (2 Cor. 1-7).

How much does the easy-going and worldly Christian miss! Oh! for more wholehearted devotion to Christ.