

Paul at Miletus

Acts 20

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Article 43 of 47 **Short Meditations**

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We have, in the progress of Scripture, several instances of dying saints and servants of God taking leave of the scene here, and of their ministry in it. Jacob does so — and so Moses and Joshua and David. And among them Samuel also, in a very affecting scene recorded in 1 Samuel 12.

In this chapter, the Apostle Paul is in the like condition. He is taking leave of his ministry on the shore at Miletus, in the presence of the Ephesian Elders.

Paul's story in the Book of the Acts consists of two parts — his service and his sufferings — or, in the one, we see Paul the *servant* of Jesus; in the other, Paul the *prisoner*.

The first part ends with this twentieth chapter, having begun, I may say, with the thirteenth. The second ends with the book itself, having begun with the twenty-first.

That, however, which attracts me at this time is Paul in this chapter in contrast with the Lord Jesus in like conditions, in John 13-17. For there the Lord is taking leave of His ministry in the presence of the Twelve, as here the Apostle is doing the same in the presence of the Elders of the Church at Ephesus.

There are points of contrast very vividly presented to us, and the *human* in its best conditions stands beside that which was *Divine as well as human*; and the distinctions are finely maintained and expressed.

But this is only what we would have reckoned upon. We are instinctively conscious that Paul, the — brightest, highest sample of a vessel of God anointed and filled by the Spirit, stands before the affections and recollections of the heart very differently from the Lord. Our love to him is that which we give to a fellow-creature, and that only — the love that we give to the Lord Jesus is a *worshipping* love. This we feel instinctively. We need not to be taught this. We know it — and thus we carry in the sensibilities of our renewed mind the witness of that which Scripture tells us, that Jesus was God as well as man, and that the most gifted vessel in God's house, though he be also the most self-surrendering saint, is still but a fellow-creature.

The contrast which these Scriptures afford, (the Lord in a parting hour, and Paul in a parting hour,) gives us a sample and illustration of all this, and re-seals the conclusions of our souls already reached and rested in, as I have said, instinctively.

The points of contrast may be thus noticed. 1. The Apostle *submits his ministry to the judgment of his Brethren*. He tells them of the humility and tears with which he had conducted it; and then of his diligence in it, how he had taught them both publicly and as from house to house, and in his preaching how he had embraced both Jews and Gentiles. And all this is sweet in him, and well becomes him. He treats them as fellows in the service of God, and submits his own peculiar measure and manner of service to them, as they might do with him.

But I ask is this the style of the Lord Jesus? Does He, after this manner, submit His work to the approval of men? In the chapters I have referred to, we do not see Him doing this even with His Father.

He is there rather delivering up His ministry as now accomplished. "I have finished the work which Thou gavest me to do," is His language, while His eyes are toward heaven, and His voice is addressed to the Father there. He delivers up an accomplished work, a work which He know Himself was all perfect. This was His glory, as a minister, His glory in His ministry. In the stead of submitting it to the approval of His Apostles, He rather, as I have said, delivers up His work as that which had been accomplished, and accomplished to perfection.*

*So, in due time, He "delivers up the kingdom." (1 Cor. 15) Now having served as a Witness, and by-and-by, when He shall have served as a King, still it is perfect He is in each. He delivers up His stewardship as one that had been faithful.

2. Paul tells the Ephesian Elders that he was going on his way, bound in spirit, to Jerusalem, but that *he did not know what was to happen to him*, beyond what the Holy Ghost had witnessed, that bonds and imprisonment awaited him.

Was this the Lord, again I ask? Why, the very opposite shows itself in Him? When He was taking leave of His ministry and of His servants, He lets them know that He knew all things, things near and things afar of, things in heaven and things on earth, the story of the world's enmity and of the sufferings of the righteous in it; and the story of eternity itself; for He tells them also, that He will return to take His people home with Him to be in the Father's house, there to abide for ever. Surely this is the glory of the Lord again; and bearing witness of the One with whom we are conversing in John 13-17.

3. Again — the Apostle tells his companions, that however largely and intimately he may have been with them hitherto, he was now about to leave them, and that *they would see him no more*.

But what says the Lord in contrast with this? Paul could say nothing more, I grant. He, as a man, a fellow-creature, about speedily to close his career and his service here by death, had but to say, "You will see my face no more." But again I ask, does the Lord say this? Quite the contrary. He lets His servants know, that He would never cease to see them, and they should never cease to see Him. "Because I live, ye shall live also," He says to them. "The world seeth me no more, but ye see me." And so should it be for ever. He would return to them and for them, that He might be with them. They should see Him in spirit till that time came; and then in glory, as with Him in the Father's house, for ever.

What outshining is here! Paul could not speak in loftier language than he did; Jesus could not speak in lower strain than He did. It is the creature and God — it is the sweet, attractive, loving form of human companionship — it is the irradiation of personal Divine glory.

4. Then again, we listen to the Apostle *caring not for prison or for death*. And fine this is. It may humble us to find such a self-sacrificing faith in another. Paul laid his life on the altar, and was ready to have it offered up. But when we listen, in His turn, to the Lord Jesus, we hear the language of One who was going, as He knew, back to the Father in glory, because He had already glorified God and the Father on earth. Paul would blessedly brace himself for that which remained of the conflict and the journey, but Jesus was at the end of it in the conscious perfection of One who had so glorified God in the world here, as gave Him His place and His title of being glorified with God in the heavens.

5. And we further find the Apostle *giving counsel* to his Brethren. And seasonable and right counsel it was. It could not be more just and fit, we may say. It was this — to *serve God* in His Church, and to look to themselves, for dangers were at hand.

But what do we find in Christ corresponding to this? He counsels His Apostles too — and various are His words to them. But among them He tells them that they shall bear witness to Him. And He tells

them that the Holy Ghost, who is about to come from heaven, shall also bear witness to Him, and serve the glory of His name by taking of His things and showing them to them.

What infinite and yet due distance is there here? Could Paul tell the Ephesian Elders any thing like this? Could he, would he, dare he, make himself their object, when he was absent from them? Was he to be their subject? — He tells them, and rightly so, to serve God and look to themselves. But without robbery, Jesus puts Himself in company with God and the Father, making Himself together with the Father the object of the Holy Ghost's testimony, and of the Apostles' ministry.

Surely, in each and every feature of this contrast, the glory of One who was infinitely above the first of the mere children of men shines out. It all confirms the instinctive impressions of our own souls, telling us that with Jesus, but with Jesus alone, of all the sons of men, are we in conscious converse with the living God Himself, with One whom we worship as well as love.

6. Still, however, there is more of this. — Paul commits *his Brethren and companions to God and to the word of His grace*. What more could he do? But what does the Lord do, in like conditions, leaving behind Him his apostles and saints, as Paul was leaving behind him his companions and brethren? Various, and all gloriously, does He act indeed. He leaves His peace with them — He washes their feet, so that they might appear before God "clean every whit" — He promises them the Spirit to be their Light and Comfort — and He commits them to the Father, that the Father might continue to do for them, in His absence, what He Himself had been doing for them while He was with them. What outbreakings of Divine glory! And He undertakes to give them His care and thought and service, till He have perfected their condition, and that for ever, in the house of the Father!

If Paul, as a man, could do nothing more than he did, Jesus is here doing what none *less* than Jehovah's Fellow could have done.

7. And once more, in tracing this wondrous subject. — Paul *submits his conduct to the judgment of his Brethren*. "I have coveted no man's silver or gold or apparel — yea, ye yourselves know that these hands have ministered to my necessities, and to them that were with me." He stands before them in the testimony of a good conscience. I do not blame him or seek to depreciate him for this — though on another occasion he could say, it was a very small thing with him to be judged of man's judgment, (1 Cor. 4: 3); and would own that he was a fool in glorying. (2 Cor. 11: 12) But again I say, I do not blame or depreciate him for this. But I ask is this the Lord Jesus? Does He submit His conduct to the judgment of man? Nay, He rather asserts three grand and glorious moral facts connected with Himself, and His way and life and behaviour in the world. He tells His Apostles that He had glorified God on the earth; He tells the Father that He had glorified Him in His ministry to the elect; and He says of Himself, "The prince of this world cometh and hath nothing in me."

What conscious moral elevation expresses itself here! It is moral glory of a quality necessarily, essentially Divine. This was a life and conduct that God manifest in flesh alone could exhibit. We dare not seek the like of it anywhere but in Jesus. It is our joy to know that it could not be found elsewhere in heaven or on earth, among angels or men; that none but the Son of the bosom, who was also the Son of Man, could have rendered such a living sacrifice of pure incense and sweet savour, more to the blessed God than the obedience of a whole creation would have been.

Thus have we looked at the glory that excelleth. Sweet moral beauty there was in Paul indeed. We may be humbled in ourselves as we look at or think of such a man. But our own souls tell themselves, and the histories tell us in like manner, that it is all of another kind and quality, differing in material and in temperament altogether, from that which shows itself to us in the Lord Jesus. In Him it was Divinely moral beauty. It was the gold wire worked in the ephod. (Ex. 39: 3)

And let me just further ask, is there not the expression of humanity in the scene, as it closes, which we could not get in the kindred scene between the Lord and His Apostles? "Paul kneeled down and prayed with them all; and they all wept sore, and fell on his neck and kissed him." Precious to the heart this is. We long to have more of it, and to see more of it. We are straitened and cold. The heart has but little capacity to let itself out after this manner. But could this have been the way between Jesus and His Apostles? What say our renewed instincts, our apprehensions and sensibilities in the new creature? And what says the history? Jesus prayed, as Paul did — but it was as turning His eyes to heaven, and addressing His Father, on the ground and title of His accomplished obedience; and then uttering His will and desire touching His saints. The disciples were sorrowful, as Paul's companions were, very sorrowful. Sorrow had filled their hearts, because they were about to lose Him, as they judged. But they well know that He was more and other to them than Paul was to his brethren. They would hardly, in human, affectionate, warm-hearted intimacy, fall on the neck of One who had so lately, in Divine grace, washed their feet, giving them title to appear before God their Father without a spot upon them.

Surely these distinctions are full of meaning, and perfect in beauty. And again I say, for it is a happy thought to me, our instincts as saints would have suggested these very contrasts which we here find in these two sacred histories.