

PAUL ... and his superb bankruptcy

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(PHILIPPIANS 3:8-9)

From time immemorial, the Christian life has been likened to a journey on which the saint has had to fight his way onward. Perhaps Israel's march to Canaan originally inspired this idea, but Paul in writing the Epistle to the Ephesians certainly had similar thoughts in mind. He said that Christians would need the whole armour of God, for only thus would they be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. The apostle John also wrote, "This is the victory that overcometh the world, our faith (I John 5:4). This is the means whereby we triumph-our faith. We are indebted to John for this remarkable verse, but Paul is the ideal exponent of the truth.

Righteousness by Faith

Paul was one of the noblest characters in the ancient world. Some preachers have permitted his persecution of the early church to blind them with prejudice, but it must be remembered that Paul's fierce onslaught upon the new faith was governed by the fact that he considered this upstart sect to be a menace to the cause of God; the Carpenter to be an irresponsible deceiver. A true gauge of the quality of his morality may be found in his testimony, ". . . touching the righteousness which is in the law, I was blameless." Paul was an excellent man prior to his conversion, but afterward he reached heights never before known. Of his Christian conduct he said, "And herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men" (Acts 24: 16). Of all men he might have boasted most concerning his virtue, yet he pronounced himself to be a bankrupt. Believing his own righteousness to be utterly insufficient, he said, "Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss . . . that I may be found in Christ, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith." If such an exemplary character needed a righteousness other than his own, I am quite sure that I need it.

Reassurance by Faith

The ship was going down. Overcome by worry and excessive duties, the crew were exhausted; their immediate future was bleak. Describing those awful days, Luke wrote, "And when neither sun nor stars in many days appeared, and no small tempest lay on us, all hope that we should be saved was then taken away" (Acts 27:20). Every sailor was anxious, and some were frantic; yet down in his small cabin Paul was completely calm. He was in good company, for the radiance of an angel had illuminated both his cabin and his soul. Later, when he stood before the bewildered sailors, his voice throbbed with confidence as he said, ". . . There stood by me this night the angel of God, whose I am and whom I serve, saying, Fear not Paul; thou must be brought before Caesar, and lo, God hath given thee all them that sail with thee. Wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer: for I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me" (vv. 23-25). Faith brought Paul to the heavenly pathway; faith strengthened him as he progressed along it. My surrender to the Saviour does not imply that trials and tribulations will never be encountered again. God never promised to remove my difficulties, but rather I should never be expected to face them alone.

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Resplendent by Faith

Paul, old before his time, sat in his unlovely prison; thoughts were his only companions. Sometimes the beloved Doctor Luke was allowed to visit his old friend, but apart from the famous physician, few men even thought of the prisoner. Sitting alone, Paul became reminiscent, and taking his pen, wrote to Timothy. " I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me . . ." (2 Tim. 4:6, 7). Paul might easily have said, " Henceforth there is laid up for me a coffin-a sepulchre-a martyr's death." No. Faith had saved him; faith had strengthened him; faith would now succor him in his hour of need. Faith would make this the dawn of an eternal day. Faith would carry him through the valley, over the hills, beyond the mists, until by grace he would stand in his Lord's presence. Borrowing John's text, Paul could say, " This is the means whereby I triumph-faith." God is immeasurably wealthy; His resources know no limitations. His ways, too, are strange; for when a man discovers the bankruptcy of his own virtues, loses his self-confidence, and in despair turns his eyes toward the heavens, then into that man's poverty is poured divine wealth. There is a bankruptcy which is superb-this kind.

Transparent Clothing!

The Bible is a storehouse of scintillating illustrations; often certain Scriptures perfectly describe what is taught elsewhere. The value of righteousness by faith is never seen to better advantage than in the earliest account of man's folly. We are told that when Adam sinned, he became conscious of his nakedness, and with Eve's assistance " sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons " (Gen. 3:7). This was man's first attempt to hide his shame. That he succeeded in a primitive fashion, none could deny; at least he was no longer naked. " And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden. And the Lord God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou? And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself " (vv. 8-10).

But surely, Adam made a mistake! He had been naked, but now was clothed. That is precisely what Adam believed, until the voice of God shattered his complacency. Then he knew he was still naked. Adam was never adequately clothed until he received from God's hand the coat of skins-a garment obtained through sacrifice. The same truth is revealed in the account of the demoniac of Gadara. It is written, "When Jesus went forth to land, there met him out of the city a certain man, which had devils long time, and ware no clothes, neither abode in any house, but in the tombs " (Luke 8:27). Probably the man resisted all efforts to clothe him; he saw no need of garments, and was perfectly content to remain naked. Yet when the Saviour delivered him, his eyes were opened and he accepted the garment which either Christ or a disciple offered. " Then the people went out to see what was done; and came to Jesus, and found the man, out of whom the devils were departed, sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed, and in his right mind: and they were afraid " (v. 35). The Word of God states that our best righteousness is as filthy rags; our most efficient efforts cannot hide the nakedness of

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the soul. We need to be clothed with righteousness which is of
God by faith (Phil. 3:9).

The Wheel Came Off the Milkcart

George Muller, the founder of the Bristol Orphanage, was a man of great faith. Many stories of his spiritual exploits have been told, but one of the most thrilling related to a milkman. George Muller was in urgent need one morning, for he had no milk to feed his orphans. He was actually praying about the matter when a knock at the door commanded attention. The milkman had lost a wheel from his cart, and was wondering what could be done with the milk. "Could you use it, sir?" The man of prayer smiled. Faith had taken him another step along the path of victorious living.

My Father's Pigeons

The former chapter closed with a triumphant note. Faith carried Paul to his mansion in the sky. Faith enabled him to write, "For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand." (The Greek word analuseo, which has been translated "departure," is most interesting, for it expresses two thoughts: to be set free; and to go on a journey.

Many years ago, my father trained racing pigeons, and in due course reduced the business to a fine art. He would so arrange his preparation that on the eve of an important race, his best bird sat with two fluffy babies. I often wondered why he decided to race that particular bird. Ultimately her basket, with many others, would reach the starting point of the race, far away in northern England or Scotland; and if one could have read the mind of the pigeon, two thoughts would have been detected. I want my freedom; I want to fly away. The call of motherhood had stirred her breast, and she longed to respond. Similarly Paul felt he was imprisoned within a basket of flesh. Yet he knew the lid would soon be raised, and instantly he was free he would begin his journey home. "Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord ... shall give me . - - "

Perhaps the same thought might be expressed in the case of a balloon moored to earth. Within the circular canvas is an urge, endeavoring to send the balloon toward the sky. Alas, the restraining ropes of circumstance prevent the realization of this ambition. Yet when the rope is severed, when freedom has been gained, earth immediately begins to recede. Paul's soul was somewhat like the balloon; but as the moment of liberation approached, exultantly he cried, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" (I Cor. 15:55). Faith is the key to the divine treasures. No man can be really poor if he knows how to use it!

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