

THE MAN WHO WAS READY!

THE MAN WHO WAS READY! (ROMANS 1:15)

When General Eisenhower lay seriously ill in the Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, D.C., Billy Graham was invited to visit the dying President. He was told by the medical authorities that his visit could only last thirty minutes. When he entered the room the General greeted him with his customary smile, even though he realized he had not long to live.

Later, the preacher revealed what had taken place during that last conversation. At the end of the specified time the sick man asked the evangelist to lengthen his stay, and then said: "Billy, I want you to tell me again, how can I be sure my sins are forgiven, and that I am going to Heaven? Nothing else matters now.

"I took my New Testament and read scriptures to him. I pointed out that we are not going to Heaven because of our good works, nor because of money we have given to the church. We are going to Heaven totally and completely on the basis of the merits of what Christ did on the cross. Therefore he could rest in the comfort that Jesus paid it all. After prayer, Ike said: 'Thank you, I'm ready.'"

It is regrettable that many informed people cannot repeat the late President's statement. Luke described the reactions of three men who had the opportunity to become followers of Christ. The enthusiasm of the first man waned when he heard the Lord saying: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head." A warm comfortable bed at night was more attractive than lying beneath a hedge.

The second man did not have much interest in discipleship, and he made his family duties the excuse for avoiding acceptance of a new way of living. He might be ready -- some day!

The third fellow wished to rejoin his family who, undoubtedly, would endeavor to dissuade him from starting something which would, in their estimation, interfere with his life. In any case, he would not do anything until he had basked in the warmth of his family's admiration. While the men considered other possibilities, their opportunity was possibly lost forever

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(Luke 9:57-62). All three might have been ready -- but other projects appeared to be more important.

Compared with these men, Paul's example shone forth with unusual splendor. He was ready at all times, in any place, to do or be whatever the Lord desired. That was the outstanding characteristic of his ministry. Even when he was helpless on the Damascus road, he said: "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" Then, soon after his conversion to Christ, it was said of him: "He straightway preached Christ in the synagogues.

That readiness continued throughout his ministry. He grew accustomed to going from stall to stall in market places to speak to business men about the claims of his Savior, at other times he went "from house to house," and when someone opened a door, the apostle preached the Gospel. Confronted by philosophers on Mars Hill, he testified before them; when his ship was about to sink in a storm, he witnessed to the captain and crew of the vessel. When he reached a certain island and discovered the governor was seriously ill, he supplied what was needed. Imprisoned in Rome, he preached both inside and outside of his prison.

As long as he lived he never willingly lost an opportunity to tell the story of God's redeeming grace, and among his final statements was "Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of

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righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me... ." (2 Tim. 4:8). Three tremendous texts invite examination.

"I am Ready to Preach the Gospel... at Rome also"
Ä The Special Service

The setting of this text is extremely interesting. Paul had already traversed most of the known world, and had preached in many of the major cities of earth. Rome was the one exception. That fact was exploited by some of the apostle's enemies who suggested he was a coward. That metropolis was exceptionally sinful; the emperor claimed to be divine, and any person who challenged his authority was murdered. Men were literally skinned alive, and others were fed to ravenous beasts to provide entertainment for onlookers.

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Within the city was a small but energetic church. How it was formed remains a mystery. Probably Jews from Rome had been at the feast of Pentecost, where some were converted to Christianity. They carried the message to their homes, and provided the first fruits of the Gospel within the imperial city. Later, when persecution scattered the earliest Christians, some of them could have fled to Rome to give needed assistance to the saints already there.

It became increasingly evident that Rome was a hostile city where Christians were threatened. If it be possible to understand the plight of the Jews in Hitler's Berlin, it might be easy to appreciate the danger of Christians in Rome. Many were burned at stakes in the emperor's gardens, and others died in the arena. It was therefore to be expected that some critics would exploit the situation and charge Paul with cowardice.

Paul knew what was being said, and to end the controversy, he sent a letter to the Christians in Rome to refute the allegations. He emphasized his readiness to preach in Rome. The "Three I am's" in the first chapter of his epistle are worthy of scrutiny. "I am debtor, I am ready; I am not ashamed." The threats of hardship were unimportant. He had to visit the city whether he liked it or not, for otherwise, his conscience would destroy his happiness. God had given to him a treasure to convey to his friends in Rome, and until he fulfilled his commitments he was a thief, keeping for himself something which belonged to others!

Furthermore, his Gospel was needed urgently by the citizens of Rome. None of its inhabitants were as dangerous and difficult as he had been prior to his conversion. If Christ could save Saul of Tarsus, He could do the same for arrogant Romans. Therefore, it had become a necessity to visit the brethren in the city of Nero. It has been claimed that people are saved to serve. Paul's life was an outstanding example of that fact.

"I am Ready... to Die at Jerusalem" (Acts 21:13)
Ä The Suggested Suffering

Paul was a determined man; if it were possible to tunnel through or climb over high mountains of difficulties, he never

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waited to go around them. It might be said that his strength was his weakness! The feast at Jerusalem was swiftly approaching, and the apostle was aware that vast multitudes of visitors would throng the city. If he were able to be present, he would probably reach half of Asia merely by preaching in a street! When he considered the amazing possibilities his heart began to sing!

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Possibly he consulted ship's captains to obtain an estimated day of arrival; he had corresponded with his friends about land arrangements, and at that time, being present at the feast was the only thought in his mind.

When his ship reached Tyre, in Syria, Paul went ashore "And finding disciples, we tarried there seven days; who said to Paul through the Spirit, that he should not go up to Jerusalem" (Acts 21:4). The apostle listened to the words of his friends but frowned when he was urged to change his plans. Their counsel was a dark cloud against the blue sky of personal desire. Good winds had helped him to arrive early, and thus he had time to spare. Fellowship with other Christians was most desirable, but why should their influence ruin his plans? Unfortunately he was unwise and failed to accept a command given "through the Holy Spirit." If he were influenced by that message, he would not only lose the greatest opportunity of his lifetime, but would encourage critics to repeat their allegations. The insistent warnings given by the brethren at Tyre were annoying; Paul was glad when he continued his voyage to Caesarea.

"And when we had finished our course from Tyre, we came to Ptolemais, and saluted the brethren, and abode with them one day." That, in all probability, was the time necessary to unload cargo at the port. "And the next day we that were of Paul's company departed, and came unto Caesarea: and we entered into the house of Philip the evangelist, which was one of the seven, and abode with him. And the same man had seven daughters, virgins, which did prophesy. And as we tarried there many days, there came down from Judaea a certain prophet, named Agabus. And when he was come unto us, he took Paul's girdle, and bound his own hands and feet, and said, Thus saith the Holy Ghost, So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man that owneth this girdle, and shall deliver him into the hands of

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the Gentiles. And when we heard these things, both we, and they of that place, besought him not to go up to Jerusalem."

The discussion and arguments probably ruined Paul's stay with Philip. The statement "they of that place" meant Philip, his family, and all the local Christians. When Luke and Paul's companions agreed with them, the apostle was opposed by every person present. Yet as far as he was concerned, they were all wrong! His amazing strength became weakness. Unfortunately, he stepped out of the will of God, and during his two-year imprisonment in Jerusalem was a worried man. It would have been more rewarding preaching to multitudes than watching spiders spinning webs in the corner of his cell!

Paul's reply to the friends in Caesarea revealed nothing would interfere with his plans to attend the forthcoming feast — not even the Spirit-given command at Tyre; the message delivered by the prophet, nor the persuasion and reasoning of his personal physician, Dr. Luke. He said: "What mean ye to weep and to break mine heart? for I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus . . ." (Acts 21:8-13).

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Paul made one of the greatest mistakes of his life. It would have been wonderful to die for the Lord Jesus — but only if that were the expressed will of God. Nevertheless, in fairness to the apostle, it must be emphasized his determination was the reason why he never quit. He finished his course while others lingered along life's highway.

"I am Ready to be Offered. . . Poured Out" (2 Tim. 4:6)

Ä The Supreme Sacrifice

Paul knew the end of his life was approaching as he sat alone in his prison cell in Rome. Most of his friends had either been sent to assigned tasks, or had retired to their homes in the imperial city. Frequently Dr. Luke visited the prison to minister to the needs of his friend. Ahead lay another meeting with Nero, and it seemed inevitable that the great missionary would be executed. There was no escape, but Paul was ready for his supreme sacrifice.

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His last letter to Timothy was destined to find an abiding place in the affections of all Christians. He wrote: "For 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 at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing" (2 Tim. 4:6-8). The intrepid evangelist, who had fought so valiantly against evil, was ready to lay aside his armor, and kneel in the presence of his Master.

The word translated offered is *spindomai*, and is translated in The Englishman's Greek Testament as "I am already being poured out." The Amplified Version of the New Testament translates the entire passage: "For I am already about to be sacrificed Ä my life is about to be poured out (as a drink offering); the time of my (spirit's) release (from the body) is at hand and I will soon be free." The reference to being "poured out" is interesting, for it evidently referred to the drink-offering which was an integral part of temple worship (Num. 15:1-10). A drink-offering was never shared by the priests; it was totally and completely poured out before God; that is, it was offered exclusively to Jehovah.

Paul realized this process had already begun. His life-flow was ebbing; he had only a limited time to remain on earth. His final sacrifice would give pleasure to his Lord and peace to himself. Furthermore, the apostle had neither regret nor complaint; he was happy to be going home! Probably, when he was led to the place of his execution, he could already hear the singing of the angels. He was ready!

During the reign of the notorious Roman emperor, Nero, there was a company of distinguished soldiers known as "The Emperor's Wrestlers." They were drawn from every part of the empire, and represented the finest athletes of their generation. It was reported that when the army was sent to fight in Gaul, the bravery of these men exceeded all other combatants.

When Nero heard that some of his troops were becoming Christians, he dispatched orders to the leader, Vespasian, commanding the men be executed. The General asked his army:

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"Are there any among you who cling to the faith of the Christians?" Instantly forty wrestlers stepped forward and saluted. Vespasian was shocked to discover so many valiant men had forsaken the faith of Rome, and urged the men to recant. He gave them until evening to change their faith.

That night, in the midst of a very severe winter, the men refused to abandon Christianity; they were stripped of their clothing and made to walk to the middle of an ice-covered lake. Vespasian said: "I am not willing that your comrades should shed your blood. I shall leave you to the mercy of the elements."

As they marched to their death, the men sang: "Forty wres-

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tlers wrestling for Thee, O Christ, to win for Thee the victory and from Thee the victor's crown." Throughout the night, Vespasian sat at his campfire watching and listening as the song became more subdued. As the new day dawned, one exhausted soldier returned; he had renounced his faith. But then, faintly, but clearly, came the song: `Thirty-nine wrestlers wrestling for Thee O Christ, to win for Thee the victory, and from Thee the victor's crown." When the commander saw the desperate man at the fire, and heard the renewed song of the Christians, he removed his clothing, and walking upon the frozen lake cried: "Forty westlers wrestling for Thee, O Christ, to win for Thee the victory, and from Thee the victor's crown." He had reached the point of no return, and he was ready.

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