

I Am Ready to Be Offered

"The servant of the Lord must not strive, but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves"—2 Timothy 2:24-25.

Paul's 2nd letter to Timothy was written to strengthen and encourage him. Paul was a prisoner in Rome, about to be put to death for his service to Christ. Timothy was laboring in the Truth at some distant place. Paul appears to fear that Timothy was somewhat disheartened. Truly there was much to cause discouragement. Things were not going well with the Truth. They never have and never will. This is the day of small things—of trial and probation and darkness and faith.

In reading the epistles, we are impressed with how personal and individual a thing early Christianity was. It hung to a large extent on the shoulders of this one man and the few who were willing to give their lives to help him. Writing to the Philippians (also from prison) he said (2:19-20)--

"I trust in the Lord to send Timothy shortly unto you. I have no man likeminded who will naturally care for your state, for all seek their own—not the things that are Christ's."

All were wrapped up in their own little lives and affairs, too busy to accept the honor and glory of a part in the most wonderful and history-making endeavor that the world has ever seen. What is left now of the things they thought so important?

But Timothy—though he early chose the one thing which was needful and held fast to it to the end—could get discouraged too. And though writing to encourage him, the external picture that Paul gives is not a happy one. His comfort did not rest or depend on temporary and external conditions, but on the immovable facts of the external purpose. In 1:15 he says,

"This thou knowest, that all they which are in Asia be turned away from me."

And 4:10—"Demas hath forsaken me, having loved the present world."

V. 16—"At my first answer, no one stood with me, but all forsook me."

Timothy would wonder if there were any point in trying to maintain and hold together an organized body of believers—in trying to carry on ecclesial arrangements. Here was Paul, the very heart of the movement, a prisoner facing execution, and the body of so-called Christians he had gotten together had almost completely deserted him.

How pathetically he mentions Onesiphorus—one, at least, who sought him out in his imprisonment and was not ashamed of his chains. What a state of affairs—when one brother stands out for grateful commendation for not having been ashamed of association with the apostle in his hour of humiliation and trial! But Paul relates these things without any bitterness or despair. He knows God's purpose cannot fail. He says (2:19)

"The foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal: The Lord knoweth them that are His."

Men may waver back and forth, but the foundation standeth sure; and all who will may stand upon it—be they many or few. Paul's concern was to keep the foundation before the eyes of men, regardless of the appearances or conditions in the external Christian body all around him. He urges Timothy (1:6) to

"Stir up the gift of God which is in thee."

Not that we are to infer that Timothy was negligent, but all need the exhortation to patient and sustained spiritual activity. Paul knew he would soon be gone, and the younger man who had worked with him and depended on him would be facing ecclesial problems alone. His was writing to Timothy of the greatness and surety of the divine purpose, the vast power that controls all and shapes all things to the divine end, the love and joy that casts out all fear

"For God hath not given us the spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind" (2 Tim. 1:7).

Power, and love, and a sound mind, This is the spirit that God gives us. All the power was on Paul's side. And so

he counsels with cheerful assurance, though forsaken and in prison and facing death. In the next chapter he says (2:9)

"I am in bonds, but the WORD OF GOD IS NOT BOUND!" So he exhorts Timothy (1:8)

"Be not ashamed, therefore, to testify to the Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but take your share of suffering for the Gospel in the power of God."

"I am not ashamed," he says. He was not ashamed or afraid to meet scorn and ridicule and peril for the sake of the Truth. Why was he not, when others were? Was he naturally any different from them? No, his secret was, as he says (1:12)

"I am not ashamed, because I know Whom I have believed!"

He KNEW God. He did not just know about Him. He knew Him by close, personal acquaintance. Such knowledge does not come overnight. It takes time. The intimate companionship of God is not for every light and casual seeker. Solomon says

"When thou vowest, defer not to pay it; God hath no pleasure in fools" (Eccl. 5:4).

This seems a "hard saying," but it conveys an important prin-

ciple of divine wisdom. Getting to know God must be taken seriously, and must be made the center of life's purpose. And

we must be prepared to wait in patience, though the vision seem to tarry long. Can God be expected to open Himself to one whose heart is not firmly set on developing the acquaintance into permanent, devoted affection?

"God hath no pleasure in fools"—thoughtless, shallow-minded people who are divided in their interests. Paul knew Him, and therefore he could say

"NONE OF THESE THINGS MOVE ME."

What triumphant peace of mind! Paul was not above human feelings. He had simply availed himself of something that was far mightier—the God-given spirit of "power and of love and of a sound mind." He said to the Corinthians that he was "perplexed, but not in despair." In the present darkness perplexity cannot be avoided. It is part of the training. But it need not, and must not, lend to despair.

In v.13 he exhorts Timothy to "Hold fast the form of sound words." This principle runs throughout the epistle. In 2:15 it is:

"Study to show thyself approved with God—rightly dividing the Word of Truth."

But how? When we contemplate the endless multitude of theories developed on the supposed basis of the Word of God, we wonder how we should go about avoiding similar pitfalls. But actually it is not the problem that it may appear. The Truth is simple. It is adjusted to our mental capacity. As long as we hold fast to its simple elements, we are safe. And it has largely to do with our way of life. Jesus said (John 7:17)

"If any man will DO God's will, he shall know of the doctrine."

Truly much of Scripture requires study, but there is plenty that is very clear and of practical bearing on our lives, and if we do this part then—and only then—will we know the other. As guidance in this respect, Paul (in ch. 2) warns against 3 dangers:

V. 14—"Strive not about words;"

V. 16—"Shun profane and vain babblings;"

V. 23—"Avoid foolish and unlearned questions."

One thing it will do us good to remember—it is much easier and more flesh-pleasing to dream and speculate than to study and learn. Imagination has tireless wings, but solid learning is slow, and plodding, and against the grain, especially scriptural learning. Let us briefly consider Paul's 3 points.

1. "Strive not about words." Words are just tools. Much strife has been caused by attaching different meanings to a word. Our contact with the mind of the Spirit is through the recorded words of Scripture, so let us study to get the true meaning of those words, and to use them properly. Let us never think we know the meaning of a word until we have looked it up and have checked its use through Scripture. Words as they are commonly and locally used are often very inaccurate. The greatest pitfall is thinking we know, without making the effort to really find out. The Word of God is the only true education there is, but it is not something we can peck at. To get anywhere we must, as Paul told Timothy, give ourselves "wholly to it."

2. "Shun profane and vain babblings." On the face of it we thoughtlessly assume that that never applies to us. But the real meaning is just empty, human talking—that is, the natural expressing of natural thought. The natural mind is foolish in God's sight. Man can learn and observe facts, and modern man has made great strides in applying learned facts to modern inventions, In spiritual realms he must learn and stick to the facts—the revealed facts—he is lost if he begins to speculate on what is not revealed.

3. "Foolish and unlearned questions avoid, knowing that they

gender strifes." There are many unanswered questions in the Bible, and they are often bandied profitlessly back and forth while the practical meat of divine instruction is overlooked. The real teaching of Christ bears down hard on the flesh, so naturally the flesh prefers to turn its attention to side issues which do not relate to the way of life.

But when we read the Scriptures, let us try to keep our attention on the heart of the flesh-mortifying teaching, and not allow it to deceitfully expend itself on the incidental scenery, for the heart of man is "deceitful above all things." Let us concentrate on the practical aspects—the holiness, the service to God and others, the self-denial, the kindness, the meekness, the purifications, the eschewing of earthly treasures and pleasures, the faith and fearless allegiance of Jesus, the humble, lowly way of life

"The servant of the Lord must not strive, but must be gentle toward everyone" (2:24).

The word used here means 'fight or 'quarrel' and is never scripturally used in a good sense. (5 other words are also trans-

lated 'strive'). If we can accomplish this basic attitude then we

have the groundwork for the gradual bringing unto perfection of the fruit of the Spirit. But it must go deep. The natural,

evil, irritable, human tendency to quarrel must be completely dissolved away by the mind of the Spirit, not just side-tracked into other channels by being given a spiritual veneer. The servant of the Lord must not strive, fight, or quarrel, but must be calm, patient and gentle toward all.

V. 25—"In meekness instructing those that oppose them-selves, if God peradventure will give them repentance."

If we can bring ourselves to realize that all things are at all times in the unerring and almighty hand of God, and that we are each but a small cog in a vast machine, we shall not be trapped into that self-important anxiety that leads to hastiness and harshness. When we see worldliness and unclean, debasing habits gaining ground in an ecclesia; when we see modern customs and fashions making a mockery of scriptural ordinances;

when we see some we have loved and labored with drifting away into looser groups that have the appeal of numbers; when

we see attendances gradually diminishing and worldly things interfering even on Sunday mornings, we are apt to become despondent and panicky. But why should we? Did Paul? NO!

"The foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal: The Lord knoweth them that are His" (2 Tim. 2:19).

And the apostle, far from despondency, sounded out from his prison-cell inspiring words of courage, and patience, and glorious hope. Without bitterness, but with terrible significance, he points out to Timothy (2:20) that in a great house there are not only vessels of honor, but also vessels of dishonor. If a man will purify himself he shall be among the vessels of honor, he says. This may seem a strange way to give encouragement,

but it would help Timothy to realize that ecclesial disappointments and difficulties do not necessarily mean an abandonment by God, but are rather a part of the divine wisdom of probation.

If things were so in Paul's day, what are we to expect at the time of the end—the "perilous times" of the "last days" of which he speaks in the beginning of ch. 3? In the list of evils that will particularly mark the latter days, the 3 he puts first are instructive. Surely we can assume that the first ones he mentions are outstanding, either as the most serious, the most dangerous, or the most fundamental—"covetous, boasters, proud."

Surely, above all, these are days of covetousness, boasting and pride in this world's goods, even among those naming the name of Christ. And being human we are all too easily drawn into this same vicious net unless we are consciously on guard. Covetousness is something that we always regard as applying to others. In ourselves we see it as just an "intelligent appreciation of finer things and a commendable industriousness to acquire them." Let us turn the searching beam of the Spirit on this foolishness. It was someone far wiser than we who said,

"Having food and raiment, therewith be content . . . Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also . Verily they have their reward" (1 Tim. 6:8; Luke 12:34; Matt. 6:2).

Among the characteristics of the latter days is (v. 5)

"Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof."

"Denying the power thereof." Saying it cannot be done—it is not "reasonable" to expect the beauty of holiness in mortal flesh. What is "the power thereof"? Let us consider a few verses in which this power is referred to.

"The exceeding greatness of His power to usward, according to the working of His mighty power' (Eph. 1:19).

"Now unto Him Who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us" (Eph. 3:20).

"My brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might" (Eph. 6:10).

"Strengthened with all might according to His glorious power, unto all patience and longsuffering with joyfulness"

Is there such a thing as being "strengthened with all might

according to His glorious power, unto all patience and long-suffering with joyfulness"? Let us, at least, not be among those

who "deny the power thereof." There is such a power, and making contact with it through the Word is vitally important

in the way of life. It can and must be done.

V. 12—"All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution."

"Persecution" does not necessarily mean bodily peril. But the Scriptures lay down the principle that if we live faithfully and consistently according to the commands of Christ, we shall be treated in an unfriendly manner by the world in general. It is not something we should invite, and quite often it is our fleshliness and incourtesy—rather than our Christlikeness—that creates unpleasantness which we may be inclined to interpret as persecution for righteousness' sake. There is much that is self-condoned (and even self-glorified!) as "righteous anger" which is really but an ugly giving vent to the evil of the flesh.

But still the fact remains that "All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." If we openly advocate and try to live up to the principles of Christ we shall annoy most people because they do not want to live that way and they resent the inference that they should. You are an "extremist," you are too "narrow-minded," you are "righteous overmuch." Until we recognize and completely accept this state of affairs, we shall be unhappy and divided in our minds. We can have no friendship with the world or with worldly "brethren" if we are an out-and-out, unconcealed follower of Christ. They may tolerate us, but they cannot like us, for they will be uneasy in our presence, and we in theirs. Everything that is not of the Father is of the world. Therefore the world can even be among our own selves.

There can be no true communion in the Spirit except between those few who are hungering and thirsting for righteousness—anxious and striving to get closer and closer to God and the divine way of life.

V. 14—"Continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and been assured of . from a child thou hast known the holy Scriptures which are able to make thee wise unto salvation."

How are they able to make us "wise unto salvation?" Paul continues

"All Scripture is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction and instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, throughly (that is, completely) furnished unto all good works."

This is a very common quotation among us, but have we ever stopped to analyze it and to note what the Scriptures are de-signed to do to us?—what it means to be "wise unto salvation"?

"Reproof, correction, instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect and completely equipped."

Do we realize the tremendous, vital power that lies between the covers of this Book? If we come to it hungering and thirst-

ing after righteousness, we shall find it. It is a promise. It is a divine guarantee. It may be in a far different way than we expect, and there may be long waiting and darkness, but it will come—a marvelous, divine, transforming power of godliness.

Our part is to hold fast, keep at it. On one occasion Daniel, the greatly beloved, mourned and fasted and prayed for 3 weeks continuously before receiving any recognition. Moses had to afflict himself 40 days before being received up to the mount of God. And these are but symbolic periods of waiting. Anna, the prophetess, waited 84 years as a widow in the Temple, serving God night and day with fasting and prayer—waiting to see the salvation of the Lord.

"For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine" (4:3).

We know that the whole vast body of so-called Christendom has long since reached this state. They cannot bear to listen to sound teaching, for it interferes with their way of life. This is the biggest stumbling-block to acceptance of the Truth. The lesson for us is to be sure that we are not among the number who are annoyed and resentful when the call to ever-increasing godliness and holiness is presented. We dare not regard it as a burden. That was wherein Israel grievously offended God. "The burden of the Lord." Can it be a burden that God asks us to draw closer and closer to Him and His way? We must hunger and thirst after righteousness—we must perceive its divine beauty and value, and the repulsive, deathly ugliness of the natural fleshly mind.

"I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand" (4:6).

Paul had come to the end of his course. Apart from the Master himself no man had given more, or suffered more, for the Household of Faith. One would expect that as the great apostle to the Gentiles went to his death for the Truth, the whole brotherhood would surround him in love and sorrow. But just the opposite was the case

"All Asia (the heart of his labors) be turned away from me." And when he stood before the Roman bar, his life at stake—"No one stood with me—all forsook me."

Twice the aged apostle says to Timothy in this last chapter—"Do your best to come to me soon."

The reason he gives is

"For Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world."

Demas was at one time a close fellowlaborer with Paul, and joins lovingly with him in greetings in two former epistles. But apparently he had never truly grasped the real value and beauty of the Truth; never had its divine transforming power sink into his heart, There is no indication that Demas had necessarily openly "left the Truth," as the saying goes. He had just come to "love the world" and had left Paul.

The falling-away of the once-earnest Demas is the saddest part of the whole epistle—far sadder than the lonely, forsaken position of Paul himself. The sadness is that for Demas the picture had faded. He had once shared with Paul bright visions of eternal joy in Christ, but now he "loved this present world."

Why? Surely we would expect the vision of the future to grow brighter as one continued in the Truth. It does—if we are ever striving to get closer to God. But if we regard being in the Truth as an end in itself—an accomplished thing that just re-quires routine maintaining t h e n the vital, living reality of it will gradually, imperceptibly, fade from our minds. For we are so constituted. We get used to things—and their effect on us diminishes. Consider Israel and the marvellous, divine pillar of fire that became so commonplace to them. We cannot maintain an interest and an enthusiasm unless we are striving for some-thing. Paul said to the Philippians (3:13-14)

"Brethren, I do not count myself yet to have laid hold, but one thing I do, forgetting the things which are behind and stretching forward to the things which are before, I press on toward the goal unto the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."

He did not consider that he had attained. He could see that all the time that remained to him had to be accounted for by a continual movement toward the ideal in Christ. Not a mechanical approach—just a "doing" or "not doing"—but as he says, that he might better apprehend, or comprehend: that is, a continuous mental drawing closer to the ideal. Let us note that this man says in the same Philippian epistle

"I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me." "I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content."

"I have suffered the loss of all things and do count them but dung that I may win Christ."

But still he could at the same time say: "I have not attained. I have further to go. I stretch forward to the mark of the high calling." That is the beauty and glory and power of the mark of the high calling in Christ Jesus—its unattainable but ever-inspiring perfection of godliness.

This was the secret that kept Paul's zeal on tiptoe—counting each moment an opportunity to improve his offering, to draw closer to God, to intensify the joy of divine fellowship—eagerly spending the time in loving preparation, always adding by anticipation to the pleasure of the final perfect, endless communion.

And when the time of his departure came, he said,

"I have fought a good fight."

It was a fight. It still is a fight—a bitter, yet glorious battle. A battle whose weapons are kindness, and patience, and gentleness, and endless self-searchings, and hope in the darkness, and an enduring, unquestioning faith. BUT

"He that overcometh shall inherit all things." —G.V.G.