

Tribulation Worketh Patience

**"I will show him how great things he must suffer
for my Name's sake"—Acts 9:16**

IN Acts 16 and 17 we are again traveling with Paul. At the close of chapter 15 he set out with Silas on the second of his three great journeys of proclaiming the Gospel to the world. It was about 50 AD, 20 years after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection.

He suggested to Barnabas that they revisit the ecclesias they had established in western Asia Minor on the first journey. From this arose the dispute over taking Mark, who had left them and turned back on the first journey. This disagreement between Paul and Barnabas could not be settled, so after working together for over 15 years, they parted.

Paul and Barnabas had been close from the beginning. It was Barnabas who introduced Paul to the brethren at Jerusalem, when they were afraid of him. And it was Barnabas who got Paul to go to Antioch to help him with the work there.

Both these men had the Holy Spirit in great measure. Of Barnabas it is said he was "full of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 11:24). At the beginning of the first journey, the Holy Spirit specifically selected Barnabas and Paul (mentioning Barnabas first) to go forth together to preach to the Gentiles (Acts 13:2).

Yet still, they could not solve this point at issue between them, and this divinely appointed team broke into two. There is much food for profitable thought here, and much comfort for our present dark day. Why did they not appeal to God, and why did not God settle it for them by the direct guidance of the Spirit?

Doubtless they DID fervently appeal to God, and doubtless He DID settle it, but not necessarily in the way we might desire or expect. Of another trouble of another kind at another time, Paul said it had worked out "to the furtherance of the Gospel" (Phil. 1:12).

So here. Two expeditions set out instead of one. Of Barnabas we do not hear again, but this is no reflection on him, for the record is concerned with Paul and we hear very little about any other at all.

Of Mark, Paul later speaks very highly more than once. In Col. 4:10-11, he was with Paul in his first imprisonment in Rome, and Paul says he was a "comfort to him." And in 2 Tim. 4:11, at the very end of Paul's life, again in prison in Rome, the one person he tells Timothy to bring to him is Mark, and he speaks of him as "profitable to him for the ministry."

Of these two Holy Spirit-filled men, Paul and Barnabas, which was to blame? Which was wrong?

Not necessarily either. Nor is there any evidence that either behaved in an unChristlike way. The word in Acts 15:39, translated "contention" is more often used in a good sense than a bad one. It denotes very strong feeling, but not necessarily wrong feeling. It is the word translated "provoke" in—

"Provoke unto love and good works" (Heb. 10:24)

It is the word used for "stirred" in Acts 17:16 where Paul's heart was compassionately and zealously stirred by the ignorance of the Athenians' pitiful, intense worship of what they knew not.

There was very strong feeling on both sides of this disagreement, each for his own unshakably determined course of action. Paul was determined he would not take Mark on this

trip. Barnabas was determined he would not go without Mark. Both may have been perfectly right in their judgment. We are not specifically told their reasons, but they seem quite clear and both legitimate.

Paul would not take him because he had failed them on the first trip. Paul's reason may have just as much out of love and consideration for Mark as Barnabas' was. The hardships of this second trip were greater and more prolonged than those of the first. We have only to think of the terrible beating with iron rods the apostles suffered in Philippi, and the mob uproars and vicious treatments at Thessalonica, Berea and Corinth. He would know young Mark was not ready, and another failure could be disastrous for both Mark and the expedition.

Barnabas, on the other hand, would not go without his nephew Mark. He too was probably right. Clearly Mark wanted to go. Clearly therefore he regretted having abandoned them on the first journey. Clearly he was anxious to redeem himself. To deny him the opportunity might have destroyed him by remorse and disappointment.

So two expeditions would clearly be the answer, dividing the proposed field of visiting the ecclesias they had established, one by Barnabas and Mark to more familiar and less hazardous territory, until Mark was more fully matured as a soldier of Christ.

There are many lessons for us, but what surely is the great one? That even very outstanding apostles filled with the Holy Spirit may sincerely and irreconcilably disagree. God does not always choose to give all the answers to everything, for He is testing us to see how we react to problems and difficulties.

If we always react with gentleness and kindness and fairness and meekness and patience and brotherliness and love, all will at last be well for us, and God will in His good time clear all the clouds away. But if the flesh comes to the surface, and we react with harshness and bitterness and rudeness and unkindness, and believe and spread false reports about our brethren, then woe betide us, for our just condemnation will be terrible indeed!

We shall never know all the answers to all problems. But if we do not consistently manifest the meek and loving spirit of Christ in all our dealings with our brethren, and scrupulous truth and fairness in what we say about them, then we might as well forget everything and join the world, for we are the world's biggest hypocrites.

We cannot possibly be right if our spirit is wrong, for God will only guide those of the right spirit. If we cannot control our own tongue and temper, then that—and that alone—is our number one life-and-death problem, and we had better worry about ourselves and forget about condemning others.

So Paul starts out on Journey Two with Silas, a new companion. This time they went by land across the mountains into eastern Asia Minor, to Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, etc.

The first incident, beginning ch. 16, is the addition of Timothy to the party. It is clear that a devoted young man, to take care of the many details of traveling, would be a tremendous advantage in the work, and the loss of such, in the middle of the journey, a great blow and handicap to them. Twelve years later, Timothy is still especially noted for his youth, so at this time he must have been very young indeed, most probably in his teens.

The first thing Paul does is to have him circumcised, though he taught to these very same ecclesias, in Gal. 5:2, that—

"If ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing."

There are always those who are eagerly looking for "inconsistencies" to condemn in their

brethren, and here indeed is a perfect example—

"Paul! You said, 'If ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing.' But here when faced with a problem yourself, you directly violate that principle, just as an expediency to save yourself trouble with the Jews!"

We know there was no inconsistency. We know Paul's motives in both cases were perfectly correct, and completely harmonious with each other. We see the picture clearly. But how can you convince someone who is seeking for something to find fault with, and to use to discredit someone? The scriptural command is, over and over—

"JUDGE NOT, THAT YE BE NOT JUDGED."

With our puny little limited minds, it is impossible for us to judge fairly, even if we should have all the facts. And we never have ALL the facts.

This is not to say that there must not be a strong fellowship stand, strongly adhered to. Otherwise we would all be still in the Catholic Church. We must decide where the fellowship line is, and we must faithfully adhere to it, very gently and kindly, but very firmly.

But we must never judge motives, or seek occasions of fault-finding, or believe and peddle hurtful rumors, or talk behind peoples' backs, or speak of sins—either real or supposed—TO ANYONE EXCEPT THE PERSON INVOLVED. In doing such, we condemn ourselves. The stern penalties of the law of Christ are very fearful against any of these fleshly abominations—

"AS YE JUDGE, SO SHALL YE BE JUDGED."

Many do not seem to realize the terrible judgment in store for those who accept Christ, and then violate his laws of brotherliness and kindness.

So Paul circumcised Timothy, even though he said the circumcision would cut a man off from the salvation of Christ.

The next few verses (6-10) are very interesting. We remember that these men—especially Paul—had the power of the Holy Spirit in tremendous measure, that Spirit which Jesus said should "lead them in all truth." In these verses, we are reminded of Abraham, who, Paul says (Heb. 11:8)—

"Went out, not knowing whither he went"

God just said to him, "Leave home; start out; I'll tell you later where you are going." We tend to get impatient. We tend to worry about what is coming, and what to do about it. But—

"Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."

God doesn't have to tell us what to do until the time comes to do it. All we have to be concerned about are the problems of today. That is the big lesson we find so hard to learn. We worry about so many things that haven't happened, and never will happen. When shall we ever learn that God knows what He is doing, and we can very safely leave all the worrying to Him?

But getting back to Acts 16:6. These men were filled with the power of the Spirit, and they were out doing the Spirit's work. But what do we find? They must stumble on their way by trial and error.

They made the circuit of the ecclesias, confirming the disciples. Then they considered where to go next. Did the Spirit guide them? Not at all, except negatively. They apparently first considered going to Asia. This refers to the western end of Asia Minor, centered around Ephesus. This would be the logical move on the basis of Paul's pattern of moving gradually west by way of great cities.

But the Spirit just forbade them to go to Asia. So they headed north for Bithynia, but again the

Spirit said no. They had tried west and north, and been barred, so they tried northwest, in between, and this time they were permitted to proceed.

Why did God act like this? And why are we told about it? Surely to teach us essential lessons. We have got to have patience, and we have got to have faith, and we have got to have complete, calm, unworried dependence. Answers will come, when they are needed.

So they finally by trial and error, reached the coast at Troas, at the northwest tip of Asia Minor, opposite Europe. And still the destination God had in mind for them has not been revealed. But after they reached Troas, Paul had the vision of the man of Macedonia, calling for help. Even then there was no direct instruction. How easy for God to have said at the very beginning—

"Don't waste your time trying this direction and that direction. Go straight to Macedonia."

But God, in His Own good wisdom, did not choose to do it that way. They still, by putting everything together, had to reach the conclusion that this appeared to be what God wanted them to do. And this time they were right.

Surely this whole impressive train of events is to emphasize our day-to-day dependence on the guidance of God. As soon as He tells us too far ahead, as soon as we begin to confidently plan for the future, as soon as problems seem to be clearing up and answers seem to be coming, we begin to lose touch—to lose the urgent sense of the need of daily guidance. Right away we relax. Our minds—released from pressure—turn to worldly things. We begin to build sepulchres on high, as if this were our eternal resting place.

The next deeply instructive event is the beating and jailing of Paul and Silas. Up to the time he wrote 2nd Corinthians (which was about 2/3 through his life in the Truth), Paul had been beaten 3 times with iron rods by the Romans, and 5 times lashed with 40 stripes by the Jews. The beating with iron rods was a terrible punishment, not only at the time but in its long painful crippling effects afterward. Often it broke bones and did great permanent injury.

Why did Paul have to suffer these things? Why did Christ have to suffer as he did? Why is it—as Paul told the Lycaonian brethren after his own stoning at Lystra—that (Acts 14:22)—

"We must through MUCH tribulation enter the Kingdom of God."

Of Christ himself it is said (and it is one of the deepest statements of Scripture), that (Heb. 5:8)—

"He LEARNED OBEDIENCE by the things that he suffered."

How could a perfect, sinless man "learn obedience"? From the very beginning he was sinless: but he was untried, unexperienced, undeveloped in character. He had not "overcome." At the end he was tried, and experienced, and established—having perfectly overcome all trials and sufferings.

Suffering is the crucible in which character is purged and purified and beautified, and then fired to indestructible permanence. In our original, natural state, we are rotten, ugly, fleshly, animal creatures. Some of us never get to be anything else but rotten, ugly, fleshly, animal creatures all our lives, though we are given the inestimable privilege and responsibility of living, like Judas, in the presence of divine beauty.

Suffering takes many forms, and only God knows what each suffers, and how much. Suffering does not NECESSARILY beautify and purify. Sometimes it makes us even worse than our original natural ugliness was. It is a matter of how we are exercised by it. If we really believe God—and sadly there is much less REAL belief than there appears to be on the surface—if we really believe God, then we really believe that—

"All things work together for good to them that love God."

"All things"! If we haven't got that connection, we haven't got ANYTHING. And if we have got it—how can we ever be unhappy—how can we ever be disappointed—how can we ever wish things to be different than they are?

Truly we wish them to be different in the sense that we wish them to be working in a certain direction of change and accomplishment. But they ARE doing that! We KNOW they are, for—
"All things WORK TOGETHER for good—toward good—for them that love God."

All we have to be concerned about is that we are among those that truly "love" God—in the scriptural sense of complete and unrestrained devotion and obedience. And this is indeed a tall order, a lifetime effort, a fulltime project. It consists mainly of always doing what God wants, and not doing what WE want—of always acting in harmony with the beauty of the Spirit and not the ugliness of the flesh. That's our main concern—our own character and conduct, or we are just hypocrites.

But why should Paul need more suffering than anyone else? We would think it was terrible if we were nearly beaten to death once, but Paul experienced this at least 8 times, and never knew when it was coming again.

It was not because he deserved or needed it more. There is another aspect to suffering, another marvelous and beautiful aspect. Jesus said of Paul at the very beginning—

"I will show him what great things he must suffer for my Name."

Of Peter, Jesus spoke concerning the death whereby he should glorify God. And of himself it is recorded—"With his stripes we are healed."

How does suffering serve the Name of Christ, and glorify God, and heal others? These are strange and wonderful divine things. There is much we do not know, but there is also much we can dimly perceive, and somehow feel rather than actually comprehend.

Paul speaks of striving to participate in the fellowship of Christ's sufferings, and there IS indeed a "fellowship of suffering" that is far deeper and closer than any fellowship of mere joy could ever be. If we are Christ-like and compassionate, and kind to one another, we shall come through all problems more closely knit together in love, for we shall have experienced the beautiful "fellowship of sufferings."

The reaction to suffering is the key to its value. It is the beauty of character born of bitter tribulation that makes all worthwhile. If Paul had just endured these things stoically and courageously, it would have been commendable, but it would have had no living power. Many do that, and yet they are nameless and forgotten.

But let us consider the apostles' reaction. First, their clothes were torn off and they were beaten severely with iron bars. The record specifically says that "many stripes" were laid upon them—that is, more than usual—especial severity. They would be in constant severe pain for many days after; any movement would be agony.

Then they were thrown—literally thrown—into prison. The jailor, being specially charged with their safety, in turn "throws" them into the inner prison—the dungeon, and fastens their feet in stocks. These stocks were an instrument of torture to create a position of great discomfort.

All this time they would be wounded and bleeding, with their wounds completely unattended to. But the main thing is, what was their reaction to all this? All down through earth's dark history of man's wickedness this has happened (and still happens) countless times to countless millions. Natural man is a vile, jungle creature of hatred and vindictiveness and backbiting and

vicious falsehood.

"And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God."

They were not putting on an act. This was the true, deep, spontaneous reaction of their hearts. These men were really IN the Truth. They really knew what it was all about. Their minds were thoroughly and inseparably in tune with God. They knew that all was of God, and all was for some great eternal good, and that they were a privileged part of that great purpose of at last filling the earth with God's glory.

Let us not be sorry for them. Let us rather be sorry for ourselves that in this day of ease and comfort and luxury and self-indulgence, we are so pitifully out of touch with those glorious realities the apostles' experienced. How many of us are really IN the Truth, as they were?

They did not seek martyrdom. They fled from it whenever they faithfully could. They did all they faithfully could to avoid it. But when it came, they knew it was of God for some strange and glorious purpose, and they rejoiced in tribulation, they "rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer" for the great Name of Jesus.

One result was the conversion of the jailor—the one who just previously had cruelly added to their misery by roughly throwing them into the dungeon and putting their feet in stocks.

Was it worth it? Would we consider it worth it, if we could save a soul from death? Here is the key to the whole matter. Here we can test our hearts to see if we really are in the Truth and have any idea what it is all about. To them it WAS worth it, worth all the suffering, because they were driven by the mighty power of love for their fellowman. They were not self-centered. They thought nothing of themselves.

To what extent are we driven by that power? Is it a vital overwhelming force within us so that we are constantly seeking to do good, and willing to suffer anything for it? Are we really IN the Truth—God's glorious TRANSFORMING Truth—or do we just have a religion? "Let a man examine himself," says Paul, as he turns our hearts and minds to this great sacrifice for mankind, this supreme manifestation of love—"Greater love hath no man than this"—

"Let a man examine HIMSELF."

To examine ourselves is an ugly, stomach-turning task. Few indeed are willing to face what they see, but those few are God's eternal jewels.

—G.V.Growcott, The Berean Christadelphian, March 1973