

Our Flesh Had No Relief

“For even when we were come into Macedonia our flesh had no relief, but we were afflicted on every side; without were fightings, within were fears. Nevertheless he that comforted the lowly, even God, comforted us by the coming of Titus; and not by his coming only, but also by the comfort wherewith he was comforted in you, while he told us your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced yet more” (2 Cor. 7:5-7).

Chapter one and seven have much in common: both give us insight to the “person” of Paul. Both picture a man troubled by the circumstances around him — both reflect the intense relief he feels when the thing that bothered him intensely turned into vapor. The word “comfort” is found ten times in chapter 1; seven times in chapter 7. What relief the apostle feels when his alarm and concern fades away when he glimpses Titus!

These circumstances in the narrative are somewhat akin to the anointing of Saul to be Israel’s king. The loss of Kish’s (Saul’s father) asses was a matter of great concern, but the extended absence of Saul in his search for them was feared to cause his father to turn from concern about his animals to concern for his son (1 Sam. 9:1-5). So it was in this case. Paul’s concern for the Corinthians’ problems made him unwilling to go personally to them to deal with the problem. In his words he wrote, “And I wrote this very thing, lest, when I come and should have sorrow from those of whom I ought to rejoice” (2 Cor. 2:3). So he sent Titus with the letter, instructing him to bring back word of the Corinthians’ reaction to his letter. But Titus’ long delay as well as not being in the place Paul expected to find him in, made Paul more troubled about Titus’ safety than for the reaction of the Corinthians to his letter.

Paul mentions the afflictions which pressed him on every side in Macedonia. Just what those afflictions were we have no knowledge for Luke makes no mention of them when he records Paul’s journey through that region (Acts 19:1-2). Paul also mentions afflictions which befell him in Asia (2 Cor. 1:8) and Luke did give some information about those problems in Acts 19. There was a great riot in which Paul’s life was in danger. Paul mentions “fightings” in Macedonia yet neither he nor Luke gives indication of the nature of them. He had plenty of enemies there among unbelieving Jews in Thessalonica who had hounded him not only in Thessalonica, forcing him to leave their city, but also when they learned of the success he was having in Berea, they followed him there to create more trouble for him (Acts 17:1-13). But God comforts the lowly and somewhere Titus appeared in Paul’s vision. He wasn’t a mirage as Paul might have first considered him to be — he was actually there; safe and sound and not only was he whole but he brought welcomed needs from Corinth. He told Paul of their longing, their desire to see him who was their father in the faith and from whom they received, through his instrumentality, the spiritual gifts they exercised. Yes, the Holy Spirit was the originator of those gifts who determined who received whatever gift was bestowed (1 Cor. 12:11), but only an apostle could confer those gifts and Paul was that apostle who came to preach the gospel to them.

Titus told of their sorrow: sorrow which could have been for their inaction of dealing with the man who had taken his father's wife; or perhaps sorrow for their immorality and divisions, and very likely, sorrow for the grief their immaturity brought to Paul. And Titus told Paul of their zeal for him, likely their defense of Paul to those who were in doubt or disposed to dishonor him.

Who is it that cannot relate to the expression "without were fears"? And while we feel regret for Paul's troubled mind, we rejoice in it also. He wasn't a super human who was never ruffled, agitated, or uneasy in mind. He was a man of great faith, but not free from human frailties and fears.

Let us learn a lesson from Paul on faith, afflictions, and works. A dark cloud hung over Paul when he returned to the place of his confinement after having nearly been torn to pieces by an angry mob (Acts 23:1-10). The Lord had repeatedly warned him that bonds and afflictions awaited him in Jerusalem and such had come to pass. Yet in that dark hour hope shone round about him when the Lord stood by him and said, "Be of good cheer; for as thou has testified concerning me at Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness at Rome" (Acts 23:11). What a glorious hope! Yet the next day his nephew brought him word that 40 Jews had bound themselves under an oath they would neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul (Acts 12:12-16)! Paul had God's promise he would survive to see Rome, yet he did not decide he would do nothing but "leave it all in the hands of God": he sent his nephew to the chief captain, informing him of the Jewish plot (Acts 23:17-27). The chief captain swiftly made plans to convey Paul to a more secure place of confinement and so Paul was moved to Caesarea. What lesson can we learn from this? We must learn to trust God's promise, but if there is action we may take to help bring about that promise, we should take that action. Then, when we have done all we can and can do no more, we can say again with Paul: "Wherefore sirs, be of good cheer: for I believe God that it shall be even as it hath been spoken unto me" (Acts 27:25).

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