

THE OVERCOMER

Mary M. Bodie

"BUT I WOULD YE SHOULD UNDERSTAND, BRETHREN, THAT THE THINGS WHICH HAPPENED UNTO ME HAVE FALLEN OUT RATHER UNTO THE FURTHERANCE OF THE GOSPEL Phillippians 1:12-18.

We are accustomed to think it a calamity when some strong one in the Christian ranks is called Home, or is laid aside from active duty for awhile, or trouble comes upon him in any of its various guises. Probably the Christians of the first century felt that it was a reproach and a calamity of the first magnitude when the apostles were persecuted or martyred. When Paul, the great leader of the Church, was shut up in prison at the time that he was most needed in every conceivable way they must have suffered deeply. The worldly man, no doubt, was amused that such a thing happened to that good Christian; and maybe he commented upon the circumstance in a mocking scornful way. For folk are always folk in every age and clime.

Let us hear how Paul looked upon the matter. Did he, like John the Baptist, have a fit of depression as he waited year after year for his release? Terrible must have been the discipline of delay, the slow monotonous months consuming his life, while the great harvest of which he was so zealous remained to be reaped. No doubt, many perplexing problems presented themselves to him, and we are sure that Satan was around with his question mark.. "Why are you in such a place? Why does the Lord treat you in such a manner? He could quickly remedy all your conditions if He would." There was reason for all these cogitations. Paul's great call to the leadership of the age, to service for the Lord whom he dearly loved, and his great ambition for the work, could have been forgotten. To all appearances, it was as though those vital things were just imaginations. His life appeared wasted in a prison. He might have been excused, if he failed to understand God's ways with him at that time and complained about them.

His friends were also perplexed. Those of Macedonia, the scene of his first converts in Europe, were distressed at his imprisonment, as we can read between the lines in his letter to the Philippians. He positively assures them that he was not discouraged, that all things were working good turning out for the furtherance of the Gospel. He, who was in prison, wrote to comfort the dear people who loved him and were weeping for him. They did not know God as he knew Him. He must perforce be an example of faith and fortitude, as in all else. He must hold the victory for them as well as for himself. He cannot yield one inch to the devil in the matter of God's dealings with him. In his estimation and judgment, the Lord was always right, whatever happened.

Satan can do nothing with saints who refuse to feel sorry for themselves, and realize their part in God's great scheme of the ages. They know that they are a most essential part in the plan of God for the glory of His Son; yea, a member of that marvelous Son of His. They are blessed whichever way the wind blows ... good or ill wind is bringing upon them the benediction of the Lord in various ways.

The first and greatest blessing which resulted from Paul's long imprisonment, he does not mention, because he was not aware of it. He could see into the future, only as the

Lord revealed coming events unto him. He could not tell men would be reading his wonderful prison epistles for nineteen centuries, even down to the present hour, and deriving life and strength from these writings. What the Church would have missed, if Paul had not been shut up alone and endured those years of loneliness and trial! Imagine not knowing of our being raised up together and seated together in the heavenlies in Christ, the subject proper of the letter to the Ephesians written from Paul' s study in a Roman cell!

Colossians was also penned from the same close quarters, wherein are declared the marvelous truths concerning Christ' s Divine creatorship and His indwelling the individual Christian here upon the earth. What a loss to us if we had never known these things. Then there is Philippians, with its special truth concerning the Christian race and the hope of winning Christ as the Prize. Also, there is II Timothy, with so much of inspired caution and counsel, giving us a glimpse into the very heart of the apostle as he is nearing his departure shortly to be with the Lord. Then we have Philemon, that little masterpiece of literature from one brother to another, brimful of courtesy and tact. We say again, what information of value and of Divine revelation we would have missed, if these letters had not been written! Which one of these could we give up? They, all of them, are so precious that it would be difficult to decide.

The second great result from Paul' s stay in that Roman cell is, as he declares, that his bonds are more manifest throughout the whole Praetorian guard. These latter were selected soldiers, 16,000 of the strongest tallest men, picked out not only because of their stature but also for faithfulness and sundry other special characteristics. Augustus, stationed the most of these able guardsmen in Rome and dispersed the others in adjacent cities. Tiberius stationed them all in Rome, making it a strongly fortified city. These soldiers were distinguished by special privileges and greater pay.

Paul was committed to these men and chained to one during his entire term in Rome. The soldiers were changed every four hours, so he was never left alone. What exquisite torture that must have caused to his sensitive soul! many of those guards were, no doubt, kind and considerate; especially after that had learned to know the gentle Paul. Nevertheless, it was a terrible ordeal never to be alone. But, we listen in vain, for any record of the torture of compulsory association by night and day with those heathen soldiers. There is not a word of complaint. In fact, there seems to be a ring of joy because the soldiers were always present. He thus had a continual audience. Every new guard was a prospective convert.

No doubt, at times the hired house was filled with soldiers to whom the apostle spoke words of life - Acts 28. While some were rude and blasphemous, others were quiet and respectful and listened to profit; many being saved, and later preaching the same mighty Gospel which Paul preached. At night, when the warrior was unable to sleep, the sentry was necessitated to hear him pray and praise God. That was victory. Christ was in that prison with Paul, and the Gospel began to shake the place. Paul' s imprisonment was not a mark of Heaven' s displeasure, as some of his enemies might affirm, but rather a means to a great end. It turned to victory everywhere. Not only in the palace, but outside, the glorious Gospel became known because of the surrendered servant in bonds and servitude. Nothing is defeat to such a one. All is triumph.

Oh yes, Paul suffered every day in every way; but the gain that accrued was immeasurable. Throughout eternity it will be seen. Even in his captivity, Paul had great joy in beholding soldier after soldier yielding to Jesus Christ and being saved. The whole praetorian guard was thereby influenced to sympathize with the gentle apostle, who always showed himself kind to the men that temporarily shared his imprisonment. No doubt, some of them when off duty would return to listen to the words of life spoken by the man of God. What a fruitful ministry Paul's life-day shows. He was a captive slave, not of Rome, but to One who was greater than Caesar ... the Lord Himself.

Who could conceive a more wonderful plan to carry the Gospel to the very citadel of Rome where, otherwise, it would have taken generations to arrive in the ordinary way? Verily God's ways are past finding out; but we see the results in transformed lives. We too may be bound to unsympathetic companions, as Paul was bound to his guards; and, we too may win them by our lives of consistency and love, even if we are not allowed to speak to them of salvation. It is perfectly astounding what God is able to accomplish through "base things." Who could fathom the marvelous purposes of the great Creator and Redeemer which began to be fulfilled in that prison cell in Rome? God delights in weak things, in circumstances which apparently are beneath His notice, in environments which men despise ... these things, that men turn from with contempt, glorify Him. We are always too big in the natural for Him to use.

By way of illustration, witness Gideon, and his three hundred trained army which God used to defeat and drive out of Canaan a multitude as mighty as a horde of grasshoppers and as devastating. God does not need great numbers. The multitude generally have to be sifted and sifted again, as were Gideon's warriors, before the Lord can use them. He is glorified in weakness; let us not forget. It is when religious men appear to prosper in natural ways, that they begin to depart from the Lord. Then is the zero hour.

If the apostle had failed in maintaining the victory and had murmured and complained against his guards and in general against everything, which is natural; he would not have lost his salvation, but he would have lost the gain, the fame, and the glory which are now his inheritance. He would not have won those souls from Caesar's household, and thus would have lost the opportunity to enrich himself eternally. He stands as the foremost overcomer of the present age ... the leader of the ranks in the Church ... following a direct course in the will of God, walking in the steps of his Lord and Master, Christ, counting all things of this world loss in comparison with winning Christ, the Prize. These are facts to faith.

Then the third result of Paul's incarceration in Rome's jail follows. It is also wonderful, as is declared. "But I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the Gospel; so that my bonds in Christ are manifest in all the palace, and in all other places: and many of the brethren in the Lord, waxing confident by my bonds, are much more bold to speak the word without fear" - Phil. 1:12-14.

A soul on fire has power to set other folk aflame with enthusiasm in the things of God as well as in natural affairs. It is always so. A cold church will never bring about a revival. Enthusiastic folk win every time. Every revival has been born of Spirit-filled flaming

evangels. The Roman Christians were stimulated by Paul's zeal and courage. His overwhelming confidence in the Message of Grace and its powerful effects on sinful men roused them to greater efforts. His patience, fortitude and constancy, in the midst of persecution touched other hearts and lives. We do not live unto ourselves, but unto others. It is always the case.

The blood of the martyrs was the life of the Church. The more they were persecuted, the faster they grew. The reason of the deadness, indifference and apathy manifested today among Christians is because there is no opposition. Our testimony is too null to cause any persecution. We are too much like the world to bring any conviction upon them. We are so busy criticizing, fighting and persecuting one another, that we do not stir the enmity of Satan. He knows when Christians quarrel among themselves, biting and devouring one another, busying themselves over this little failure and that little episode in the life of their brother or sister, thus unfitting them to damage his kingdom; therefore, he lets them alone. It is when we are on fire to declare the Gospel of God's grace, sacrificing our lives and all that we possess for Christ, that Satan seeks our downfall.

Paul adorned the Gospel wherever he dwelt, by his subjection to Christ and the will of God. In every place and under every circumstance, he was an overcomer. Nothing could hinder nor defeat him, nor the Message of Grace which was deposited with him. He knew who he was and to what an exalted place he was called. Christ was living in him, and animating his every desire and action. Whether others preached "Christ even of envy and strife ... not sincerely, supposing to add affliction" to Paul's bonds, he rejoiced. Philippians 1:15-16. This too worked good for him, because his whole life was bound up in that Gospel. No affliction was added to him, even when men preached Christ with insincere motives and intended to hurt him. They did not succeed. The Gospel was going forth and Paul was the one who gained. He was sincere and honest in all that he did and said, regardless of the attitude of others. He knew God was over all; therefore, he walked before Him, living in His Presence. He feared and served the Lord rather than men.

Oh, what a man! We feel led to exclaim... a man of like passions with all other men, yet so marvelously different because he let God work in his life and change him. God can transform us in like manner as we allow Him to form Christ in us. We too, may come into His image as Paul, if we yield and let Him work. He is still able to make much of little and get glory out of nothing, and less than nothing. All things are working for His glory and our good, when we take them from His hands and yield to Him. Then weakness becomes almightiness, and dependence all-power. THE END