

Paul in Jerusalem

In his first Epistle to Timothy, the Apostle Paul speaks of how the Lord chose him to be an example, or pattern for all believers to follow:

“Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all longsuffering, **for a pattern** to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting” (1 Tim. 1:16).

In our New Testament reading for today, we consider the final recorded journey of Paul to Jerusalem in Acts chapters 21 and 22. But this is not the only occasion he was found there: in the book of Acts, he is described as being at Jerusalem on 5 separate occasions – we shall consider these in turn to glean what exhortation, instruction and encouragement we can find there.

The Apostle is referred to first of all as being in Jerusalem giving his voice in persecuting the early ecclesia there, under the name of Saul:

“As for Saul he made havock of the ecclesia, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison” (Acts 8:3).

He consented to the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:1), and displayed great zeal in hunting down members of the ecclesia at Jerusalem. Although he was of the town of Tarsus (Acts 22:3), he spent his early years at Jerusalem. Hence he spoke later before Agrippa:

“My manner of life from my youth, which was at the first among my own nation **at Jerusalem**, know all the Jews; which knew me from the beginning, if they would testify, that after the most straitest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee ...” (Acts 26:4-5).

And he continued to speak of what he did to the brethren and sisters of Jerusalem:

“I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Which thing I also did **in Jerusalem**: and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them. And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto foreign cities ...” (Acts 26:9-11).

The Apostle was thus a man of high standing amongst his own people, zealously persecuting the ecclesia (Phil. 3:6) - yet he left all this behind, to live a life of an outcast, spearheading the preaching of the Gospel message to those who would hear it: “but what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ” (Phil. 3:7). He received forgiveness from the Lord for those things he had done, because he had done them in ignorance, and received a preaching commission directly from the Lord:

“... and I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into he ministry: Who was before a blasphemmer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 1:12-14).

The “pattern” in these events for our learning and admonition is that we must leave behind our precious sins, “forgetting the things that are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before” (Phil. 3:13). We must be prepared to forsake the praise of men, and devote our lives to the service of Messiah, wherever that may lead us – even if, as with Paul, it will end with our death.

Seeking first the kingdom and righteousness of God, we must redirect our zeal to the things that pertain to eternity, and lay hold upon the Hope of Israel, for which Paul was later bound in chains.

THE SECOND VISIT

Having received the light of the glorious Gospel of Jesus Christ on the way to Damascus, Paul was converted to be a foremost preacher of the faith he once destroyed. But because of his background, when he came back to Jerusalem, the disciples were afraid of him. The Lord had previously given the warning: **“beware of men:** for they will deliver you up to the councils, and they will scourge you in their synagogues; and ye shall be brought before governors and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them and the Gentiles ...” (Mat. 10:17-18). The believers then, were to “beware of men”, and that included Saul who did such things against them. It fell to Barnabas therefore, to convince them that Saul really had been converted, and that he was now a bold preacher of the things concerning the Name of Jesus Christ:

“when Saul was come to Jerusalem, he assayed to join himself to the disciples: but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles, and declared unto them how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus.” (Acts 9:26-27).

This really commenced the ministry of Saul. By contrast to his previous activities at Jerusalem, having returned as a convert, “he was with them [i.e. the disciples- CAM] coming in and going out at Jerusalem. And he spake boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus ...” (Acts 9:28-29), even putting his life at risk by disputing against the gainsayers.

The lessons here include how we should receive sinners who have turned from the wickedness of their previous way of life. We must not judge them according to what they have done in the past, but rather be encouraged by their new example of a life devoted to the Lord. Messiah taught that “there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth” (Luk. 15:10), and so we must joy and rejoice with them. And also, being repentant sinners ourselves, we must be like Saul in devoting ourselves to the ministry of Christ, even in the face of severe opposition.

THE THIRD VISIT

The third visit of Paul to Jerusalem is described in Acts 11:29-20, and also Acts 12:25. The purpose of the visit was to bring relief to the new converts in Jerusalem, who were about to suffer a great famine, as prophesied by Agabus:

“Then, the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judea: Which also they did, **and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul**” (Acts 11:29-30).

And again, chapter 12 and verse 25 describes how that “Barnabas and Saul returned **from Jerusalem**, when they had fulfilled their ministry ...”

Notice here, that every man gave “according to his ability” to provide relief from the famine. The language here is taken from the building of the temple in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah:

“... some of the chief of the fathers, when they came to the house of Yahweh which is at Jerusalem offered freely for the house of God to set it up in his place. **They gave after their ability** unto the treasure of the work ...” (Ezra 2:68-69).

The Lord does not require us to give that which is beyond our ability, but will bless a cheerful giver (2 Cor. 9:7) who gives from his heart, however small it might be – even like the widow’s mite.

It is interesting to note the way in which at the beginning when new converts were being made in Jerusalem, their needs were met by the brethren and sisters:

“neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold then, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, and laid them down at the apostles’ feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need” (Acts 4:34-35).

Chapter 5 of Acts then narrates how that Ananias and Saphira did not give according to their ability: they could have given more but did not. Instead, they pretended to give everything, but only gave a part of what they had: their condemnation was just.

But it would appear that in the case of the famine that was to come, this source of help had dried up, and there was a need for the brethren and sisters from other parts of the land to provide relief. The example for ourselves therefore, is to provide for the needs of our brethren and sisters as we are able to, and not according to a show. We must provide for one another’s benefit, and not be like Ananias and Saphira who kept back part of what they had claimed they had given. In our Baptisms, we publicly declared that we will give everything we have in Divine Service, and we must not hold back in doing so, lest we be condemned as they.

THE FOURTH VISIT

The purpose of Paul’s fourth visit to Jerusalem was to deal with the issue of the Judaizers who sought to bring the new converts under the principles of the Law. When the brethren were confronted with “certain men which came down from Judea”, and “Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the Apostles and Elders about this question” (Acts 15:1-2). At the conference which ensued, “all the multitude gave silence, and gave audience to Barnabas and Paul, declaring what miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them” (Acts 15:12).

The message of Barnabas and Paul was reinforced by the “miracles and wonders” that had been performed. As the writer to the Hebrews describes the “... great salvation which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him; God also bearing them witness, both **with signs and wonders**, and gifts of the Holy Spirit according to his own will ...” (Heb. 2:3-4).

The miracles then, testified to the truth of that which was being preached, and left the hearers with no excuse to refuse to obey the Gospel message.

This occasion seems to be that which Paul later alluded to in his Epistle to the Galatians:

“... then fourteen years after I went up again into Jerusalem with Barnabas, and took Titus with me also. And I went up by revelation and communicated unto them that Gospel which I preach among the Gentiles”

On that occasion, there were “false brethren unawares brought in who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage” of the Law (Gal. 2:1-4). This was very significant, and an issue that had to be dealt with as described in Acts chapter 15. But whilst this doctrinal issue was important and significant, the Apostle Paul remained focused upon also meeting the material needs of the brethren and sisters. The outcome of this meeting in Jerusalem was that Paul and Barnabas were sent “unto the heathen” to preach the Word, but they continued: “Only they would **that we should remember the poor**; the same which I also was forward to do” (Gal. 2:10).

And Paul's next visit to Jerusalem would be for that very reason: providing for the poor:

THE FIFTH VISIT

The fifth visit of Paul to Jerusalem marked a significant turning point in his ministry. Being apprehended by the Jews, and delivered to the Romans, he no longer had the freedom to go and preach where he pleased. Rather, he had to go wherever he was taken, and preach to whoever he came into contact with. We read of the purpose of this visit in chapter 24:17:

“... now after many years I came to bring alms to my nation and offerings” (Acts 24:17).

The principal reason for returning to Jerusalem a fifth time therefore, was to “bring alms” to meet the needs of those who were suffering the effects of the famine. But even then, the Jews sought his destruction. He was to be bound and delivered into Gentile hands (Acts 21:11), that they might have him put to death.

This intention to bring alms at this time features in some of the Epistles of Paul. Romans 15:25 describes the words of the Apostle:

“... but now I go unto Jerusalem to minister unto the saints. For it hath pleased them at Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor saints which are at Jerusalem” (Rom 15:25-26)

Again, he describes concerning the offering from the ecclesia at Corinth:

“Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the ecclesias of Galatia, even so do ye. Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come. And when I come, whomsoever ye shall approve by your letters, them will I send to bring your liberality unto Jerusalem” (1 Cor. 16:1-3)

And again further, chapters 8 and 9 of the second Epistle to Corinth are all about this very issue. Chapter 9 describes:

“he that soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully. Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7-8).

In connection with this point, the Apostle draws our attention to the example of Messiah himself: “For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich” (2 Cor. 8:9).

When we consider the example of the Apostle Paul therefore, we see one who was not afraid to suffer for Christ's sake. Even going to Jerusalem a fifth time, when the Spirit had said that bonds awaited him, his dedication towards the work of the Truth was outstanding. And when we come to bring our attention to focus on the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, we find that he also gave everything he had, to relieve our spiritual poverty. Laying down his life for his friends, he set his face toward Jerusalem, where, like Paul, he was taken by the hands of wicked men, crucified and slain. Yet he was raised from the dead and was transformed into immortality: something that we hope to attain to ourselves. Let us therefore take heed to the example of Messiah and the Apostle, and devote ourselves to ministering to the saints: then we will be partakers of the reward that Christ will bring at his appearing.

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