

DEARER THAN LIFE

"But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God." Acts 20:24.

After the riot at Ephesus, following Paul's proclamation of the gospel of Christ in that city, the Apostle went into Macedonia, revisited churches, corrected errors and stimulated whatever was good. On this third missionary journey, the boat on which Paul and his companions had taken passage stopped at Miletus for a few days. Ephesus, where Paul had labored for more than three years, was about thirty miles away. He sent messengers to that city, calling the elders of the church there to come to Miletus. With great joy the Ephesian elders responded to that call. How glad they would be to see their great leader again!

When they arrived at Miletus, Paul reminded them of his labor of love in their city. He then pointed out some of the dangers that confronted them, and exhorted them to be faithful and true. Then Paul told them something of the experiences which he was about to face. He was on his way to Jerusalem, not knowing what would befall him there, save that in every city through which he passed men who were filled with the Holy Spirit had said that bonds and afflictions awaited him. Then he uttered the words of this text: "But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God." His statement revealed something of the courage and spirit of devotion to his Lord which characterized him.

Calm determination was one of the commendable and valuable characteristics revealed by these words. Paul was greatly concerned about his own conduct. He had a great work to do, and he was very anxious to avoid any interference with it. He wanted to think clearly, speak discreetly and act wisely. Paul was going "bound" to Jerusalem. In his thought the chains were already upon his wrists.

Everywhere he saw bonds and afflictions waiting for him; but none of these things moved him, nor did he count his life dear to himself in the accomplishment of his mission. We are humbled and challenged by his sublime character and his determination to serve Christ. It is our privilege and duty to imitate him in this regard as well as to admire him. All the threats of evil men, and even the danger of death itself, could not turn him back.

True steadfastness was another of his commendable characteristics. He who exhorted others to be steadfast was a consistent exponent of his own teaching. Looking at the difficult and dangerous things which were ahead, Paul said, "None of these things move me." Outward circumstances did not draw him aside. He displayed firm conviction, solid faith, calm demeanor and genuine steadfastness. But, we must remember that if one is to be independent of or victorious over external circumstances he must depend upon God.

Willingness to sacrifice was still another commendable characteristic of Paul. When he said, "Neither count I my life dear unto myself," this was not an idle boast, because Paul had suffered already. Rather, it was a spiritual appraisal. Paul was willing to suffer the loss of all things if the cause of Christ might be advanced thereby.

Paul said that, in comparison with his great object of preaching the gospel of Christ, he did not count his life to be dear to himself; yet, Paul valued life highly. He had the same love of life as other men, and he knew besides that his own life was of great consequence to the churches, and to the cause of Christ. Paul was not weary of life, nor was he a vain person who could treat life as though it were a thing to fling away. Yet he soberly said to the elders of the church at Ephesus that he did not regard his life as a dear thing in comparison with bearing testimony to the gospel of the grace of God.

Life is dear. Good health, a fine appetite and the joy of living are experienced by many people. Our Father's world, the grandeur and beauty of nature, the privileges of friendship and the joys of home are invaluable. Good books add much to life. Good conversation, creative thinking and freedom of expression mean so much to us.

There are those who pamper life and seek to save it in order that it might be used indulgently, selfishly and chiefly for their own pleasure. There are others who waste, injure and abuse life. There are still others who spend life for God's glory and in the service of their fellow men. Paul lived his life in this latter fashion in a noble and outstanding way.

I. Duty Is Dearer Than Life.

Duty is an august, a noble and a majestic word. It has a priority that should be in one's soul. Obligation is at the very heart of it. It is deeper than one's wishes or desires or feelings. Duty involves conscience, faithfulness and loyalty. When one does his duty he brings much good to others and great glory to God.

II. The Welfare Of Others Is Dearer Than Life.

In his Merrick Lectures, Dr. Robert E. Speer said, "Service is the man of truth and purity spending himself upon the highest use of life, namely, the uplifting of life and the making of men. We have the best ground for regarding this as the supreme service, the real purpose of life."

When men settle in their own minds and souls the great issue of whether they will serve others before self, that they will ally themselves with the great moral forces of the universe and spend and be spent in the unselfish service of others, that they will hear and heed the Holy Spirit when He speaks to them, they are really counting unselfish service for the welfare of others dearer than life itself.

III. The Cause Of Christ Is Dearer Than Life.

Christ made this very plain to those who thought they wanted to follow Him. He said, "He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and he that taketh not his cross and followeth after me is not worthy of me. He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it" (Matthew 10:37-39).

Only One gave Himself to redeem men from sin's guilt and power. No founder of any other religion dreamed of dying for his followers. The ethnic religions may contain some fine truths, but not a one of them has a Redeemer. Christ alone laid down His life in order that men might have life abundant and everlasting. Ever since Christ lived and died, there have been those who have not counted their lives dear unto themselves, but they have considered their lives dear unto Christ for the sake of the gospel. Some worldly classmates said to one of their number who was about to sail for China: "Why do you throw your life away in that God-forsaken country?" The young man replied: "Christ poured out His life for me and for them; why should I not go?"

Paul had the consciousness of a divine mission. He said, "So that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus." He carried with him the conviction that he was following the course which Christ had marked out for him, and that he was fulfilling the ministry which he had received from his Lord and Master. Paul received that commission from his Lord at his conversion. From that time he was conscious of a divinely given mission, and he was anxious to be true to that mission whatever the cost. Many times during his career Paul referred to the fact that he had been divinely commissioned. From time to time we hear such declarations as these from his lips: "A dispensation of the gospel is committed unto me"; "Woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!"; "According to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which was committed to my trust."

If there is anything that will put zeal and courage into the soul of a man, it is the conviction that he has been called of God for his task. When one knows that he is doing the work God gave him to do, there is a zeal and courage in his soul that all the forces of Satan cannot destroy.

The message which Paul was commissioned to preach was "the gospel of the grace of God." The word "grace" is one of the most baffling words of the Bible. Law is the expression of divine righteousness; grace is the expression of divine love. Law says, "Give the man what he deserves"; grace says, "Have mercy on the man." Law condemns; grace saves. The law says, "The wages of sin is death"; grace says, "The free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." Law leads to despair; grace kindles hope. The law shows men their sins; grace shows a remedy for sin. The law reveals to men their condemnation; grace reveals redemption. The law says, "Pay the debt"; grace says, "Christ has paid the debt for you."

The supreme manifestation of the grace of God is in the gift of His Son. "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son." Grace is the love of God going out to a lost world in the person of His Son. "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." "For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures."

All of Paul's energies were dedicated to the pursuit of one object, namely, bearing testimony to the gospel of the grace of God. The life which he lived was valued by him as only a means to that end. He also regarded the gospel, and his ministry in witnessing to it, as a sacred deposit which had been committed to him by the Lord Himself. He looked upon

himself "as put in trust with the gospel"; and he resolved to be faithful though it should cost him his life. He "desired to fulfill the ministry which he had received of the Lord Jesus Christ." Wherever Paul went he published the gospel. This is what we must do.

Whoever does this work with a steadfast purpose will receive a great joy. It is the privilege of Christians everywhere to experience this joy. To have helped some soul from darkness into light, to have lifted one from despondency to courage, is to experience great joy. To know that we have done our best brings great satisfaction. The work of the Lord is not a burden too heavy to be borne, but it becomes a privilege and an inspiration.