

"WHOSE I AM AND WHOM I SERVE"

"For there stood by me this night the angel of God, whose I am, and whom I serve."
Acts 27:23.

In the last two chapters of ACTS we have a most graphic and thrilling account of Paul's voyage from Caesarea to Rome. In those far-off days the only medium of transit between distant parts of the Roman Empire was the merchant-vessel; and when we remember that navigation was then only in its infancy, it is no wonder that sea-voyaging was so difficult and dangerous. In these days of steam power we have no idea of the difficulties with which ancient seaman had to contend. A voyage from Caesarea to Malta in those days was far more perilous than a voyage around the world in these days of swift ocean liners.

This story gives one of the most accurate descriptions in ancient literature of the methods of sea-faring in those early days. But the interest of the story for us lies in the way in which Paul, the man of faith, becomes the hero of the story. He was a prisoner on his way to Rome, to be tried before the court of Caesar. He had appealed his case from the prejudice and hate of Palestine, because he well knew he could not get a fair hearing before the Jews.

On board the ship in which Paul sailed was a world in miniature. Stern law was represented by Julius, the centurion; navigation was represented by the captain. Commerce was represented by the merchants who voyaged westward to buy and sell. Labor was represented by the hard-working sailors. The army was represented by the stern-faced soldiers. Science was represented by Luke the physician. Literature was represented by Paul the Apostle; and law-breaking was represented by the prisoners. On board that ship were to be found all sorts and conditions of men.

A prisoner on his way to trial ranked no higher then than he does today. I suppose many of the crew stood apart from him and avoided him as perhaps a murderer or a felon of some kind. As they were crossing the Mediterranean Sea a great storm arose and grew in its fury for many days, until all hope of safety had fled from all aboard the vessel. When the men aboard were about to jump into the sea Paul spoke to them and told them of a heavenly visitor who had stood by him that night and had encouraged him with a message from God. The message contained the assurance that he and all on the vessel would be saved, if they would stay with the ship.

What was Paul's secret that made him so calm in the storm?

1. He recognized God's ownership.

"Whose I am." "This is my Father's world; this dark night is His; I am His child, and He loves me too well to forget me; and I am safe because my Father rules the storm."

2. He knew he was doing his duty.

He was on his way to Rome. He thought if he could get to Rome he would be able to teach the whole world, because Rome was the metropolis of the world. He had even prayed that God would take him there. But God sometimes answers our prayers in a queer fashion. Paul never thought of going to Rome as a prisoner on a ship that seemed likely to go to the bottom of the sea. When we ask God for something He often send the answer in a different way from what we expected. One thing that always brings comfort to one's heart is to know that he is just on the path of duty where God put him, and that if danger meets him there God will take care of him. When God sends His servants upon His errands He takes all risks. If you are on God's tracks and doing His work He will see you safely through.

3. He was a man of prayer.

In answer to his prayers God granted him all the crew. Prayer gives heart's-ease.

4. Heaven was near to him.

"There stood by me an angel of God." The angel stood alongside him in the storm.

5. He had a good conscience.

The man who is right with his better self is a happy man, and the man who is wrong with his better self is a miserable man.

These words of Paul are a glad testimony to:--

I. His Standing.

"The God whose I am." "I belong to God" said Paul to the heathen company on that ship. And every man there said in his heart, "We know you do." His confession presupposes in the very tone of it that he is only telling them what they already knew. That is to say, before he announced that he was God's he had lived as if he were. And that is the true test of our belonging to Him, that we shall not need to say it, but that we shall not be ashamed to say it. The thought that we are His opens out into heights of duty and tenderness, of sweetness and greatness, of blessedness beyond all that I can speak. But the first thing that it requires is that each of us should see that infinite love which has given itself to us that it might acquire us for itself. We should recognize and yield to the Divine possession of us.

Psalm one hundred bases God's ownership upon His creative work, "It is He that hath made us, and not we ourselves; we are His people." But the New Testament goes a great deal deeper than that. God's ownership resulted from His creative act, but the true ground on which men belong to God is embraced in the great words, "Ye are not your own, ye are bought with a price," even the precious blood of Jesus Christ. He has acquired us for His own by the mighty act of redemption, and has purchased us with the gift of His son. God is mine, I am God's; these are the two halves of one truth. If I belong to God, God belongs to me; and viceversa. To say, "I am God's" means: "Do with me as Thou wilt. Take me where Thou wilt; take from me what Thou wilt; command me as Thou wilt. Let my will be wholly blended with and conformed to Thine."

When the consciousness of being owned possessed the great Apostle, it is not difficult to conceive what it imparted to his life.

1. A saving dignity.

The sense of a great relationship always tends to impart a saving dignity to human life. About the lives of those whose high relationships are spiritual and eternal there belongs a certain dignity of demeanor which proclaims their royal birth and rank. Men who are owned by the Lord will share the walk and the work of the Lord. Paul's life was full of an impressive dignity because he was conscious of the high and intimate relationship between him and his Lord.

2. A mellow courtesy.

God's gentleness had made Paul great, and true greatness is ever natural, and therefore very gentle.

The really great are rarely proud. Paul belonged to the Lord, and the holy mark of that high lineage is found in his exquisite courtesies, in his tender compassions, in his pity for the down-trodden, the sore-stricken, and the poor.

3. A sense of right.

A man who had come to know the power of the Lord, and the overwhelming love of his Lord, would most certainly acknowledge the rights of the Lord. He who had remade him and sustained him by continued ministries of redeeming love had certain rights which a reciprocal love would yearn to revere. The Lord who had given him love had a right to his heart. The Lord who had given him light had a right to his mind. The Lord who had given him power had a right to his will. When we have experienced the uplifting power of the Lord, and the wealth of His redeeming love, we shall gratefully and gladly acknowledge the rights of Him who redeemed us.

II. His Service.

Every strong life must acknowledge some master, and must bow to some domination. There must be some fixed center around which its activities turn. The strength of a life is found in its fixed attachments, whether the attachments be virtuous or vile. The utterly impotent life is the life that has no center, no point of obligation, and no link of enslavement.

The word that is employed for "service" implies, not the menial actions of a slave, but the priestly actions of a worshipper. And so Paul says, "I belong to God, and because I belong to Him I bring Him the joyful adoration of a worshipper." Paul, calm and collected, devout and attent upon God, as if he stood within some sanctuary shrine with the world shut out, was offering up his prayers and his worship on the slippery deck and amidst the howling storm.

The man who is owned by the Lord will walk with his Master in fields of welcome service. And the services will be wide and manifold. They will go beyond common boundaries, and will be known to be Christian by their wealth and range.

The man who knows himself to be God's, and in the strength of that knowledge is serving God, has great future purposes of the Divine will to accomplish, and is immortal till his work is done.

Christian relationship implies a life of service. It is more than a profession, or a creed, or a theory or a philosophy of life. It is life lived according to the pattern given by Christ Himself.

1. Whom I serve in the affairs of life.

He was in active service every day. To do good in the name of Christ, and for Christ's sake, was the ruling passion of his soul. True service begins in the heart. "I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ" was the badge Paul wore throughout life.

2. Whom I serve in the world at large.

The only way to serve God is to serve people, and there were people on board that ship who needed God. He was among men whom he had never seen before, neither was there a single tie of affection between him and them, but he saw there the grand possibilities of manhood through the cross. His life was a benediction to all mankind.

The motives for Christian service are purely gratuitous. Men do not serve God in order to get something. They rather serve God out of gratitude for what they have already received.

In the midst of that storm Paul said, "Sirs, be of good cheer, for I believe God." "I believe God" was a bold pronouncement of his loyalty to God. There were many embarrassing problems which he could not explain, yet his confidence in God was unshaken. He believed God in spite of the predicament he was in. He believed God in spite of the unjustified persecutions heaped upon him. He believed God in spite of the dangers that faced him. He was bold and unafraid to declare his belief in his God. It was that belief which saved his life and the lives of his companions. How much hung on the faith of one man! His faith stopped a panic. It gave others confidence in a desperate situation. It gave them hope.

It is time we recovered this faith in the power of God to work through us and in us. The first thing it would do for us would be to make us see to it that nothing was wanting in us of that surrender, that utter openness to God in our own lives, through which He can work. The next thing it would do would be to make us fearless in the way of witnessing to our faith. For that was what Paul did. Paul gave his testimony, told his convictions, and shared his experience.