

Insuring Paul's Ministry

“... giving no occasion of stumbling in anything, that our ministration be not blamed; but in everything commending ourselves, as ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in watchings, in fastings, in pureness, in knowledge, in the Holy Spirit, in love unfeigned, in the word of truth, in the power of God, by the armor of righteousness on the right hand and on the left, by glory and dishonor; by evil report and good report; as deceivers, and yet true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich, as having nothing, and yet possession all things” (2 Cor. 6:3-10).

Paul was ever mindful of the danger of giving offense to others and he had written that although eating meats was not of itself wrong, if eating meats would cause his brother to stumble, he would eat no meat forevermore lest he cause his brother to stumble (1 Cor. 8:13). He wrote to “strong men” and urged them that they should forgo any liberty they had if in the exercising of it they caused a weak brother to sin (1 Cor. 10:30-33). So, since he was conscious of his need to walk circumspectly in eating meats, he was particularly careful that his life be above reproach lest perchance by some misstep he reflect unfavorably on the ministration he had from God: that ministry being a fellow worker with God pleading with all men “be ye reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:20).

In vv. 5-7 of this chapter Paul cites both trials he experienced he experienced in preaching the gospel, as well as virtues in his life to keep his ministry above reproach. He had manifested “patience” — steadfastness, whether in trials or reflecting the necessary virtues man should evidence that he was God's servant.

First on Paul's list of tribulations he manifested steadfastness in was “afflictions”. Paul did not embark on his apostolic ministry ignorant of the deprivations he would be called upon to endure. Ananias was sent to Paul with instructions of what God required Paul must do to be saved and, God added in his instructions to Ananias, that “he would show him how many things he must suffer for my name's sake” (Acts 9:16). Afflictions would be experienced by other Christians of course (Acts 14:22), but they would be a normal part of the apostle's life. In additions to afflictions, Paul would know “necessities”. Vine's defines this word as denoting “a necessity whether imposed by external circumstances or inward pressures” (Vines Ex. Dict. of N. T. Words, Vol. 1, p. 325). To necessities is added “distresses” defined by some as “narrow places which one cannot well escape” (Filson, 547). Then Paul mentions “stripes” — the beatings which often were imposed upon him. In 11:24-25, he wrote “of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods.” Stripes were followed by “imprisonments,” of which, when this epistle was written, there was only one recorded event, that being when he was in Philippi (Acts 16:23), but many more would follow: at Jerusalem (Acts 21), Caesarea (Acts 24), and Rome (Acts 28). “Tumults” was the next indignity he suffered, riots at Ephesus (Acts 19) and Jerusalem (Acts 21-22) being examples of such.

Paul then enumerates labors, watchings, fasting (2 Cor. 6:5). The “labors” were his “back grinding” efforts to sustain himself and often those with him (Acts 20:34). The “watchings” would include the sleepless nights when he hastened from one city to a safer one, the night journey from Jerusalem to Caesarea to escape the plot of more than 40 rabid Jews who determined to neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. Finally, “fastings” whether because he was without funds to buy food, or so busy in the kingdom there was no time to eat or perhaps hours on his knees, forgoing food, to intercede with God for special requests heavy on his heart. While the trials Paul endured bore down, often grievously, they demonstrated to one and all that with the apostle truly “righteousness was not a way of gain” but for him a way of sacrifice: of self, of his needs, of his interests. They were certain assurance that Paul was sincere in the message he preached.

Beside the tribulations previously named, Paul then gives a list of virtues in which he exercised the same steadfastness that he had in bearing up under tribulations. “Pureness” (a word found only in this text) stresses Paul’s motives and behavior. “Knowledge” (following pureness) tells of the divine knowledge Paul received through the agency of the Holy Spirit. “Longsuffering” is the enduring up under weights, sometimes insults, sometimes bodily injury. “Kindness” suggests goodness or generosity. By (in) the Holy Spirit shows Paul being led by the Spirit, bearing the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). “Love unfeigned” a love not pretended just as faith must be genuine, unfeigned (1 Tim. 1:5). By the “word of truth” likely is his affirmation that his message is not false, but true. By “the power of God” he tells us the source of the strength that kept him going. By “the armor of righteousness on the right hand and on the left”: meeting the enemy from whatever angle or direction that danger came.

Concluding his list of tribulations and virtues he experienced or exhibited that his ministry might not be blamed, Paul now gives a list of paradoxes; the results of his efforts. These are paradoxes because we are looking at two sets of eyes! Just as Paul contrasts the “mind of the flesh” with the “mind of the Spirit” (Rom. 8:4-8); so Paul (and the other apostles) would be viewed differently by those who looked at “things that are seen” with those who looked “at the things not seen”. Some would regard Paul’s effort as producing glory, others with dishonor. Some bore an evil report of him and his work; others joyously spake a good report of him. Some regarded Paul as a deceiver; others received him as a bearer of truth.

Thus Paul was a “nobody” in some eyes: unknown, but to others he was well known and esteemed. As dying, yet we live! As chastened, yet not killed. As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing. As poor, yet making many rich. As having nothing and yet possessing all things. These latter all emphasize one truth: if our affections are set on things above, then this “nobody” Paul (as some saw him), was in the eyes of others one to be esteemed, highly regarded. It all depended on the direction one looked; above, or on the things of this earth.

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