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The Wisdom and Value of Being Pronouncedly the Lord's

by T. Austin-Sparks

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A Message to Young Christians

"Whose I am, and whom I serve" (Acts 27:23).

This dramatic story of the voyage of the apostle Paul to Rome has many things in it which form profitable instruction. From among these we are just lifting out one of particular value. It is that contained in our title: the wisdom and value of being pronouncedly the Lord's.

You know that the Apostle was a prisoner on his way to be tried before Caesar. Perhaps it would both help you and make unnecessary the lengthening of this message if you refreshed your memory with the whole chapter and what led up to it. The focal point of the message is that Paul did not leave anyone in any doubt as to where he stood, and because of that God eventually put everything into *his* hands. Paul could have kept quiet. There were several things that might have made him decide to do so. He was Caesar's prisoner. He was under the authority of both the Roman centurion and the captain of the ship. He had a very great deal to think about, for things had taken a strange and unexpected course in his life, and now he might be going to a quick execution. But, no, he looked beyond Caesar, Rome, ship, sea and circumstances to the Lord, and, in the hour of trouble he declared himself boldly and openly, not as the prisoner of men or circumstances, but as the prisoner and servant of the Lord. This openness and courage became

A Position of Power with the Lord

It constituted a link with Divine sovereignty. That Divine sovereignty had been very real in his recent history leading up to this situation. There were not lacking those things which could have provided plenty of ground for misgivings, and for the devil's paralysing accusations. This whole threatening disaster could have been looked at as the result of Paul's own mistakes and faults. He had gone to Jerusalem in spite of:

(a) The Lord's earlier command that he (Paul) should depart from that city and be sent "far hence" because they would not receive his testimony (Acts 22:21).

(b) The fact that his brethren had besought him not to go, and warned him of what would happen.

But his concern for his own people in that city was so strong that he would not be dissuaded, and he went against all appeals and pleadings. When he got to Jerusalem he was caught in a trap, resulting in imprisonment, near death, and the several trials, issuing ultimately in his appeal to Caesar. One of the rulers said that if only Paul had not appealed to Caesar he might have been set at liberty. That 'if only' could have been a forceful point of satanic and self condemnation. 'If only I had not made that mistake!'

The apostle had much to reflect upon, and when things go wrong and trouble overtakes, the devil is not slow to jump in and say: 'This is God's judgment upon your wrongdoing.' The appearances are that God has left us to our fate, and we see no way out. But this man was no introvert, but one who still believed God; for, whatever *strange* and seemingly contradictory features arose in the process, God had said to him that he 'must testify of Him in Rome' as he had done in Jerusalem. This confidence in the sovereign rule and overruling of God had these two initial effects: it made him bold before men, and linked him with that sovereign rule and grace. There was an underlying factor that gave God a clear way for His sovereignty. Paul had absolutely no *personal* interests to serve. He knew that in going up to Jerusalem he took his life in his hands. He was not going there for anything for himself. He was not actuated by some worldly ambition. There were no prizes for him in this life along that course. It was all a way of cost and suffering and sacrifice. Such a spiritual position is always a way which God will take to overrule our mistakes, and even use adversity to His own end.

Apostles were not perfect and infallible men. God has never had an infallible servant apart from His Son. His best men have made mistakes, and these mistakes have never been kept out of the records of their lives. But be it Abraham, Moses, David, Peter, or Paul, their utterness of heart for God, and the absence of personal interests have made those records a story, pre-eminently, of sovereign grace and power.

So it was in the occasion under consideration. Utter abandonment to God gave God that wonderful opportunity of exercising His sovereignty, so that this *seeming* disaster turned out to be a Divine strategy.

If the heart is *wholly* set upon God's purpose our human faults and defaults will be covered by sovereign grace. We are not now thinking of the definite sins of rebellion and self-will. They may arrest or retard the goings of God, so far as we are concerned. But the weaknesses of our humanity can be no hindrance to God if only there is no dominating self-interest.

The next thing which is noted in our chapter is that this pronounced out-and-outness for the Lord is,

A Position of Moral Power in a Time of Crisis

For a time the ship's master flouted Paul's advice. Paul was less than a passenger: he was one of a number of prisoners. His opinion could be dispensed with; and so they silenced him and made it necessary for him to be quiet. In any conference which they had, Paul was in the rejected minority. But the hour of crisis came. The day and the hour came when that majority was in sore straits, and now the one man upon whom their only hope depends is the man who had been refused a place; the man who had been keeping a silent vigil with God, and to whom God had been speaking. You know the rest of the story. The man of utterness for God whom men rejected is God's key to the situation when everything is going to pieces. The lesson is quite evident, and this principle has had many occasions in history. "Be still, and know that I am God."

There is one more very wonderful feature of this sovereign government of God. It is:

The Foreknowledge of God

In the narrative we come on the statement by God to Paul: "God hath given thee all those that sail with thee". Does this mean, as it well might do, that God had the *eternal* salvation of the ship's master, the centurion, and the company in mind when He put Paul on that ship? Would we be going too far in imagination if we thought that some of those later referred to by Paul as "those of Caesar's household" (evidently saved believers) came to the Lord on that voyage, and that even the centurion may have been one of "the praetorian guard"? (See Philippians 1:13, 4:22.) Such a surmise can be supported by another occasion when Paul was "in much fear and trembling". The Lord spoke to him with the same words as those used here: "Fear not, Paul", and then, as to the desperate situation in Corinth: "I have much people in this city." Note: "I have". Not: 'I am going to have.' The Lord foreknows those who will believe and has a messenger on hand. Before the voyage came to its climax in the loss of the ship, and *before any listening to Paul* took place, God had said, "I have given thee". It was a sovereign act out of sovereign foreknowledge. I venture to say that if Paul had never let anyone suspect that he was a Christian, the great co-operation with God would not have followed.

There are times when we wonder why we are found in certain most difficult and perplexing situations. Everything in our expectation has broken down. It is far from rare that, eventually, it is found that God had something of considerable importance to Himself in that situation. Hell has raged like a sea tempest, and, humanly, the way seemed to have come to an end. But, again, if the heart is not divided in its interests, and no other concern than those of the Lord is keeping us from being pronouncedly the Lord's, the issue may be the eternal good of others. Remember, the Lord would not, on the two occasions mentioned, have said to Paul, "Fear not, Paul", if Paul had been above fear, and incapable of it; a superman, utterly without fear. Paul's moral ascendancy was due to God's grace; and that is not for giants in themselves, but for those who are wholly committed to Him.

A closer look at the story will reveal some characteristics needed in anyone whose ways are supported by the Lord. One of these is true humility. There was no proud or arrogant fighting for his own conviction on the part of Paul. However strongly he knew of the mistaken course, and

repudiation of his advice, he stood back and evidently left the situation in the Lord's hands, keeping his own hands off. This is vital to the Lord's undertaking. Humility is the evidence that we have no personal or private interests to safeguard. It is also a mark of our not "thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought to think". It is not *our* vindication that matters, but only the Lord's honour.

Then patience is so very important. Paul had given his advice. It was flouted. Then it seemed that he had been wrong and the others right. Things went in their favour and they seemed justified. "The south wind blew softly, supposing that they had obtained their purpose..." (Acts 27:13). This is a very trying element in God's sovereign ways - the way by which alone He can come into His own place, and also brings souls to Himself by way of self-devastation. Sometimes it does *appear* that God is favouring those who have refused His authority and better judgment. They really do seem to be prospered and blessed! This is set in much wider context than Paul's voyage to Rome. In the whole range of God's goings from of old He has so often allowed wrong, and His own authority to be set aside and seemingly given rein to man's independence.

"History's pages but record
One death grapple in the darkness,
'Twixt old systems and the Word.
Truth for ever on the scaffold;
Wrong for ever on the throne:
Yet that scaffold sways the future;
And amidst the dim unknown
Standeth God, keeping watch above His own."

The phrase "the patience of Jesus" (Revelation 1:9) was used by John in a time when that 'scaffold' of Rome's persecutions *did* seem to be the triumphant 'throne' of intense opposition to all that was of the Lord Jesus. But history has shown otherwise, in that phase, and in many others. Patience is Divine power.

So we conclude this message, with its deep eternal principles of God's sovereign rule, and its showing of the wisdom and value of being *pronouncedly* the Lord's.

"Whose I am" - absolute proprietorship.

"Whom I serve" - absolute obedience.