



THE EXHORTER

“And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation.” Acts 2:40

The Palmer Road church of Christ, Westland, Mi. (prchurchofchrist.org)

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Jump Start # 2324

2 Corinthians 11:25 "Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep."

It is hard to read these words of Paul. It hurts my heart to know that he was hurt. We wish we could have been there to help him. And, we know it's not just this one verse. The whole context through here is filled with the sufferings of an apostle. Beaten. Stoned. Whipped. Constantly in danger. Hungry. Thirsty. Sleepless nights. Cold. People let him down. People turned on him. People discouraged him. People deserted him. Prison.

And we ask, why? Why did he do this? Because God was counting on him. Because Jesus had chosen him. Because others needed him. Because where would we be today, had he taken the safe and the easy course in life. The rocks that were thrown at him were thrown with anger and with the intention of killing him. The beatings weren't carefully given so as to not cross the lines of abuse. They crossed all lines. They were intended to abuse, break and destroy his life. And, a night in the deep. Would he drown? Would he make it? Dark. Wet. Cold. Fearful. On his own. This is where our verse takes us today.

I want us to consider some thoughts here:

First, stop saying I can't go on. Yes, you can. It's never more than you can handle. It's never too much. I can't deal with this, yes, you can. I can't face this, yes, you can. It may be the hardest thing in your life. It may be taxing all your energy, but you can and you must go on. As I write these words, I think of a young father whose sweet wife is about to pass from this life. He has two small children. How can he deal with these things? He can, because he sees in Paul, that he did. I think of the godly couple whose child sits in jail. They are so embarrassed, ashamed and disappointed, first in themselves and then in their child. How can they ever walk back in that church house again? How can they? They look to what Paul did. Yes, you can go on. You must.

Second, we preachers need to stop whining so much. We go hold a meeting, traveling in nice airplane, staying in fine hotels, preaching simply lessons in the evening and think, this is so hard. Is it? We look at our paychecks and we complain that we deserve more. We complain about how hot the church building seems or having to meet so many brethren, or having so many people ask us questions or want us to send them things. We need to stand in Paul's shoes for a moment. I fear that I would have ran the other way rather than endure what he did. We fear upsetting a parent because we mention dancing during prom season or we take a stand against social drinking, but no one is going to beat us. No one is going to try to kill us. Most of us have pretty secure positions and jobs. I hang my head in shame and ask God to forgive me for the times I complain. We have it so good and so easy. We are paid much more than we are worth. We have so many conveniences that make preaching a breeze. And, when we have to go out in the evening to talk to a person, we moan and gripe as if it is a big inconvenience. Forgive us, Lord.

(OVER)

Third, we need to work hard for the Lord. Paul did. Our salvation is not based upon works, but our love for the Lord and His kingdom is demonstrated by how much effort we put into things. I've talked to preachers about making booklets, printing fill-in-the-blank notecards and other things. One told me, "that's too much work." What are we supposed to be doing? Look at that poor apostle in our passage. He was going through all those things because he wanted the kingdom to grow. How much do we want the kingdom to grow? Need teachers for the children's classes, the announcement sounds forth on a Sunday morning. Everyone hangs their heads. Not me, they think. Too busy. Got no time. Ties me down too much. Let someone else do it. Just wonder if Paul thought those things? There was an old guy I met years ago. He told me folks today are just too soft. I believe he was on to something. We like soft beds, soft ice cream and an easy way. We don't like to stand in line, wait in traffic or endure uncomfortable temperature. Where's the guy whose willing to bust it for the Lord? Where's the family who will take a vacation to help out in the kingdom? Too easy. Too soft. Too comfortable. We ought to be wearing ourselves out for the Lord. Push on. Stay in longer. Keep going. Now, that's the spirit.

Fourth, not stated here, but understood because of the nature of Paul's faith, are the many, many prayers through those difficult times. As the rods were busting open his skin and breaking his bones, you and I know that prayers were being uttered to Heaven. As he longed for something, anything to eat, but nothing was there, you and I know that prayers were going upward to Heaven. Those many times Paul faced dangers, scared, unsure, and not knowing the outcome, you know that prayers were being prayed. Paul was aware of apostles, such as James, who had been executed. John the prophet, the Lord's cousin, had been executed. Each event, each crisis, may have brought an end to Paul's life. It makes us wonder how often we are praying to God. Difficult times. Dark nights. Alone. Fearful. Prayers need to be going upward towards Heaven.

Fifth, the journey of faith, is often uphill, alone and difficult. People in our own family can become obstacles to our walk with the Lord. Challenges in society and dealing with a world that caters and caves in to sin, and corporate world that follows that suit, makes it hard to be a Christian. The people of God have never been popular. In Egypt, they were slaves. In Babylon, they were captives. They have been sent to fiery furnaces, lion's dens, prisons, beheadings, sawn in two and violent deaths. Not all escaped those things. The easy religion is what the world offers. Just enough Jesus to offend no one and not enough to make any difference. Blend in, rather than stand out. Conform, rather than transform. Follow others, rather than follow Christ. People may not like you because you walk with Jesus. You may not be included, invited or welcome. They may talk about you. They may try to pick apart your life to find flaws. They may ridicule the Jesus you love. They may misuse and mock the Bible you read. Your body may never be beaten with rods, but your spirit, your feelings and your emotions may.

Finally, Paul understood that God would never desert him. The Psalmist said long ago, "even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, Thou art with me..." (**Psalm 23:4**) In Hebrews, we find the promise that I will never desert you. (**Hebrews 13:5**) Tough times is not an indication of God's angry or disappointment in you. Because your prayers are not answered to the favorable hope that you wanted, does not mean that God no longer loves you. This world is not it. Our faith and our walk with the Lord will take us away from this place into the arms of our loving Savior. This world is not our home. This is not Heaven. Since the early days of Genesis, this planet has been broken, ruined and obsessed with sin. We long for a better place. We long for a Heavenly home.

Those dark nights when Paul sat alone in a prison, he wasn't really alone. God was with him. Those scary nights when he was in the water and trying to survive, he was not alone. God was with him. And, those moments in your life, when you think no one understands, and no one is here, God is. Take your heart to the Lord. Trust His words. Believe His promises. Be thankful for His grace. Long for His heavenly home.

Thank you, Paul. You remind me to hang in there and keep going when I am tired, weary on the inside and want to stop for a while. And, thank you, Lord, for being patient with us and giving us this supreme example of faith, dedication and love. Paul only did it, because the Lord did it first.

May we be so committed, so true, and so faithful, that nothing this side of death will stop us. Others need us. God is counting upon us. Where will the kingdom be, if we don't stay with it?

Roger Shouse
