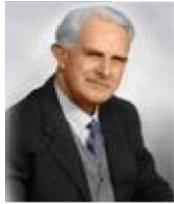


Captivity In The Lord and Prison - Vision - Provision

by T. Austin-Sparks



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Table of Contents

Captivity In The Lord

I. The instrument of the Lord's testimony in a place of limiting by the will of God.

II. The importance and value of seeing and accepting things into God's light.

I. The instrument of the Lord's testimony in a place of limiting by the will of God.

Prison - Vision - Provision

1. *Prison*: God only knows all the exercises of an eager heart when shut out and shut in by - *what seems to be* - the unkindness of men, or the overtaking of adversity!

2. *Vision*: And yet such times can be times of an 'open Heaven' and much spiritual enrichment

3. *Provision*: And the fruit may be life to many in a time of spiritual famine

Read: Ephesians 3:1, 4:1; 2 Timothy 2:9 & 1:8.

There is a very real sense in which the Apostle Paul, in his own person and experience, was an embodiment of the history of the Church in this age. Indeed it would seem to be a principle in the Divine economy that those to whom a revelation has been entrusted should themselves have it so wrought into their very being and history that they are able to say, "I am your sign." To take the one fragment which is now before us, the end of Paul's life saw a process of narrowing down and limitation working itself through by "a great falling away" on the one hand, and a closing up from the general to the specific in the case of which (him who) represented the testimony on the other. This is precisely what is foretold as to the conditions at "the end" and it is not a little significant that it is specially referred to in prophetic utterances to Timothy - in the end letter. So that this phrase "The Prisoner in the Lord" occurring as it does in the last writings, is prophetic in its meaning, and wonderfully explanatory of the end way of the sovereignty of the Lord.

What we have here, then is

I. The instrument of the Lord's testimony in a place of limiting by the will of God.

As we read the record of the incidents which led up to Paul's going to Rome as a prisoner, and especially when we read the words of Agrippa: "This man might have been set at liberty, if he had not appealed unto Caesar" we are not far from feeling that there were mistakes and accidents, but for which there might have been a much more propitious issue, and the ministry of the Apostle at large might have extended. There may have been times of stress when Paul himself was tempted to wonder if he had not been impulsive in that appeal to the Emperor. But as he went forward, and when the Lord spoke to him from time

to time giving light, it became clear that, however the thing might have been construed humanly, there was a sovereign government of God in it all, and that he was in prison not as the Emperor's prisoner, but as the prisoner of the Lord.

Perhaps Paul did not accept this all at once. Possibly he did not realise just how it would work out. A more or less quick trial and release may have been put to mind. Some hope of further ministry amongst beloved saints seems to be absent from his correspondence. (There probably was a short period of release from the first imprisonment.) At length, however, he fully accepted what was becoming increasingly clear as the Lord's way, and it grew upon him that this was in the greatest interest of the Body of Christ. Thus we see that when the time comes for the Lord's people to be brought face to face with the ultimate and supreme things of the revelation of Jesus Christ: things beyond personal salvation: things which relate to the mind of God from above being saved: then there has to be a narrowing down, a closing up, a limiting. Much activity that has been, and all quite right for bringing things to a certain position and state, now ceases to carry them further, and something more intensive is needed.

That which represents the testimony in its fullest and closest approximation to the ultimate purpose of God, then, has to be shorn of much that has been good, necessary, and of God in a preparatory way, and must be shut up to what is ultimate. The captivity is not to a conceived truth or a superimposed doctrinal acceptance. It is wrought into the very fiber of the being by experience following revelation, and revelation interpreting experience. It is not the championing of some espoused interpretation: it is that it is the very life of instruments and the instrument is that in its very being. It is not a matter of wanting to be or not wanting to be, but cannot be other, a prisoner, the sovereignty of God has done it.

II. The importance and value of seeing and accepting things into God's light.

This applied both to Paul and to those who were brought into touch with him. For the Apostle the settling in to the sovereign ordering of God in his imprisonment issued in increasing illumination leading to spiritual emancipation.

No one can fail to recognize the tremendous enrichment of ministry as contained in what are called "the Prison Epistles". If he had been restive, piqued, rebellious, or bitter, there would have been no open heaven, and a spirit of controversy with the Lord would have closed and bolted the door to the fuller Divine unveilings and clarifyings.

When all was accepted according to the mind of the Lord, then "the heavenly places" became the eternal expanses of his walking about, and earthly bondage gave place to heavenly freedom. So it must be with every instrument set apart in relation to the higher interests of the Lord's testimony. Then the reading of certain passages in his letters and the record of his imprisonment shows how this applied to others. Take the following:-

"Be not ashamed therefore of the testimony of the Lord, nor of me his prisoner" (2 Tim. 1:8). "And he abode two whole years in his own hired dwelling, and received all that went in unto him. ...teaching the things concerning the Lord Jesus" (Acts 28:30).

"The Lord grant mercy unto the house of Onesiphorus: for oft he refreshed me, and he was not ashamed of my chain; but, when he was in Rome, he sought me diligently, and found me" (2 Tim. 1:6).

Clearly the effect of these passages is that there had to be a Divine apprehension and not merely a human appraisal of Paul's position. Human levels of mentality would have produced an atmosphere of doubt, suspicion, question, and would have let in elements of false imputation. Regarded on merely natural lines, association with the prisoner would have involved such associates in the suspicion and prejudice. Doubt of the Lord's servant was very widespread, and even many of the Lord's people were not sure of him. But the

Lord was shutting up a very vital revelation to this channel, and for such as were really in spiritual need, and such as were to stand in a living relation to fullness of testimony from identification with Christ in death and resurrection, on to throne-union with Him, power over "Principalities, Powers" etc., and on to the ministry "in the ages to come", there had to be a putting aside of all human, personal, and diplomatic considerations and a standing right in there with the instrument where God put it in honorable imprisonment. For possession of which is to come through the vessel, there has to be a coming where the vessel is, without consideration for reputation, influence, or popularity.

In this way the Lord sifts His people and finds out who really is wholly for Himself and His testimony, and who is actuated in any measure by other considerations and interests. The instrument in this position of popular rejection is thus the Lord's means of searching, and it will thus meet their need.

The other truth remains here, then, is that

III. Shame, reproach and limitation are often God's ways of enriching the whole Body of Christ.

This has always been so. The measure of approximation to the fullness of the revelation has always been accompanied by a relative cost. Every instrument of the testimony has been laid under suspicion and reproach in a measure commensurate with the degree of value to the Lord, and this has meant that, humanly, they were limited to that extent. Many have withdrawn, fallen away, held aloof, doubted, feared, and questioned. But as Paul could say "my tribulations for you, which are your glory" (Eph. 3:13), or "The prisoner of Christ Jesus in behalf of you Gentiles" (Eph. 3:1), so the measure of limitation in the Lord is the measure of enrichment in His people. The fuller the revelation, the fewer are those who apprehend, or the greater the number of those who stand aloof. Revelation only comes through suffering and limitation, and to have it experimentally means sharing the cost in some way. But this is God's way of securing for Himself a spiritual seed plot.

A seed plot is an intensive thing. These things are narrowed down to very limited dimensions. It is not a great extensive show that is immediately in view, but things are all considered firstly in the light of seed. The real meaning of things is not always recognized there, but you can travel the world over and find a great many gardens which are the expression of that intensive and restricted seed plot. If ever there was such a seed plot it was Paul's prison in Rome.

All this may apply to individual lives in relation to the Lord's testimony. There may often be a chafing against limitation, confinement, and a restless hankering after what we would call something wider or less restricted. If the Lord has willed us to the place where we are, our acceptance of it in faith may prove that it becomes a far bigger thing than any human reckoning can judge. I wonder if Paul had any idea that his prison meant his continuous expansion of value to the Lord Jesus through nineteen hundred years? What applies to individuals also applies to corporate bodies, assemblies, or companies of the Lord's people scattered in the earth but one in their fellowship in relation to the Lord's full testimony. May the Lord be graciously pleased to cause the merely human aspect of prison walls to fall away, and give the realization that, far from being limited by men and circumstances, it is imprisonment in the Lord, and this means that all ages and all realms are entered through that prison.

Prison - Vision - Provision

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"And Joseph's master took him, and put him into the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were bound: and he was there in the prison" (Genesis 39:20).

"Then Pharaoh sent and called Joseph, and they brought him hastily out of the dungeon... and Pharaoh said unto Joseph, I have dreamed a dream... I have heard say of thee, that when thou hearest a dream thou canst interpret it. And Joseph answered Pharaoh, saying, It is not in me: God shall give Pharaoh an answer."

"And Pharaoh said unto his servants, Can we find such a one as this, a man in whom the spirit of God is?"

"And he [Joseph] gathered up all the food of the seven years... and Joseph laid up corn as the sand of the sea, very much..."

"And the famine was sore in the land" (Genesis 41:14-16,38,48,49,56).

"...desiring to gain favour with the Jews, Felix left Paul in bonds" (Acts 24:27).

"And when we entered into Rome, the centurion delivered the prisoners to the captain of the praetorian guard" (Acts 28:16, margin)

"The prisoner of Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 4:1).

"I John... was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus".

"And I heard... a great voice... saying, What thou seest, write in a book, and send it to the churches" (Revelation 1:9-11).

The passages quoted above are a summary of the lives and ministries of three of God's servants, the fruit of whose experience has meant life to the people of God in a very full way. But that way of God's sovereign choice is not peculiar to those three alone. It is the story of many more, both in Bible times and since. To the former we could add Jeremiah and Daniel, as outstanding cases.

There are many such records in the 'Book of Remembrance' of those whose hard way has meant - and is now meaning - bread for the spiritually hungry. The prison has not always been *literal* chains and incarceration. Sometimes it has been a sick room; sometimes the lonely isolation of a divinely-appointed place of service; sometimes the rejection and exclusion of a servant of God because of prejudice, blindness, jealousy, or spiritual smallness on the part of those who could so force him out. Of many it could - and can - be said: "for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus".

There are some features of such 'imprisonments' which it may be helpful to note. Inclusively, of course, we have to have our hearts at rest as to the certainty of the Divine government. Provided always that such a position is not due to a wayward, self-willed, or disobedient course on the part of the one concerned, and their situation is not due to anything akin to that of Jonah's predicament; although there may have been human weakness and mistakes, yet God is greater than all, and given a heart really true to Him, He can turn all things to serve His main end: "Who worketh *all things* after the counsel of his own will".

In difficult and seemingly impossible situations there will always be much room for reflection upon the faults and mistakes which *could* account for the trouble. 'If only' is a desolating reflection. 'If only Paul had not appealed to Caesar!' 'If only Joseph had told Potiphar what his wife had really done!' There is no end to this kind of reflection, and there are very few who, if they had their time over again, would not - they think - have done differently, and so have avoided a great deal of trouble. We are not referring to particular sins, but to 'mistakes'. The matter of the sins of the past goes without saying that we should - with our present light - not repeat. With so much of what we *now* look upon as mistaken,

we *then* acted according to the best light that we had. This provides a very large realm for sovereign grace, and sovereign grace is quite equal to the task.

The adversary of God and of our walk with Him will flog us hard with accusation to make us mistrust Him. There is thus a big realm which has to be definitely committed to the Father's understanding and mercy.

Having said that, we can look at some of these more comforting features of adversity.

1. God is never overtaken by an emergency, nor is He the victim of adverse activities. This fact is so evident in the above instances.

Joseph's classic verdict upon the whole soul-wracking experience was 'You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good', and then he gives the all-justifying reason - "God *meant it*". Paul and John would have heartily endorsed that verdict.

The very foreknowledge of God in choosing and calling His servants, whose hearts He cleanses from selfish and worldly ambitions, is involved in what befalls them in the way of their devotion to Him. Even Job, than whom no one ever had a more bewildering history, could say: "He knoweth the way that I take".

Not even in the greatest and most terrible of man's defaultings, and Satan's seeming triumph - the "Fall" - was God unprepared and unprovided with His way through. The answer was with Him before the demand was actually existing - "The Lamb [was] ...slain from the foundation [the laying down] of the world". God's end justified His permission. Grace and glory will vastly transcend the suffering and the sorrow. With God there are no unforeseen accidents. "He is Lord of *all*".

2. While the servant in question is going through the dark, cold, and desolate ordeal of the 'prison', he does not know what it all means. At *best* and *most* he knows that the Lord is God. All the appearances are of being cut off, shut up or in; being forgotten; having suffered through the treachery, disloyalty, cruelty, or fickleness of men - even of brethren; or the vicious spite of evil powers, human and satanic. The iron can eat into the soul, as it did with Joseph. The battle against bitterness of spirit, disappointment, depression and despair may be fierce. Joseph had no knowledge of the coming fourteen years of vindication, the fruit of his sufferings. Disillusionment was a cruel foe, for *present* experience gave useful ground for the mocking evil spirits to make fun of his early dreams of honour.

Paul and John never imagined that for two thousand years people would read with immense profit and gain that which came from their prisons. They knew nothing of making spiritual history for the duration of time and eternity. But so it was.

3. The major factor in these imprisonments and apparent limitations was that the fruit was for a time yet to come. Pharaoh's dreams and Joseph's interpretation related to a time not yet come and which had to be prepared for in sheer faith. God knows what is coming, and He Himself prepares and provides for a situation beyond the present. In the deep dark night of adversity, God may be doing something, securing something which will "save much people alive". In our own time, because of the poverty and shallowness of contemporary resources, there is a reverting to and reproducing of the deeper, stronger, and more heart-satisfying ministry of those times when it cost deeply to be "obedient to the heavenly vision".

The writer included among his personal friends a servant of God whose name is known worldwide for his Bible-teaching ministry. That dear man was formerly the minister of a certain church. There came a time when the responsible people in that church decided upon adopting policies and procedures which he believed to be quite contrary to spiritual principles. The minister withstood this on Scriptural grounds. He was forced to leave the

church, and because 'this thing was not done in a corner', it was taken up by the secular and religious press, mostly to his condemnation. For several years no church or people would have anything to do with him. He was ostracised, excluded, isolated, and confined to his own home, coming down - with his wife - to their last two shillings and sixpence. But, said he to me, 'It was in those years of imprisonment that I was able to give myself so thoroughly to my Bible as to lay the ground for the many subsequent years of worldwide Bible teaching!' There was no church, however important, and no convention, however large, that would not welcome him (if they were faithful to the Bible), and the university of the city of his later ministry honoured him with a doctorate of divinity.

Not all - *in their lifetime* - are given their vindication, but the principle holds good that, in times of adversity, God prepares and provides for a time to come.

So, Israel was preserved for the subsequent centuries, in spite of the brothers' treachery; because Joseph went to prison and there proved his God.

So we have the infinite treasures of Paul's prison ministry in his letters. So we have the priceless wealth of John's Patmos visions and writings. For these latter there was nothing that they could do but to write; and the writing - though they did not know it - was to be the food of saints for many generations to come.

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Vision. And yet such times can be times of an 'open Heaven' and much spiritual enrichment.

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