

'HAVING RECEIVED THE WORD IN MUCH TRIBULATION'

SERIES: PAUL, AN INSTRUMENT OF THE RISEN CHRIST

by Ron Ritchie

I will read from an article in *Prison Bulletin*, a publication committed to "represent, defend, and aid Evangelical Christian Baptists in the Soviet Union." The article is by a Baptist minister, Peter Peters, who is currently serving his fifth term of imprisonment for preaching the gospel in Russia. Here is what the opening paragraph says:

Suffering for Christ's sake should not be viewed as something unexpected and unfortunate. On the contrary, suffering is essential to a truly godly life (2 Tim.3:12). The world offers a multitude of broad paths which require no suffering, and many Christians, seduced by the freedom offered to the flesh, turn aside to easier paths. And yet, other Christians refuse to compromise and find themselves behind prison bars.

In many countries throughout the world, men and women who have dedicated their lives in the service of Jesus Christ face all kinds of persecution for their faith. By contrast, we who live in the United States are free to talk about our faith and free to congregate together and worship. It is hard for us to imagine any other kind of life, especially a restricted lifestyle. Yet we also must aware that many of the religious freedoms which we now enjoy are being challenged in the courts of this country. And it is almost certain that new challenges will be made in the days and years ahead. Our Lord, of course, wants us to use the freedoms we have to his honor and glory. We must not use them selfishly, thinking only of ourselves and what makes us happy. Let us instead be thankful to God for his good gifts and be willing to share with others who are not as blessed as we.

In spite of the fact that we have a large measure of religious freedom in this country, however, some among us are facing political persecution for their faith. At this moment, Peter Peters is sitting in a jail somewhere in the Soviet Union, but at this moment also the Jews for Jesus movement here in the United States is suffering persecution. Although the Supreme Court voted 9-0 to allow that group to pass out their literature at airports throughout this country, some of their members were arrested for doing so at a ball game recently. One, a young secretary, suffered severe neck injuries during her arrest. These events, together with other warning signs, should make us diligent to speak out and share the gospel while we yet have time. We should never forget that God is in the business of redeeming a people from among every nation on earth; and that you and I as Christians are privileged to be included in that work. But let us not forget either that suffering is part and parcel of that job description.

Suffering was a given in the apostle Paul's experience during the days of his ministry. As we have been discovering in this series on the apostle's life, his story is really a study of the life of the risen Christ in and through Paul, his "chosen instrument," as Jesus declared in the book of Acts, "to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel and to suffer much for My name's sake" (Acts 9:15). We have been looking at the apostle's second missionary journey. In 51 A.D., Paul, together with Silas, Timothy and Luke, had established a beach-head for the gospel in Europe, in the city in Philippi, in Macedonia. This was quite a painful ministry--and very much an unplanned one--for the missionary team, especially for Paul and Silas. The two men were arrested following Paul's casting out of a demon from a slave girl who was used of her masters to foretell the future. As Paul and Silas lay in a dungeon, an earthquake destroyed the prison. The jailer and his family came to faith as a result, and they joined together with Lydia and her household to form the first home church on the European continent. Luke would remain on to shepherd the young church, while Paul and his companions headed south on the Egnatian Way to the city of Thessalonica, 100 miles away. There they would share the same two experiences which they had shared throughout their second missionary journey...

I. Joy and tribulation in Thessalonica, Acts 17:1-9

Now when they had traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ." And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a great multitude of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women. But the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; and coming upon the house of Jason, they were seeking to bring them out to the people. And when they did not find them, they began dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities, shouting, "These men who have upset the whole world have come here also; and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus." And they stirred up the crowd and the city authorities who heard these things. And when they had received a pledge from Jason and the others, they released them.

Thessalonica in those days was known as "the lap of the Roman Empire." It was a trading city of which it was said, "as long as nature did not change [a reference to the fact that the city was located in earthquake country] Thessalonica would remain wealthy and prosperous." The city, which was founded in 315 B.C., was named in honor of Philip II's daughter, Thessalonica. It was declared a free city by the Emperor Augustus in 42 B.C. and given the privilege of self rule. Thessalonica was populated by Greeks, Roman citizens, Jews and Orientals. Notice that the Jewish religious influence was having an effect among the population; Paul found many "God-fearing Greeks" among the citizenry.

On his arrival in Thessalonica, Paul began to do two things. First, he sought to earn his living by working at his trade of tent-making. We learn this from the apostle's first letter to the Thessalonians, where he says, "For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you..." (1 Thess.2:9). Paul was careful to support himself because there were many traveling philosophers, who had a reputation for selfishness, making the rounds in that first century day. The apostle did not want to be included among that group.

The second thing which Paul did was to look for opportunities to proclaim the gospel. We note that this was his practice wherever he went. In Damascus, Jerusalem, Pisidian Antioch, Lystra and Philippi, his pattern of ministry was to first seek to establish a hearing with the Jews and then turn to the Gentiles. Paul first sought out the Jews because of his deep love for his own people, a love that finds no better expression than his own word in Romans 9, "I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh" (9:1-3). Paul had such a love for the Jews that, if it were possible, he was willing to be condemned to hell if they could go to heaven. So, according to his custom, Paul "for three Sabbaths reasoned with them [the Jews] from the scriptures."

The apostle's approach to his Jewish and God-fearing Gentile audiences was three-fold: he would teach on the Old Testament prophecies that dealt with the characteristics of the Messiah; then he would explain the scripture in context; and then give evidence that the Christ had to suffer death and be raised from the dead.

Paul's first contention, that the Christ had to suffer, was the very argument of the Lord himself to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus: "O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory? And beginning with Moses and all the prophets He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the scriptures" (Luke 24:25-27). Paul appealed to several of the Old Testament prophets to back up his claim that the Messiah would have to suffer. This was one of the ways by which he could be identified. Paul may very well have looked to Isaiah's prophecy,

He was despised and forsaken of men,
A man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief;
And like one from whom men hide their face,

He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.
Surely our griefs He Himself bore,
And our sorrows He carried...

But he was pierced through for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities;
The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him,
And by His scourging we are healed...
But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all
To fall on Him.
(Isaiah 53)

But the Jews found it difficult to accept that their Messiah would have to suffer and die. Furthermore, they found it impossible to believe that he would suffer death by hanging on a tree, for the Old Testament taught, in Deuteronomy 22, that all who hang on a tree are under the curse of God.

But then Paul would go on to teach that the Christ had to rise again from the dead. This was the key to the apostle's message. It is the key to Christianity itself. The apostle may have made reference to the book of Psalms to underscore his point that Messiah would rise from the dead. Psalm 16:10,11 says,

For Thou wilt not abandon my soul to Sheol;
Neither wilt Thou allow Thy Holy One to see the pit.
Thou wilt make known to me the path of life.

Paul may have quoted Psalm 30:3,

O Lord, Thou hast brought up my soul from Sheol;
Thou hast kept me alive, that I should not go down to the pit.
Jesus himself said to his disciples following his resurrection,

"Thus it is written that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations" (Luke 24:44-47)

Thus Paul would explain to the Jews in the synagogue at Thessalonica the twin truths set out in the Old Testament: that the Messiah would have to suffer and die, and that he would be raised from the dead.

And thirdly, having identified the characteristics of the Messiah according to the Old Testament, Paul would then identify Jesus, whom he had been proclaiming, as the Christ. Jesus is the Anointed one of God; he is the Ideal and Righteous King of Isaiah 55; the True Shepherd of Jeremiah 23; the Prophet of Deuteronomy 18; the Priest of Psalm 110; the Judge of Isaiah 33; the Lord of Psalm 110; the Prince of Peace of Isaiah 9; the Son of Man of Daniel 7; the Son of God of Psalm 2; the Savior of Isaiah 43. Referring to this Jesus, Peter declared some 20 years earlier in the presence of the Jewish Supreme Court in Jerusalem, "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

As he preached in the synagogue at Thessalonica for three Sabbaths, Paul would declare to the Jews that there was no salvation in Judaism, nor was salvation possible by means of the Roman philosophy, nor in the two thousand mystery religions prevalent in that day. Salvation was to be found only in Jesus Christ, the Messiah of God whom the Jews had rejected while he was on earth. To these religions and philosophies, we today could add that there is no salvation in the New Age movement, in the Human Potential movement, in Hinduism, Mormonism, Buddhism, Islam, Spiritualism, Christian Science, Unity, or Eastern mysticism. "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by

which we must be saved."

The San Francisco Chronicle published an article recently entitled, "AIDS Launches a Spiritual Journey," the story of a 54-year-old gay man who had contracted AIDS. Here is part of what this man said,

I had been receiving counsel to stabilize my emotional state, even though I felt I was stable without help. To my surprise I found, upon reflection, that my inner needs were spiritual or metaphysical. [My friends] suggested I read several books, including one by Louise L. Hay, a metaphysical healer who had been working successfully with cancer and AIDS patients...I acquired several of her tapes and purchased other meditation tapes...and played them several times a day. Slowly I began to understand that my future was in my own hands...it's strange when you consider that, as a futurist, I had told my clients, "If you can dream it, you can do it." I began to believe I could play a major role in healing myself.

The article went on to say, however, that the man was becoming weaker and needed to depend more and more on others. There is no salvation in metaphysical tapes and books. Only in Jesus the Christ is salvation to be found.

The result of the apostle's teaching in the synagogue over three Sabbaths was three-fold. First, "some of [the Jews] were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas..." The word "joined" conveys the idea that they threw their lot in with Paul and Silas; they were assigned by lot by the Holy Spirit, given by God's grace to the missionaries. And secondly, joining the believing Jews, "...a great number of God-fearing Greeks." The Greeks did not have as much to lose by forsaking the Jewish society; they were more open to the truth as presented by Paul. The apostle would later write to the Thessalonians, "You turned to God from idols and served a living and true God" (1 Thess.1:9). And the third group who believed were "a number of the leading women." The women of northern Greece, whether Jew or Gentile, were held in high esteem and given great respect and position in the social, civil and religious affairs of the cities of Philippi and Thessalonica. As they listened to Paul and Silas explain the Old Testament prophecies concerning Jesus the Messiah, the hearts of these women were opened to the Lord.

What was the reaction of the Jewish leaders to this teaching by Paul which had attracted these three groups to come to faith in Christ? We have their predictable response in verse 5: "But the Jews, becoming jealous..." It seems every time Paul finished his teaching in a synagogue, the next verse opens with the words, "But the Jews..." You could hardly be blamed for thinking that Satan had written a script which was mailed to every synagogue in anticipation of Paul's message. The script may have gone like this: "If the apostle Paul comes to your synagogue, do the following: (1) Listen carefully; if Paul declares a certain Jesus to be Messiah, King, Savior and Lord (2) fill your hearts with jealousy; (3) gather some wicked men from the marketplace; (4) form a mob from the wharf rats and bench warmers; (5) set the city in an uproar; (6) formulate an emotional, political or social charge rather than a religious one; (7) disturb the peace of your city so that the local authorities must be called in." That is just about what happened every time the apostle spoke in a synagogue in the cities he visited.

So the Jews in Thessalonica began to persecute the missionaries, but they did it in such a way that the local authorities would see it as a political, rather than a religious issue. The charge they really wanted to lay against the disciples, of course, was blasphemy; that is what they were charging Paul and Silas with. Deuteronomy 22 made clear that Messiah could not possibly be hung on a tree; but that was an internal Jewish affair, thus the local Roman authorities would have no reason for stoning these men. That is why the Jews came up with two new counts against Paul and his companions.

Their first charge was, "These men who have upset the whole world have come here also." What a reputation the disciples had developed! They had "upset the whole world!" Wouldn't you love to have that said of you? My problem is that no matter which town I enter, nobody even notices! I buy a newspaper and nobody looks twice at me. I get in a taxi only to hear, just like everybody else who takes a taxi, "Where to?" Once when I was in Athens, a taxi driver said to me, "Do you want a prostitute?" I said, "No, I'm married." "What does that have to do with anything?" he asked. "I'm in love with my wife," I said. "Yes, but she's in the United States," he replied. "I know," I said, "but God is living in my heart whether I'm in Athens or in California." That was the biggest ripple I ever made in my travels. But Paul and Silas, Luke and Timothy were accused of "upsetting the whole world."

The problem was, people thought that the world was doing fine but that these men were turning it upside-down. The world from God's point of view, however, was upside-down in sin; what the disciples were doing was bringing it right-side-up again. But these men and women who wanted to lives pleasing to God appeared to the Jews to be upsetting pagan society. The word that was whispered to the local authorities therefore was, "These men who have upset the whole world have now arrived here and they already have a follower, Jason, who is harboring them." This was the political charge which the Jews brought against the disciples; but actually the charge they really had against them, as we have pointed out, was that they had blasphemed God by proclaiming that Jesus was the Messiah.

These charges by the Jews must be set in the context of the widespread unrest in the Jewish communities throughout the Roman Empire of that day. Jewish freedom fighters were particularly active in Judea and Israel during the reign of Claudius (45-54 A.D.). A militant Messianism was working like a ferment among the Jews of the Dispersion, and the custodians of law and order in the imperial provinces and cities were not likely to draw a distinction between it and the Messianism of Paul. In Rome itself there had been trouble of this kind already, so much so that Claudius had expelled the Jewish community from the city (Acts 18:2). Thus when viewed in this light the charges made by the Jews could be construed to have a grain of truth in them.

The second charge made by the Jews was much more serious, however. Paul and his companions, they charged, acted "contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus." The Jews in this instance were doing what the Jews had done before Pilate (John 19:15): they were renouncing their hope for a Messianic King. To the Jews, Claudius was king. Declaring that there was another king was treason, they charged. When Pilate asked Jesus if he were indeed king of the Jews, our Lord replied that he was King over a spiritual kingdom, come to bring redemption to a world that was upside-down.

But the authorities to whom this charge was brought by the Jews had no way of disproving the charges of treason against Paul and Silas since they were not present. Thus the charge as it stood was based on a false witness. We have the outcome in verse 9: "And when they had received a pledge from Jason and the others, they released them." Jason and the other new Christians were dragged to the court by the mob and placed under a lot of pressure. A judgement was made and a bond was paid by Jason, together with a promise that he would find Paul, Silas and Timothy and tell them they had to leave Thessalonica immediately. In order to protect the new believers in the city, Paul agreed with the solution which had been worked out, and he and the others accordingly left Thessalonica.

We have the results of that three-week ministry of Paul, Silas and Timothy set out in the two letters of Paul to the Thessalonians. They were examples to all the believers in Greece "because of your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in the Lord." They were "imitators of the Lord"; they had "suffered for the gospel"; they had been "taught by God to love one another"; their "faith is greatly enlarged"; they had "perseverance and faith in the midst of all their persecutions and afflictions." The Thessalonians had received the word of God in much tribulation but with the joy of the Holy Spirit. Much of that tension would remain, but the church would grow and be an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.

So Paul and Silas take to the road again, on their way to a new adventure in a new city. They leave behind Timothy to shepherd the new church, while they go on to more,

II. Joy and tribulation in Berea, Acts 17:10-15

And the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea; and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily, to see whether these things were so. Many of them therefore believed, along with a number of prominent Greek women and men. But when the Jews of Thessalonica found out that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Berea also, they came there likewise, agitating and stirring up the crowds. And then immediately the brethren sent Paul out to go as far as the sea; and Silas and Timothy remained there. Now those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to

him as soon as possible, they departed.

Paul and Silas find a different kind of listener when they enter the synagogue in the city of Berea, some 60 miles south of Thessalonica. There the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles, we read, were "more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness." In contrast to the Thessalonians, who may have made an emotional response to the word which Paul preached, the Bereans had more of an intellectual response. As they listened to Paul and Silas share the Old Testament prophecies of Jesus as Messiah, the Bereans "examined the Scriptures daily, to see whether these things were so." They sifted what they were hearing, making careful and exact research, just as in a legal process. They were very much interested in the new message being taught by Paul and Silas but they wanted to check it out for themselves. The result was that "many of them therefore believed, along with a number of prominent Greek women and men."

I fully believe the Word of God, but at times when I share it I don't see any immediate results. As I read it, it almost sounds foolish to me. I sometimes ask myself, "How can this possibly result in someone's salvation?" But at times I will later hear that the person to whom I read the Scripture later came to faith in Jesus Christ. Just last week a young woman told me she had come to Christ after listening to one of my tapes of the New Covenant. She was ready to receive the Lord because the Spirit of God was already working in her heart. In the same way, many of the Bereans, having already been prepared by the Holy Spirit, came to faith in Jesus as the Messiah through the teaching of Paul and Silas.

"But when the Jews..." Once again we find these words, this time in verse 13 of our text.

Apparently some Berean businessmen went up to Thessalonica and came in contact with the Jewish leaders there. The Bereans shared with them what had happened when Paul and Silas came into their city, how the people responded to the good news which the missionaries had preached, etc. Emboldened by their success in getting rid of the disciples in Thessalonica, the Jews immediately headed for Berea. Upon their arrival there they used the same plan that had worked so successfully in Thessalonica--avoiding direct confrontation with the apostle and instead stirring up the crowd. In all likelihood they accused the disciples of the same charge of treason--"acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus. But they were too late. Once again a new group of believers had been established in the city. Very soon they would establish a home church and appoint elders. Then they would begin to minister, by the power of the Holy Spirit, in their community.

So by now churches had been established in Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea. The gospel had gained a foothold in three different cities in Greece.

Paul once more takes to the road. The new Christians in Berea escorted him to a ship bound for Athens; while Timothy and Silas remained on for a time in Berea to shepherd the new church. At Paul's request, they joined him as soon as they were able.

I will conclude by reading the closing paragraph from the article by Peter Peters from which I quoted earlier:

More than conquerors! Let us thank the Lord for the thorny path along which He is leading His people in Russia. The path that we and our suffering brothers tread passes through amazing places where we find the streams of God's blessing. Wherever we are led by His protecting hand, we find ourselves surrounded by His love...For He alone is the help of his people in all generations, and He enables us to walk in faith through the valley of the shadow of death. Not even the bravest and staunchest and most patient man could ever in his own strength endure the horrors of persecution with joy and hope, blessing those who curse him. "In all these things, we are more than conquerors," says Paul, but not in our own strength, only "through Him who loved us" (Rom.8:37). In our Lord is found an inexhaustible fountain of inspiration and courage, from which His persecuted people draw strength. Praise God for everything!

We are not living in Russia, Philippi, Thessalonica, or in Berea. Yet in this Age of the Spirit we have the same commission, as Jesus directed, "to be witnesses of Me." Tell people about the good news of God's plan of redemption for man. Speak, live and be motivated by the Spirit of God. "Your life is no longer your own..." It is no longer our hopes and dreams that count, but God's plan of redemption. Let us live in our communities, in our businesses and our families, aware that God wants to speak through us so that many may come to know him as Lord and Savior. But know also that we will suffer tribulation even amidst the joy we experience in sharing his Word. One member of our family may come to faith and the rest of them may turn against us. I am disturbed that I am not turning the world upside-down or right-side-up, that I am not doing this in my world--my neighborhood, my local restaurant, my local gas station. I have to look at my life and see what is wrong. God did not send me to Thessalonica. He has placed me here. I want to be available. Don't you want to see others come to Christ? Realize, however, that your joy in doing this will be mixed with tribulation sent by our enemy Satan.

Paul would later write to the Thessalonians, "You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the Word in much affliction, with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit; so that you became examples to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia." May the same sentiments be written of us in our generation.

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