

## Chapter 20 **REMAINING FAITHFUL TO THE END Acts 28:11- 31**

No-one could ever accuse Paul of being a quitter. Right at the very beginning of his Christian life he was shown by God the privilege and the price of his calling. God promised "Go, this man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." Acts 9:15, 16. Paul did not need too much instruction and he knew what he himself had meted out to Christians during his own persecution excursions. He was aware too, that God had warned him of the difficulties. When he gave testimony to King Agrippa in Caesarea he recalled the Lord's words to him at his conversion: "I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me", Acts 26:17 and 18. Paul knew that a person only needed rescuing if he was in deep trouble and he also knew that Satan would never let people go from his awful power without a struggle.

Paul lists some of his own struggles and hardships in 2 Corinthians 11:23-29. In the following chapter he makes an astounding claim. "That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties, for when I am weak, then I am strong", 2 Corinthians 12:10. He knew that only God's power could bring anyone through severe trouble and, therefore, when he was in deep trouble, God's power would surge into and through the situation.

In the Acts narrative Paul had many reasons to resign, many opportunities to opt out and many excuses for taking an easier lifestyle. He was to have a plot on his life in Damascus a few weeks after his conversion and he ended up being smuggled out of the city one night in a basket over the wall, Acts 9:23-25. The disciples in Jerusalem initially closed their doors to him, Acts 9:26. They took him to be an undercover agent. In Jerusalem he had another attempt to kill him, Acts 9:29, but was whisked away to the safety of his home town. In Antioch in Pisidia the jealous Jews were abusive to Paul and they aroused persecution that led to his expulsion from the region, Acts 13:45, 50. In Iconium the man of God again encountered venomous language and an attempt to cause him grievous bodily harm if it wasn't murder, Acts 14 verses 2 and 5. A different difficulty arose in Lystra when followers tried to deify Paul and Barnabas, Acts 14:12. The enemy knows that if he cannot defeat us by knocking us down he may succeed by inflating our egos. This fickle crowd soon felt betrayed and were easily swayed by the trouble-makers who now followed Paul from place to place. In Lystra he was stoned and left for dead, Acts 14:19, but God had not finished with him yet. In Acts 15:1 and 2 Paul is confronted by accepted teachers undermining the true gospel with error. After he had gone to a town, they would visit it too adding to his teaching. I'm sure Paul must have said "What is the point in me doing what I'm doing?" By Acts 15:39 it was the wrenching apart of his working partnership with Barnabas that would have dragged him down. When you intensely disagree with someone close to you, whom you respect and owe a great deal to, it also brings real doubts into your mind over whether you have strayed from God's will in your own life.

In Philippi Paul was arrested and imprisoned simply because he rebuked an evil spirit who was, in fact, speaking the truth! The owners of the slave girl, who made their living from her fortune-telling, wrongfully accused him of "advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practise", Acts 16:21. The undaunted spirits of Paul and Silas were still praising God at midnight, in the darkest cell with their feet in stocks in the Philippian lock-up. Even when exonerated and released they were asked to leave the city. In Thessalonica a mob of bad characters were attempting to find and lynch Paul, Acts 17:5, and the team were similarly disrupted in ministry at Berea a few days later, Acts 17:13. In Athens there was some positive response to his preaching while others called him a babbler and poured scorn on him and his message, Acts 17:18, 32-34. The abusive opposition from some Jews in Corinth got to Paul while he was still feeling a bit low, Acts 18:6. God graciously gave him a tonic just when he needed it. The ruler of the synagogue, Crispus, and his entire family became believers and, in addition, God gave a vision to Paul telling him six things which kept him going at this point in his life:

1. He had no real need to fear, even if there were apparent reasons.
2. He should keep preaching, teaching, debating, proving Jesus is the Christ.
3. He should not be silent, even if people said he should be.
4. God was with him, and nothing others could do would take God away!
5. No attacks on him would succeed.
6. God was working in Corinth drawing many people into a saving relationship with Himself, Acts 18:9, 10.

Whenever we feel that the going is becoming too hard, the obstacles too big, the opposition too intense, the disappointments too painful, **spend a night alone with God**. He is always in control. He can and He will reconfirm your calling and give you the encouragement to keep on keeping on.

A theological attack did come on Paul at Corinth. "This man", they charged, "is persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law", Acts 18:13, but it was soon dismissed. At Ephesus Paul's troubles began with the, by now, usual rejection at the synagogue, Acts 19:9. The public maligning of the Way (the Christian movement) eventually led to public riots, Acts 19:23, and Paul was once again the centre of attention. "And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that man-made gods are no gods at all", Acts 19:26. In Greece he had to alter a planned boat ride to Syria because of a plot by the Jews, Acts 20:3, but God used that unexpected change of direction for visits to Philippi, Troas and Miletus during which the dead were raised and the apprehensive Ephesian elders encouraged.

In Tyre well-meaning believers attempted to stop Paul going on to Jerusalem although he knew it was what he had to do, Acts 21:4. He did not draw the same conclusion they did, nor from Agabus' prophecy in Caesarea, Acts 21:11,12. Because great difficulty, imprisonment and suffering was prophesied, Paul's friends (including Luke, Acts 21:12 "we") tried to divert him from going on to Jerusalem. His reply to the assembly shows that stubborn obstinacy can sometimes be a gift from God! "Then Paul answered 'Why are

you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus", Acts 21:13.

Once in Jerusalem it only took a week for the Jews to make false accusations about defiling the temple area and once again Paul was the subject of an angry mob's wrath. It was not an isolated pocket of trouble either! "While they were trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city of Jerusalem was in an uproar", Acts 21:31. I sometimes smile when I read Paul telling the Thessalonians to make it their ambition to live a quiet life, 1 Thessalonians 4:11. He may have aimed at it himself, but he certainly did not achieve it! I am sure that even many of his enemies gave him their respect however. Paul had beatings to his body, to his mind, to his dreams, to his friends, but he never gave up. On this occasion he ran the gauntlet of a murderous mob but God gave him the protection of the Roman guard! At the end of a permitted testimony to this mob from the steps of the barracks Paul suffered public and malicious threats to his life, Acts 22:22. He spent the night under guard before going to appear before the Jewish ruling court, the Sanhedrin, the following day. There "the dispute became so violent that the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them. He ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force and bring him into the barracks, Acts 23:10. Out of the frying pan into the fire. More than forty men vowed together to kill Paul before they would ever eat again, Acts 23:12. They were going to ambush him on his way to the Sanhedrin next day, but Paul's nephew is used by God to bring protection. Four hundred and seventy Roman military men ensured his safe arrival in Caesarea!

More charges were laid against him by the Jews before Governor Felix, Acts chapter 24, Governor Festus, Acts 25, King Agrippa and Queen Bernice, Acts 25 and 26, and Paul is sped on his way to Rome as he had appealed to be tried before Caesar, Acts 25:11. Even the journey to Rome was not without event. Paul was always able to recall the Lord's word to him in the Jerusalem barracks, Acts 23:11, "The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, 'Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome'". He knew God would see him safely to the capital of the Empire. That helped him when dangerous decisions were made to sail on in bad weather, Acts 27:11, to run the ship aground in a storm, Acts 27:39 and to kill all the prisoners to prevent any escape, Acts 27:42. A snake tangled with Paul when they were building a fire on Malta, Acts 28:3, and although the islanders attributed his ongoing life to him being a god Paul knew that it was simply the Living God carrying out His word in order to keep His promises.

So Paul arrived at his final destination. Two verses from Acts 28 epitomise the old warrior Paul battling on for the Lord even in his last days. Verse 23 describes him explaining, declaring and trying to convince any who would come to his house arrest that Jesus was the Christ, the long awaited Saviour. He used every day with every person God sent to him, and every part of the day too. No-one was turned away, verse 30. Verse 31 reads "Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ". A two year mission in the heart of the known world. Those words "without hindrance" speak to us. Paul had no control over the Roman authorities or the Jewish accusers and the ways they might hinder him. In

fact, several of Caesar's household became believers as God used him there, Philippians 4:22. But Paul did control his own feelings. Self-pity, "See what a mess I'm in", would be a hindrance, as would self-satisfaction, "I've done my part". Resentment towards his enemies would have simply put bitterness into his big heart, and he could tell anyway that God was using all these circumstances to work out His Divine plan.

I would love to be able to write like Paul did about his own death and the value of his life's work.

"For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day - and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing",  
2 Timothy 4:6-8.

Wherever you are now, whatever God is calling you to, will you remain faithful to Him to the end?

### Discussion questions

\* *"Problems develop character".*

*Would Paul have developed so far as a Christian without trials?*

*What does this teach us?*

\* *Paul said the church was destined to attain "to the whole measure of the fulness of Christ".*

*How far have you and your fellowship reached?*