

Commitment to Christ

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What a week! For those of us who have just experienced the fury of hurricane Fran it is instructive to remember the apostle Paul's life of commitment in the face of adversity - not only from natural disasters whose hardships are common to all, but especially from persecution for his life-long commitment to Christ. In Acts 26 we read the dramatic description Paul gave to King Agrippa of his Damascus road conversion.

About noon, O king, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads. Then I asked, "Who are you Lord?" "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 26:13-15).

There is a "light from heaven, brighter than the sun" and a heavenly voice. To what office was Paul being called in such spectacular fashion? Bishop? Chairman of the Board? Pope?

"Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you. 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: 15-18).

Here Paul is receiving his job description as an apostle of Jesus Christ. Did he suspect what was in store for him? Perhaps there is a hint in the phrase "I will rescue you from ..." Look at II Corinthians:

Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, in hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard

work, sleepless nights and hunger; in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything (II Cor. 6: 4-10).

Would Paul have accepted his calling if he had known what price he would have to pay? God asks each of us to make an absolute commitment to Him, even though none of us knows what trials await us in this life. There is no turning back for the true believer in Christ. Look again at Paul's example:

Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this). I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles, in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea, and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn? (II Corinthians 11: 23-29)

Wait a minute! Didn't God love Paul? Wasn't Paul working for the Lord? Why did God permit all these catastrophes, any one of which might shake the faith of one of us? It doesn't seem *fair*. As mature believers, we must abandon the romantic notion that

this life is somehow fair. We don't see Paul complaining to God about how he is being taken care of. How did Paul view his own life's experiences?

"I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus" (I Tim. 1:12).

What a fantastic attitude! Recall the mind numbing list of terrors and tortures which Paul endured in the service of the Lord! Here he speaks of being strengthened by the Lord. In Philippians 2:5-8, Paul writes of Jesus as having "made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness, and being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross". The Lord who called Paul had himself demonstrated the life of a servant. Endurance is an important quality for the believer to cultivate. Jesus cultivated endurance (Heb. 12:1,2). So did Paul, and he also exhorted Timothy to do the same (I Tim. 1:18,19; 6:11,12; II Tim. 2:3,4; 4:5-8).

How could Jesus face the shame and pain of the cross? How could Paul say "the grace of the Lord was poured out on me abundantly" as he bounced

from perils and pressures to prison and from sleepless nights and shipwreck to stoning? Jesus did it for the "joy that was set before him". He trusted his life to God who "exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name" (Phil. 2:9). Paul also saw a future destiny for himself and all believers beyond the troubles of this life.

"Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (II Cor. 4:16-18).

Here is Paul's great secret to commitment and endurance, which he undoubtedly learned from Jesus. Seen through human eyes, the events of his life hardly seem "light" or "momentary". All of our life experiences, positive or negative, fair or unfair, pleasurable or painful, must be seen in the light of the eternal, unseen realities. Our hope, the "eternal glory" for which our Father and His Son Jesus Christ have prepared us, makes a life of self sacrificing service possible. When we realize that "no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him - but God has revealed it to us by his spirit" (I Cor. 2:9,10), the only conceivable response is to commit ourselves unreservedly to serving Him.