

Old Soldiers Never Die

In his April 19, 1951 farewell address to the joint session of the United States Congress, General Douglas MacArthur said, "... but I still remember the refrain of one of the most popular barrack ballads of that day which proclaimed most proudly that 'old soldiers never die; they just fade away.' And like the old soldier of that ballad, I now close my military career and just fade away, an old soldier who tried to do his duty as God gave him the light to see that duty. Good-bye."

As we now approach Paul's martyrdom, we see the old soldier of the cross soon to exit this world having written 14 books of the New Testament (I include Hebrews) and now coming to the final chapter of his life. We cannot say, however, that Paul, God's great soldier faded away. He is talked about, preached about and read after in this twenty-first century far more than he ever was in the first century of Christianity. These words of Daniel 12:3 could most definitely be said of Paul: "And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever." Paul's star has never dimmed or faded in over two millennia.

Clement, pastoring in Rome within the first century wrote, "After he had been seven times in chains, had been driven into exile, had been stoned, and had preached in the east and in the west, he won the genuine glory for his faith, having taught righteousness to the whole world and having reached the farthest limits of the west. Finally, when he had given his testimony before the rulers, he thus departed from the world and went to the holy place, having become an outstanding example of patient endurance."

On July 18, 64 AD, Rome was burned. History leans heavily toward Nero as the arson by proxy. It is believed shortly afterwards Nero blamed the fire on the Christians. The results were that Christian martyrdom escalated to its highest level to date. And now Paul begins to worship with his brothers and sisters in Christ in the catacombs. In more than one catacomb there is the likeness of Paul carved into the walls, as if to verify that Paul was there. These are the famous words of Tacitus, then a child of ten and writing fifty years later: "A vast multitude were not only put to death with insult, in that they were either dressed up in the skins of beasts to perish by the worrying of dogs, or else put on crosses to be set on fire, and when the daylight failed, to be burned for use as lights by night. Nero had thrown open his gardens for that spectacle, and was giving a circus exhibition, mingling with the people in a jockey's dress, or driving in a chariot." Seneca wrote of this time, "In the midst of the flame and the rack, I have seen men not only not groan, that is a little: not only not complain, that is a little: not only not answer back, that too is little; but I have seen them smile, and smile with a good heart."

Paul was arrested after his temporary freedom from his first imprisonment and now stands in his final opportunity to defend the glorious Gospel of Christ. Now as the one chief proponent of the sect of the Nazarenes, i.e., the Christians, Paul stands before Nero and the senators and speaks without shame (Romans 1:16), "...contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, one Jesus" (Acts 17:7b)." And not only does he speak of Jesus as King, but he no doubt asserted Jesus as Lord and God. In Titus 1:4 we find what he wrote to Titus in this final imprisonment: "To Titus, mine own son after the common faith: Grace, mercy, and peace, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ our Saviour." Titus 3:4, 5a: "But after that the kindness and

love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us....”

It appears that Paul stood before Nero twice. In his first trial, Paul had no one to stand with him as he says writes in II Timothy 4:17, “Notwithstanding the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me; that by me the preaching might be fully known, and that all the Gentiles might hear: and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion.” Paul gave a full account of the Gospel. Although this speech/sermon is not recorded, I could only imagine how Paul presented the message and how cruel Nero responded verbally. We do know the action that Nero took. He sent Paul to the infamous Mamertine prison. This was a filthy hole, an obnoxious dungeon. The prisoner was lowered down by ropes or ladder. There was only a small grate that permitted only a little light from outside. There was no adequate latrine; open sewage flowed freely. It was also damp and cold and getting colder and that why Paul requested in II Timothy 4:21a, “Do thy diligence to come before winter....” This is why Paul said earlier in II Timothy 4:13, “The cloke that I left at Troas with Carpus, when thou comest, bring with thee, and the books, but especially the parchments.” Ever more the student, Paul says, in essence, “Above all, bring me the warmth that only comes from books, but more importantly the parchments which were his own personal scrolls of the Bible. Let us meditate on Paul’s final words to his son in the faith, Timothy:

1. PREACH

II Timothy 4:1, 2. Paul reminds Timothy to remind his listeners that we must all stand before God. He goes on to say Timothy should preach in every season, under every circumstance. Preach against sin by reproof and rebuking. But don’t forget to remind those who have received Christ that they have forgiveness of their sins. Exhort! lift them up!

2. TEACH

II Timothy 4:2c-4. Paul is reflecting on the coming apostasy as written about in II Timothy 3:1-8. Paul tells Timothy, don’t be hoodwinked by these teachers who “scratch the proverbially itching ears” of their hearers. Itching is taken from the Greek word κνήθω (*knēthō*). These are those desirous of hearing something pleasant.

3. PROCLAIM

II Timothy 4:5. Paul is encouraging Timothy to do the work of the evangelist. The word evangelist means “a bringer of good tidings.” And the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus is the good news that sets the captives free! Romans 10:15: “And how shall they preach, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!” Converts at the Judgement Seat of Christ are in and of itself a great reward! I Thessalonians 2:19: “For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming?”

4. SACRIFICE

II Timothy 4:6-8. The word offer is taken from the Greek word σπένδω (*spendō*). It means to pour out as a libation, i.e., to devote one's life or blood, as a sacrifice. You

can see in the Greek word what is meant: “to spend.” Paul says it is a good fight because we are on the winning side! We shall stand at the Bema Seat, before our Righteous Judge and give account: Hebrews 13:17b: “...as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief...”

“They marched Paul to the third milestone in the Ostian Way, to a little pinewood in a glade, probably a place of tombs, known then as *Aquae Salviae*, or Healing Waters, and now as the *Tre Fontane* where the abbey stands in his honor, he is believed to have been put overnight in a tiny cell, for this was a common place of execution. If Luke was allowed to stay by his window, if Timothy or Mark had reached Rome in time, the sounds of the night vigil would not be of weeping but singing: ‘as sorrowful yet always rejoicing: as dying and, behold, we live (II Corinthians 6:9, 10).

“At first light, the soldiers took Paul to the pillar. The executioner stood ready [the choice execution weaponry had now moved from the axe to the sword]...Soldiers stripped Paul to the waist and tied him, kneeling upright, to the low pillar leaving his neck free. Some accounts say the lictors beat him with rods...If they must administer this last, senseless dose of pain to the body so soon to die: ‘Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? (Romans 8:35). I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with’ (the flash of a sword)—‘the glory...’ (Romans 8:18a). (The Apostle, A Life of Paul by John Pollock).

-Pastor Pope-