

[R4517 : page 348]

ST. PAUL'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

– 2 CORINTHIANS 11:21; 12:10. – NOVEMBER 21. –

Golden Text: – "He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength is made perfect in weakness."

– 2 Cor. 12:9.

ST. PAUL'S brief story of his life noted in this study was written from Macedonia A.D. 57, before the occurrences noted in our recent studies. He gives us various facts recorded in the Book of Acts. An opponent might criticize his recitation of trying experiences and faith victories and might claim that modesty on the Apostle's part should have hindered such an eulogistic account of his own exploits. However, the Church at Corinth and all of God's people since have cause for thankfulness that the account was given. It was the Apostle's defense, not merely of himself, but specially a defense of the doctrines of Christ, which he, as the Lord's mouthpiece, had been used to declare. In God's order he was the leader in the presentation of Christian doctrine then, as he has been since. His expositions were opposed by false teachers and pseudo apostles, as well as by "would-be teachers."

The Apostle was thus obliged to contend with foes outside and inside the Church and only the Divine power seemingly could have sustained him in so unequal a contest. He had spent more than a year at Corinth, planting the seeds of Truth and establishing believers there, while encouraging other little groups of the Lord's people in various quarters by messages and epistles. The work flourished and the Adversary was permitted of the Lord to stir up opposition both external and internal. Internally false brethren had made various charges against St. Paul. They opposed some of his teachings. They denied that he was an Apostle any more than themselves. They urged that he erred in teaching that circumcision was unnecessary to the Gentiles; that

his teachings were not fixed and consistent (2 Cor. 1:17); that he was given to self-commendation (2 Cor. 3:1; 5:12; 10:8); and that he assumed unauthorized authority. – 2 Cor. 10:14.

They charged that he was unpatriotic and had fallen away from the faith (2 Cor. 11:22); that he was not Christ's servant at all (2 Cor. 10:7; 11:23); that he had falsely assumed to be one of the ambassadors of Christ (2 Cor. 11:5; 12:11); that he could show no proofs of his claimed apostleship; that unlike the twelve he had never known Christ personally; that his witness was second-hand and not direct like that of the others.

It does not surprise us to learn that these false teachers [**R4518 : page 348**] confused the Church at Corinth and that splits, factions, sects, parties, resulted – some saying, I am of Paul; others, I am of Apollos; others, I am for Peter, etc. They reproached St. Paul for having worked at his trade and received gifts from Macedonia (2 Cor. 11:2-10), claiming that he should have urged his needs upon the Corinthians. They insinuated that the collections taken for the poor at Jerusalem were probably in part, at least, for himself. (2 Cor. 12:16.) They even asked if it were certain that he was a Hebrew at all – of pure blood – if he were not a Gentile in whole or in part. (2 Cor. 11:22.) These wicked arrows, even bitter words, must have wounded deeply, painfully, one so sensitive as the Apostle, especially as they came from erstwhile friends, for whom he had been willing to suffer the loss of all things. But this second epistle to the Corinthians was not written, we may be sure, in self-defense merely, but chiefly in the defense of the Truth, because if he were personally discredited the truths which he represented and the Lord himself and his glorious Plan would be likewise discredited.

St. Paul was not alone in these perils from false brethren and the world. In the past Socrates, Calvin, Wesley, Washington, Savonarola, Lincoln, Grant, all of them had their traducers,

slanderers, vilifiers. Bishop Phillips Brooks in recent years had severe experiences along this line which led him to write these lines respecting himself: –

"And this is then the way he looks,
This tiresome creature, Phillips Brooks?
No wonder if 'tis thus he looks,
The Church has doubts of Phillips Brooks!
Well, if he knows himself, he'll try
To give those doubtful looks the lie.
He dares not promise, but will seek
Even as a bishop to be meek;

"To walk the way he shall be shown,
To trust a strength that's not his own,
To fill the years with honest work,
To serve his day and not to shirk;
To quite forget what folks have said,
To keep his heart and keep his head,
Until men, laying him to rest,
Shall say, 'At least he did his best.'"

ST. PAUL'S THREE PROOFS

Studying in the light of the foregoing we may divide the Apostle's defense in his second epistle to the Corinthians into three divisions: –

(1) The sufferings which he endured in connection with preaching the Truth demonstrated his love for it, his love for the Lord, and his love for such of mankind as might have the hearing ear.

(2) The proof of his apostleship in the visions granted to him, the communion with God and his deep insight into spiritual truths

and the fact that the Lord had specially commissioned him to declare his name at Jerusalem and to the Gentiles. This, indeed, in conjunction with his having seen the Lord "as one born before the time," constituted the chief evidence of his apostleship, in conjunction with the service which he was permitted to render to the Lord's cause under that commission.

(3) Finally his further proof – he was still a minister of the Lord and of his message to such as had the hearing ear.

Under the first count St. Paul enumerates his faithfulness, saying, Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they the Seed of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I serve more; for I have ministered or served more than they, in larger fields; in labors more abundant; in stripes above measure – received at the hands of Gentiles, the Jewish measure being forty blows. In prisons he was more frequent; exposed to death more often; flogged to the limit (thirty-nine blows) by the Jews; five times beaten with rods; stoned; shipwrecked; a day and a night in the deep on wreckage; in journeyings often; in perils many from floods, from robbers; from the heathen; from his fellow-countrymen; in the city; and in the wilds; on the sea and amongst false brethren. The weariness and painfulness of his service; his watching, hungering and thirsting, fastings, cold and deprivations he had experienced more than any of the other Apostles. Furthermore, in God's providence the care of all the Churches had been his pleasurable and weighty responsibility. All these demonstrated his supreme love for God, his neighbor, and his brethren, to a degree unequalled.

Under the second count he had seen the Lord as a spirit-being in the brightness above the sun at noonday, and in **[R4518 : page 349]** advance of the remainder of the Church. What the other apostles saw of our Lord during the forty days of his appearance as a man after his resurrection would not compare in

importance to the witness of our Lord's resurrection which St. Paul had seen. Besides this he had a most astounding vision or revelation in which he was "caught away to the third heaven" and saw things he was not authorized to explain.

The third heaven is the new heaven of the future – of the Millennial Age. The first "heaven and earth," or primary arrangement, passed away at the flood. The second "heaven and earth" organization, beginning at the flood, still persists. The third "heaven and earth," or new dispensation, is the one to come – the one which will be introduced at Messiah's Second Advent. In other words, St. Paul in vision was caught away and given a glimpse of the Millennial Kingdom conditions, glories, blessings, etc. – things not proper at the time to be generally disclosed. Nevertheless that vision assisted the Apostle to a clearness of mental grasp of the Divine purposes, and shaped and colored all of his epistles.

And now, "in due time," St. Paul's writings constitute the key to the Divine Plan of the Ages. He saw more literally the things subsequently revealed in symbols to St. John at Patmos and delivered to the Church in symbols which could not be solved until the due time. In view of these things he could well write, "I certify you, brethren, that the Gospel which was preached of me is not after man; for I neither received it of man, nor was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ." – Gal. 1:11,12.

The third test, namely, his sanctity, is everywhere manifest in his writings. He preached not for filthy lucre, nor for worldly applause, nor for the honor of men – not even for honor from the Church. He declared, "I will very gladly spend and be spent for you, though the more abundantly I love you the less I be loved." And again he says what his life affirmed, "I seek not yours but you."

His "thorn in the flesh," probably weakness of the eyes, resulting from his experiences with the great light, enroute to Damascus, seems to have marred his personal appearance and, for the sake of the cause, to have justified him in praying to the Lord for relief and thereby a wider influence. His prayer was answered, but not as he had expected. The Lord declared that he would give his *compensating grace*, declaring, "My grace is sufficient for thee; my strength is made perfect in weakness." The Apostle assures us that he most heartily acceded to this proposition, saying, "Most gladly, therefore, will I suffer, that the grace of God may abound towards me."

What a wonderful lesson we have in St. Paul's experiences and how justly he wrote that we should follow him, as he followed the Lord Jesus!

