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A WORD FROM THE HAUNTS OF PAUL

The International Sunday School Lesson For December 25 Is, "A Six Months' Review of the Life of Paul"—Eph. 2:4-10

By DR. W. T. ELLIS.

Places suggest memories: and this lesson (which I have been holding for two and a half years) is being written on the heaving bosom of the Mediterranean, the glorious blue of which must have satisfied the beauty-loving soul of the Apostle Paul as he sailed to and fro across it, in storm and calm. This is Paul's sea, the sea that he traveled as a missionary, and the sea that wrecked his little craft. Our course is laid toward the city of Antioch, whence he started on his journeys, but, although out of sight of land at the moment, we are nearer Ephesus than Antioch. Most of the passengers have been laid low by the heavy sea; and as I think of the tiny craft upon which the apostle and his companions adventured these great waters I wonder if he also, sensitive creature that he was, had to roll up in his cloak under a sheltering side of the ship and simply endure the voyage. It is worthy of note how little Paul tells us about himself and his travel experiences. He had more important things to say.

With thronging thoughts of the author, a real man knowing real life, a cosmopolitan man thinking in general terms, we take up these mighty words of his concerning the grace of God, addressed to the Christians of Ephesus. That is the first point to perceive. These utterances are not vague generalities, spoken into space. They are personal, and as direct and applicable as the letter a traveler sends to his family. As he wrote, Paul had in mind the Christmas at Ephesus, the city where he had undergone tempestuous experiences.

The City of Diana.

Even as I have paused here to look upon the surging sea—wild white horses galloping over the blue pastures—did Paul raise his pen occasionally to think of Ephesus: its great marble theater, where for hours the silly mob yelled their throats sore in praise of Diana, as a protest against his preaching; its magnificent highway leading down to the quay, with statues and fountains and fountains and temples and baths lining it; its huge stadium on the hillside beyond the theater; its artificial harbor, shaped like a frying pan, and crowded with traffic from the Medditerranean? Scenes of its splendor and of its sensuality may have crowded his active brain, as he dwelt upon the surroundings of these friends who were "called to be saints"—in heathen, profligate Ephesus!

Let no one say that these passages from Paul's writing are only for the Apostolic Church, and not for us in our more difficult times; thank God, owing to such preaching as Paul's, we have no conception of the un-Christian character of the Roman civilization amid which Paul's converts had to practice their faith. The worst of our modern cities is righteous as compared with old Ephesus.

Right here we see the audacity of Christianity. It offers the best to the worst, the highest to the lowest. Degradation does not daunt it. To the sensualized Roman it gives a lofty spirituality. There is no adapting of the message to the taste of the hearer; the Gospel is not cheapened or watered down. With a sublime disregard of environment and heredity, Paul presents to the Ephesians exalted spiritual truths concerning the nature of God and of His provisions for man's redemption, and of the duty of even a citizen of Ephesus to live a saintly life. This is the answer to the half-baked intelligence which declares that one cannot be a Christian in camp or in business, or in shop or in college or wherever else the complainer's lot may be cast. Behold, one could be a Christian even in Ephesus!

God Dislikes Boasters.

Squarely countering the old-new tendency to regard man as big and God as little, Paul declared that all the salvation that had come to his Ephesian converts had been because of the nature of God. Men are not saved by being good, but because they are saved they become good. They are saved because God is good. He is rich in mercy. It is His character that provides redemption. Not our deserving, but His designs, impart life. God, being the sort of God He is, makes it possible for His wandering children to come back home, led by His Son Jesus. What God is Christ is: and Christ shares Himself with His friends. "By grace are ye saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast."

Evidently God does not like boasters. We know what Jesus thought of the posing, parading Pharisee. Religion that is real always makes one humble and fills one with a sense of undeserving. No true Christian ever bragged of his own Christianity. For the closer we get to the perfection of Christ, the more hideous do we see our own imperfections to be. It is not our merits, but God's nature, that brings us salvation. We glory, if at all all, in His grace. What sang the blind hymn-writer, whose soul had seeing eyes?

"Some day when sinks the golden sun,
Beneath the rosy-tinted west,
My blessed Lord will say 'Well done!'
And I shall enter into rest.
And I shall see Him, face to face,
And tell the story 'Saved by Grace'."

In heaven, we are told, the songs of the ransomed are not of self-exultation, but in praise of Him whose grace saved them, despite their undeserving.

The Sea-Sick Missionaries.

Whether people are saved or not does not depend upon their feelings. Most religious depression would be cured by a change of diet and a little more fresh air and exercise. This lesson takes us straight back to the central truth that, whether we feel like it or not, we are the children of the grace of God.

On this ship are three women missionaries, bound for Jerusalem. Today they are seasick. They have no zest for Jerusalem or for their mission. All the enthusiasm that inspired them to leave America is gone. They have no interest in Paul's Mediterranean or John's Patmos. Seasickness has emptied their souls. Nevertheless, they are on the way to Jerusalem, just as truly as on the first night when they sang hymns in the saloon. Their feelings do not affect their progress.

That is the way it is with the Christian. He may be a strange combination of exaltation and depression; one day up, the next day down; for we are mercurial creatures. Nevertheless, he is Christ's in all weathers. It is not his hold on the Master, but the Master's hold on him that saves him. "By grace are ye saved." We may become sea-sick en route, but we are on the way to Jerusalem.

The Soldier Lesson.

For months past my lot has been cast with armies and navies. As a war correspondent, I am in uniform myself; and traveling at the moment under military permission. I dine frequently at officers messes and almost never in a home. My daily thought is of the war and its after effects. There are certain convictions shaping themselves gradually, as a result of these contacts and this rather extended observation.

One of magnitude is that it is the English-speaking nations, with Anglo-Saxon traditions of a free Gospel, who are conducting themselves most creditably in the hour of victory, and who must bear the heaviest load of responsibility for world-deconstruction. I would write charitably upon this point, and without disparagement of any others. Religion has borne its fruit in character. The British Empire and America still hold fast to the great Christian ideals upon which we are established. And this faith works out even in the conduct of the private soldier in such places as Salonica and Constantinople. The theme is one for fuller treatment than can be given it here; for its gravity and significance are beyond measure.

There is a direct connection between this condition and the present lesson. The religion of grace develops integrity of character. When men know themselves the direct beneficiaries of Divine mercy, with a responsibility to God alone, they watch after the fashion of their faith. Salvation comes not by character, says evangelical religion, but character comes by salvation. True religion expresses itself in handicraft in shop and home and field. Orthodoxy is proved less by words than by giving honest weight and sweeping under the beds.

This teaching clinches the day's lesson. Here we have it in Paul's words—words worthy to be memorized, as declaring the very purpose of the coming of Christ, and the object of man's redemmption: "who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from all iniquity." Or, more fully to quote earlier verses in the lesson, "For the grace of God that bringeth salvation have appeared to all me, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously and godly, in this present world."

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