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## The Prisoner of the Lord

*by T. Austin-Sparks*

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"The prisoner of the Lord" (Ephesians 4:1).

"Thanks be unto God, who leads me on from place to place in the train of His triumph to celebrate His victory over the enemies of Christ" (2 Corinthians 2:14, Conybeare).

It is a matter of vital importance that in our relation to the Lord Jesus for the outworking of God's eternal purpose we should have a right conception of ourselves. Among the many designations by which the Apostle Paul expresses his conception of himself, that of the "prisoner of the Lord" is by no means the least significant. This designation had in his experience various aspects. There was that which related to the literal imprisonment at Rome, true; but there were others....

But even this captivity in Rome was not regarded by him as a captivity to jail or jailor - to Rome, Caesar, or circumstances - but as a captivity to Christ. In other words, he was a captive by a foreseen and foreordained purpose of God, and all was according to the divine schedule.

There was a sense in which such imprisonment meant liberty. His body may have been in chains and under close guard, but his spirit was "in the heavenlies in Christ Jesus"; and he was traversing the limitless realms of divine truth and revelation. To those who live in the Spirit there are no limits to spiritual influence and effectiveness. The prisoners of the Lord have realized this in all ages.

The spiritual experience of the Apostle had become the ground of the great revelation that the prisoner of Jesus Christ is such because he is not in the slightest degree free to draw upon his own resources.... Paul is a sign to us in this matter, for of all men he knew best that he was entirely and utterly dependent upon the Life not his own. Even his physical body was dependent upon the inner quickening of the Spirit of Him that raised up Jesus from the dead.

He had no life of his own for the work of God. The sentence of death was in him - the lord of death was ever against him; death beset his course seeking to get its advantage at every point, and but for this energizing within by the Risen Lord the great purposes of God could never have been accomplished. It was not the Lord's will that it should be otherwise; in fact, we might truly say that the Lord would have it thus, and Paul himself realized that it was for the safety of the revelation that his own life should be staked through and pinned down. Thus it would be impossible for him to move in any self-directed way and act as out from himself without immediately coming up against the fact that he had no life from above for such a course, and therefore it would prove fatal to seek so to essay. Thus he was a prisoner of the Lord because of his utter dependence upon the Lord's Life for all service.

The principle is an abiding one for all who are "called according to His purpose." If there should be the full recognition of the principle... and obedience to this law, then the working out of it in physical weakness and suffering might be modulated accordingly; but who is there that, with large resources of personal energy, will not draw upon them, count upon them, and - almost unconsciously - make them in themselves a factor of strength.

This was Paul's dangerous tendency at the outset, and so might it be with the majority of those *whom the Lord would greatly use*. Because of this, they have to be brought to the place where, by reason of their own weakness and utter insufficiency, they draw every breath by the Holy Spirit... and come to realize that the Risen Lord, as within them, must live their life for them. It is thus that the Master secures for Himself the greatest percentage of real spiritual life and work... and protects His own interests against the judged and condemned flesh that seeks to glory in His presence.

Much has been said about the wonderful intellect of the Apostle, just as it has concerning his energy. But in this respect the Apostle himself would have pointed out, with equal emphasis, that the spring of everything was the Spirit of wisdom and revelation as a specific endowment in Christ. He of all men would have most strongly discriminated between reason and revelation - between the judgment acumen, and intellectual resources of man and that wisdom and discernment from heaven which comes by revelation.

For all spiritual service, spiritual revelation is essential and indispensable - our speaking, our plans, our methods, our times must be by revelation. So many there are who have schemes and enterprises - visions and undertakings - for the Lord, but who are falling far short of real spiritual effectiveness.

A mentally conceived purpose and desire for God is not adequate... even though it be an assent to a program as contained in the Word of God. What is in the written Word by revelation of the Holy Spirit must also be in the spirit of each servant of God in the same way. We shall be held to this if we really are abandoned to the Lord and walking not after the flesh - even in Christian service - but after the Spirit.

On the one hand, one may essay to go here and there in the general conception that the Lord wishes work to be done in such places, but to our surprise and temporary bewilderment we may find that the Spirit suffers us not. On the other hand, we may find that - while everything according to our judgment and the arguments of Christian men would dictate a certain course of restraint - we have to go "bound in spirit" in the face of all.

Then again, it is not sufficient to have received revelation, but - for the transmitting of such - a special enablement of utterance is necessary. Few men have received greater and fuller revelation than the Apostle Paul, but how he besought the saints to pray that he might have utterance! And this emphasizes the principle of our complete imprisonment to the Lord Jesus, so that every word, every step, every undertaking shall be as out from Himself... and not of ourselves.

Now in his declaration of God's leading him on "from place to place in the train of His triumph" (2 Corinthians 2:14), the Apostle suggests other aspects of this imprisonment. He draws for us a picture of the victorious return of a Roman general from campaign. As the general approaches the gates of the imperial city, his distinguished prisoners are fastened with chains to his chariot. The whole populace has turned out to greet him and applaud his prowess. He sweeps through the gates and then - at a given point - the procession halts. He makes a speech, telling of his conquests, and then - with a wave of his hand toward the prisoners - would make them the evidence of his triumph. In effect he would say, "These prisoners speak for themselves of the truth of what I say." Then the procession would move forward and the same thing would happen again and yet again. It is these prisoners who are on show for his glory and are used to celebrate his triumph.

Paul takes up this historical background and uses it to illustrate his own relationship to the Lord Jesus. As Paul was led by the Lord from place to place, he in himself was the evidence of what Calvary and its triumph means within a man. Many would remember Saul of Tarsus - his pride, his vehemence, his forcefulness, his intolerant and bitter opposition to the followers of Jesus of Nazareth - how that he would stand at nothing, even to the hurling of women as well as men into prison... and fully consenting to the murder of the young man Stephen. And here is this man - the same, yet another - suffering for the "Way" that he persecuted, no longer bigoted, proud, bitter. He who once would brook no interference with his schemes now shows infinite patience with those who oppose themselves. He who once in wrath would breathe out threatenings and slaughters against those whom he had made his enemies, now - when even carnal believers criticize, malign, misrepresent as at Corinth - would write to them one of the most glorious pieces of spiritual literature ever penned, showing how love - even the love of God in Christ - when it gains the ascendent, suffers long, is kind, envieth not, is not puffed up, behaveth not itself unseemly, seeketh not its own, keeps no record of evil, and never gives up. Surely this change would speak for itself, and this man's testimony would ever be... as in his life... a celebration of Calvary's victory. He was on show to the glory of Christ... and was being led from place to place thus to celebrate His victory.

But there was another vital aspect of this imprisonment. Paul realized that the great adversary of Christ was holding sway in the world. He had his hands upon man; he was having things his own way; he was throwing a world darkness around the mind of man as a precaution against the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus from shining in unto them. And yet, Calvary was victory; and the Prince of this World was cast out, and principalities and powers were stripped off, but how was this to be wrought out for the deliverance of man?

So the Apostle conceived of himself as being led in the triumphal train of his Lord to meet the enemy in back of the situation in all those places of the Divine appointment, and there to have the celebration of Calvary's triumph in the form of a small company who would maintain in their place the testimony of Jesus - even the testimony of His mighty Calvary conquest.

So the Lord would lead Paul to a place, and there the enemy - recognizing the significance of his presence - would stir up all his resources against him. It might seem that the first encounter ended disastrously, as at Philippi or Lystra or Ephesus, but there was no element of disaster in the spirit of the Apostle, and he firmly held on for the celebration to be complete. We know the issue - how that in a phenomenal way in a few short years, the testimony of Jesus was triumphantly established in a multitude of places, each of which was itself strategic.

What a conception of our relationship to the Lord! All our own programs scrapped, our own schemes set aside, our own resources ended; dependent to the last degree - even to a word - upon the Lord as our life, chained to Him as prisoners, having no freedom to think, speak, or act for, or of, ourselves; and then led by Him from place to place, and in each place almost immediately encountering a deluge of Satanic opposition - the terrific efforts of the enemy to make it impossible for us to stay there; and yet, held in spirit, ready to die for the testimony of Jesus, that testimony at length represented perhaps in a small company - a nucleus - His triumph celebrated, His victory declared. So dotted here and there, as marking the stages of a triumphal march, the scene presents the witness to the fact that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father - each of these testimonies a prophecy of His possession of all the earth.