

THE LAST WORD

by Dr. O. Kenneth Walther

Paul replied: "Short time or long - I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains."

Acts 26:29

This verse constitutes Paul's last recorded words spoken in Palestine. Here is his final hearing before Herod Agrippa II and Festus, Paul makes his last stand before being sent off to Rome. He addresses those in the audience hall of ancient Caesarea and his audience of readers today with a most intriguing climactic sentence: "Short time or long - I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains."

As it stands, this final statement is a remarkable example of enthusiastic Christian zeal and genuine Christian courtesy. There is nothing abrasive, over-zealous, obnoxious or repugnant here. Despite his unjust imprisonment for two long years at Caesarea, and surely after receiving some cruel physical as well as mental abuse by corrupt Felix, he finishes his final speech of self-defense with a personal invitation to Herod Agrippa and others present at the court appearance to soberly reflect on both his life and his words. One can only suspect that this earnest, yet tactful, plea made by the apostle induced Herod Agrippa to take yet a second look at the sincerity and commitment of the prisoner standing before him.

Just as the audience with the king and the other nobles had begun with Paul lifting one manacled hand to gain their attention, Acts 26:1, we ought to picture Paul here raising the same hand at the conclusion of this imperial interview. The intriguing question is: Why does he here mention his chains which earlier he had already displayed openly and which must have been obvious to everyone present? And what does Paul mean by the final phrase "except for these chains?"

I shall try to provide three brief suggestions, offer a personal illustration and give three key words on which to hang the three suggestions. Paul's chains are at once restrictive, redundant, and yet redemptive. The chains are referred to by Paul must have a special significance. The Greek word **desmos** meaning chain or bond appears eighteen times in the New Testament. Thirteen of these eighteen appearances may be directly attributed to Paul. For Paul this is an undeniably crucial word.

But let us look at the first suggestion for the special significance of the word "chains" here in Paul's last recorded statement in Palestine.

First, "except for these chains" might mean, and here I am admittedly paraphrasing Paul: "Well, thank goodness these chains are not your lot, O King Agrippa, or yours too, Festus. For I am not able to move about, but you are!"

Read this way Paul's last words may have initially surprised the hearers. For surely Paul recognized the apparent incongruity of appealing to King Agrippa and the others present to experience spiritual freedom - a real theological liberation, where there is neither Greek or Jew, slave or free, male or female, while he himself stood conspicuously in chains before them.

For Paul chains were restrictive and limiting. Could it be that Paul would wish no hurdle or handicap to be placed in the king's path to keep him from joyously discovering for himself the experience of faith in the Lord of the universe - the Saviour of mankind - Jesus Christ? Do you remember that first flush of faith when you first believed? No one - nothing could distract you. You knew; you believed; you trusted; your faith walk commenced at that very moment. Later there would be hurdles and hazards and handicaps. But there is no place for them when faith is first fresh and green and rooting. Could Paul be wishing for Agrippa such a ripe opportunity to experience for himself such a fresh, personal discovery without distraction and diversion?

Chains are restrictive is surely what Paul is implying here. And he would wish no impediment to stand in the king's way for Agrippa was already on the verge of making a decision based on Paul's long self-defense and personal appeal to him. In no way would he want Agrippa burdened with any weight or restricted by any barrier to outright discovery of the living Lord.

On the other hand, for Paul the limitations created by the chains caused him to reflect personally that no situation is ever so hopeless, no individual is ever so helpless, no occasion is ever so filled with hurting that God cannot be present with the one who suffers and yet endures. In his great prison epistle - Philippians - Paul has confided openly: "...for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all things through him who gives me strength." (Philippians 3:12-13). Surely Paul became a living example of an individual equipped by God to overcome incredible obstacles. Undoubtedly the Roman court at Caesarea must have been impressed by the sheer courage and tenacity of this man in chains.

I believe that there is another dimension to Paul's use of this concluding phrase "except for these chains." I can hear Paul asserting that these

chains are redundant, or really necessary, even embarrassing, yet not without an ultimate purpose. Again, allow me to paraphrase Paul here. He could be saying: "I didn't really need these chains for I've travelled and spoken openly and freely in a large part of the Roman Empire, but my period of internment here at Caesarea has caused me to experience some things I would not trade. Although these chains have pushed me beyond all reasonable levels of tolerance and endurance, what an experience this has been for me! Don't you feel sorry for me, O Agrippa, or you Festus, for these are *my* chains!"

In Philippians Paul has expressed his outright conviction of God's purpose in letting him experience the depths of imprisonment. "Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly (Philippians 1:12-14).

Have you ever been confined in one place for two years? Or have you found yourself in a tight spot for an indefinite period of time? Only then can you possibly relate to Paul's situation. How well I recalled the line of that great hymn "Once to Every Man and Nation" which goes "New occasions teach new duties" when one night in the summer of 1985 I boarded the night train from Johannesburg to Durban in South Africa. I had just begun the long trip cooped up in a train compartment with five other men. When it came time to sleep our seats were adjusted so that three bunks were suspended on each side of the tiny compartment. There was barely room to crawl in and I felt fortunate to have a lower bunk. I don't think I ever felt more cramped or confined in my life. I laid my head not on the pillow provided but on the leather shoulder bag I'd been carrying with me for some six weeks in Africa. It was filled with several dozen pieces of priceless Palestinian pottery, some my own, and some from the Ashland Theological Seminary collection, which I had been using in my lectures at various Bible schools and seminaries in East and Central Africa. This indeed was one new occasion in which I could hardly see anything new and lasting occurring. But God in his providence placed in that compartment a gentleman considerably my senior who must have noted my uneasiness and my over-protection of my shoulder bag. He tried in a series of indirect and finally direct questions to ascertain why I didn't just put the bag up above where it would be out of the way, and even more pointedly, what was so important about that bag anyway that I'd even sleep with it for a pillow? Finally, I decided to just tell him that it contained a quantity of old pieces of Palesti-

nian pottery thinking that that would turn him off. But instead my response only sparked his enthusiasm and his outright excitement. He was quickly up and out of his berth and beside me almost begging me for a look inside. I learned that he had taught ceramics in England for over twenty-five years and was on his way to Pietermaritzburg to open his own shop. As I watched him tenderly handle each piece during a period of three or four hours, I also discovered that he was related to the famous Doulton family of the Royal Doulton China dynasty in England. Soon the other men in the compartment were bending over to look down at the pottery collection. Two soldiers, a dentist and a student on break from the University of Durban and Mr. Doulton were my audience that night. And they heard not only about Palestinian pottery, but about my life and witness. I had felt helpless and lonesome when I first boarded that train. I had secretly asked: "Why me. Lord, here on this night train?" But you see that experience with that unexpected audience became a new occasion and even a great occasion and surely one of the most unforgettable occasions of all my time in Africa. I simply would not have traded that night's experiences for anything. I learned in that experience to listen to Paul's "except for these chains." Chains are not without positive fallout. Paul had planned to go to Rome as a missionary evangelist; he was taken to Rome as a prisoner defending the faith before Caesar himself. Indeed, "new occasions teach new duties." What a remarkable learning experience was that unconventional compartment on the night express to Durban.

Finally, I believe I can hear Paul saying with reference to his chains: "I accept and even hold up for you these chains since they are God's redemptive symbol for you and others. Yes, these chains are God's mark of a redemptive process at work." Paul again has expressed this aspect of his chains so candidly in the Epistle to the Philippians. "Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one many for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved - and that by God. For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have" (Philippians 1:27-30).

Jim Elliott, one of the five missionaries martyred by the Auca Indians, wrote in his diary: "He is no fool who loses what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." Following Jesus involves as costly discipleship. Paul was aware that his chains were part of that redemptive act of suf-

fering and humiliation which took place in the sacrifice and death of Jesus Christ. As a proud Pharisee Paul had long before been broken in pride and in religious spirit. But he was broken only to be reborn and reshaped for service to Christ and His Church. Chains are clearly a symbol of submissive brokenness in the life of the prisoner. So, too, the chains that come into our Christian life today may impede our spiritual progress, may cause us varying degrees of inconvenience, and can even create impossible demands which would literally break us. But with Paul we need to see obstacles as opportunities for deeper spiritual growth and commitment. Paul, despite his many chains in life, never gave up. He looked to Jesus - the author and perfecter of the faith. He participated in the struggle for faith. He experienced the redeeming work of sharing with Christ and others the unfinished task of evangelizing. Paul's living example of dealing with his chains witnessed to Herod Agrippa and his court on that so long ago and it offers us a challenge in our Christian walk even today.