**Divine deliverance from a deadly peril** 5/9/21 dkm

Read: Acts 19:21-41, 2Corinthians 1

Text: 2Corinthians 1:8-11

Psalms: 146, 23old, 46:1-7, 72old

Can you remember a time when you thought you were going to die? Have you ever been saved from drowning, from a fire, or maybe from a car accident? Maybe there was a time when you were so sick you thought you were going to die. At one time in India I was told that someone had threatened to run me off the road when I was riding my bike. If you have had such an experience I am sure you remember it.

A traumatic experience has been the trigger for some to become a Christian. John Newton was such a man; he cried to the Lord while fearing shipwreck and when he survived he gave thanks to the Lord and even gave himself to the Lord. King Hezekiah ‘wept bitterly’ and ‘prayed to the Lord’ when he was dying. The Lord heard his prayer and granted him another fifteen years of life (Isa 38:1-5). However, like so many, Hezekiah sinned after this great deliverance. I can tell you of many who, not necessarily in fear death but in great anguish, prayed to the Lord but after their prayer was answered no longer bother with prayer; they might pray again next time they are overcome with fear.

The apostle Paul trembled in fear when struck by a bolt of light that blinded him. He never forgot that experience on the road to Damascus, especially not the words the risen Jesus spoke to him at that time (Acts 9). He was not a person to forget the grace of God that he received that day. It was many years later when in Asia that Paul was again in fear of death and experienced the saving power of God, as in a physical deliverance. He shares this experience and what he learned from it with brethren in the church at Corinth and with us here in this passage. We know that some in that church were critical of Paul but he opens his heart to them in this his second letter, sharing even his deepest fears. While most preachers hide their vulnerabilities from the people, Paul exposed his weaknesses and fears. He did not minister in his own strength but in the strength of the Lord.

As Paul continues reflecting on the ‘God of all comfort’, and sharing this comfort with the church in Corinth, he informs them of a particular danger he faced and how God delivered him from death. Our subheadings are: ‘Trouble in Asia’, ‘Trust in God who raises the dead’, ‘Together in prayer’, and ‘Thanks to God by many’.

**1. Trouble in Asia**

In the opening paragraph of this letter Paul used the word ‘trouble’ three times. There he used it in a general sense but now it is a specific ‘trouble’; we noted that the Greek means ‘pressure’. In the province of Asia, the western part of what today is Turkey, we know of the cities of Ephesus and Troas, as well as the seven churches listed in Revelation 2 and 3. Paul spent over two years ministering in Ephesus after he established the church in Corinth. He wrote his first letter to the Corinthians from Ephesus, but this second letter from somewhere in Macedonia.

In the meantime, Paul became the cause of a riot in Ephesus. Actually, Demetrius the silversmith, who crafted idols of the goddess Diana, instigated the riot. He did so because people were believing the gospel preached by Paul and no longer buying his idols. Riots are dangerous because you never know what a volatile crowd will do - just look at the football riots of recent years. This crowd at Ephesus grabbed two of Paul’s friends as they rushed towards the arena, but other friends stopped Paul from going (Acts 19:30). The city clerk stepped in and dismissed the rioting mob. After this scare Paul left Ephesus for Macedonia. Luke, the writer of Acts, does not say that Paul himself faced mortal danger but he was certainly the target of the murderous mob.

In this letter Paul refers to, ‘trouble which came to us in Asia’, but gives no further details, apart from saying he feared he would die (1:8). The Corinthians probably knew more of the details than we are told. Paul did not want his brethren to be uninformed of this dangerous situation he faced in Asia (1:8). A number of other suggestions have been made as to the details of what made the apostle ‘despair even of life’. Some think he was so sick he thought he would die, a not uncommon fear. Paul had his ‘thorn in the flesh’ but this was not life-threatening. Besides, this trouble came from outside, a ‘sentence of death’ (1:9).

Paul faced so many life-threatening situations that he could write, ‘in deaths often’ (11:23). Once the Jews stoned him and left him for dead, but this was years before, and not in Asia (11:25, Acts 14:19). While we cannot be certain as to the details, as to who or what threatened the apostle’s life, being the target of a murderous mob may have put him in greater danger than indicated by Luke in the book of Acts.

**2. Trust in God who raises the dead**

The verses we are looking at are linked to the preceding paragraph by the word ‘for’ (1:8), and the subject of sharing the comfort of God with the brethren in Corinth. Paul was troubled by the opposition he faced in the Corinthian church but he had faced other troubles, life- threatening troubles in the recent past. He wants the church to know about this trouble, not by way of boasting but by way of sharing how God delivered him; it is in later chapters that he resorts to reluctant boasting about the troubles he had faced during his ministry.

Whatever the trouble Paul faced, he was ‘burdened beyond measure’ and ‘despaired even of life’ (1:8). He thought he was going to die. But the key word in verse 8 is, ‘above strength’. He was crushed and unable to do anything to save himself- apart from pray, we presume. Even when he and Silas were in prison in Philippi they prayed and sang psalms.

No one, not even the apostle Paul, likes being completely helpless, unable to do a thing to help themselves. We are talking about physical danger and physical help, but such dangers have psychological effects of course. We know about the stresses of life and about depression, but despair is something different; it is something I think Christians should avoid because it means ‘to lose all hope’. Yet this is the word Paul uses, ‘despair’, utmost despair.

But as Paul looked back on this terrible time he saw that God was teaching him something, teaching him not to trust in himself but in ‘God who raises the dead’ (1:9). We included the last phrase in our subheading and for good reason but will come back to it shortly. Let us stay with Paul for a moment as all his means of saving himself were peeled away, leaving him vulnerable and helpless, exposed and naked- not literally naked but he certainly felt naked. He was utterly without strength or power, as helpless as a newborn baby.

What do you do when you feel completely helpless, when all your strength is exhausted, when all your wit is drained and no one is listening to your excuse or pleas for mercy? We usually look to other people for help. We call a lawyer or appeal to the king. We call the doctor or the politician. But sometimes no human being can help. I think the current pandemic is teaching us a lesson not unlike that which Paul is sharing. No, we are not despairing of life, but we do feel helpless as we endure another week of lockdown. We are losing hope in our politicians, who themselves are feeling helpless to stop the spread of the deadly virus. We are not even sure that the scientists are on top of things. But in all of this, is any lesson being learnt?

The psalmist learnt the lesson, ‘Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal man who cannot save’ (Ps 146:3 NIV). And Paul learnt not to trust in himself, and presumably in any other man, but to trust in God alone. God had obviously delivered him from the deadly peril. Having experienced God’s grace and power to deliver him once, he trusted He would do it again (1:10). In the darkness of the valley of the shadow of death the Lord came to deliver his servant Paul, and he never forgot the grace and power of God.

Do you believe God is powerful to save you from whatever troubles you face in life? Do you believe in a God who raises the dead (1:9)? Why does Paul mention the raising of the dead? Like Martha, he believed in the resurrection of course (John 11:24). But did she believe Jesus could raise her brother right before her eyes? Did Paul believe God could raise him from the dead if he did die? Did he have the faith of Abraham, who believed that God was able to raise his son Isaac ‘even from the dead’, as he obeyed God and placed his son on the altar (Heb 11:19). This is the power that Paul came to believe as he faced death, the greatest power on earth, the power of the resurrection. For Abraham and Paul, this was not just a pleasant thought; it was a ‘here and now’ reality, it was something they experienced. Too many Christians fail to live the reality of the resurrection.

**3. Together in prayer**

Paul shared about his trouble in Asia, and God’s great deliverance with the brethren in Corinth that they might learn the lesson he learnt, namely, ‘My strength is made perfect in weakness’ (12:9). He was also encouraging them to pray for him because it is prayer, personal prayer and intercessory prayer that God loves to hear, and to which he responds. It is not clear if they were praying for him before this but he urges them to ‘help us by your prayers’ (1:11 NIV).

The more we pray, and the more people there are praying, the more the Lord is pleased. Prayer is not a mechanical or mathematical activity of course. We always pray, ‘Your will be done’, knowing that God’s will is perfect. We also pray, knowing that in all things God ‘works together for good to those who love Him’ (Rom 8:28). As God’s people pray together, God works together for our good and for his glory. We pray with this knowledge; we pray believing that with God nothing is impossible (Luke 1:37). Such knowledge should stir us to prayer, to be more earnest in prayer when we or others face troubles in this life. Every day we know someone who needs prayer do we not?

**4. Thanks to God by many**

Prayer and thanksgiving go together- unless prayer is merely a ritual. Paul urges the Romans to ‘continue steadfastly in prayer’ just as he urges them to ‘rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep’ (Rom 12:12, 15). It is part of the fellowship of a church, part of the functioning of the body of Christ, that troubles are shared, and that we pray together and praise together.

Is this what we see in our church? Without troubles shared we will not be together in prayer. Without prayer we will not be together in thanking God for answered prayer- right. Without prayer we may start attributing our deliverance to ourselves or some human intervention rather than divine intervention. If we are set free by a judge when we had no hope of freedom, do we thank God for answering prayer or do we just walk away saying we were lucky?

Paul speaks of a sea of uplifted faces giving thanks to God for his past deliverance and for any future deliverance. He did not expect this to be the last deadly peril he would face as a servant of the Lord. Remember, we live in a fallen world, a world that is hostile to the gospel. But remember most of all that God is great. He is powerful to pull down and to raise up. Powerful to heal and powerful to save from death, not just physical death but everlasting death. If you have received the gift of eternal life you should be thanking God every day, and we your brethren should be joining you and thanking God for his indescribable gift.