

“In Search of Meaning”
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My name is Paul. People often call me an Apostle. It's a bit confusing because I wasn't there with Jesus in his earthly life, but I was riding to destroy Jesus' people - his followers, when I was knocked off that horse - and you know the story - the spirit of God filled me; the very voice of Jesus spoke to my heart, and I was transformed. People even within the early church questioned me - questioned my dedication, questioned whether I was just a manipulator who was just setting everyone up, so that the Jewish authorities could come and take out as many Christians as possible. But I think I have proven over the entire length of time of my ministry - and the sufferings that I have put up with - that I am who I say I am; because I'm talking to you now from prison.

Here I am in this small little cell, with nothing but this bench that I drag around with me. In this time I sit and I ponder, “What is it that I'm supposed to do, stuck in this cell?” and obviously there are moments when I become so low that I can't think about anything or anyone except my own pitiful life. But God will not let me stay there. God pulls me up by my boot straps and says, “You have more to do. As long as you have a breath in this life, Paul, you have a responsibility to proclaim that Gospel.” I proclaim it to churches everywhere from Corinth to Ephesus, to Thessalonica, to Troas, and everywhere in between - all the way to Rome, where I sit in this prison. God needed me to do a specific ministry and if it meant being a libation that is being poured out, then so be it.

You see, in the Old Testament, the way in which people offered themselves to God was to offer sacrifices. So they'd take a lamb, or a cow, or a goat, or even a dove - for those who had very little money - and they would slaughter that. A portion of that meat went to God and the rest went out to be sold to keep the Temple prosperous. Then they took a certain amount of blood and they would pour it into the chalice of the Temple. It would be poured out and offered to God as a living sacrifice. Jesus replaced the Temple slaughter house, Jesus' blood was poured out like a libation, so that we would no longer have to go to a Temple to sacrifice. Jesus was that sacrifice. Do you want to be Christ-like? Do you really? Because to be Christ-like is for your blood to be poured out as a libation, just like everyone else's - just like Jesus and just like mine. But it is not to be poured out in vain. It is to be poured out with a purpose to transform the world in which we live.

I [Paul] had churches, little churches that struggled to exist. The church in Rome was the smallest, the church in Jerusalem was tiny, and in fact we were formulating offerings in Asia Minor, where my churches were to care for the original church in Jerusalem, because they were so unfaithful and tiny. Yet here were these churches. I'm locked up in a prison in Rome and they are struggling. They are bickering and struggling with all sorts of issues.

The church is not an easy place because so many demands are placed on a church. It's full of people and we people do not always get along. But it is also the place where the Holy Spirit resides. I can be sitting in a prison in Rome and I know that my churches will not fail, because they are not truly mine; they are God's through Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit moves in their midst. God will allow them to continue to thrive no matter what happens to

me. It was then that I sat back down on my bench in my prison cell and I said, “I have a purpose.”

Roman jails are horrible places. I wish you could understand the smell, the brutality and the pain of sitting in a prison cell in Rome in the first century, the way I have. There was one blessing. That was that the Roman authorities would allow me to not only write letters - my letters were sent out to all of the churches giving them strength and hope. Some of them [those letters] you have in what is now the Bible; others are alluded to but you don't see them anymore. They never survived. They encouraged the church. But, the other benefit for the church, that the prison system in Rome offered, was that we could get visitors. There was one visitor in particular - a young man named Timothy and his friend Titus. They would come to me and say, “You are locked up here. How can we take your place?”

There were many moments when I was still out and around that I couldn't reach everywhere. You can never do it alone. My heart always aches for those people who try to live out their faith by themselves. You are not strong enough for that. We need each other, so Timothy came to me - but he was so young and inexperienced - but each day he would come to the prison. It was wonderful because at least I had someone to talk to. But, more important than that, I had someone I could share the ministry with. I needed to build him up, to make sure he was strong enough and understood what he was getting into. A lot of people become members of a church, or they start attending for what they can get out of it. [They say,] “I want peace.” Well, if you have been a member here any length of time, you know there is a lot of “not peace” going on in churches.

Peace does not mean freed from anxiety or struggle. Peace means you can live with all of that anxiety and struggle, because the Holy Spirit carries you above it, beyond it. It gives you a perspective that allows you to succeed amidst the mess. That is what I had to teach Timothy.

Why do people think peace means comfort? There wasn't one comfortable day in the life of Jesus. Jesus wasn't sent to a royal throne in Rome. He was sent to a struggling, earth-barren place called Nazareth that had almost no redeeming qualities, because peace is not found in comfort. Peace is found in Divine meaning. It is in the search for that meaning that peace is truly found.

I said to Peter, “Jesus' blood was shed on the cross as a libation for your sin and mine and everyone else's. My blood will be poured out as a libation for the sin and the struggle of everyone else. That's what it means to be Christ-like.

“Timothy, if you and Titus follow me, your blood will be poured out. That doesn't mean that you might end up being sacrificed by the Roman authorities, but it means you are going to struggle in this world. If you can't handle that, don't get into the ministry. I don't mean an ordained ministry, I mean a ministry that occurs with every single Christian. If you are a Christian, you have a ministry. You had better get about doing it. The more difficult it is the more meaningful it is. The more painful the better, because now you have to rely not on yourself, but on the Holy Spirit to carry you through.”

Peter, James, John and the other Apostles knew that, but it was the next generation of Timothy's and Titus' and all of those after them who knew what they were getting

themselves into. They are the ones we should thank the most for the Christian Church not only surviving but thriving because they were willing, knowing full well what would happen. They were willing to give their lives - to let their lives be poured out like a libation. You and I, no matter what generation in which we live, are called to do the same thing.

I tried to explain to Timothy what it means to have perspective. If you are only living in this life, then it is awful what happens and it is horrifying to end up in a stinky prison in Rome, and you truly are a failure then.

But if you have a perspective that is miles greater than this world - if you have an eternal vision - this is but a blink of an eye and great things can be done. If this is my only world, I want to hoard my cup. I won't pour out one little bit because I want to get as much from it as I can. But if I have an eternal perspective, then I want to end my life in this world with my cup empty. I want to be able to say when I take the last breath in my life that I gave it all and left nothing in my cup. Don't live to hoard peace and earthly peace, where it is your comfort. Pour it all out. The more you get, the more you pour out, the more that you throw it at people - giving them everything you have - emotionally, physically, materially and spiritually. Be worn out at the end of the day. Be worn out at the end of a life. Make your last breath be because you can't give one more thing, because you have given it your all. Then you will have lived a Christ-like life.

I told that to Timothy and he shared it with Titus. They took my little beginning and they spread that Gospel all over the world. I replaced Jesus. Timothy replaced me. And you - each and every one of you - need to replace him. Get in line, offer your lives and pour out your libation. Give it your all and leave nothing in your chalice, and you will find peace. Amen