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Standing firm in the midst of a sinking world

"Having therefore obtained help of God, I continue unto this day, witnessing both to small and great, saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come,"
Acts 26:22.

(A message preached in Kilskeery Free Presbyterian Church by Rev Ivan Foster on 21st August 2004 and in Walsham Le Willows Congregational Church, 30th August 2015.)

This world has ever been sinking down morally since the entrance of sin. It is not a process that is limited to the closing years of this age as some might think. It is true that the moral decline will accelerate in the days of the rise of the Antichrist. This is stated clearly in such places as 2 Timothy 3:1. "This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come."

But moral and spiritual decline has been an ongoing feature of every age. Its rate of decline may have varied throughout the ages but its inexorable continuance is undeniable.

It has been kept from sinking utterly into the mire of utter depravity by the restraining hand of God. There is a little phrase in Romans 1:26, which reminds us of that. "For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections." Literally, it means "He let them go". He had been holding them up but because of their kicking against His restraints He let them go.

We see the world sinking today. It is a most distressing sight, especially if we see loved ones sinking down, refusing to accept the saving mercy of God.

In the midst of such sinking, it is the duty of the believer to stand firm.

Let us remind ourselves of this central and paramount duty.

Consider Paul's words before King Agrippa.

I. REMAINING STEDFAST REQUIRES THE HELP OF GOD

1. We are incapable of continuing without help. If a man so spiritual and talented as Paul required help, then how much more do we! The word "help" means "succour" or "aid" and carries within it the idea of the assistance of a servant to a master. This is the only place it is used in the New Testament. This a help that is unique but available to every believer.

2. It is the help of God. The child of God is not alone and unaided in this world. The help of heaven is made available to us. Angels help the believer though the exact nature of their help is presently unknown by us. "But to which of the angels said he at any time, Sit on my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool? Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?" Hebrews 1:13-14. The great Elijah was so helped. "And as he lay and slept under a juniper tree, behold, then an angel touched him, and said unto him, Arise and eat. And he looked, and, behold, there was a cake baken on the coals, and a cruse of water at his head. And he did eat and drink, and laid him down again," 1 Kings 19:5-6. This but a much lesser help. Paul is speaking of God Himself stooping down to assist. He labours with us and imparts His strength. "For we are labourers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building," 1 Corinthians 3:9. "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me," Philippians 4:13. "But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you," 1 Peter 5:10.



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3. We are required to 'obtain' this help. This help must be sought after and obtained. There is the idea of 'hitting a target' in this word 'obtained'. We must hit the mark in our seeking after God's grace. Consider how the word is translated in Acts 27:3. "And the next day we touched at Sidon. And Julius courteously entreated Paul, and gave him liberty to go unto his friends to refresh himself." It is the word refresh. It helps us understand the meaning of the word. To be helped of God is to be refreshed by Him and for that we must seek Him, wait on Him.

II. REMAINING STEDFAST ENTAILS MAINTAINING THE WITNESS OF THE GOSPEL

His steadfastness, brought about by the refreshing grace of God, showed itself in his continuing to witness. Notice just what a true gospel witness consists of.

1. His unlimited audience. Witnessing both to "Jew and Gentile, small and great," verses 20, 22. He bore record of God's message to all he encountered. An example is given us in verses 4-18 as he tells the story of his own conversion.

2. His limited content. "Saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come," verse 26. Everything the steadfast person witnesses to will be found in the Bible. It is only that which is within the Bible that ought to be the message of God's servant. We cannot go beyond His revelation.

3. His central theme. "That Christ should suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should shew light unto the people, and to the Gentiles," verse 23. The sufferings of Christ and the resurrection of Christ is the 'light' which is to be proclaimed to the world. This is the message of the Bible.

III. REMAINING STEDFAST PROVOKES OPPOSITION

Here is why so many fail to be steadfast. As soon as Paul makes this statement it provokes an angry retort from Festus. One wonders why, since Festus had heard Paul and when speaking of him privately to King Agrippa, had nothing ill to say of him but rather seemed to suggest he was an innocent man. Why the outburst then? Could it have been brought on by a fear that others might think him sympathetic to the gospel of Christ?

Being ashamed of Christ and afraid of the sneers of men has damned many.

1. Consider the low opinion of the steadfast man. He was mad = 'a man possessed of a raving frenzy.' This is what they said of Christ. "And many of them said, He hath a devil, and is mad; why hear ye him?" John 10:20. Even His friends levelled this accusation at Him! "And when his friends heard of it, they went out to lay hold on him: for they said, He is beside himself," Mark 3:21. The phrase means to be out of one's mind!

That is a common reproach laid against the zealous soul.

2. See how he was ridiculed publicly. Festus spoke loudly. He wanted all to hear his opinion of Paul.

3. They were prepared to deprive him of his liberties and rights. This outburst took place in a courtroom where a man was on trial for his life, but such a disorderly outburst was acceptable since he was only a Christian determined to be steadfast to God. Though court officials acknowledged his innocence, no attempt was made to set him free. "And when they were gone aside, they talked between themselves, saying, This man doeth nothing worthy of death or of bonds," Acts 26:31. Still he was sent as a prisoner to Rome rather than steps being taken to release him and declare his innocence.

This is what it is to bear the reproach of Christ.

4. Paul's response to the abuse he suffered. "But he said, I am not mad, most noble Festus; but speak forth the words of truth and soberness. For the king knoweth of these things, before whom also I speak freely: for I am persuaded that none of these things are hidden from him; for this thing was not done in a



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corner. King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest. Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian. And Paul said, I would to God, that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were both almost, and altogether such as I am, except these bonds." Acts 26:25-29.

Despite the cruel jibe, Paul's overriding concern was the souls of those in his presence. He would have been justified had he strongly rebuked the incivility of Festus, but he did not. Instead, he quietly refuted his charge and then spoke in tender tones to King Agrippa, drawing his mind and heart back to the Word of God.

It is clear that the king was touched, sinful man that he was. "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian." What a statement from such a hardened sinner!

Paul's closing words display fully his tender heart. "I would to God, that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were both almost, and altogether such as I am, except these bonds."

We see again that he had his eye upon all in that courtroom - high officials, clerks, servants. He was still speaking to the "Jew and Gentile, small and great."

Here is what it is to stand firm for God amidst trial and rebellion!

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