

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (9-7-2000 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Acts 21:1-16
Philip, Agabus and Mnason

Introduction

We have reached the last stage of recorded history of the Apostle Paul. He had completed his three great missionary journeys and written a number of his great letters. Under his ministry the Gospel first reached Europe. Now he was returning to Jerusalem, stopping en route at Cos, Rhodes, Patara, Tyre, Ptolemais, and finally Caesarea.

During his stop in Caesarea, he met three men, minor New Testament characters who have a lot to teach us – though few sermons are ever preached about them. One was an evangelist, one a prophet, and the last is described as a disciple – Philip, Agabus and Mnason.

The faithful service of Philip the Evangelist

There are two Philips in the New Testament – Philip the Apostle, very prominent in John's Gospel, and Philip the Evangelist whom we meet in Acts. He was one of the seven deacons in Acts 6, appointed to take care of the widows. Then he evangelised the city of Samaria with much blessing, and also led the Ethiopian Eunuch – the Chancellor of the Exchequer of Queen Candace's government – to the Lord, and thus the Gospel got to Africa.

After that, Philip fell into obscurity, and we do not read any more about the next 20 years. Finally his name crops up again in Acts 21 - **We (Paul and Luke) reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven** (Acts 21:8). His situation was now a lot less conspicuous than the role he had once played in the Jerusalem church. He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied. Truly he could say with Joshua, **As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord** (Joshua 24:15). He warmly welcomed Paul into his home.

There is a lesson here for those who have had to accept a far less conspicuous place than their early beginnings seemed to promise. It is easy to become sour and cynical and have a chip on the shoulder – but not Philip. He was a man full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom (Acts 6:3), and being at the centre of God's will, whatever position that meant, was all that mattered to him. He had died to self and was alive to God – and there was no place for striving for prominence and recognition.

The Christian worker needs to remember this. He must put everything in the Lord's hand, to chose his lot in life, and this will give him the right attitude to Christian work. Strain, anxiety, worry, self-regarding motives will disappear. It does not depend on the worker – it is the Lord's work, and our place is simply to let Him be in control and be His servant. This is a difficult challenge to those with strong ambitions, who want to be known as successes, want to be talked about, hit the headlines. Opinion of others is not what matters, only the opinion of God and His approval.

Solemn warning by Agabus

Agabus the prophet was mentioned in Acts 11:28 as foretelling a famine throughout the Roman Empire. Now this man turned up at Philip's house. He took Paul's belt and tied his own hands and feet with it, foretelling that the owner of the belt would be bound over by the Jews in Jerusalem and handed over to the Gentiles. It was common practice of Old Testament prophets to reinforce their words by acting out the message to make people notice, c.f. Isaiah took off his clothes and sandals as a sign that the Egyptians would be taken captive by Assyria (Isaiah 20:2), and Jeremiah's girdle was spoiled when hidden near the Euphrates, demonstrating how God would mar the pride of Judah.

Paul was prepared for this prophecy. His reply was that he was not only ready to be a prisoner, but to die for the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 21:13). He had told the Ephesian elders that the Holy Spirit had warned him of this, **I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace** (Acts 20:24). It was not that Paul was fond of prison, but his love of Christ and the claims of Christ came first.

Agabus reminds us of the costliness of belonging to the Lord and the supreme and prior claim the Lord has on every life. The conditions of discipleship - **If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple** (Luke 14:26). We need to be reminded that this is what being a Christian requires.

John Bunyan was a clear example – preaching meant prison. He described the parting from his poor wife and children as being like pulling the flesh from bones, especially separation from his blind child, “my poor blind child who lay nearer my heart than all besides. Thought of the hardships that my poor blind one might undergo broke my heart to pieces. I felt like pulling down the house over the head of my wife and children. Yet I thought, I must do it, I must do it.”

When we are Christians, the Lord must come first, not when it is convenient or when it does not upset anyone else. His will comes before comfort, money, position, the nearest and dearest, and myself. This is not the condition that super-Christians have to comply with – this is the condition for normal Christians. Our easy-going laidback Christianity in this century and this country needs a constant reminder of this. That is the only kind of discipleship Christ knows.

Unwavering constancy of Mnason

One of the shortest Bible biographies: **He was a man from Cyprus and one of the early disciples** (Acts 21:16). He was probably a foundation member of the Jerusalem church, maybe a convert on the Day of Pentecost, or a convert from Paul's first missionary journey to Cyprus. He had been a Christian a long time – and was still going strong. Despite old age, he was still willing to receive Paul into his house. His life preached the importance of going on with the Lord year after year, holding fast to the faith come what may. Despite the distractions, and temptations to turn aside, and difficult times, he still walked with God.

How many have begun well, but have stumbled, taken eyes off the Lord and His will, and finished the race in shame and failure. The Bible stresses the need to keep on keeping on. **If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples** (John 8:31). **Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up** (Galatians 6:9). **No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God** (Luke 9:62). **Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us** (Hebrews 12:1).

The Bible also speaks of those like Mnason who have kept the faith into old age. **The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon; planted in the house of the Lord, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green** (Psalm 92:12-14). This is one of the most beautiful pictures of older Christians going on with the Lord. Their health may not be what it was, or their memory, but strong in the faith and walking with God, holding by their early convictions and maturing in them.

We are not told of great achievements by Mnason, or eloquent sermons by him, just that he was a disciple from early days, and still going on. Barnabas encouraged the Christians at Antioch to do the same: **he encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts** (Acts 11:23). A daily walk, in daily surrender and daily appropriation.

Conclusion

So we have Philip, who was content wherever the Lord put him. The limelight and attention of men was not something he sought. And Agabus gives us a solemn warning, as he did to Paul, that we must be ready to suffer if we would be disciples. Mnason, keeping on with the Lord, bearing fruit in old age, is a lesson to all. These three challenge our service to the Lord, our devotion to the Lord, and our walk with the Lord.