

PERSIS

"Salute the beloved Persis, who labored much in the Lord," Romans 16:13.

There are a great number of otherwise unknown Christians who pass for a moment before our view in this chapter. Their characterizations are like the slight outlines to the background of some great artist's canvas, a touch of the brush is all that is spared for each, and yet, if we like to look compassionately, they live before us.

This next *"Woman in My Life,"* about whom we never hear again, and for whom these few words are all her epitaph, was apparently, judging by her name, of Persian descent, and possibly had been brought to Rome as a slave. At all events, finding herself there, she had somehow or other become connected with the church in that city, and had there distinguished herself by continuous and faithful Christian toil, which had won the affection of the apostle Paul, though he had never seen her, and knew no more about her.

That is all. Still she comes into the foreground for a moment, and then she vanishes. Like a ship passing in the night, sounds out and moves on.

What does this lady say to you? Well, first of all, like the others named by Paul, she helps us to understand, by her living example, the wonderful, new, uniting process that was carried out by means of Christianity. The simple fact of a Persian woman getting a loving message from a Jew, and the message being written in Greek, the woman being in Rome, and the Jew in Corinth, brings before us a whole group of nationalities all fused together. They had been hammered together, or, if you like it better, chained together, by Roman power, **but they were melted together by Christ's Gospel.**

This eastern woman and this Jewish man, and the many others whose names and different nationalities pass in a flash before

us in this chapter, were all brought together in Jesus Christ.

If you run your eyes over these salutations, what sticks one, even at the first sight, is the very small number of Jewish names, only one certain, and another doubtful. Four or five names are Latin, and then all the rest are Greek. But this woman seemingly came from further east than any of them.

There they all were, forgetting the hostile nationalities to which they belonged, because they had found "the One" who had brought them into one great community.

We talk about the uniting influence of Christianity, but when we see the process going on before us in a case like this, we begin to understand it much better.

But another point may be noticed in regard to this uniting process, how it brought into action the purest and truest love as a bond that linked men. There are four or five of the people commended in this chapter of whom the apostle has nothing to say but that they are "beloved." This is the only woman to whom he applies that term.

And notice his instinctive delicacy. When he is speaking of men, he says, "My beloved." When he is greeting this lady, Persis, he says, "The beloved," in order that there may be no misunderstanding about the "my." "The beloved Persis who labored much in the Lord," indicating by one delicate touch, the loftiness, the purity, and truly Christian character of the bond that held them together. They were all "accepted in the Beloved."

And that is no true church, where anything but that is the bond. **The love that knits us to one another, because we believe that each is knit to the Lord and fountain of all love.**

What more does Persis mean to you? She is an example living and breathing there before us, of what a woman may be in God's Church. Paul has never been in Rome. No

apostle, so far as we know, had had anything to do with the founding of the Church. The most important church in the Roman Empire, and the church which afterwards became the curse of Christendom, was founded by some anonymous Christians, with no commission, with no supervision, with no officials amongst them but who just had the GRACE of God in their hearts, and found themselves in Rome, and could not help speaking about Jesus Christ. God helped them, and a little church sprang into being.

The great abundance of salutations here, and the honorable titles which the apostle gives to the Christians of whom he speaks, and many of whom he signalizes as having done great service, are a kind of certificate on his part to the vigorous life which, without any apostolic supervision or official direction, had developed itself there in that church.

Now it is to be noticed that this striking form of eulogium which is attached to our "Persis" she shares in common with others in the group. And it is to be further noticed that all these who are, as it were, decorated with this medal, on whom Paul bestows this honor of saying that they had "labored," or "labored much in the Lord," are women that stand alone in the list. There are several other women in it, but they are all coupled with men, husbands or brothers, or some kind of relative.

But there are three sets of women, standing singly in the list, and it is about them, and them only, that Paul says they "labored," or "labored much." There is a Mary who stands alone, and she "bestowed much labor to Paul," and others. Then there are in the same verse as our text two sisters, Tryphena and Tryphosa, who names mean "the luxurious." And the apostle seems to think as he writes the two names that spoke of self-indulgence, maybe they rightly described these two women once, but they do not now. In the bad old days, before they were Christians, they may have been rightly named luxuriously living. But here are their names now, the luxurious is turned into the

self-sacrificing worker and the two sisters "labor in the Lord."

Then comes our next lady, Persis, who also stands alone, and she shares in the honor that only these other two companies of women share with her. She "labored much in the Lord."

In that little community, without any direction from apostles and authorized teachers, the brethren and the sisters had every one found their tasks, and these solitary women, with nobody to say to them, "Go and do this or that," had found out for themselves, or rather had been taught by the Holy Spirit, what they had to do, and they worked at it with a will. **There are many things that Christian women can do a great deal better than men.**

We are not to forget that this modern talk about emancipation of women has its roots here in the New Testament. **We are not to forget either that prerogative means obligation, and that the elevation of woman means the laying upon her of solemn duties to perform.** I wonder how many of the women members of our churches and congregations deserve such a designation as that. We hear a great deal about "women's rights" nowadays. **I wish some of us would lay a little more to heart than they do, WOMEN'S DUTIES.**

But finally, Persis gives us our final lesson from this eulogium of an otherwise altogether unknown woman as **she presents to us the model of Christian service.**

First, in regard to its measure, "She labored much in the Lord." Now both these two words, "labored" and "much" are extremely emphatic. The properly translated "labored" will appear in its full force if you recall a couple other places where it is used in the New Testament. You remember that touching incident about the Lord when, being "wearied with His journey. He sat thus on the well." The word "wearied" is the same word as is used here.

Then you remember how the apostle, after he had been hauling empty nets all night

and caught nothing. He uses the same word as employed here. Remember his words to Christ, "Master, we have toiled all the night and caught nothing." **Such is the sort of work that these women had done, work carried to the point of exhaustion, work up to the very edge of their powers, work unsparing and continuous, and not done once in some flash of evanescent enthusiasm, but all through a dreary night, in spite of apparent failures. Now there is the measure of service.**

Many of us seem to think that if we say, "I am tired," that is a reason for not doing anything. Sometimes it is, no doubt, and no man has a right so to labor as to impair his capacity for future labor, but subject to that condition, I do not know that the plea of fatigue is sufficient reason for idleness.

And I am quite sure that the true example for us is the example of Jesus Christ who, when He was most wearied, sitting on the well, was so invigorated and refreshed by the opportunity of winning another soul that, when His disciples came back to Him, they looked at His fresh strength with astonishment and said to themselves, "Has any man brought Him anything to eat?" Yes, what He had to eat was the work that He finished for the Father, and some of us know that the truest refreshment in toil is a change of toil. It is almost as good to shift the load to the other shoulder, or to take a stock into the other hand, as it is to put away the load altogether.

We put careful limits as Christians nowadays in our Christian service for the Lord. Christians are not afraid of being tired in their pursuit of business or pleasure, but in regard to the work of the Lord they will let anything go to wrack and ruin rather than that they should turn a hair, by persevering efforts to prevent it. Work to the limit of power if you live in the light of His GRACE.

She "labored much in the Lord," or as Jesus Christ said about the other woman who was blamed by the people that did not love enough to understand the blessedness

of self-sacrifice, "She had done what she could." It was an apology for the form of Mary's service, but it was a stringent demand as to its amount. "What she could." Not half of what she could, not what she conveniently could. **That is the measure of acceptable service.**

And we also learn from this lady Persis, the spring of all true Christian work. "She labored much in the Lord," **because she was "in Him," and in union with Him there came to her power and desire to do things which, without that close fellowship, she neither would have desired nor been able to do.**

It is vain to try to whip up Christians to forms of service by appealing to lower motives. There is only one motive that will last, and bring out from us all that is in us to do, **and that is the appeal to our sense of union and communion with the Lord Jesus Christ. And the exhortation to live in Him, and then we shall work in Him by means of God the Holy Spirit.**

If you link the spindles in your mill, or the looms in your weaving shed, with the engine, they will go. It is of no use to try to turn them by hand. You will only spoil the machinery, and it will be poor work that you will get off them.

So, in the Lord, in fellowship with Him, having God the Holy Spirit control your life, that is the secret of service. And the longer we stay in fellowship with Christ, and the more continuously, moment by moment, we realize our individual dependence upon Him and our union with Him, **the more will our lives effloresce and blossom into all manner of excellence and joyful service, and nothing else that Christians are whipped up to do, from lower and more vulgar motives than that, will.** It may be a certain kind of inferior value, but it is far beneath the highest beauty of the Spirit-filled Christian service, nor will its issue reach the loftiest point of usefulness to which even our poor service may attain.

"Persis" seems to me to suggest too, the safeguard of work. If she had not "labored much in the Lord," and been in the Lord while she was laboring, she would very soon have stopped her toil. **Our Christian work, however pure its motives when we begin it, has in itself the tendency to become mechanical, and to be done from lower motives than those from which it was first begun.** That is true about all of us, in our several ways of trying to serve the Lord. - **Unless we make a conscience of continually renewing our communion with Him, and getting our feet once more firmly upon the Rock, we shall certainly in our Christian work, having begun in the Spirit, continue in the flesh, and before we know where we are, we shall be doing work from habit,** because we did it yesterday at this hour, because people expect it of us, because A, B, and C does it, or for a hundred other reasons, all of which are but too familiar to us by experience. **They are sure to slip in.** They change the whole character of the work, and they harm the workers. The only way by which we can keep the garland fresh is by continually dipping it in the fountain. "Be constantly filled with the Spirit." **The only way by which we can keep our Christian work pure, useful, worthy of the Lord, is by seeing to it that our work itself does not draw us away from our fellowship with the Lord.** And the more we do it, the more needful it is that we should listen to **Christ's words** when He says to us, "Come ye yourselves apart with Me into a solitary place, and there renew your communion with Me."

Now the last thing that we are taught by this lady, Persis, is the **unexpected immortality of true Christian service.** How Persis

would have opened her eyes if anybody had told her that nearly 2000 years after she lived, people in a far away barbarous land would be sitting thinking about her, as you and I are doing now. How astonished she would have been if it had been said to her, "Now, Persis, wheresoever in the whole world the Gospel is preached, your name and your work and your epitaph will go with it. And as long as men know about the Lord Jesus Christ, your and their Lord, they will know about you, His humble servant."

Well, we shall not have our names in that fashion in men's memories, **but Jesus Christ will have your name and mine, if we do His work as this woman did it, in His memory.** "I will never forget any of their works."

And if we, self-forgetful to the limit of our power, and as the joyful result of our personal union with that Saviour who has done everything for us, try to live for His praise and glory in any fashion, then be sure of this, that our poor deeds are as immortal as Him for whom they are done, and that we may take to ourselves the great Word which He has spoken, when He declared that at the last He will "Confess His confessors names before the angels in heaven."

Blessed are the living that "live in the Lord." Blessed are the workers that "work in the Lord." For when they come to be the dead, that "die in the Lord," and rest from their labors, "their works shall follow them." Gold, silver, and precious stones.

Thank you, Persis.

How many of these women have you met in your life?