

Hugo Bouter

Until the day breaks

Looking forward to the day of Christ

“Then, fearing lest we should run aground on the rocks, they dropped four anchors from the stern, and prayed for day to come (...). And as day was about to dawn, Paul implored them all to take food (...). And when he had said these things, he took bread and gave thanks to God in the presence of them all; and when he had broken it he began to eat. Then they were all encouraged, and also took food themselves.”

Acts 27:29-36

The storm

Paul's voyage to Rome, which is recounted to us in this chapter by Luke with great historical accuracy, did not go as smoothly as the helmsman and the owner of the ship had thought. At first everything seemed fine and the conditions were favorable, but soon the ship became a plaything of the waves due to the suddenly rising storm. The gentle south wind had given way to a fierce storm, which ravaged the ship to such an extent that the people on board finally lost all hope of rescue.

For many days they drifted about in darkness, for neither sun nor stars gave any light (v. 20). But when the fourteenth night had arrived that they were drifting in the Adriatic Sea, around midnight the sailors began to suspect that land was approaching. Later this turned out to be the island of Malta. They were afraid of hitting possible cliffs in the dark, so they decided to drop the anchors and wait for the day. How they must have longed for the dawn! Other translations say that they prayed for the day to come.

But this wish, or prayer, we can also apply to ourselves, and in two ways: personally and as a fellowship of Christians. On a personal level, this scripture can be meaningful to us when we are in difficult circumstances, or in need. Sometimes it can be dark in our lives and then we long fervently for God to dispel the darkness. With David we may then say, "The LORD my God will enlighten my darkness" (Ps. 18:28). We know that He will answer our prayers. God is light, and He dispels the darkness.

The day of Christ

But also as a fellowship of Christians, these words have much to say to us. After all, the church of God looks forward to the coming of the day of Christ! When He was on earth, He was the Light of the world (John 9:5). But He spoke of going back to the Father, who had sent Him into the world. The light of God, the truth of God would now have to be spread by His followers, for they would henceforth be "the light of the world" (Matt. 5:14).

Christ Himself, the great Light, would go back to heaven. The children of light would now testify of Him in this dark world, in which they would shine as light bearers. The true light would henceforth be manifest in their lives (see for example John 8:12; 9:5; 12:35-36; Eph. 5:8; Phil. 2:15-16; 1 John 2:8). Thus, while it is night in this world, due to the absence of the great Light, believers are a witness to the Light.

This world is the territory of the rulers of this darkness; therefore, we look forward to the coming of the day of Christ. And as it becomes darker in this world, which has preferred darkness to light, we long all the more fervently for the dawning of the new morning. Yes, we comfort ourselves with the thought that the night is far spent and the day is at hand (Rom. 13:12). More than watchmen do, we wait for the morning (Ps. 130:6).

Is it not our desire that the day should come? Do we not have every reason to look forward to the return of the Light, to His coming for His own as the Bright and Morning Star and His glorious appearing as the Sun of righteousness? After all, figuratively speaking, it has been the same with the church as it was with the ship on which Paul sailed to Rome. The "ship" of the Christian testimony has been badly battered by the storm and it is in danger of being shipwrecked. The people on board are in distress and they look forward to the new day.

The voice of Paul

Yet the people on board were themselves to blame, for they had not listened to the words of Paul. The apostle was just a prisoner on the ship, and his voice was not given the authority it deserved. The advice of others, say the professionals, weighed more heavily; and that really was the cause of the problems. Paul and his words and letters have traveled with the church on its journey across the world's seas, but his message was not listened to in regard to the course to be taken – the prophetic words he had spoken were ignored. Human traditions and opinions have prevailed in the history of the church. People have been "more persuaded by the helmsman and the owner of the ship than by the things spoken by Paul" (v. 11). And the consequences have been extremely serious. The course taken by the professing church proved fatal and led to its downfall.

But finally, when all hope of salvation is taken away from the sailors, Paul's voice is heard again. This gives a happy twist to the rest of the story. As soon as we come to the recognition that we should have listened more carefully to Paul's inspired words, hope once again dawns. The ship may be lost, but the people on board, in accordance with the words of the apostle, will all arrive safely in the desired haven. The judgment on the professing church has become inevitable. She is set aside as God's testimony here on earth (Rom. 11:22; Rev. 3:16). But true believers need not fear for their lives, and they can even keep good cheer (vv. 22, 25).

What does this have to say to us? We must recognize that in many ways the church has departed from God's will and taken a wrong course. For example, when it comes to the organization and administration of the church, worldly standards have been used and the word spoken by Paul has not been followed. The church has become worldly and it has listened to the wrong leaders. Only when one starts listening again to the voice of Paul does hope dawn. Whoever does not return to the law and to the testimony, for him there is no future.

However, the apostle assures us to keep up good spirits. On the one hand, he notes that the church would follow a wrong course (Acts 20:29-30; 2 Thess. 2:7; 1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Tim. 2:16-17; 4:3-4), but on the other hand, he directs our eyes to God's faithfulness. In this way we find in his letters, on the one hand, that he predicts the deviation, but on the other hand, that he points to the fulfillment of God's plans with regard to His own – among others in the letter to the Ephesians. And that gives us new courage and fills us with a firm confidence that all of God's children will come safely ashore, i.e. reach the heavenly goal safely.

The meal

Paul also urged the sailors to take food (v. 33). This is what we need in the end times, in the last days just before the return of the Lord Jesus Christ, when the storms rage so fiercely and threaten to wreck the little ship. We need spiritual food, food "in due season" (Matt. 24:45-46). We must be strengthened by the Word of God, so that we can survive. This takes place "as day was about to dawn" (v. 33).

Just before daybreak a meal was held here, at which all the sailors were satisfied with food. In the same way we need spiritual food in these last days before the coming of Christ, when the storms rage so violently and the ship is in danger of sinking. Fortunately, here is a servant of God who is watchful and who distributes the needed food at the right time. Through the ministry of the Word we receive new strength and draw new courage. God's Word is our only anchor when human supports fall away. This meal – which, by the way, can also be seen as a picture of the Lord's Supper and the true worship according to His will – serves to satisfy all those on board.

It must have been a remarkable sight: to see all these people gathered together so calmly in the midst of the storm, and to see them eating this food with thankfulness, spurred on by the word of the Apostle! But God has also "set a table" before us, and that in the midst of the storms in the end time. Let us take to heart the teaching that the Lord gives us in these last days, so close to His coming! Let us not miss the meal that He has prepared for us. Let us take the food that He has given us and thereby look forward with new courage to the dawning of the day, "a morning without clouds" (2 Sam. 23:4).

OudeSporen 2021

