

Entry from the Log of the Good Ship Davis: July 2011

"This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as **servants** of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed."

1 Cor 4:1 NIV

"Let a man so account of us, as the **ministers** of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God."

1 Cor 4:1 KJV

My pastor gave me a word, a Greek word, one that I had not heard before, although when I researched it I found considerable commentary from others. I had asked for a meeting with the pastor to discuss theological issues, most of which were camouflage for my real topic of griping about our current life situation. He is a wise man and soon saw through me; after listening to my many complaints about how I couldn't see where God was taking us, couldn't understand why God would have prepared me for so many things only to seemingly disallow my pursuit of them, and my concerns that God has forgotten to keep me informed about His plan and obtain my approval of same, the pastor briefly but firmly reassured me that 1) God has me exactly where He wants me, and 2) there was ample Biblical evidence that the Kingdom can, and will, move on without my guidance. And then he gave me the word: *hyperetes*.

Look at the first verse of the fourth chapter of 1 Corinthians: Paul, the principal theologian (after Christ) of the New Testament, once again refers to himself and his companions as "servants". I am familiar with the Greek word *doulos* which he uses more frequently, often translated as "slave", or "bondservant", either of which has its own connotation of just where in the hierarchy of Christian service this esteemed apostle saw himself. But in the verse above, it isn't *doulos*; it is *hyperetes*. According to linguists, it is usually translated as "servant", or "minister", such as seen in the NIV and KJV passages above. But to the original reader of Paul's letter, to the Greco-Roman citizen of the seaport city of Corinth and thus familiar with the terminology of ships and sailors, it would have been heard in its literal meaning: *under-rower*.

The Roman *trireme* was the principal warship of the fleet, a craft that evolved from earlier Greek versions. The sail would be hoisted only on long journeys or during storms; the principle mode of power came from three banks of rowers. The top row was considered physically more difficult to master, as the angle of the oar and synchrony of the stroke made the task challenging. The middle row was no vacation, either. But the bottom row, the "under-rowers" was the worst. Picture Charlton Heston in *Ben Hur*, the scene where he is confined along with other unfortunates deep in the bowels of a trireme. While the



original Greek ships used paid crew, in Roman times the rowers were slaves. They were kept in place by shackles, and the lowest section was dark and dank; the portholes where the oars were deployed were covered by leather flaps in an attempt to keep the water out, as this level of oarsman was literally at the waterline. The rower couldn't tell where the ship was going, or why it needed to go at a particular speed. The rhythm and cadence of the pace of each stroke was set by a drummer or piper who in turn got orders from above. And should the ship sail into peril, swamp or sink, the *hyperetes* would find themselves obligatorily following what in modern times is the captain's duty: go down with the ship.

And this is the word that Paul uses to describe himself, and us, when he says we are "servants" and "ministers" of Christ: *hyperetes*, sometimes in the dark, unable to determine the course, dependent on someone else to establish the direction and the pace of our journey, continuing to work at the job at hand while being utterly dependent on those above for the outcome of the voyage.

Karen has now effectively lost the ability to recall who many of the important people in our lives have been; she can remember first and last names, but not where, when, or how we have known them. She senses that they are important to us, but cannot identify why. Even the best of times we now have with our granddaughters are fleeting experiences; on a recent drive back to Arizona from a visit with our family in Texas, Karen remarked that she looked forward to when we could see them. Not see them again, but see them; she had already lost the events of the previous day. Yet she is still vibrant, alert, and beautiful. Those who don't know us would not guess what she is going through. It is painful, but she can handle it because she doesn't have much left to compare it to. She is aware only of the moment, unencumbered by memory of what was or what might have been. She trusts God and thanks Him for His promises. She doesn't always like where she is, but she has no doubt that she is where she is supposed to be.



We are getting excellent neurological care; the cutting-edge research program that enrolled her in a novel drug trial for Alzheimer's patients later determined, on the basis of still more research-level tests, that she almost certainly does not have Alzheimer's. They removed her from the drug study, only to ask after two months if she could be re-enrolled; they don't think it will harm her, and are hoping that unexpected benefit might be seen regardless of diagnosis. Which diagnosis, unfortunately, we still don't have; we are receiving the best care from the best people, but nobody has yet been able to define the problem. The current working diagnosis, at least the one they put on the requests for another PET scan and trials of cognitive rehabilitation, is "Pick's Disease", a form of FTD, the much less common group of FrontoTemporal Dementias. The outcomes are not necessarily better, but the progress of illness may be atypical, and slower, compared to Alzheimer's. Our next neurology appointment is in August, where we hope to get more information from the results of these most recent tests.

Typically at this point in a letter, particularly to ministry supporters, I would write about what I have been able to do work-wise under the circumstances: some local volunteer work at a crisis center, some church consultations associated with my attempts to learn Spanish under the very patient tutelage of the wife of a pastor of a local Hispanic church, and my sporadic efforts to respond to requests from those on the mission field for consultation and supervision, accomplished through video Skype. I feel compelled to reassure everybody that I am still useful and relevant. I am grateful that I can serve in these ways, but there is such a huge part of me that still wants to do more, to travel, to meet needs internationally that I hear about routinely, to take control of the course of this vessel and steer it out of the storm. In my heart, I want to take back the helm of my ship so I can sail it where I want to go.

No wonder my pastor gave me this word. He quickly saw my litany of supposed accomplishments was just an attempt to convince everybody that I am the best rower in the galley, worthy of promotion from the third level back to the deck, ready to give advice to the captain, ready to take command and take this vessel to infinity and beyond, trying to escape a situation where things often seem dark, the course unfathomable, and where I must respond to a rhythm dictated by others, completely out of my control. I have been missing the obvious: I truly am exactly where I am supposed to be. My tasks are few and simple. I am to trust my Captain to set the course, I am to tug on the oar that I have before me rather than try to teach others how to row, and respond to the drumbeat rather than try to set what I think is a more efficient cadence. There is a purpose in my rowing, yet it is not mine to know the course or length of passage. This may be a long journey. But this I know: however apparently menial my assignment as crew may be, the ship in which we sail is a victorious vessel. By the grace of God, we have been chosen to serve on the winning boat.

Thus, this report from the lower deck. Actually, it isn't all that bad. Fewer responsibilities, pretty clear job description, and a growing awareness that sometimes the cook (it's a small trireme; some of we under-rowers have more than one job) can put out an acceptable gruel. But most importantly, I am realizing I am supposed to be here. I don't need to know why, or where, or when. I just need to remember Who has the helm.

God is faithful. Your prayers for us are effective and much appreciated. I look forward to hearing from you. In our trireme, *hyperetes* can receive e-mail....

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