

One Called Saul of Tarsus

By
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*“And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the street which is call Straight, and inquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul, of Tarsus: for, behold, he prayeth.”
(Acts 9:11).*

Across the stage of human history, many great men have passed and made their contribution to the welfare of the world. Some have been like a meteor that shined brightly for a while, like a bright flare stabbing the night for a moment, then passing quickly into darkness as if they had never lived. Others have appeared in the firmament like a fixed star. Men of destiny they have been. They lived. They served. They died, but they never cease to speak. Such a man was Saul of Tarsus. Some men fill their niche in a certain period and serve only one generation, but Saul of Tarsus who lived in the first century of the Christian era belongs to the ages.

Men of the past whose memory lingers with us still immortalized their names because they excelled in some particular phase of life. Find the point of a man's excellence and you discover the key to his greatness.

In Abraham it was faith.

In Job it was patience.

In Joseph it was integrity.

In Daniel it was courage.

In David it was devotion.

In Jeremiah it was compassion.

In John it was love.

In the immortal Apostle Paul, he said of himself that he was the chiefest of sinners, but the record reveals him as a saint, head and shoulders above every other man who has ever spoken for God in this world. We meet him first as a spectator at the execution of Stephen. He stands as the finished product, the excelsior of a thousand years of Jewish culture, the very acme of Pharisaical perfection, the darling of the priestly hierarchy. Let him give his own testimony. "I am verily a man which am a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, yet brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel and taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers, and was zealous toward God as ye all are this day."

His conversion on the Damascus Road was the watershed moment of the first century. From that hour the cause of Christianity began to take on tremendous proportions. Had there never been an Apostle Paul, Christianity might have been relegated to the archives of other Jewish sects, limiting its sphere of influence to the land of Palestine. Someone has said that he was supposed to have taken the vacancy among the twelve by Judas after his transgression and fall. Some have said that the disciples were too hasty in choosing Matthias. To that I do not agree. Saul of Tarsus was no substitute for any man. There was no other like him. He stands in a class apart. God only made one like him. He towers above the good and great of all the ages like a giant above pygmies.

Bent on stamping out Christianity, he went with orders from Jerusalem to Damascus to arrest and imprison any of "that way". But as they trudged along beneath the blistering rays of a noonday sun, a flush of holy light from the sky struck him down and the voice of Jesus Christ called his name. Not until this moment has he associated

Jesus of Nazareth, whom he persecuted, with the Lord whom he served. But from this hour on he became the bond slave of the Nazarene.

His ministry

After many days he was shut up in Damascus and confounded the Jews, proving that Jesus was very Christ. They could not stop him so they lay in wait to kill him. The disciples there let him down over the city wall in a basket and turned him loose in the world. The historians forget to tell us who made that basket or furnished the rope or the names of those kind, strong men who silently lowered that precious cargo to the ground. But the man they loosed in the night turned the course of history for the Gentile world and lifted the human race up a little closer to God.

With Barnabas, Silas, John Mark, Timothy, Luke and others, he traveled over 10,000 miles, much of this on his feet, on three missionary journeys. From Mars Hill among the philosophers of Athens to the barbarians of Asia Minor, he preached Jesus Christ and him crucified. Always to every man the same theme: Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block, to the Greeks foolishness, but to those that believe, it is the power of God.

The historian does not give us the record of all his sermons. He ran one revival in Corinth for eighteen months. I wish I had the copy of Paul's sermons at Corinth. With them I believe my library would be complete. What a preacher he must have been. He didn't rant and rave. Again and again we are told that he reasoned with them. Like a lawyer he pled the case of the crucified, risen Lord. And in every city, the result was the same. He won converts to Christ and organized a church.

After his arrest in Jerusalem, we have several recorded sermons. In at least two of them he gave his testimony. Even as he neared the end of his life, he would rehearse that wonderful experience on the Damascus Road. We get an idea of how his sermons affected people as we see him in chains before Felix and Agrippa. Before Felix he reasoned until Felix, despite his hard heart, was caught as if in the grip of a might auger. He had to stop Paul before he finished. Felix trembled. Before King Agrippa he told the story of his conversion and before he could finish, Agrippa was saying, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian."

His Suffering

The touchstone of his life, the key to his greatness, is a single statement: "I am ready."

I am ready to preach the Gospel at Rome.

I am ready to die in Jerusalem.

I am ready to suffer anything for Christ's sake.

I am now ready to be offered up.

We shrink from suffering. Paul was ready to suffer. We look for the easy way. Paul looked for God's way. As a rule the magnitude of a man's character can be measured by the amount of suffering the Lord allows to come upon him. In verse 16 Jesus says to Ananias, "I will show him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake." We don't have a record of all his sufferings in detail, but Paul lists them in chapter eleven of the second letter to the Corinthians. At Lystra they stoned him and left him for dead. God brought him back to life and sent him on to preach. In Philippi he was beaten and jailed but that night they had a prayer meeting and sang songs in the night. Those

songs caused an earthquake that shook the stocks loose from their hands. Long years he spent in a Roman prison, but from that dark dungeon he sent out his letters to the churches and to the world.

Modern theology is trying to divorce suffering and sickness from the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That is farfetched and impossible to do as if trying to divorce light from the sun or heat from fire. Christianity was born in the crucible of suffering on Calvary's brow. On the hot rocks of the place known as the place of the skull, the blood of Christ ran down and the shafts of justice shot through his soul like ten thousand poisonous darts. His heart burst open, but out of that ghastly, tortuous death, Christianity was born. The men and women who have followed the way of suffering have given most to make this world a better place to live.

Great literature has come to us out of affliction. If there had been no Bedford jail for Bunyan, we never would have had *Pilgrim's Progress*. In Milton's blindness, *Paradise Lost* was born. The book of Job is a classic that ranks among earth's greatest literature, but it came out of the ash heap where Job suffered. The twenty-third Psalm, the greatest piece of poetry on earth, came out of the heart of David, a heart that had been crushed and broken a thousand times. If he had never been driven to extremities and if he had never felt the lash of affliction's whip, we never would have read, "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want." The most passionate music comes to us in the minor key. In it you hear the plaintive notes of pain in the songs of the oppressed. The great apostle is greatest in his suffering and consequently greatest in the writings that he has left for posterity. Think of the paucity of New Testament theology as it relates to the Gentile if there had been no Paul.

The character of Saul of Tarsus shines brightest against the backdrop of his testimony. Behold him standing before Felix, Agrippa, and Festus. He bristles like a lion at bay. His words like fiery darts stab the conscience until arrogance wilts in the presence of holiness.

Mangled, bruised, bleeding, he hobbles from the rock heap at Lystra. Down the street he comes, staining his tracks with blood, raising a quivering hand, encouraging the Christians.

Behold him that night in the storm, making his way to Rome. After fourteen days and nights, he calls the captain and crew around him and says, "Be of good cheer, men. There stood by me this night the angel of God whose I am and whom I serve and said we would all make it to Rome." See him floating on a piece of a beam from the ship, making it to shore and helping gather wood for a fire. A snake venomous bites him, but he shakes it off into the fire and suffers no harm.

See him in Rome. Under house arrest, he is given enough freedom to preach, to write, to win souls, to reach the lost. Legend has it that after some time in Rome, he finally was condemned to death in Nero's court. Finally, his suffering ended; his race was over, but the voice of Paul rings out yet today in the pages of the Holy Scriptures. Perhaps, he stands as the greatest of martyrs and thousands upon thousands have followed in his wake, each sacrifice opening the way for others to hear the Gospel, for others through the ages to know the Christ, for us to know and for those who follows us to know.

I stood one day by the grave of the unknown soldier in Arlington Cemetary. I could see in the distance the winding Potomac. Across the river I could see the Lincoln

Memorial and in the distance, the towering dome of our nation's capitol. I listened to the rhythmic click of the lone sentinel's heels on the cold pavement as he marched up and down. The icy winds howled down out of the north. Standing there with hat in hand, I seemed to hear the voices of the dead out of the past who had given so much that I might be free. I could hear the voices from Valley Forge, Appomattox, Gettysburg, the Alamo, the Argonne Forrest, the Battle of the Bulge, Iwo Jima, Battan, Corrigador, Heartbreak Ridge, and Pork Chop Hill. They all came back saying, "I died that you might be free." But above and beyond all of them, and above and beyond all of the Christian martyrs from Stephen to today, yonder on a cross outside Jerusalem nearly 2,000 years, a man died that I might not only be free her in this world, but that I might live with him in all eternity. He died for me and he died for you. Paul and the other apostles suffered and died that we might hear that message, that it would not be lost to the ages, but held and revered and above all, proclaimed.