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THE MAN WHO WAS ALWAYS READY

"I am debtor both to the Greeks, and to the Barbarians; both to the wise, and to the unwise. So, as much as in me is, I am ready to preach the gospel to you that are at Rome also. For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:14, 15 and 16).

The most interesting topic of discussion is people and the most fascinating of all subjects is character study.

Across the stage of human history many great men have passed and made their contribution to the welfare of the world. Some like a meteor shine brightly for a while, but when they have passed on the world is just as dark as if they had never lived and never died. Others appear in the firmament like a star and never go out. They may cease to live and move among men, but they will never cease to speak.

The good and great of bygone generations look over our shoulders today and with knowing fingers, point out the way for us to take.

Each man in his own sphere and order made his individual contribution and by some trait of character, some talent possessed, or some task well done, distinguished himself from among his fellows and became immortal.

By carefully studying the lives of the great, we can almost without exception discover the source of greatness and the key to success:

In Abraham it was his *faith*.

In Job it was his *patience*.

In Joseph it was his *integrity*.

In Daniel it was his *courage* and *conviction*.

In David it was his *devotion*.

In Jeremiah it was his *compassion*.

In Jesus Christ it was His *love*.

This does not mean that these are the only qualities in which they excelled. It simply means that this is possibly the most obvious virtue.

We have before us in this text a man who walked across the stage of action almost two thousand years ago. He walked in the footsteps of the Galilean whom he met on the Damascus road. He lived, loved, labored and died in such a way that men still class him as the top man who spoke for Christ in this world. This man was Paul, the Apostle.

The motto of Paul's life and the key to his magnitude is contained in the words: "I am ready."

It was this quality of character punctuating his life that lifted him from among the commonplace and mediocre and marked him for importance and immortality.

What a rebuke and challenge was this sort of philosophy to the sleepy, lazy, drowsy people of Palestine.

To read the book of Acts is to thrill with the aggressive quality of the early Christians. Not only did the apostles feel the urge to spread the glorious message of the resurrection of Christ and the Pentecostal message, but the laymen took the cue and echoed the truth wherever they went.

Simon Peter set the pace on the Day of Pentecost and the whole host of believers caught step with him. Both men and women felt the fire burning on the altar of their hearts, and they went everywhere preaching the Word.

Stephen, the deacon, was not content just to serve tables. As he fed the hungry widows and orphans, he lifted up his voice to preach Christ to men. On and on he preached until flying stones stopped his burning lips and silenced his eloquent tongue.

Philip, another deacon, went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ unto them. A revival swept that city saving thousands, healing the sick, casting out devils and filling the multitudes with the Holy Spirit.

The people who spilled down out of the upper room that morning of the 50th day were all preachers—men, women, handmaidens and servants—they all had a story to tell, a testimony to give. They felt that they must tell it or die.

It has always been so. When people catch fire, they must tell it or die. What they had was truth on fire.

That indeed was a stormy period of history. Lame men walked when spoken to in the name of Jesus. Men fell dead in the church door when they lied to God. Martyrs preached until they lay dead in the streets. Men with bleeding backs sat in prison cells and rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer for Christ.

A period of pioneering begets pioneer children. A man of great caliber gears his message and life to the times in which he lives. These were pioneer days. Life was hard and the type of life men lived was reflected in their thinking about God, His judgment and justice. The world never knew

braver or stronger men than those who pioneered the creed of Christianity in those early days.

They were iron men. They were mighty men; men who would neither bend nor bow, who feared none but God and hated nothing but sin and Satan. This splendid courage for the first time was matched against all kinds of tyranny and wrong that had held sway in the world for so long.

They were products of the times. The fact and freshness of the resurrection had robbed death of its terrors. The mighty wind, fire, and tongues of the Day of Pentecost, followed by the three thousand wilting before Simon's preaching had convinced them of the power of the message.

The angels unlocking the prison doors and telling them to go and stand and speak in the temple had assured them of the vital nearness of the Holy Spirit and the concern of Christ for them. The sudden death of Ananias and Sapphira had convinced them of the justice and judgments of God. The message of the angels on Mt. Olivet had spurred them on with the certainty of Christ's soon return. No wonder they all went everywhere preaching the Word!

At this stormy stage, a new face appears in the picture. At this fiery point of development, a new man joins the despised few. He has been intercepted by the powers from another world at high noon. At a very irregular time, at a very unusual place and in a very remarkable manner, Saul of Tarsus becomes Paul the Apostle.

He was a product of the times. He was a son of the Christian church in one of her most aggressive, stormy, fiery periods. No wonder he was such a mighty man—such a ready man.

The statement in the text is in connection with

Paul's desire and plans to go to Rome to preach the Gospel.

In writing this letter, he opens with "So much as in me is, I am ready to preach the gospel to you that are at Rome also."

In the earnestness and wholeheartedness of this resolve, there is something that grips and thrills you. What is so challenging in Paul's being ready to go to Rome? What is so extraordinary about this confession?

Rome was the world capital at that time. All roads led to Rome. The opportunity was greatest at Rome to feel the pulse of the world and attack the lion in his lair. The danger point for all Christians of the world was at Rome because there the bloodthirsty Nero ruled. It was the Nero who killed his own mother, Nero who lighted his garden at night with the tarred bodies of living Christians, Nero, the ruthless pagan, the bloodthirsty dictator, who drew satisfaction from inflicting pain and watching people suffer from his barbarous torture.

Realizing full well the situation that held sway in Rome, Paul penned the words: "I am ready to preach this message in Rome."

That's the spirit that pushed Daniel's windows open toward Jerusalem. That's the spirit that left the three Hebrew children standing upright when everybody else bowed down to the Babylonian gods.

Paul was ready to preach the Gospel of Christ at Rome because:

It is the power of God unto salvation.
 It is the bread of life to the hungry.
 It is the water of life to the thirsty.
 It is life to the dead and dying.
 It is hope to the hopeless.

It is peace to the troubled.

It is light to those in darkness.

Paul was ready to preach the Gospel of Christ because of what it is and what it would do for Rome if they would accept it. It was Rome's only hope. Somebody needed to carry the Gospel to Rome, and although Paul knew in all likelihood that the man who dared to stand up in Rome and preach this Gospel would have to die for it, yet he was ready. In the face of these staggering facts, he picked up his pen to write: "I am ready to go to Rome."

His whole life from the day on the Damascus Road was punctuated with this statement, "I am ready." He not only wrote it but he practiced it.

At Caesarea he stopped on his way to Jerusalem and a prophet came to him and told him what was going to befall him there. The people wept and begged him not to go, but he said, "What mean ye to weep and break my heart? I am ready not only to be bound but to die for the name of Jesus."

One of the tests of real Christian character is a willingness to suffer for the cause of Christ—ready to suffer persecution, ready to suffer because you have been misunderstood, ready to suffer unjustly, ready to suffer at the hands of people whom you have sacrificed to help. You may have to suffer for doing good, suffer from scorn of someone you thought was your friend, suffer when you stand for the right.

Paul said: "Behold, the third time I am ready to come unto you. I seek not yours but you." He was ready to bear the burdens of others.

His readiness did not forsake him when the shadows of the evening gathered and the martyr's

death waited just outside. He was not reluctant to face the executioner, but with the same buoyancy that characterized his entire life, in his final hours he could say, "I am now ready to be offered up."

"Now ready" is the significant statement. Not hedging or putting off, but ready *now*.

His readiness began on the Damascus Road. He was then ready to repent. He was ready to confess his wrong. He was ready to apologize. He was ready to forgive.

All experiences previous to this signal hour made him ready to go from Nero's place of execution to Heaven, "To be absent from the body and be present with the Lord."