

Paul's Humiliating Confession

by Thomas Reade

The sermon discusses Paul's humiliating confession and his conversion to Christianity, highlighting the power of God's grace and the possibility of salvation for all people.

Scripture: Jeremiah 1:17, Ezekiel 2:6, Malachi 2:6, Acts 4:29, Acts 9:1, Acts 14:19, Acts 26:9, 1 Corinthians 15:9, 2 Corinthians 11:23, Galatians 1:13, Philippians 3:4, 1 Timothy 1:12, Revelation 2:4

Topics: "Humility And Grace", "Persevering Faith"

Description

Thomas Reade preaches about Paul's humiliating confession, the opposition he faced from the Jews, his reception by the apostles in Jerusalem, and the natural energy of his character. Reade emphasizes the importance of humility in acknowledging our sins and the transforming power of God's grace in Paul's life. He highlights Paul's boldness in preaching the Gospel despite persecution and encourages believers to have unwavering faith and courage in sharing the message of salvation. Reade urges Christians to be examples in love, faith, and purity, following Paul's dedication and zeal in serving the Lord.

Transcript

PAUL'S HUMILIATING CONFESSION.

THE OPPOSITION HE MET WITH FROM THE JEWS.

HIS RECEPTION AT JERUSALEM BY THE APOSTLES.

THE NATURAL ENERGY OF HIS CHARACTER.

PRIDE is the great opposer of regenerating grace, and would, if unsubdued, forever close the heart against the entrance of the Spirit. By an act of sovereign love, the proud sinner is made sensible of his guilt and helplessness. The Spirit, through his convincing light, empties him of all haughty thoughts of his own righteousness and strength; while the Law, in which he trusted, affords him no shelter from the arm of Justice. By its spirituality and extent, reaching to the inmost motions of the will, the Law pronounces his condemnation; and extorting from him the anxious cry- What trust I do to be saved?- becomes a schoolmaster to bring him unto Christ, that he may be justified by faith. Thus, through grace he renounces all dependence on his own works, and is resolved to be saved in God's way, or to perish at his feet.

Such were the feelings of Paul, now that he was baptized with the Holy Spirit, and made a servant and an Apostle of Jesus Christ -SELF was crucified. With heart-felt sorrow he confessed his guilt, bore the most

open testimony to the former enmity of his heart, and magnified that grace which brought him out of darkness into marvelous light. O happy change! the fruit of everlasting love.

Many striking instances are recorded of his self-abasing acknowledgments. When standing on the stairs of a castle at Jerusalem, he said to the infuriated multitude, who were ready to tear him in pieces for his boldness in preaching Christ, as the King and Redeemer of Israel; "I persecuted this way unto death, binding and delivering into prison both men and women, as the high-priest bears me witness, and all the estate of the elders, from whom also I received letters unto the brethren, and went to Damascus to bring those who were there, bound to Jerusalem to be punished." With this usual sincerity, when pleading his cause before King Agrippa, he unhesitatingly declared, "I thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth, which things I did in Jerusalem; and many of the saints I put in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them; and I punished them often in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme, and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them, even unto strange cities." To the Galatian converts, he told the same humiliating history; "You have heard of my life in time past in the Jews' religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the Church of God, and devastated it." In his Epistles to the Christians at Corinth, he thus abases himself; "I am the least of the Apostles, and am not fit to be called an Apostle, because I persecuted the Church of God."

Enumerating to the believers at Philippi his Pharisaical merits, of which he was once so proud, he ranks as one of their number, "his zeal in persecuting the Church." To the Ephesians, in a strain of sweet humility, he thus extols his grace which was so richly manifested in his conversion; "I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God, given unto me by the effectual working of his power. Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ."

How beautiful is true humility; it is the very image of Jesus. This heavenly grace gives such a sweetness to him who possesses it, that even the world attempts to imitate so lovely an attainment. The essential difference between Christian and counterfeit humility is soon discovered, by the patient endurance of the one, and the petulant nature of the other. The haughty Saul, when he became a Christian, was humbled by every view of himself; but his humility was blended with gratitude, as is beautifully instanced in his Epistle to Timothy; "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has enabled me, for he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, who was once a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious; but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief; and the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the chief. Howbeit, for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first, Jesus Christ might show forth all long-suffering, for a pattern to those who should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting."

After this exhibition of free unmerited mercy, no poor sinner need despair. To the heavy laden soul crying out for help, the converted Saul gives the cheering intelligence, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved." How blessed is the assurance, that with the Lord there is mercy, that with him there is plenteous redemption. Delightful truth! He is good and ready to forgive, full of compassion and gracious, long-suffering, and plenteous in mercy and truth. Happy then is the man who has the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in the Lord his God; for the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those that hope in his mercy. What can exceed the richness of this divine promise, made to every humble believer in Jesus; "Because he has set his love upon me, therefore will I deliver him, I will set him on high, because

he has known my name. He shall call upon me, and I will answer him. I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver and honor him; with long life will I satisfy him, and show him my salvation."

As Paul, like a ravenous wolf, devoured the sheep of Christ, so he himself, when made one of the Savior's flock, became the object of bitter persecution. How true it is, that all who will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution. Even natural affection cannot restrain the violence of this deep-seated enmity against Christ and his people; for, "the brother shall deliver up the brother to death, and the father the child; and the children shall rise up against their parents, and cause them to be put to death." With what faithfulness did Jesus forewarn his disciples, that through much tribulation they must enter the kingdom. But, did he leave them comfortless? Oh! how gracious are his parting words- "These things have I spoken unto you, that in me you might have peace. In the world you shall have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

"After that many days were fulfilled," the sacred historian informs us, "the Jews at Damascus took counsel to kill Saul." They watched the gates of the city day and night, so intent were they on their purpose. But their laying wait was made known to Saul, and the disciples took him by night, and let him down by the wall in a basket, by which means he escaped out of their hands.

How secure is the believer in Jesus. "As the mountains are round about Jerusalem, so the Lord is round about his people. Behold, he that keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep." Jesus guarded the life of his servant, to whom he had appointed a great and glorious work. He could therefore say to King Agrippa; "Having obtained help of God, I continue to this day." Blessed are they, who are actively engaged in the Lord's service; they may have many trials by the way, but He, who for their sakes endured the cross, despising the shame, will uphold them by his grace, and at length give them a crown of glory that fades not away.

We might naturally expect, that a powerful opposition would be excited against a man, whose conversion to the faith of Christ afforded such an overpowering evidence to the truth of Christianity, and whose holy life in Christ condemned the worldliness of the Priests and Pharisees. The more Paul, by his life and doctrine, demonstrated the power and excellency of the Gospel, the more inveterate was the enmity manifested against him. The minds of the Jews, as a nation, were judicially blinded. They knew not the day of their visitation. The Lord would have gathered them, as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings, and they would not. Their language towards Jesus was; "We will not have this man to reign over us."- and to his faithful servant; "Away with such a fellow from the earth; for it is not fit that he should live." No arguments could convince them, no reasoning could persuade them, no miracles, wrought before their eyes, could remove the stubbornness of their unbelief. Nothing, no nothing but the Almighty Power of the Spirit of God could bring them, as humble penitents, to the foot of the cross, make them to rejoice in the atonement of Jesus, and cause them to glorify God, by an entire submission to his will.

"Even unto this day, when Moses is read, the veil is upon their heart, nevertheless, when they shall turn to the Lord, the veil shall be taken away." When that reviving period shall arrive, a new impulse will be given to the Christian Church; and the knowledge of the Lord shall cover the earth, as the waters cover the sea.

In reading the history of the infant Church, we might naturally expect that the disciples, on hearing of the conversion of Saul, would instantly hail it as a glorious triumph of Christianity. But, how faithfully does the sacred historian describe the feelings of the primitive Christians, who, knowing that Satan can transform himself into an angel of light, the more effectually to deceive and to destroy, dreaded lest they should be

betrayed under the mask of friendship. "When Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join himself to the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the Apostles, and declared unto them, how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus."

What could be more natural, than that Saul, having tasted the grace of Jesus, should be anxious to join himself to his beloved people. The Apostle mentions this visit to Jerusalem, in his Epistle to the Galatians; "You know what I was like when I followed the Jewish religion--how I violently persecuted the Christians. I did my best to get rid of them. I was one of the most religious Jews of my own age, and I tried as hard as possible to follow all the old traditions of my religion. But then something happened! For it pleased God in his kindness to choose me and call me, even before I was born! What undeserved mercy! Then he revealed his Son to me so that I could proclaim the Good News about Jesus to the Gentiles. When all this happened to me, I did not rush out to consult with anyone else; nor did I go up to Jerusalem to consult with those who were apostles before I was. No, I went away into Arabia and later returned to the city of Damascus. It was not until three years later that I finally went to Jerusalem for a visit with Peter and stayed there with him for fifteen days. And the only other apostle I met at that time was James, our Lord's brother. You must believe what I am saying, for I declare before God that I am not lying. Then after this visit, I went north into the provinces of Syria and Cilicia. And still the Christians in the churches in Judea didn't know me personally. All they knew was that people were saying, "The one who used to persecute us now preaches the very faith he tried to destroy!" And they gave glory to God because of me."

When Saul first introduced himself to the church of Jerusalem, in the new character of an Apostle, we cannot be surprised at the tardy reception he met with, as the disciples would well remember the caution given to them by their Divine Master- "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravaging wolves." How exactly does this accord with our own experience. Any sudden change of character generally excites a degree of suspicion in our minds, and makes us cautious, lest, by coming too hastily to a favorable decision, we should become the dupes of artful deception; and more especially, if an avowed enemy, suddenly professes himself to be our friend.

But, if there be joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repents, is there no feeling of delight in the hearts of believers, when sinners, and especially persecutors, are converted to the faith of Christ? Assuredly there is- and such holy joy was experienced by the saints at Jerusalem, when Barnabas had dissipated their fears, by bearing witness to the grace of Jesus manifested towards this bloody persecutor. The Apostles admitted Paul to the fellowship of the saints; they rejoiced over him; he was with them coming in, and going out of Jerusalem; and in their Epistle to the Gentile converts on the subject of circumcision, they styled him and Barnabas; "Beloved- chosen men, who had hazarded their lives for the name of the Lord Jesus." Thus they bore testimony to the truth of his conversion; and they glorified God in him.

During his stay at Jerusalem, the zealous Paul was actively engaged in the work to which Jesus had appointed him. He spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus, and disputed against the Grecians; but so violent was their enmity to the Truth, that they went about to slay him; which, when the brethren knew, they brought him down to Caesarea, and sent him forth to Tarsus. "Then had the churches rest throughout all Judea, and Galilee, and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, were multiplied."

The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church. This ancient aphorism, founded upon experience, proves the truth of David's declaration; "God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God shall help her, and that right early." The disciples, who were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen, went everywhere preaching the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them, and there was great joy in that city. Many traveled as far as Venice, and Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only. Some of them were men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke unto the Grecians, preaching the Lord Jesus; and the hand of the Lord was with them; and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord.

When tidings of these things came unto the ears of the church which was in Jerusalem, the hearts of the disciples overflowed with joy. Being anxious to ascertain the reality of these conversions, they sent forth Barnabas, that he should go as far as Antioch. This good man, who was full of the Holy Spirit, and of faith, gladly undertook the journey. When he came to Antioch, and saw the grace of God, as displayed in the spirit and conduct of these converts to the Truth, who were first honored by the name of Christian, he was glad, and exhorted them all that with purpose of heart, they would cleave unto the Lord. His visit and labors were greatly blessed; for much people was added unto the Lord. O that we could now behold a renewal of these gracious manifestations of the Spirit; that this ancient promise might now be experienced in all its fullness- "I will cause the shower to come down in his season, there shall be a shower of blessings." May we never cease to pray, until God shall make our Jerusalem a praise in the earth.

Christian love is of a peculiarly cementing nature; it binds those together by the sweetest ties whose hearts are filled with the Spirit of Jesus. This uniting love was felt in all its delightful influence by the early Christians, whose trials and consolations were derived from the same sources. From the world, they experienced contempt and persecution; from Christ their Divine Savior, they received strength and peace. This union of heart was enjoyed by Barnabas and Paul, whose lives were now devoted to the glory of the Redeemer.

Having introduced Paul to the church at Jerusalem, and feeling his heart knit to this monument of the Savior's grace, Barnabas was desirous to have him as a fellow-laborer. He, therefore, departed to Tarsus, where Paul had been sent by the brethren to escape the fury of the Jews; and when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. For a whole year, these honored servants of Christ, assembled themselves with the Church, and taught many people. Paul, being called by special grace to the apostolic office, was not permitted to remain in obscurity. He was a chosen vessel, and had a great work to do. Jesus, therefore brought him into his vineyard, which the Apostle cultivated with unwearied labor, and watered with many prayers and tears.

When the Lord bestows his gifts, he designs them for use, and not for idle display. The faith which he gives, is a working faith, and must be tried. The patience which he imparts, must have its perfect work. Thus wrote James to the twelve tribes who were scattered abroad; "Brethren, count it all joy, when you fall into diverse temptations, knowing this, that the trying of your faith works patience; but let patience have her perfect work, that you may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing."

O what an honor does God put upon poor mortals, when he employs them in his service. The highest archangel derives his honor and happiness, from fulfilling, without any mixture of sin, the commands of the Almighty. Jesus, who is in the bosom of the Father, has taught us to pray, "Your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven." Were our views of Jehovah's greatness and glory, such as they will be when we see him as he is, how lowly would every human distinction appear, compared with that honor which rests upon the

saints of the Most High.

Shall a worm of the earth, a rebel sinner, a hell deserving creature, be made a child of God; yes, an heir of God through Christ? Nothing but infinite Wisdom could have devised- nothing but infinite Power could have effected- nothing but infinite Love could have revealed, and applied, in all its fullness, so vast a blessing. Darkness, despair, and destruction would have overwhelmed our apostate race, had not infinite Mercy rejoiced against judgment, through the atoning blood of the Lamb of God.

With never-ceasing delight Paul and Barnabas declared these glad tidings of great joy to the listening crowds at Antioch. They spoke from the heart, to the heart, having themselves tasted that the Lord is gracious, and living in the daily enjoyment of his presence, through the influence of the Holy Spirit. O that our hearts felt this glow of holy love, which rendered the primitive believers so abundantly useful, and caused them to shine as lights in the world.

In tracing the life and character of Paul, there is one feature of peculiar prominence, which cannot fail to strike every attentive observer- THE NATURAL ENERGY OF HIS MIND. He pursued no half measures, he entered into no cold calculations; what he did, he did with all his heart. This he intimated, when pleading before King Agrippa; "I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth;" -and he fully acted upon that conviction. Being dark in his views of prophetic truth respecting the Messiah, he stumbled at that Stone which God had laid in Zion. Jesus was to him a rock of offence. Hence all his energies were called into action to suppress the growing Church of Christ, and to silence those who proclaimed Jesus as the Son of God, and the Savior of the world. But, when enlightened by the Holy Spirit to see the glory of Emmanuel, and, to behold in the virgin's Son, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace; a total change took place within him. His native energies were then directed into anew channel. Being brought under the influence of holy love; his ardor, though unquenchable, was tempered by mildness.

With incessant toil he labored to promote the cause of his beloved Savior, esteeming no sacrifice too great to advance his kingdom. Forbearance and charity shed their sweetness over his character, while decision and courage proved the firmness of his faith. He was truly a burning and a shining light- a city set on a hill, which could not be hidden. The sacred historian records several instances of his boldness in declaring the truth of the Gospel.

At JERUSALEM, as we have already seen, he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus, and disputed against the Grecians. At ANTIOCH, Paul and Barnabas waxed bold, and said, "It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you, but seeing you put it from you, and, judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles." At Iconium they abode long time, speaking boldly in the Lord, who gave testimony unto the word of his grace, and granted signs and wonders to be done by their hands. At EPHESUS, Paul went into the synagogue, and spoke boldly for the space of three months, disputing and persuading the things concerning the kingdom of God.

Lukewarmness and faint-heartedness are traitors in the camp of Israel, and do more to weaken the cause of truth than the fiercest opposition from its determined enemies. Faith and love, patience and prayer, are mighty weapons in the hand of the Spirit. The weakest saint, when exercising these graces, shall come off more than conqueror over the powers of darkness.

The reason why so many shrink from suffering for Christ's sake, arises from the coldness of their love. Their faith, being weak, cannot bear them up against that stream of persecution which so powerfully sets

in against them. Through fear, they yield to the attacks of the enemy, and thus bring distress into their consciences, as well as discredit on the Gospel. The realities of Eternity seem to be forgotten; or, at least, but faintly impressed upon their minds. Looking more at present inconveniences connected with a bold attachment to Christ, than at the glories to be revealed, they flag in their Christian course, and would forever perish, if not restored through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The undaunted Apostle was a stranger to that fear of man, which brings a snare and causes multitudes to shrink from the cross. Paul being convinced of the truth of Christianity, through the immediate teaching of his divine Savior, and the inward witness of the Spirit, feared not the face of man, nor the fury of the oppressor. Whether in Jerusalem, amid the bigoted Jews, or at Athens, among the philosophers of the age, he gloried in the cross of Christ; and drew all his peace and joy from a believing reliance on the power and grace of Jesus.

The poison of popularity, the prospect of some temporal advantage, a false shame, the love of ease, a dread of suffering; in a word, the love of the world, concentrating all these evils within itself, causes many a minister of the Gospel to betray his trust, and many a promising professor to droop and wither.

Faith in the atonement of Christ, is the victory that overcomes the world. This divine principle made the faithful Apostle always to triumph in Christ. Through the power of the cross, the world had lost its charms, and death its terrors. A heavenly light filled his mind, and an all-constraining love his heart. He saw in Jesus, all that was precious, and he found in him all that he needed; hence he disregarded the frowns of men, and was willing to bear shame and reproach for Jesus' sake. Being filled with the Spirit, he preached the word of life with the fullest confidence of success; well knowing, that through the combined power of Truth and Love, the stoutest hearts would be humbled, the hardest softened, and the most polluted rendered pure.

When Jesus was seated at the right-hand of the Father, in fulfillment of his promise, he graciously poured out the Holy Spirit on his Apostles. With this Divine unction, they went forth to proclaim the glad tidings of salvation; and nothing could exceed the fortitude which they displayed. Their courage astonished the Jewish rulers; of whom it is recorded, that, "when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marveled, and took knowledge of them- that they had been with Jesus."

To encourage his disciples before his departure, Jesus said, "Hitherto you have asked nothing in my name; ask, and you shall receive, that your joy may be full." Being now as sheep in the midst of wolves, they needed strength and protection. With a believing reliance on this promise, "Then all the believers were united as they lifted their voices in prayer: "O Sovereign Lord, Creator of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them... Herod Antipas, Pontius Pilate the governor, the Gentiles, and the people of Israel were all united against Jesus, your holy servant, whom you anointed. In fact, everything they did occurred according to your eternal will and plan. And now, O Lord, hear their threats, and give your servants great boldness in their preaching. Send your healing power; may miraculous signs and wonders be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus." After this prayer, the building where they were meeting shook, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. And they preached God's message with boldness."

It may well be said, that the prayer of faith moves the hand that moves the world. Happy, thrice happy would it be for the Christian Church, if all her ministers were men of a kindred spirit, who, in the fullness of their faith and love, could sacrifice reputation, ease, wealth, yes, even life itself, for the Gospel's sake. But

alas! the spirit of the world has made sad inroads into the visible Church of Christ; for many are slumbering on the lap of ease, who should be watchmen on the walls, and champions in the camp of Zion. Still, there are many blessed witnesses, who are valiant for the Truth, whose light shines in the midst of darkness, and whose labors are rendered effectual in spreading the knowledge of Christ. May their numbers be abundantly increased, until Zion shall become a praise in the earth.

To every such faithful laborer, Paul gives this most important charge, "Be an example to all believers in what you teach, in the way you live, in your love, your faith, and your purity. Until I get there, focus on reading the Scriptures to the church, encouraging the believers, and teaching them. Give your complete attention to these matters. Throw yourself into your tasks so that everyone will see your progress. Keep a close watch on yourself and on your teaching. Stay true to what is right, and God will save you and those who hear you."

How rousing was the Divine commission given by Jehovah to his servant Jeremiah; "Get yourself ready! Stand up and say to them whatever I command you. Do not be terrified by them, or I will terrify you before them. Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land--against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land. They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you."

With equal force is the command to Ezekiel, "Son of man, do not fear them. Don't be afraid even though their threats are sharp as thorns and barbed like briars, and they sting like scorpions. Do not be dismayed by their dark scowls. For remember, they are rebels! You must give them my messages whether they listen or not. But they won't listen, for they are completely rebellious!"

The great Apostle of the Gentiles entered fully into the spirit of these Divine charges. He was no timid, no time-serving shepherd of the flock. His character is beautifully described by Malachi, under the general description of faithful pastors; "They passed on to the people all the truth they received from me. They did not lie or cheat; they walked with me, living good and righteous lives, and they turned many from lives of sin. The priests' lips should guard knowledge, and people should go to them for instruction, for the priests are the messengers of the Lord Almighty."

May all the friends of Christ be stirred up to fervent prayer at this eventful period, that a spirit of revival may be poured out on all our Churches, lest the Lord, in righteous judgment, should fulfill on us, his threatening to the church at Ephesus; "Remember from where you are fallen; and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto you quickly, and will remove your candlestick out of his place, except you repent."

In pity to a dying world,

Almighty Father, send your grace;

And let your banner be unfurled,

And faith's slow triumph speed its pace.

What millions of immortal souls,

Still live unmindful of your way

And as death's fearful torrent rolls,
Hundreds are daily swept away.
O Lord, must creatures be undone,
Who from your hand receive their breath?
Shall they be lost, for whom your Son,
Came down to suffer shame and death?
Let sovereign mercy interpose,
To rescue sinners from their doom;
And send your Word to heal their woes,
And light their passage to the tomb.
O spread your Truth through every clime,
Teach stubborn souls to weep and pray;
Let this be the accepted time,
And this salvation's glorious day.

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