

THE SECRET OF A GREAT LIFE

Philippians 3:8-14

Looking back to a very definite time in his experience when he had weighed the matter of his personal relationship to Christ very carefully, Paul recalls his decision, "But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ." He had made a definite surrender to Christ. He had not found any assets in self, and had yielded himself in definite surrender to the Lord. No other way leads to a life of usefulness for God. We cannot please Him and be a power for Him if we are not definitely surrendered.

Paul does not rest upon an old experience that has grown weak by being relied upon continually; his surrender is a present reality. "Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss." That definite surrender in the past is lived out in a present daily experience of yieldedness. That experience has never grown cold.

One is impressed by his progressive surrender—"I counted," "I count," "I do count." Nothing represses the passion of his soul as Paul goes all out for Christ. There wasn't any wishful thinking of what might have been if he had held on to the things so highly esteemed by men, or any pang of regret as he said, "I have suffered the loss of all things."

Wishing may be a noble or an ignoble practice. It may be an air castle of a visionary or the senseless babbling of a lazy vagrant. In many cases it is just the foolish murmuring against our lot in life, a protest against the dispensation of Providence. Splendid wishing expresses itself in the purpose to realize a great ideal. Here Paul sets forth his ideal as he sought to live the Christian life.

Man is the only creature in the earth that is discontented with himself and his environment. The fish in the seas, the beasts in the forests, and the birds in the air are contented. God did not place ambition in them, so they build their homes and live their lives exactly as their ancestors did in the earliest ages. When we compare the homes of the cave dwellers, the of the Hottentots, and the wigwams of the Indians and the stately mansions that adorn our avenues and boulevards today, we can see a tremendous difference in the ambitions of men. The homes of common people today surpass the luxury and comfort of the palaces of the rich of some years ago.

In connection with his admirable aspiration, as expressed in this paragraph, we note that Paul rests his argument on God's electing grace. He recognized that God had a purpose in the life of each individual. Behind our presence here was His purpose to place us here. Behind our acceptance of Christ was His purpose that we should be in the redeemed family of God. Apart from His grace no one would have yielded to the wooings of the Spirit and accepted Christ as Saviour. Before Paul laid hold on Christ, the Saviour had laid hold on him. There was a time when the name of Jesus was hateful to Paul, so he set himself to obliterate Christ and His followers. Then it was that Christ laid hold on him. He yielded to His grasp, and he later discovered that he had been chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world.

Paul knew God had a very definite plan for his life when he chose him to be one of the redeemed family. He knew that the hand of Christ had been laid on him, so he was eager to know for what purpose this choice had been made. He knew that the Divine choice meant more than keeping him out of hell and ushering him into heaven by and by. Paul's ambition was to discover God's will for his life, and to bend every energy to accomplish it.

Paul said that all human endeavor is directed toward one of three things--knowledge, power or experience. So, Paul weaves all three of these into his own ideal.

Paul's ideal of knowledge was to know Christ. "That I may know Him." Paul was a graduate of the school of Gamaliel. He knew science, philosophy and art, but he declared that they were as refuse when compared with the knowledge of Christ Jesus. Paul knew Christ,

and had much experience with Him, yet he was still conscious that there were many things about Him which he did not know. To really know a person one must live with him, enter into his life, see things as he sees them, and feel things as he feels them.

Paul's ideal of power was to know the power of Christ's resurrection. He coveted the power that raised Him from the dead. He wanted that Spirit which raised the Lord Jesus from the dead to control his life in such a way as to enable him to live a resurrected life while he was still in the body.

Paul's ideal of experience was to have fellowship with Christ's sufferings. That aspiration ran counter to human nature. Suffering is one thing that people strive to avoid. We often wish for pleasures that others have, but we never crave their pains. The sufferings of Christ were vicarious. Not a pain did He endure but what it was on account of the sin of someone else. Paul knew that the death of Christ was for the sake of the sinful race, so he had a longing to lay down his life, if necessary, in order that others might be saved. The fellowship of Christ's sufferings is one of the greatest Christian privileges. It preserves us from many evils. It is a great honor to be counted worthy to suffer with Him. Those who have fellowship with Him in suffering will participate in His glory. Those who suffer with Him will also be glorified together with Him.

In these verses of scripture Paul, the most remarkable Christian of the centuries, has told us the secret of his marvelous life. He wanted to get more knowledge of Christ by experience, to triumph over sin, and to have fellowship with Christ in suffering. But, he declared that he had not been able to accomplish his purpose. According to this text, the secret of Paul's great life was four-fold.

I. He Was Dissatisfied With His Attainments.

The loving grasp of Christ had gripped Paul in the midst of his career of persecution. Christ laid hold of Paul for a definite purpose--to divert his great ability into the right channels and make a great missionary out of him. Paul yielded to that grasp and gave himself voluntarily to Christian service. His influence spread extensively, large cities were permeated with Christian truth, flourishing churches looked to him as their founder, and at least thirteen valuable epistles were written by him. He did many wonderful things for his Lord. When his career was almost ended, and he was thinking over what he had done, he frankly stated that he was dissatisfied with what he had done for his Lord Who had done so much for him. He plainly said that he had not yet reached the goal of perfection. Some are satisfied with what they are and what they have done. But Paul was dissatisfied with his attainments and had an eager longing for loftier heights.

II. He Was Desirous Of Spiritual Achievement.

Although he had not yet attained perfection, he was striving to achieve it. His ruling passion was to get nearer to Christ, to grow in His grace and knowledge, to be more like Him, and to do more and better work for Him. His goal was still in front of him.

In his desire for greater spiritual achievement, Paul forgot what he had already attained. He did not lull himself to ease and relaxation of effort because of past attainments.

He would not use the memory of what God had wrought in and through him to encourage self-satisfaction. His attainments served only as a stimulus to greater endeavors for Jesus Christ.

In our desire for greater spiritual achievements, we, like Paul, ought to cultivate a wise forgetfulness of everything that tends to limit the audacity of our hopes and the energy of our efforts.

III. He Was Devoted To A Single Aim.

He said, "I would lay hold on that for which I was laid hold on by Christ Jesus." He took God's purpose in calling and Christ's purpose in redeeming him for his aim in life. For him, the "one thing" worth while was to win the ideal set up for him by Christ. He would not be diverted to anything else. He had no time for lesser interests. He would not dissipate his powers nor fritter away his energy in frivolous and futile activities. With words and actions, he urged all to have a definite and high aim and then concentrate all of life's energies on reaching that aim in life.

From Paul we learn that no life can be very happy, or very great, or very useful, without a single aim and a strong devotion to it. Concentration is the secret of strength in politics, in trade, and in the management of all human affairs. It is indispensable to success in every realm of life.

Our aims should be identical with the aims which God has for us. God has a plan for every life. He has a pattern for every character. He has an ideal for every soul. His aim of every life is the production in us of God-pleasing and Christ-honoring character and service. Each life will be successful just in proportion to its fulfillment of God's plan and aim for it.

IV. He Was Diligent In Strenuous Activity.

When Paul wrote these verses, which reveal the secret of his great life, he had the picture of a race in his mind. He knew that distractions were fatal in a race. As he was running the race of life, he had no time nor inclination to look backward. Neither did he turn aside to look at anything else. He stretched toward the object that he was so eager to reach. He strained every nerve to reach the goal and win the prize. Like every great idealist, he saw the unattained burning so clearly before him that all the attained seemed as nothing to him. He persisted with strenuous and unceasing activity in bearing down upon the goal.

Being dissatisfied with his attainments, desirous of greater spiritual achievement, devoted to a single aim, and diligent in strenuous activity, Paul generated the greatest personality and did the greatest deeds of any follower of Jesus in all these centuries. Then, our scripture tells us how Paul came to be the sort of man that he was. In his own inimitable way, he informs us how we too may live great lives of consecration and service. This we can do by following his example and by meeting the conditions of spiritual progress as he met them.