

BEARERS OF THE NAME

"But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel." Acts 9:15.

The one concerning whom this text was first spoken was Saul of Tarsus, who was bound for Damascus to bind and to butcher. But Christ crossed the path of Saul on the Damascus road, and a great transformation took place, as is the case every time that Christ crosses a man's path. Grace revolutionized the rebel. The antagonist became the apostle by the power of Christ's name. The persecutor became the writer of letters of inspiration, which in itself was a testimony to the power of Christ and the truth of the Gospel. When such an intelligent and well-instructed opponent was converted through the appearance of the Lord from Heaven, it was a testimony to the fact of our Lord's resurrection and to the power of His word.

The change in the man himself and the results of that change extending to all subsequent generations are the things that warrant the statement that his conversion to Christianity is the greatest event in history since the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The transformation was instantaneous and complete. One moment he was breathing out threatening and slaughter and the next he was prone on his face crying, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" From that hour, his whole life throbbed with a passion like that of his Lord. It swayed his purpose, it commanded his action, and it dominated his sacrifice. He counted not his life dear unto himself that he might prove faithful in his ministry. By a remarkable adjustment, he made himself "all things to all men" that he might win some. He warned men night and day. In his ministry he was ever enduring hardship, suffering persecution and privation, yet always sounding a lofty note of triumph.

This man of gigantic intellect and ripe culture found no employment for his great ability so congenial as the preaching of the gospel of the grace of God. It should never be forgotten that his ministry, which was the greatest of all ministries of the Christian centuries, including as it did both the preaching of the gospel of Christ and the writing of the inspired Epistles, resulted in the salvation of millions. It was a great day for all men when Saul of Tarsus fell at the feet of Jesus Christ and said, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" It was also a great day for Saul himself, because the world would never have heard of him if he had not received Christ as his Saviour and surrendered himself to Him as Lord.

Saul learned that Jesus of Nazareth, whom he had hated and persecuted, was none other than the Messiah for whom the Hebrew people had been waiting, and that day he accepted Him as his personal Saviour. Saul also discovered that God had a plan for his life. He did not know that before, and he never would have found it out had he not yielded himself to the control of the Spirit of God. He cried, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" "And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do." Cecil Rhodes, of South African fame, once said, "If there is a God and He cares for men, then the most important thing for any one of us to do than to find out what the plan of God is for our lives and conform to it. Some of us have lived long enough to know that His will is not only the holiest and safest thing for us, but it is the happiest. The power of God, the love of God, the grace of God and the wisdom of God are all back of the man who lives his life in the will of God."

Saul was not chosen because of his talents or brilliant gifts. We are very apt to magnify the man rather than the grace of God. After he was saved, Paul never thought of glorying in his native or acquired ability. He said, "By the grace of God I am what I am." But, before he had a soul vision of Christ, he thought very highly of himself. When he saw his Lord he revised his opinion of himself. He felt it an honor to be able to say, "I am the chief of sinners" and "less than the least of all saints." When we come face to face with our Lord, we are cured of self-righteousness. A vision of Him kills human pride and conceit. When God would do a great work, He always looks for a servant who is small enough in his own estimation to allow God to use him.

How may one know the plan of God for his life? There is just one way to discover it, the way that Saul did--by an absolute surrender to Christ, to go as He leads, to go where He leads, and to go when He leads. Surrender your life to the Lord and He will surely use you.

You will recall that after the conversion of Saul, when Ananias was wondering about going into his presence, he was reassured by the Lord's statement, "He is a chosen vessel unto me." All that is implied in that sentence cannot be fathomed by the mere human mind.

A vessel is a container in which something is held. To be a chosen vessel of the Lord means that one is to be a container for Him. He is to be filled with that which the Lord pleases to place in him. Paul was the type of vessel that the Lord needed to carry the gospel of Christ to the Gentiles. He was a clean vessel. He was faithful and did not refuse the Lord what He asked of him. He was ready to do and to dare to any degree. He never feared anything that might come to him. He trusted the Lord and went ahead. He was not moved by anything that came his way. He said, "None of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself" (Acts 20:24). That was the testimony of his lips and the secret of his great and successful ministry.

The statement of our text, "He is a chosen vessel unto me," suggests an earthenware jar bearing water to thirsty and dying people. It also implies that we are to hear and know and receive the truth as a living message and living power, and that we are to be vessels taking the water of truth to those who are perishing in their ignorance and famishing in their thirst. Just as Paul was chosen to be such a vessel of truth, so we too are to be honored, so wonderfully privileged in conveying that same life-giving and life-saving water to perishing souls around us. If you are a real believer in Christ, you are a chosen vessel. Then, in what condition are you?

When we read the story of the life and ministry of Paul we are embarrassed over the quantity and quality of our Christian service. His sublime faith, great courage, consuming passion for lost souls, willingness to be anything or nothing in the eyes of men, and joy in suffering for Christ's sake place him in a category by himself. Paul occupies a large place in the Bible and in history. No mere man, before or since, has left his mark so wide and deep upon the world. Think of the lands into which he carried the name of Christ. It pleased God to select this most remarkable man to be the medium of inspiration by whose writings we should receive the most thorough and complete exhibition of the gospel of the grace of God. Note how large a space is occupied in the New Testament by the letters which were written by this servant of Christ. To this very moment he exercises, under God, a greater influence over the theology of Christendom than any other man. The Pauline mark can never be erased from the pages of church history.

Since the gospel of Christ was the greatest power on earth, the Lord needed a man to signal afar its glad tidings. With this in view He lifted up Saul of Tarsus and employed him as an instrument to bear His name to others. Concerning this fact Paul never ceased to wonder. After many years of useful and successful service for his Lord, Paul wrote from the prison in Rome to the saints at Ephesus saying, "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" (Ephesians 3:8). This statement reveals at least four things.

I. His Mystery.

"Unto me." Many were the mysteries with which Paul had been faced, and with which he had grappled successfully, but this one is beyond all explanation. He could never understand why God had chosen him for this task of preaching the gospel of Christ. Why did God choose me to preach? That is the great mystery which he failed to solve.

From beginning to end salvation is all of grace. The Lord saved us, not because we deserved to be saved, but because of His grace. "According to his mercy he saved us." Even though we cannot explain the mystery of His grace in saving us, may we never lose the wonder of it.

"I stand amazed in the presence
Of Jesus the Nazarene,
And wonder how He could love me,
A sinner, condemned, unclean.

"How marvelous! How wonderful!
And my song shall ever be:
How marvelous! How wonderful!
Is my Saviour's love for me!"

II. His Meekness.

"Who am less than the least of all saints." Wonder will always lead to worship. The wonder of God's love leads to the worship of God's Son.

Paul held on to this opinion of himself right to the end. In I Timothy 1:15 he said, "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief." What meekness! What humility! This was an expression of what he really felt himself to be.

III. His Mission.

"That I should preach." Augustine called Paul, "The Herald of Grace." It takes grace to preach Christ, as well as grace to live for Christ. "Is this grace given, that I should preach." Paul was called by Christ and commissioned by Him to preach Christ. Paul preached among the Gentiles and many souls were saved as a result of his ministry. Are you working for God in the place of His choice for you? He has the right to say where your sphere of service is to be. Find out where it is and go there.

IV. His Message.

"The unsearchable riches of Christ." What a message! The word which is translated "unsearchable" literally means "not to be tracked by footprints." No matter how far we may investigate His riches they remain unsearchable. No matter how much we may draw from them they are inexhaustible. No matter how far we may track them they are past finding out. Paul tried to sound the depths of God's riches and fulness and he discovered that they were unfathomable.

These unsearchable, exhaustless, fathomless and unexplorable riches of Christ's goodness, grace, gifts and glory constitute a glorious subject for our wonder, meditation and proclamation. If you are saved, you, too, are a chosen vessel to bear the Lord's name to those who have not heard it. Our text tells us what we are, whose we are and to what use we are to be placed -- to bear the Lord's name before others. Make certain then that you keep yourself clean so that you may be "a vessel unto honour, sanctified and meet for the Master's use."

"I saw God wash the world last night
With His sweet showers on high,
Then when morning came,
I saw Him hang it out to dry.
He flung the showers upon the hills,
And upon the tumbling sea;
He sprinkled liquid diamonds in the rills,
And washed each trembling tree.
Now the white rose is purer white,
And the red rose is more red;
Since God has washed each fragrant face,
And put them all to bed.
I saw God wash the world last night,
I wish He had washed me;
Clean of all inside dirt and dust
As He washed the old birch tree."