

THE TRIAL BALANCE OF LIFE

"But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ" (Philippians 3:7-8).

A couple arrived in Mexico after fleeing from Cuba. The circumstances of their leaving were such that they had to leave behind all of their possessions except the clothes which they wore. They were happy to do that, for the freedom which they gained outweighed in value the material goods which they lost. They struck a trial balance of profit and loss, and found this to be so.

A trial balance is a bookkeeping operation in which the debits are set over against the credits to see if they balance. In the case of this couple, the credits overbalanced the debits. So that in the overall they realized a net profit.

In the United States on last Thursday we celebrated Thanksgiving. Its roots go back to the Pilgrim Fathers. They had migrated from Europe to America, leaving behind both friendships and possessions, searching for a place where they could worship God according to the dictates of their consciences, free from ecclesiastical or governmental interference. After a hard New England winter characterized by hardships, disease, and death, they came to their first harvest. So they set aside a day of thanksgiving and feasting. Their trial balance showed their gains far exceeded their losses.

These instances are but finite examples of the infinite gain of one who forsakes worldly position and possessions that he might win Christ. In this trial balance lies our greatest ground for thanksgiving.

On a stone seat in the Scottish Highlands are these words: "Rest and be thankful." This is good counsel for all of us. To pause in the rush of life, count our many blessings, and see what God has done for us will prove to be very beneficial to us.

Paul did this even while he was in prison in Rome. And the Philippian Christians he penned his trial balance of life, nothing that the privilege of being a Christian far exceeded in value the sum-total of his material, earthly blessings.

It is fitting, therefore, that we should study his trial balance, all the while striking one of our own.

In a ringing challenge to the legalists, Paul insists that if they are seeking justification through Judaism, they are ignorant of themselves and their system. He knows the exact worth of that religion, for prior to his experience of regeneration he had exceeded any in conforming to it. If the Judaizers had any reason to have confidence in the flesh, Paul had more than they.

I. The Debits.

"But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ." Paul was not just an ordinary man. Both by heritage and achievement he had much of

which to boast in his Jewish relationship. Some of these things he recounts to the Philippians. He was of the true stock of Israel, not merely a Jewish proselyte. His true descent could be traced back to the patriarch Jacob. At Paul's birth, covenant compliance to the Mosaic law was given, and according to custom he had been circumcised on the eighth day. So in every sense, according to the Jews, he was a son of Abraham. Furthermore, he belonged to the tribe of Benjamin, and this was added reason for boasting for this tribe never wavered in its allegiance to the Davidic throne even when the ten tribes broke away. He belonged to the most orthodox body of the Jewish faith. In every respect, by race and by religion, he was the purest of the pure, "an Hebrew of the Hebrews."

He maintained the language and customs of his people in contrast to Jews who had been compromising with Jewish customs. Likewise, he was a Pharisee, a conservative in his theology, and opposed to the more liberal Sadducees. Paul was not a halfhearted religionist, but he zealously propagated the doctrines of the Jewish faith and persecuted all opposers. And this zeal for his faith was coupled with blameless living. Racially he was as pure, and resolutely he was as strong as any in this faith. He was an unexcelled example of Pharisism. So zealous had he been for his Jewish faith that he had even persecuted the Christians. As pertaining to the keeping of the Jewish law, both judicial and ceremonial, he was without fault. He knew and practiced all the rules of the rabbis. He had a marvelous record, scoring a hundred in Judaism.

Even though he was proud of his birth, proud of his training, proud of his position, proud of his blameless character, and proud of his zeal in religion, at the time to which he referred Paul was still without Christ. What greater example of the futility of the faith not based upon Christ can be found than this deluded disciple of a dead religion, fired with the utmost sincerity and clothed with personal purity! The visions of ambition that fire the minds of many young men now, fired his mind then. The doors of success were opening to him. Everything that an educated young Jew could hope for was a possibility to him. The worldly dream of a great life beckoned him onward. There was a spirit in him which could not be satisfied with the honors and gains of the world. He also wanted to be at peace with God.

There was quite a list of things which Paul could put on the credit side of his life as a faithful Jew, and yet one day on the road to Damascus, even as he was on a mission of persecution against the Christians, he met Jesus Christ face to face. In that experience all of these things which were "gain" to him faded into insignificance. He saw them actually as debits in the ledger of his life. For they were keeping him from the truly abundant life that is in Christ.

Now let us bring this example up to date; let us make it personal. Make a list of those things which at one time kept you from becoming a Christian, or which are even now doing so. It may be the pride of your noble birth or family heritage. It may be your intellectual achievements. Or it may be your

social companions and your practices. Perhaps it is your economic position. Maybe you are doing things in your business which are contrary to God's will. It could even be a form of religion or self-righteousness which fails to satisfy the deepest needs of your life. The list could be almost endless. But whatever it is, if it keeps you from realizing the abundant life in Christ, what you regard as credits may actually be debits in your ledger of life.

Looking back to a definite time in his experience when he had weighed the matter of his personal relationship to Christ very carefully, Paul said, "Those things I counted loss for Christ." What he had thought were blessings in truth were damaging his life in the long run. They were blights instead of blessings. So he "counted" them as such. The tense of this verb means that he fully, completely, and finally took them from the credit side of his ledger and placed them on the debit side. And he did it "for Christ."

II. The Credit.

Over against these debits Paul wrote this one word "Christ." And this credit infinitely outweighed in value all of the debits. "Yea, doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord." Paul would have found it difficult to make a stronger statement than this.

When we relate these strong statements to Paul's experience as a Christian, they take on an even greater meaning. From the star of hope in Judaism he had become the object of hatred and scorn. A fitting contrast is seen at the very outset of his Christian experience. Had he rejected Christ on the Damascus road, a proud, haughty, but honored man might have ridden into Damascus, had been welcomed as a hero by his kind, and have meted out punishment upon the despise Christians. Instead, he became one of them. And as a result under cover of night he was shamefully packed into a basket like merchandise and lowered over the wall of the city to escape death at the hands of his former friends.

Subsequently, through the years he was a marked man. He was maligned, scorned, persecuted, hounded from one city to another, shopwrecked, imprisoned, and was often lonely, hungry, and cold. From one born with a silver spoon in his mouth he became a lowly tentmaker, earning a frugal living as he preached the gospel of Christ. Surely, no man ever suffered for his faith more than did Paul.

But listen to what he wrote from a Roman prison. In effect he said, "On the Damascus road I fully and completely brushed all of my earthly gains into the debit column, and put Christ in the credit column. And after all of these years, despite the hardships which I have borne and now bear, with all the emphasis at my command I still place these things in the debit column. And my experience in Christ is so surpassing in value as infinitely to outweigh them all."

Then, as though he had not said enough, he adds, "For whom (Christ) I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win

Christ." So Paul gathers up all that the natural man might hold dear, and casts it off from him as something filthy and vile in order that he might give himself completely to Christ.

Now if you examine the things which Paul lists, you will discover that none of them is bad within itself, except his persecution of the Christians. But in his unregenerate state, to him even that was a good, religious act. However, as good as they may have appeared, they were keeping him from Christ. And that made each of them a vile, vicious thing. So unlike the rich young ruler who clung to his wealth to his own eternal loss, Paul turned his back upon all of these things for the infinitely greater blessing that was his in Christ. And I pray that you will do the same.

After Paul turned his back on the balance sheet of the flesh, his humility was beautiful to behold. His sincerity of purpose set him apart from all other men. Christians the world over, and down through the centuries, have looked at Paul in admiration, and longed to have power with men for God. To this end Paul openly showed the way, but many others do not seem to find it. Paul had a new standard of values, and his change of values was due to his new knowledge of Christ.

All that Paul once regarded as grounds for boasting now seemed worthless. Christ had become the basis of his confidence and his joy. The reversal of values on his part was instant and complete. He had come to count in a different manner from which he had formerly done so. He had come to count "for Christ's sake." That was an entirely new factor in the situation, a new standard of values, and a new reason for living. Because of Christ, who had thus stepped in between Paul and his old ideals, Paul had reversed his entire outlook on life. He had changed the heading at the top of the ledger. He had erased "gains" and written "losses." For Christ's sake Paul suffered "the loss of all things," that is, the sum-total of his old life's values. His own family regarded him as a disgrace to Judaism. The Pharisees considered him a deserter of their cause. The Jews in general regarded him as a turncoat and a renegade. But, he paid the price for Christ's sake. And it was worth it. Paul did not have any regrets about it.

"For Him I count as gain each loss,
Disgrace for Him renown;
Well may I glory in my cross,
While He prepares my crown."

III. The Conclusion.

Paul's experience can and should be yours. Are you ready to say with him, "What things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ"?

Some people will not believe on Christ because of those things which they will have to give up in doing so. But Christ never asks us to give up anything that

is good, only those things that are harmful. Instead, He takes the good and gives to it an excellence hitherto unknown.

For instance, Paul did not renounce that which was good in his heritage. He only ceased to depend upon it for salvation. He never ceased to be grateful for his heritage as an Israelite. On the other hand, he said that he became a true Israelite through his faith in Christ. The righteousness which he did not receive by being blameless in the law, he received by faith in Christ. That which was good in the faith of the Pharisees, he retained, namely belief in the Scriptures, in miracles, in angels, and in the resurrection from the dead. And in Christ he found the true meaning of the law and the prophets. From persecuting the Christians, he became the greatest among them. And history records him as the greatest of all the preachers of the gospel.

Had Paul not become a Christian, what a loss it would have been to the cause of Christ! But his loss would have been infinitely greater. He would have spent a few years clinging to the refuse of his life, died, and been forgotten. But because he struck a right balance in his life he stands as one of the truly great mountain peaks among men.

Christ can do the same for you. Your accomplishments may not equal Paul's but your gain will be as great. For you will have Christ to save and to enrich and enhance your life here, and to glorify it in eternity.

Just suppose that you cling to the refuse and reject Christ. What then? The world may give you its glory for a few years, and then it will be gone into the everlasting night of an eternity without Christ. "What is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" Suppose that you gain all that the world has to offer, yet lose your soul in the bargain. Then, suppose that, realizing the loss you have sustained, you want to buy back your soul. What will you give in exchange for it? The world itself would not be a sufficient price.

So while there is still opportunity, brush the world and all of its glory onto the debit side of the ledger, and place Christ on the credit side. Then you will know the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus the Lord. Then, and only then, shall you truly have achieved the proper balance in the ledger of your life.

Complete dedication to God leads to a life of usefulness for Him. We cannot please Him and be a power for Him unless we are definitely surrendered and dedicated to Him. Has the solemn transaction taken place in your life whereby you have yielded your all in utmost dedication to the Lord? Has the crisis been faced and the eternal "yes" has been said? Can you say, "Christ is everything and everything for Christ"?

Those things that formerly were gain to Paul, he counted loss for Christ. No matter how we may beautify it, the flesh cannot please God. Nothing is of advantage to us if we hold it in our own hands. Even the highest and noblest

gain will prove our undoing and count loss for Christ. He must have all there is of us. We must make good our former vows by daily living for Christ. Today things that we have never faced before are making their claims upon us; temptations that we never dreamed of before are tugging at our heart-strings; new-born aspirations of self-interests are crying lustily to survive.