

"THE STORY OF PAUL"

INTRODUCTION Last Sunday morning we looked at the life of Stephen who is often spoken of as the first Christian martyr. Today I should like to review the story of Paul's life and legacy with you and let some of the rich meaning of this life flow into our lives. The first reference we have to him comes in that moving death scene of Stephen. We read in the closing verses of chapter seven of Acts,

"Then they cast Stephen out of the city and stoned him; and the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul". And the first verse of chapter eight of Acts reads: "And Saul was consenting to his death".

HIS LIFE This is where Paul first enters the stage of Christian history, still called Saul at this time. But let's back up for a few moments and think about his early years and the influences that helped to make and mould his life.

We seldom stop to think of Paul as a contemporary of Jesus, but it's quite evident to us that their lives overlapped. About the time that Jesus journeyed with His parents to the Temple in Jerusalem as a 12 year old, a baby boy was being dedicated by his parents in a synagogue in Tarsus - a town in Asia Minor, about 300 miles or more north of Jerusalem. The name of this younger boy was Saul, after the first king of Israel.

In some respects, Jesus and Saul followed similar paths. Each was brought up by God-fearing, Jewish parents; each was faithful in his attendance at the synagogue; each learned a trade - Jesus carpentry, Saul tentmaking. But there came a point where their paths separated. Jesus went on to emphasize a man's response to the love of God. Saul (or Paul as he later was to be called) went on to emphasize a man's response to the laws of God and man. Love versus law.

Whether or not Saul ever saw Jesus, we do not know. It's entirely possible Saul was in Jerusalem at the time of the crucifixion, for loyal Jews always made the pilgrimage to the Holy City at the time of Passover. While there is no solid evidence that Saul witnesses the proceedings of that first Holy Week, there is a good possibility that he at least heard much about them. And in one of the lodging places of Jerusalem on that first good Friday evening, it's entirely possible that he and some of his friends celebrated the defeat of that foolish Nazarene who had dared to suggest that God might be interested in something more than outward observance of the Law.

However that may have been, we are on more solid ground historically when we place Saul in Jerusalem several weeks or months later. By that time he had left his home in Tarsus to study in Jerusalem with the respected teacher, Gamaliel. And like many other young people, intoxicated with independence, he was something of an extremist with little patience or tolerance for those whose views did not coincide with his own. In particular he was irked and irritated by the persistence of the followers of this man from Nazareth. Could anything good ever come out of Nazareth? Ridiculous. The colossal nerve of these people - pitting themselves against the power of the Church and the State. He would do what he could to help stamp them out...yes, stone them to death, if necessary.

And so he was there that day when a young man named Stephen who belonged to this small group was dragged before the Sanhedrin on some false charges and con-

demned to death. Stephen, as we saw last Sunday, spoke in clear, trumpet tones in defense of his Christian faith. What he said and the manner in which he did it infuriated the mob and what followed was a First Century, first class lynching. Only they didn't hang him; they stoned him. The record says that Paul stood by - a kind of checkroom attendance for the garments of the mobsters who snuffed out the life and light of this young man. No protest on Saul's part as he witnessed the death of the first martyr of our faith.

The only thing was that Stephen died in heroic fashion. Something about that face and the manner of Stephen that left one with the impression that he was the conqueror rather than the conquered. Saul could never forget that. Moreover, Saul later admitted that he was a walking "civil war" at that time. The more he tried to pull himself up by the laws of righteousness, the more frustrated he was over his failures. But he tried to ignore it and directed his time and energy to pursuing and persecuting the early Christians around Jerusalem. One day he volunteered for Gestapo service in Damascus, vowing to capture any Christians he could find up there in that city and bring them back to Jerusalem for punishment and death. We read in verse one of chapter nine of Acts:

"But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way - men or women - he might bring them bound to Jerusalem".

DAMASCUS If you know your New Testament, you know what happened. That road to Damascus was to become famous for quite another experience than that which Saul had in mind.

A light. A voice. A complete change of direction. The Paul of later years often spoke of that experience with a feeling of reverent wonder. "He appeared to me" he said. Words, of course, have their limitation in portraying what actually happened and our minds have their limitation in comprehending what actually took place. But the decisive reality of that Damascus road experience is beyond any doubt. This was the turning point. Saul became Paul. It was then that this fiery foe of the Christian way turned about face and was set on his way to become the foremost person of Christ's way in its early years.

WHAT FOLLOWED In the years that immediately followed, Paul slowly built a reputation as an able exponent and example of the Christian faith. About ten years after the Damascus experience, a Christian leader by the name of Barnabas in Antioch invited Paul to come over and help him in the little Church there. It was during that year that First Church, Antioch, asked Paul and Barnabas to serve as ministers abroad. They accepted the assignment and "after fasting and praying they laid hands on them and sent them off".

There are three distinct missionary journeys recorded in the Book of Acts that Paul undertook. He moved throughout the Mediterranean world, pioneering as an itinerant preacher across Asia Minor, Greece and Macedonia. Wherever he went he stirred up opposition with this Gospel of a Risen Lord who had died for all men, not just some. He met opposition. His opponents harassed him, hurt him, falsely accused him, imprisoned him, beat him. Midway in his travels his health broke - malaria or perhaps epilepsy. He asked God for healing and his prayers were not answered at all in the way he wanted. But nothing stopped this man.

With great persistence, passion, power, he preached the Gospel of God's love for all men where no one had been before. It was Paul who took the Christ event out of Palestine and introduced it to the rest of the world. And at length he came to Rome. And there the story ends. Tradition has it he died a martyr's death in Rome in the Neroian persecution of 65 A. D. Whatever the manner of his death, he wrote his own epitaph when he said:

"I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith". Amen.

TRANSITION

Now, this is a brief review of the facts regarding his life. Remembering the chief aim in preaching is not to shed light on the Bible, but to shed the light of the Bible on life, we would do well to consider the legacy of his life, and here there are two things about Paul - his ministry and message - which truly stand undimmed across the years, down to the present.

TRANSFORMATION

First, Paul stands out as a clear example of the transformation that the spirit of Christ brings to a human life. Our forefathers in the faith spoke of this transformation as "conversion". We don't use this term very much in our churches now-a-days. We tend to place our emphasis more on respectability than on redemption. But, if you clutch the New Testament by the arm and wonder what it's all about, it will speak to you not in terms of the attainment of respectability but rather of the gift of redemption through Jesus Christ.

The one who came into the world to fashion the New Testament where the old left off promised that he could fashion and shape new lives out of old. And he did. And He continues to do so even today. In other words, people can be "born again", and it was on this astonishing claim that the Christian Faith moved out into the Mediterranean world under Paul's direction.

You can hardly read the story of Paul without wondering what has happened to this claim. Paul reminds us of the power of God to accomplish things - to redeem life, to restore life.

"Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" asked Paul in the midst of his own inner civil war. His answer, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord".

And time and again he points to what God has done in Christ and through Christ and then from his own experience he testifies, "I Know" that this is the God who redeems from sin, who breaks the bad habits, who frees from fear, who sets love in motion, who restores sanity to life.

And some present this hour may need to hear that word again, to have it lifted up before them. We're so quick to take refuge in that old cliché, "aw, but you can't change human nature..." But either that cliché is false or the entire NT is false...and I'm willing to put my faith in that claim - in Christ - whose spirit changed Paul's life whose spirit changed Augustine's and Luther's and Wesley's and yes, scores of others...right down to the present. "Can a man be born again?". Indeed, he can!

And hearing this claim for ourselves, we also need to hear of its possibilities for others. And this is what NT Christianity is all about - that process, which

Williams James described in his classic definition of conversion in his book, Varieties of Religious Experience:

"That process...gradual or sudden....by which a self hitherto divided and consciously wrong...inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right, superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities..."

It happened to Paul....to so many since that day. It can still happen.

"Now to Him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think."

APPLICATION And the other thing that stands out in Paul's life is this. He is a fine example of a man who courageously applied his religious convictions to all areas of life. People who think of religion as a cloistered area of life...walled off...saved and sealed for only a Sunday morning at 11 - entirely personal and without any social implications or involvement will find little support from Paul. "Lord. What wilt thou have me do?" asked Paul and he spent the rest of his life witnessing to the Lordship of Christ in every realm of his life.

And it brought him into sharp conflict with the prejudices of his day. "You are all one in Christ Jesus" said Paul. "Here there cannot be Greek or Jew, slave or free man, but Christ is all and in all". Many flinched at his words, especially when he said he had been sent to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles. That was the spark that set fire to the flame. "Away with this man. He ought not to live", they said. They probably felt he was an outside agitator. "You are all one in Christ".

Yet, it was not only about race that Paul talked. He talked about a Christian and his money. He talked about a Christian and his home. He talked about a Christian in business. A Christian in society. No punches were pulled. It's all there. His faith "in Christ" he applied to all walks of life and this is where we so often fall short. Sit down and read Romans 12 or I Corinthians 13. This is where he soars to such great heights.

CLOSING Some of you are familiar with the name of E. Stanley Jones, the author of those hel ful devotional booklets and the great missionary to India of the thirties and forties and fifties. The name of this great evangelical spirit was in the home where I was reared. He once said to Gandhi that he would like to see Christianity a part of the national life of India and he asked the great leader of India "what would you suggest that we do to make this possible?" Gandhi's reply was:

"First, I would suggest that all of you Christians must begin to live more like Jesus Christ. Second, I would suggest that you must practice your religion without adulterating it or toning it down. Third, I would suggest that you must put your emphasiss on love - for love the center and the soul of Christianity".

"Though I speak with the tones of men and of angels....and have not love..." There was a man named Saul...who was "born again" in the spirit of Christ and became Paul. What a life. And what a legacy he gave us...to think about, to build on.

PRAYER

Our thanks to you, O God, for men like Paul.

Touch the restless, torn and divided lives present here this hour.
Help them to take a firmer hold on the things of the spirit. Melt us. Mold us.
Shape us. Use us. All this in the name and spirit of Christ, our Lord. Amen

We let some of the meaning of that heroic young life filter into our lives...

I do this at the encouragement of some of you who were present last Sunday...who expressed appreciation for a biographical sermon and who offered kind encouragement to pick up the story of Paul...

The preacher and the pulpit

DEAR ABBY: I have a problem, but fortunately it's a new one. I need an article from your column of several years ago recounted a meeting of church board members who, in sorting out the applications from the many preachers who had applied to fill their vacant pulpits, found fault with every one.

— JOHN W.

DEAR JOHN: Found! It was submitted by the Rev. C.W. Kirkpatrick, Union Church of Christ, Ludlow, Mass.



**DEAR
ABBY**

DEAR ABBY: One of the toughest tasks a church faces is choosing a good minister. A member of an official board undergoing this painful process finally lost patience.

He'd watched the Pastoral Relations Committee reject applicant after applicant for some fault, alleged or otherwise. It was time for a bit of soul-searching on the part of the committee. He stood up and read a letter purporting to be from another applicant.

"Gentlemen: Understanding your pulpit is vacant, I should like to apply for the position. I have many qualifications... I've been a preacher with much success and also have had some success as a writer. Some say I'm a good organizer. I've been a leader in most places I've been.

"I'm over 50 years of age. I have never preached in one place for more than three years. In some places I have left town after my work has caused riots and disturbances. I must admit I have been in jail three or four times, but not because of any real wrongdoing. My health is not good, though I still get a great deal done.

"The churches I have preached in have been small, though located in several large cities. I've not got along well with religious leaders in towns where I have preached. In fact, some have threatened me and even attacked me physically. I am not too good at keeping records. I have been known to forget whom I have baptized.

"However, if you can use me, I shall do my best for you."

The board member looked over the committee. "Well, what do you think? Shall we call him?"

The good church folks were aghast. Call an unhealthy, trouble-making, absent-minded ex-jailbird? Was the board member crazy? Who signed the application? Who had such colossal nerve?

The board member eyed them all keenly before he answered. "It's signed, 'The Apostle Paul.'"

DEAR ABBY: For all those bewildered parents who don't know how to introduce their son's or daughter's live-in partner, why not do as Lord and Lady Greystone would have done, to wit:

"This is my son, Tarzan, and his mate, Jane."

— AN ABBY FAN