

Articles by James Stalker

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A Trophy of Grace

For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am; and His grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all; yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me (1 Cor. 15:9,10).

Christianity obtained in Paul an incomparable type of Christian character. His conversion proved the power of Christianity to overcome the strongest prejudices and to stamp its own type on a large nature by a revolution both instantaneous and permanent. Paul's was a personality so strong and original that no other man could have been less expected to sink himself in another; but, from the moment when he came into contact with Christ, he was so overmastered with His influence that he never afterward had any other desire than to be the mere echo and reflection of Him to the world. And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do (Acts 9:6)? Though I might also have confidence in the flesh. If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more;.....But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ...That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable unto His death (Phil. 3:4,7,10).

But, if Christianity showed its strength in making so complete a conquest of Paul, it showed its worth no less in the kind of man it made of him when he had given himself up to its influence. It satisfied the needs of a

peculiarly hungry nature, and never to the close of his life did he betray the slightest sense that this satisfaction was abating. Nor was it ever doubtful either to himself or to others that it was the influence of Christ which made him what he was. The truest motto for his life would be his own saying, I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me (Gal. 2:20).

Secondly, Christianity obtained in Paul a great thinker. Christ had manifested forth the glory of the Father once for all and completed His atoning work. It was necessary that the meaning of His appearance should be explained to the world. If Christianity was to make an intellectual as well as a moral conquest of the world, it was necessary for the Church to have accurately explained to her the full glory of her Lord and the meaning of His saving work. There was one great subject especially which Christ had to leave unexplained - His own death. He could not explain it before it had taken place. This became the leading topic of Paul's thinking - to show why it was needed and what were its blessed results. The ruling impulse of his thinking, as of his life, was ever Christ, and it was his lifelong devotion to this exhaustless theme that made him the Thinker of Christianity. For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ; for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth (Rom. 1:16).

Thirdly, Christianity obtained in Paul the missionary of the Gentiles. He was not only the Church's greatest thinker, but the very foremost worker she has ever possessed. One of the great objects of the appearance of Christ was to break down the wall of separation between Jew and Gentile and make the blessings of salvation the property of all men, without distinction of race or

language. But He was not Himself permitted to carry this change into practical realization. It can only be imagined how congenial a task it would have been to His intensely human heart to carry the gospel beyond the limits of Palestine and make it known to nation after nation. But He was cut off in the midst of His days, and had to leave this task to His followers. He that believeth on Me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto My Father (Jn. 14:12).

Before the appearance of Paul on the scene, the execution of this task had begun. Jewish prejudice had been partially broken down, but none of the original apostles was equal to the emergency. Beyond Palestine lay the great world of Greece and Rome. It needed a man of unlimited versatility, of education, of immense human sympathy and breadth, to go out there with the gospel message. No man of this size belonged to the original apostolic circle; but Christianity needed such an one, and he was found in Paul. Originally attached more strictly than any of the other apostles to the peculiarities and prejudices of Jewish exclusiveness, he cut his way out of the jungle of these prepossessions, accepted the equality of all men in Christ, and applied this principle relentlessly in all its issues. He gave his heart to the Gentile mission, and the history of his life is the history of how true he was to his vocation. In him Jesus Christ went forth to evangelize the world, making use of his hands and feet, his tongue and brain and heart, for doing the work which in His own bodily presence He had not been permitted by the limits of His mission to accomplish. I, Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ, for you Gentiles. 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 (Eph. 3:1,8).

Kicking Against The Goad

It was the persecutor's hope utterly to exterminate Christianity. But little did he understand its genius. It thrives on persecution. Prosperity has often been [nearly] fatal to it, persecution never. "They that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word" (Acts 8:4). Hitherto the Church had been confined within the walls of Jerusalem; but now all over Judea and Samaria, and in distant Phoenicia and Syria, the beacon of the gospel began in many a town and village to twinkle through the darkness.

We can imagine with what rage the tidings of these outbreaks of fanaticism which Saul had hoped to stamp out would fill the persecutor. But he was not the person to be balked, and he resolved to hunt up the objects of his hatred even in their most distant hiding-places. Having heard that Damascus, the capital of Syria, was one of the places where the fugitives had taken refuge, he went to the high priest and got letters empowering him to seize and bring to Jerusalem all of the new way of thinking whom he might find there.

As we see him start on this journey, which was to be so momentous, we naturally ask what was the state of his mind. We are told that, as he was ranging through strange cities in pursuit of his victims, he was exceedingly mad against them (Acts 9:1).

But on this journey doubt at last invaded his mind. It was a long journey of over a hundred and sixty miles and would occupy at least six days. A considerable portion of it lay across a desert, where there was nothing to distract the mind from its own reflections. In this

enforced leisure doubts arose. What else can be meant by the word with which the Lord saluted him: "It is hard for thee to kick against the goad" (Acts 9:5)! The figure of speech is borrowed from a custom of Eastern countries. The ox-driver wields a long pole, at the end of which is fixed a piece of sharpened iron, with which he urges the animal to go on or stand still or change its course. If the animal is obstinate, it kicks against the goad, injuring and infuriating itself with the wounds it receives. This is a vivid picture of a man wounded and tortured by compunctions of conscience. There was something in him rebelling against the course of inhumanity on which he was embarked and suggesting that he was fighting against God.

It is not difficult to conceive whence these doubts arose. Probably his compunctions were chiefly awakened by the character and behavior of the Christians. He had heard the noble defense of Stephen and seen his face in the council-chamber shining like that of an angel. He had seen him kneeling on the field of execution and praying for his murderers (Acts 7:60). Doubtless, in the course of the persecution he had witnessed many similar scenes. Did these people look like enemies of God? As he entered their homes to drag them forth to prison, he got glimpses of their social life. Could such spectacles of purity and love be products of the powers of darkness? Did not the serenity with which his victims went to meet their fate look like the very peace which he had long been sighing for in vain?

Their arguments, too, must have told on a mind like his. He had heard Stephen proving from the Scriptures that it behooved the Messiah to suffer; and the general tenor of the earliest Christian apologetic assures us that many

of the accused must on their trial have appealed to passages like the fifty-third of Isaiah, where a career is predicted for the Messiah amazingly like that of Jesus of Nazareth. He heard incidents of Christ's life from their lips which betokened a personage very different from the picture sketched for him by his Pharisaic informants.

But onward he pressed, and the sun of noonday, from which all but the most impatient travelers in the East take refuge in a long siesta, looked down upon him still urging forward his course toward the city gate of Damascus. The news of Saul's coming had arrived at Damascus before him; and the little flock of Christ was praying that, if it were possible, the progress of the wolf, who was on his way to spoil the fold, might be stopped. Nearer and nearer, however, he drew; he had reached the last stage of his journey.

But the Good Shepherd had heard the cries of the trembling flock and went forth to face the wolf on their behalf. Suddenly at midday, as Paul and his company were riding forward beneath the blaze of the Syrian sun, a light which dimmed even that fierce glare shone round about them, a shock vibrated through the atmosphere, and in a moment they found themselves prostrate upon the ground.

It would be impossible to exaggerate what took place in the mind of Saul in this single instant. So measured, this one moment of Saul's life was perhaps longer than all his previous years. A voice sounded in his ears, "I am Jesus, whom thou art persecuting" (Acts 9:5).

When his companions recovered themselves and turned to their leader, they discovered that he had lost his sight, and they had to take him by the hand and lead

him into the city. What a change was there! Instead of the proud Pharisee riding through the streets with the pomp of an inquisitor, a stricken man, trembling, groping, clinging to the hand of his guide, arrives at the house of Judas amidst the consternation of those who receive him and, getting hastily to a room where he can ask them to leave him alone, sinks down there in the darkness.

But, though it was dark without, it was bright within. He neither ate nor drank for three days. He was too absorbed in the thoughts which crowded on him thick and fast. In those three days, it may be said with confidence, he got at least a partial hold of all the truths he afterward proclaimed to the world; for his whole theology is nothing but the explication of his own conversion.