

A Call to Greatness

Introduction: The Right Man at the Right Time

By the spring of 1940, the British Empire were looking over a narrow ribbon of water at the greatest war machine the world had ever seen. Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Denmark, and Norway have already fallen to the armies of the Third Reich. By the 9th of May, Holland, Belgium and France were barely hanging on and would soon succumb to the German Blitzkrieg. All that lay between England and utter destruction was 20 miles of English Channel and the courage of one man.

On the 10th of May, 1940, King George IV asked Winston Churchill to serve as Prime Minister. A month later, the day after France surrendered, Churchill addressed the nation on the BBC:

*Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilisation.
Upon it depends our own British life,
and the long continuity of our institutions and our Empire . . .
Hitler knows that he will have to break us on this island or lose the war.
If we can stand up to him all Europe may be free
and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands.
But if we fail, then the whole world, including the United States,
including all we have known and cared for,
will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age . . .
Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties,
and so bear ourselves that if the British Empire and its Commonwealth
last for a thousand years,
Men will still say:
'This was their finest hour.'*

A great man matched to a critical hour in human history. There have been a few such men through time: soldiers, explorers, scientists, writers, politicians. And not all of them have been *men*. Joan of Arc, Catherine the Great, Esther, Deborah.

Great souls who, in moments of crisis, have dared to stand in the breach and fight for something they believed in, something they loved, something worth dying for. They didn't do it for the fame. They didn't do it for the riches. God knows they didn't do it for the gratitude of their contemporaries—for more often than not their deeds were unappreciated until after their deaths. (Churchill was voted out of office weeks after the Germans finally surrendered unconditionally.)

They dared, they sacrificed, they gave all they had because they believed in the *rightness* of what they were doing. Many of them acted as they did because they felt the hand of God laid upon them. They had been given a mission, a calling. To be true to that charge, they gave up everything in the single-minded pursuit of a higher vision.

Transition: Saul of Tarsus was such a man. Saul, called Paul, changed the world and all of history more than any other person who has ever lived, with the single exception of the one who was Paul's master. At a pivotal point in time, "when there was all to lose and all to gain," God laid his hand on Paul and asked him to be His spokesman for a new world order.

I. What an unlikely candidate was Saul to become the person we know as Paul!

A. He was born an outsider to a race of outsiders.

1. As a Jew in the first century world, he belonged to a race which was universally misunderstood and despised.
 - a. His home-land was occupied by Roman troops.
 - b. The king who ruled in Palestine was a Hasmonean half-breed who cared little for Jewish ways and God's Law.
 - c. Judaism itself was dying a slow death, strangled by Roman military might, the influx of Greek culture, and the weight of a religious system that had grown irrelevant to and unbearable by most of the Jewish people themselves.
2. But Saul was an outsider even to these outsiders.
 - a. He was born, not in Palestine but in Asia Minor, in the city of Tarsus.
 - b. He was born with Roman citizenship, an honor to everyone but his own countrymen who hated Rome with a singular passion.

B. Almost everything we know about Saul foretells mediocrity, not greatness.

1. Tradition informs us that he had none of the physical equipment we would expect in a man who would play such a pivotal role in world history.
 - He is described as a short, bald, bow-legged, hunchback with weak eyes.
2. We have hints in Scripture that he made a poor impression in person, that he was not eloquent in speech, that it was easy to take him for granted and rebel against his authority (e.g., 2Co 10:8-11; 11:6).

C. But that Saul should be remembered by history as the greatest disciple of Jesus Christ is most far-fetched of all.

1. Early in life, he had been sent to Jerusalem and trained under the great teacher Gamaliel (Ac 22:3).
2. He had become a Pharisee, "advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age" (Ga 1:14). By his own admission, he was "extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers."
3. When a new sect began to threaten the true faith, Saul determined to stamp it out.
 - a. He "did all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth" (Ac 26:9).
 - b. He "put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them" (Ac 26:10).
 - c. He had them punished in synagogue after synagogue and "tried to force them to blaspheme" (Ac 26:11).
 - d. And that was just in Jerusalem. He admits that he was so "obsessed against" Christians that he even followed them to foreign cities to punish them.

II. Something happened to Saul that turned him into the Paul we know.

A. He could have lived out his life as a champion of the Jewish faith, fighting the battle against Christianity.

1. He could have won the love and respect of his peers, something he seems to have needed badly during the early years of his life.
2. He could have become a great rabbi in the declining days of the Jewish faith and nation.
3. But if he had chosen to do so, his name would have been as little remembered as the names of dozens of great Rabbis who populated the religious scene before and after Jesus.
4. Instead, Saul had a vision that turned his life inside out and utterly changed the course of his destiny—and, by the way, the course of human history.

B. Saul, the persecutor of Christianity, became Paul the preacher of the Christian faith.

1. He who once was honored for his stand against Jesus was now reviled as the leading evangelist for the new sect.
 - a. His status among the Jews went from rising star to heretic and traitor.
 - b. Family, finances, career, friendships, future—all were sacrificed on the altar of Paul's newfound faith.
 - c. Five times, Paul tells us, his own people beat him with the 40 lashes.
 - d. Once, they stoned him.
 - e. Paul was thrown out of synagogues, thrown out of cities, thrown out of the Temple, run out of Jerusalem—all at the hands of his former friends and countrymen.
2. Even many of those Jews who had become Christians saw Paul as a heretic and false teacher (e.g., 2Co 11:22-23).
 - a. Everywhere Paul went preaching the gospel, certain Jewish Christians followed closely, telling his converts that Paul had gotten it wrong.
 - b. He was accused (by those who claimed to be Christian brothers) of playing fast and loose with God's word, of preaching grace at the expense of obedience, of promoting a freedom that resulted in sinful living rather than righteousness.
 - c. In many ways, his final arrest in Jerusalem is attributable to the suspicion and hatred of *members of the church* (see Ac 21:17ff).

C. What happened to make such a change in Paul?

1. What vision had Paul seen that motivated such a change in his own life and such opposition on the part of his countrymen and even some of his brothers?
 - a. Most often, we think of the vision of Christ on the road to Damascus. That vision was certainly responsible for the change *in Paul*.
 - b. But there was a further revelation Paul received that explains why the Jews hated him so, even Jews who claimed to follow Jesus.
 - It was not Paul as the Apostle of Jesus that caused all this hatred.
 - It was Paul as *the Apostle to the Gentiles*.
2. Paul had seen nothing less than a radical restructuring of the way God related to humanity. Because of Jesus, all people—regardless of race or class or background or moral rectitude—had access to God through faith in Christ.

III. The New World Order.

A. Paul's Great Calling—Read Ephesians 3:1-9.

1. Paul speaks in this passage of a *mystery*. But, in fact, that is a poor translation of the word Paul uses here.
 - a. For Paul is not talking about something “mysterious” or mystical—as if it were difficult to comprehend.
 - b. Rather, Paul has in mind a *secret* God has kept for a very long time.
 - c. This secret has not been made known “to men in other generations” (vs 5).
 - d. It has been “kept hidden” by God (vs 9) for ages past.
2. But now, God's secret has been told to Paul (vss 3-5).
 - a. Paul says that he was given a *revelation* (vs 3), that God made known to him a secret that had been classified from the beginning of time.
 - b. That revelation gave Paul *insight* (vs 4),
 - not just into Jesus and who he was,
 - but into a result of Christ's work that many had not understood.
 - c. Paul is not the only one to have been “let in” on this secret (vs 5).
 - i. God's “holy apostles” had also received revelation about this matter.
 - ii. The “prophets” who ministered to the church knew the secret as well.
 - d. *But Paul had been called to understand this secret in a special way.* Of all those ministering to God's people at this time, Paul carried a unique burden of understanding what the cross of Jesus meant and what its implications were for the people of the world.
3. In verse 6, Paul finally explains what that secret is:
 - a. **Read Eph 3:6.**
 - b. That's what he has just finished talking about in Chapter Two.
 - i. The Gentiles—who once were excluded and separated and foreigners—have been brought near through the blood of Jesus.
 - ii. Jesus has destroyed the Law as a means of getting right with God and substituted his own body in its place.
 - iii. He came and broke down every wall that divided people, every barrier that kept people hostile to God and to each other.
 - iv. He took alienated people, hating people, hostile people and made one new person, a new nation, a new household and reconciled them, together, to God.
 - v. As Paul will say elsewhere: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for *you are all one in Christ Jesus*” (Ga 3:28).
 - c. Paul insists that the great secret which has been whispered to him is that Gentiles are heirs together, members together, sharers together with the Jew in every spiritual blessing to be found in Christ.

4. Paul has one more thing to say about himself before he turns to us. Paul has now become God's agent to make that secret known to others (vss 7-9).
 - a. He speaks (twice) of a "grace given" to him:
 - i. to preach "the unsearchable riches of Christ" to the Gentiles, and
 - ii. to tell everyone the secret that there are no more barriers between those who have faith in Jesus and their God. In Jesus Christ, God has become the God of everyman. Jesus is a universal Savior, without distinction.
 - b. Paul may call it a "grace" but it looks more like a burden to me.
 - i. If he had not been so eager to preach Christ to the Gentiles, his life would have been infinitely easier.
 - ii. Had he not insisted that all people have equal access to God through Jesus, regardless of race and background, he would have avoided many a worry and many a beating.
 - c. But Paul had no choice about his message. It was decided for him by God.
 - i. God drafted Paul and showed him a vision of reality that so captivated him, he could do nothing else but give his life in service of that divine plan.
 - ii. And because of God's wisdom and Paul's courage, you and I sit here today free to worship Jesus as 20th century Americans rather than 1st century Jews.
 - iii. Because Paul was faithful to the message God gave him:
 - the church of Jesus Christ did not remain a sect of Judaism, confined mainly to Jerusalem and various cities in which a strong Jewish population lived.
 - Greeks and Romans in the first century, Egyptians and Africans in the second, Gauls and Germans in the third, Persians and Tartars in the fourth, Chinese and Britons in the fifth—people of every known tribe and tongue and culture from Paul's day to our own have been united together into one body and given access to God.

B. The Church's Great Calling—Eph 3:10-12.

1. We also have been told the secret. Through Paul's ministry and teaching, we know what God is doing in the world.
2. We also have been "given a grace." We are now, as the church, God's agent for making known the manifold wisdom of God.
 - a. Our audience: both the world and the heavenly realms.
 - b. Our proclamation:
 - i. Verbal certainly—the word of truth, the gospel of salvation.
 - ii. Existential more certainly still—the living out of the unity and peace and purity to which Jesus has called us as a sign and foretaste of the "new heaven and new earth."
3. A call to greatness for the church. Paul invites us here to take on a role of cosmic dimensions, to seek in an active way to change the world and to impact the divine drama by the way we live as the church of Jesus today.

Conclusion: Will we be a “great church matched to a critical hour?”

1. There is no question that the mission which drove Paul has been handed on to us. % God’s “intent” is that “now, *through the church*, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known.”
2. The question is—are we as a church willing to step up to that mission?
 - a. Are we willing to stand in the breach and risk everything for what we believe?
 - b. Will we dare to make the sacrifices and pay the price in the single-minded pursuit of a higher vision?
3. God continues to look for people who will be his “Pauls.”
 - a. Somewhere in this world there are churches willing to be great for the sake of a great cause.
 - b. Somewhere in this world there are churches willing to step forward in difficult days and say “Follow us as we follow Christ.”
 - c. Will we be such a church?

The credit belongs to the man [or the church] who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, and spends himself in a worthy cause; who at best, if he wins, knows the thrills of high achievement, and, if he fails, at least fails daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.

John Kennedy,
paraphrasing Theodore Roosevelt.