

LIGHT SHALL SHINE OUT OF DARKNESS

SERIES: PAUL, AN INSTRUMENT OF THE RISEN CHRIST

by Ron Ritchie

On Friday last I did one of my favorite things: I visited my local bookstore and spent time browsing through the best-selling books. I'm very interested in what people are writing about and what the public is reading. I discovered there is a slew of biographical and autobiographical works which seem to be popular these days people writing books about themselves or others so that people like you and me can read about them. As I browsed, the words of Solomon came to my mind, ". . . my son, be warned; the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion to books is wearying to the body" (Ecc. 12:12). Despite this warning, however, in my heart I wished I had the entire bookstore to myself so I could read every book on the shelves.

Many are curious about the lives of famous people and keen to learn their secrets for living. A sampling of book titles will demonstrate just where people are looking these days. Being a World War II buff, *Eisenhower at War, 1943-45*, by David Eisenhower, caught my eye. There seems to be a big market for the following works on big-name people: *The History of the Kennedys*, *Monty*, *The War Years*, *Yeager*, *Pat Nixon*, *The Untold Story*, *Betty: The Glad Awakening*. Then there are two books by Shirley MacLaine, *Out On A Limb* and *Dancing in the Light*. Others high on the bestseller lists include *Mayflower Madam: The Secret Life of Sydney Barrows*; two books on Marilyn Monroe, *Marilyn: The Life of Norma Jean* and *Goddess: The Secret Life of Marilyn Monroe*, and a book on John DeLorean, entitled *DeLorean*.

One thing that all of these books have in common is that they list an amazing amount of details concerning the personal lives of these public people. But many of these famous individuals, unfortunately, lived wasted lives and spent their days under the influence of the world, the flesh and the devil. These are tragic accounts, for many of them were never willing to acknowledge the very Author of life itself, Jesus Christ. They may have had a momentary influence in our generation, and perhaps will have limited influence for a couple of generations yet to come, but they will soon be forgotten.

By contrast, in this series of messages we will examine the life of a man who has influenced the lives of people in every generation since the first century, and he will continue to influence for good the lives of every generation until Jesus Christ comes again. We will study the life of the apostle Paul as it is revealed in the New Testament. This is not an easy task, for the life of the apostle does not come in a nice chronological outline as do the stories of those whose books are so popular these days. We must search the New Testament diligently for the details. Paul did not leave an autobiography because, following his conversion on the Damascus Road, the only person he wanted to talk about was Jesus Christ. From that day on, the apostle's mission was to make known the grace and mercy of the Lord toward him, and how that grace and mercy were available to all who would place their faith in Jesus.

Before we begin our first message (from Acts, chapter 9) in the life of Paul we will set the stage for our study by observing three different backdrops to the drama of the apostle's life. The first backdrop is the gospel of Luke, the account which Dr. Luke wrote to his friend Theophilus telling him "all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day He was taken up." Luke was a Gentile whom Paul befriended in the city of Troas during the apostle's second missionary journey. From 51 A.D. until Paul's death in Rome in 65 A.D. these men were fellow-workers in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The second backdrop to our story of the life of Paul is the book of Acts, also written by Luke and also dedicated to Theophilus. Acts is the account of the activities of the apostles and disciples over a period of some thirty years, as the risen Lord fulfilled his promise, "I will build my church and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it" (Matt. 16). We have a concise outline to the book in the words of Jesus which he uttered before his ascension into heaven. Here is what he said in response to the disciples' question, "Lord, is it at this time that you are restoring the Kingdom of Israel?":

It is not for you to know the times and the seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you shall be of me witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth (Acts 1:6-8).

The third and most important backdrop to the story of Paul is an event that occurred on the day of Pentecost. Ten days after the Lord's ascension into heaven, the Holy Spirit came into the lives of the apostles and disciples. Since that day in 30 A.D., all followers of Jesus Christ in every generation have lived and ministered in the age of the Spirit, which will last until his physical return to earth as King of kings and Lord of lords. During this age of the Spirit, our Lord, through his Holy Spirit, is calling out a people from among the nations of the earth for his name's sake. And sharing this good news is the task which is to occupy every Christian in every generation until Jesus returns.

We could say that the Book of Acts is like a coat jacket which was woven and sewn together by the Holy Spirit in the first century. A close look at the jacket will show that its many different colored threads have been carefully woven together so as to give the church the final product. In our study in the life of Paul we will see the many beautiful threads that have been woven of his life and the lives of his fellow-workers in order to bring them to spiritual maturity as they labored to fulfill their parts in God's plan of redemption.

Here are some of the "threads" we will see in the Book of Acts. First, we see the "thread" of our Sovereign God and Father. He is the Father of creation, of Israel, of Jesus Christ, and of all believers in every age. It is he who moves people and circumstances, opening and closing doors of opportunity as history unfolds. Then there is the "thread" of our invisible but always present Lord. He is the Giver of life, the Head of his Body, the church, the Shepherd of the sheep, the Intercessor for his people, the Preparer of his bride. He is the one who challenges and encourages his followers to trust him and walk by faith, for he is with them to direct them in the age of the Spirit. Then there is the "thread" of Jesus' promise, that the Holy Spirit would indwell and empower believers, and through them convict the world of sin, righteousness and judgment.

Then we see the "thread" of the evil one, Satan himself, and his followers who are forever seeking to destroy the work of the Lord and his disciples. In the long run, however, Christians know that Satan will not succeed, for he has been defeated at the cross of Jesus Christ. Finally, we see the "thread" of joy, adventure and suffering awaiting those who are willing to follow Jesus in the age of the Spirit.

That is the story of the Book of Acts, the history of the early church. But no matter what century a believer in Jesus Christ tries on this "jacket," the fit is always perfect. All the truths written down in the first century form a perfect fit for 20th century man. Yet not all the truth that is needed for our Christian walk is found in the fabric of this jacket. Within the jacket we find the many letters written by Paul and the apostles. These letters were written to fill in details on how to wear the jacket, how to keep it, how to share it, how to avoid robbers who would try to steal it, and how to protect it from moths that would destroy the fabric. \written by the Holy Spirit through the apostles, these letters are as relevant to us in our day as they were to the Christians in that first century day. Hopefully, as we wear this jacket in our own century, we will find our hearts and minds prepared to listen to the Holy Spirit as he seeks to direct our lives, as he directed the lives of the writers of these documents. Let us strive to be part of God's plan of redemption in this age of the Spirit until Jesus returns again to earth!

I have entitled this message, "Let light shine out of darkness," words taken from chapter 6 of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. We begin our study in Acts, chapter 9. Here, then, is the story of the activity of Jesus Christ in and through the apostle Paul.

I. Blinded by Unbelief Acts 9:1, 2

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

By this time the gospel had already been preached both in Jerusalem and Samaria for a period of three years, but not without persecution and threats by the Jewish supreme court. In spite of the threats however, the apostles and disciples of Jesus continued preaching that Jesus was the Messiah. One of the disciples was Stephen, a man of grace and great power, who was performing great signs and wonders among the Jews. This caused the wrath of the Jews from the Synagogue of the Freedmen in Jerusalem. In time they brought a charge of blasphemy against Stephen, charging that he spoke against the law of Moses and had preached that Jesus would destroy the temple. As a result, Stephen was brought before the supreme court. There, he gave a wonderful testimony to the Lord. He told the court that they were resisting the Holy Spirit and that they were the murderers of the Righteous One, Jesus. As a result of his testimony Stephen was taken out of the city and stoned to death. Standing among the crowd watching his death was a man named Saul, and those who were about to stone Stephen laid their robes at his feet. ". . . and Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death," Acts records.

Who was this man, Saul, who approved the death sentence on Stephen? He traces his background for us in his own words in Acts 29:39: "I am a Jew of Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no insignificant city." Tarsus was a Hellenistic city, located on the southeast corner of Asia Minor, known for its commercial and intellectual contributions to the Roman Empire. Saul's father was a Pharisee, and a man of some means, apparently, because he purchased a Roman citizenship, which covered every member of his family. (Saul would use this citizenship to his advantage in years to come.) He had a sister who lived in Jerusalem with her son, and Saul may have stayed with her when he lived there as a young student under the famous first century rabbi, Gamaliel.

In chapter 3 of his letter to the Philippians, many years later, Saul, who was then known as Paul, lists seven credentials which he possessed. "/ was circumcised on the eighth day," he says. He was under the covenant of Abraham. "/ was of the nation of Israel. "He was neither a slave nor a convert to Judaism, but a pureblooded Jew from the loins of Jacob. "/ was of the tribe of Benjamin. " He may have been named after King Saul, who was also of the tribe of Benjamin and who reigned some one thousand years earlier. "I am a Hebrew of the Hebrews. " Although he was born and raised in a Greek city, he spoke Hebrew (and also Greek and Aramaic) and kept the Jewish law and customs. "As to the Law, I was a Pharisee. "He followed in the footsteps of his father and joined the party of the Pharisees, the separatists, rather than the liberal Sadducees. Thus, he sought to obey the letter, rather than the spirit of the Law. "As to zeal, I was a persecutor of the church. " He was a zealot who regarded followers of Jesus as a threat to Judaism. Paul would later write in Galatians: "I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions." Finally, Paul said of himself, "as to the righteousness which is in the Law, I was found blameless. " He had carried this righteousness so far as to appear perfect before men. Later, however, he would write to the Philippians, ". . . whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ." So there we have young Saul's appraisal of himself as a Pharisee.

What part did Saul play in the persecution of the church? Acts 8 tells us that immediately following Stephen's death, a great persecution of the church began in Jerusalem. All followers of Christ in that city (except for the apostles) were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Some twenty-five years later, when Paul appeared in chains before King Agrippa in Caesarea, here is what he said of his role in the persecution:

"I thought to myself that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And this is just what I did in Jerusalem; not only did I lock many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them. And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme; and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities . . ." (Acts 26:9-11)

Acts 9:2 tells us what he did with the Christians he captured: ". . . if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem."

What was the cause of Saul's murderous attitude toward Christians? We must remember that he believed the Old Testament prophecies that God would one day send his Messiah to Israel. The Jews of Saul's day divided

history into three divisions: the age of chaos, the age of the law, and the age of the Messiah. Saul's problem with Christians, therefore, did not hinge on belief in a coming Messiah but on their belief that Jesus was that Messiah. How could he be the Messiah? Paul demanded, considering the teaching of Deuteronomy 21:

"If a man guilty of a capital offense is put to death and his body is hung on a tree, you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him the same day, because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse. . . "

Saul knew that Jesus had died by crucifixion, on a tree; therefore, according to Deuteronomy, he died under the curse of God. Thus he could not possibly be the Messiah upon whom the blessings of God rested in unique measure. To claim that Jesus was the Messiah was blasphemous, Saul reasoned, and those who followed him deserved to suffer as blasphemers. They were not only deluded fools, they were deceivers and impostors. Furthermore, in Saul's mind the story that Jesus arose from the dead could not possibly be true because the divine curse could not be reversed. Saul's theology, therefore, was the motivating factor in his zeal to stamp out the heresy that followers of the Way were spreading. He had a clear conscience (almost, as we will see later) in his service to God and to the law of Moses.

Thirty years later, however, it was quite a different story. Here is what Paul wrote to Timothy:

. . . I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a wanton aggressor. And yet I was shown mercy, because I acted ignorantly in unbelief; and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus. It is a trustworthy statement deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all.

This is the place in a sermon when a preacher looks for an illustration which will help in the application of what he is saying. I spent much of last week seeking an illustration but failed to come up with one. But late one night the Lord whispered in my heart, 'Ron, you are the illustration. You were my enemy once. You were a God-hater, a Christ-hater and a Christian-hater. You helped crucify the Messiah by your sins.' Once we were all enemies of God, according to the letter to the Romans. We were ignorant and blinded by unbelief. We knew just enough truth to be confused. And yet, like Saul, we were shown mercy because we acted ignorantly in unbelief.

Thus we have some of the background of Saul the Pharisee, the religious zealot. He was blinded by unbelief, his heart filled with self-righteousness, hatred and murder. What a candidate for the grace and mercy of God!

We pick up his story again in Acts 9. This time we find him 150 miles northeast of Jerusalem, on his way to the city of Damascus. in hot pursuit of some followers of the Way.

II. Blinded by the Light Acts 9:3-S

And it came about that as he journeyed, he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; and he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" And he said, "Who art Thou, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, . . . "

Here in this section we come to the conversion of Saul. We will get a clearer picture of that if we look at two other passages in Acts, namely Acts 22:5-10, which is Paul's defense to the people of Jerusalem at the time of his arrest, and Acts 26:13-18, his defense before King Agrippa.

First. Paul's account which he gave to King Agrippa:

"And it came about that as we journeyed we were approaching Damascus about noon time,

suddenly a very bright light flashed from heaven, brighter than the sun shining all around me and those who were with me. And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew dialect, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' And I answered and said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And He said, 'I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting.' And those who were with me beheld the light to be sure, but did not understand the voice of the One who was speaking to me."

Thus was Saul, the arrester, himself arrested by the risen Son of God. The light which flashed around him was "brighter than the sun," he says. In Scripture, light is a symbol of the holiness of God, the totality of his righteous character, the symbol of truth, guidance, revelation, even life itself. This light was first seen at the creation of the world, when God said, "Let there be light." The light that enveloped Saul was like the light seen by Moses at the burning bush; the light that accompanied Israel in the wilderness; the light that accompanied the birth of Jesus; the light that the disciples saw on the Mount of Transfiguration. This light was so bright that it penetrated the darkness of Saul's heart and filled him with the revelation that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, the Son of God, resurrected from the dead. Paul wrote of this light years later in his letter to the Corinthians:

For God who said, "Light shall shine out of darkness," is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

Notice that the voice said to Saul, ". . . why are you persecuting me?" The resurrected Lord is keenly aware of how his body, the church, is being persecuted and who is doing the persecuting. Thus, to persecute the church is to persecute the Lord himself. Augustine said of this incident, "It was the Head in heaven crying out on behalf of the members who are still on earth."

Then the voice said to Saul, "It is hard for you to kick against the goads." Jesus was referring to the promptings of the Spirit which Saul was resisting. A goad was an eight-foot long stick, sharpened at one end, used by ploughmen to keep their oxen in line as they ploughed. The Lord was saying to Saul, "You had the law and the prophets to tell you who I am. You heard of me during my three years of earthly ministry, my preaching and healing. You heard of me in the messages of my apostles and converts. You heard of me from Stephen. Don't you find it hard kicking against so much evidence?" How many of us are still kicking out, like oxen, against the goads of Christ? Every time God brings yet another word of testimony about himself we resist the pricking of the goad.

All those in Saul's party on the Damascus road "fell to the ground," Acts says, and all heard the voice, but only one. Saul, asked the question, "Who are you, Lord?" The voice answered, "I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting. I am Jesus who was hanged on a tree, who was buried and rose again from the dead. I am the resurrected Messiah, the Righteous One of Israel." The disciples of Jesus had been right all along. Jesus, the man who was crucified on a tree, had indeed risen from the dead and had to be acknowledged as Messiah and Lord. The pronouncement of the divine curse on the crucified man still stood in the law, however. Messiah had indeed incurred that curse. Paul would later write to the Galatians,

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us. For it is written, "Cursed is every one who hangs on a tree," in order that in Christ Jesus the blessings of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

Paul looked at the cross and agreed that it was the ground of his justification, the means of his sanctification, the subject of his witness, and the object of his boasting. The apostle recognized that Jesus had taken upon himself the wrath of God.

We continue with Luke's account of what Jesus said to Saul during this incident on the Damascus Road.

III. Blinded, But Enlightened

Acts 9:6-9

... but rise and enter the city, and it shall be told you what you must do." And the men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice, but seeing no one. And Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus. And he was there three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Paul himself, in his testimony again before King Agrippa fills in other details on this occurrence. Acts 26:16-18 gives his account of what Jesus said to him.

"But arise, and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the thing in which I will appear to you; delivering you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, in order that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me."

Though Saul's eyes were open he could see nothing. He was physically blinded by the glorious light of the presence of the Son of God. But at that very moment in time he turned completely around to the truth that Jesus was the Messiah, and that now, by faith, he was his Messiah too. Saul had been in darkness, held captive by Satan, but now by faith he had turned to Jesus and was enlightened by his Holy Spirit. He was taken to Damascus and there he remained, blind, fasting for three days, and spending the time in prayer. He had a vision that he would meet a man named Ananias and from him he would receive back his sight. Saul spent the time praying for forgiveness, but his heart must have been filled with praise and joy when he realized he had spoken to the Messiah, Jesus. He would later say to the Galatians:

"But when He had set me apart, even from my mother's womb, and called Me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles. . . "
(Gal. 1:15, 16)

As he looked back on his life, Paul could see that God was guiding him from the moment he was born, so that all of his experiences in life were leading him ultimately to become a preacher of righteousness among the Gentiles.

Saul's story is the story of every one of us before we came to Christ. We were born into this world as enemies of God, blinded by unbelief. Were it not for the grace and mercy, the patience and love of God extended to us we would have remained so for all eternity. Saul, the very man who had such a struggle accepting the necessity of the cross and the goads of the crucified One. would later write, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me, and the life that I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and delivered himself up for me." When we come to the cross we must die to all our hopes and dreams and pleasures so that Christ may live through us. If we don't do this our lives will be counted as lost. We will be just another unread book, lacking impact on our own generation.

Let us stand and read the words of John 3:16, and let us think of the life of Saul and of our own lives. Those who have already come to Christ will find their hearts filled with joy and thanksgiving; those who are still resisting the Lord Jesus will once more feel the prick of the goad. If you are one of the stubborn ones who needs to feel the goad one more time, in order to forsake the kingdom of darkness and enter the kingdom of light, then allow the goad to have that effect on you this time. God is patient, loving and merciful. He wants you to die to yourself so that he can live through you.

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

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