

Saul of Tarsus

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In contemplating the character of this most remarkable man, we may gather valuable principles of gospel truth. He seems to have been peculiarly fitted to show forth, in the first place, what the grace of God *can* do; and, in the second place, what the greatest amount of legal effort *cannot* do. If ever there was a man upon this earth whose history illustrates the truth that "salvation is by grace, without works of law," Saul of Tarsus was that man. Indeed, it is as though God had specially designed to present in this man a living example, first, of the depth from which His grace can rescue a *sinner*; and, secondly, the height from which a *legalist is* brought down to receive Christ. He was at once the very *worst* and the very *best* of men — the chief of sinners and the chief of legalists. He travelled down to the lowest point of human wickedness, and climbed to the loftiest summit of human righteousness. He hated and persecuted Christ in His saints, he was a sinner of sinners; and a Pharisee of the Pharisees in his moral conduct and pride.

Let us, then, in the first place, contemplate him as *the chief of sinners*.

"This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I *am chief*" (1 Tim. 1: 15). Now, note particularly what the Spirit of God declares concerning Saul of Tarsus: that he was the chief of sinners. It is not the expression of Paul's humility, though, no doubt, he was humble under the sense of what he had been. We are not to be occupied with the feelings of an inspired writer, but with the statements of the Holy Ghost who inspired him. It is well to see this.

Very many persons speak of the feelings of the various inspired writers in a way calculated to weaken the sense of that precious truth, the plenary inspiration of Holy Scripture. They may not mean to do so; but then, at a time like the present, when there is so much of reason, so much of human speculation, we cannot be too guarded against aught that might, even in appearance, militate against the integrity of the Word of God. We are anxious that our readers should treasure the Scriptures in their hearts' affections, not as the expression of human feelings, however pious and praiseworthy, but as the depository of the thoughts of God. "For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Peter 1: 21).

Hence, therefore, in reading 1 Tim. 1: 15, we are not to think of the feelings of man, but of the record of God, which declares that Paul was "chief of sinners." It is never stated of any one else. No doubt, in a secondary sense, each convicted heart will feel and own itself the guiltiest within its own range of knowledge; but this is quite another matter. The Holy Ghost has declared this of Paul; nor does the fact that He has told us this by the pen of Paul himself interfere with or weaken in the smallest degree, the truth and value of the statement. Paul was the chief of sinners. No matter how bad any one may be, Paul could say, "I *am chief*." No matter how far from God any one may feel himself to be — no matter how deeply sunk in the pit of ruin — a voice rises to his ear from a deeper point still, "I *am chief*."

But let us mark the *object* of all this dealing with the chief of sinners. "Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in *me first*, Jesus Christ might show forth *all* long-suffering, for a *pattern* to them who should hereafter believe on Him to life everlasting." The chief of sinners is in Heaven. How did he get there? Simply by the blood of Jesus; and moreover, he is Christ's "pattern" man. All may look at

him and see how they too are to be saved; for in such wise as the "chief" was saved, must all the subordinate be saved. The *grace* that reached the chief can reach all. The blood that cleansed the chief can cleanse all. The title by which the chief entered Heaven is the title for all. Behold in Paul a "pattern of Christ's long-suffering"! There is not a sinner at this side the portal of hell, back-slider or aught else, beyond the reach of the love of God, the blood of Christ, or the testimony of the Holy Ghost.

We shall now turn to the other side of Saul's character, and contemplate him as *the chief of legalists*.

"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*" (Phil. 3: 4). Here we have a most valuable point. Saul of Tarsus stood, as it were, on the loftiest height of the hill of legal righteousness. He reached the topmost step of the ladder of human religion. He would suffer no man to get above him. His religious attainments were of the very highest order. (See Gal. 1: 14.) "If *any* other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I *more*." Is any man trusting in his temperance? Paul could say, "I *more*." Is any man trusting in his morality? Paul could say, "I *more*." Is any man trusting in ordinances, sacraments, religious services, or pious observances? Paul could say, "I *more*."

All this imparts a peculiar interest to the history of Saul of Tarsus. He lay at the very bottom of the pit of ruin, and he stood on the very summit of the hill of self-righteousness. Deep as any sinner may have sunk, Paul was deeper still. He combined in his own person the very best, and the very worst of men. In him we see, at one view the power of the blood of Christ. and the utter worthlessness of the fairest robe of self-righteousness that ever decked the person of a legalist. Looking at him, no sinner need despair; looking at him, no legalist can boast. If the chief of sinners is in Heaven, I can get there too. If the greatest religionist, legalist, and doer, that ever lived had to come *down* from the ladder of self-righteousness, it is of no use for me to go up.

The guilt of Saul of Tarsus was completely covered by the blood of Christ; and his lofty religious pride and boasting was swept away by a sight of Jesus, and Saul found his place at the pierced feet of Jesus of Nazareth. His guilt was no hindrance, and his righteousness no use. The former was washed away by the blood, and the latter turned into dung and dross by the moral glory of Christ. It mattered not whether it was "I *chief*," or "I *more*." The Cross was the only remedy.

"God forbid," says this chief of sinners and prince of legalists, "that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world" (Gal. 6: 14). Paul had just as little idea of trusting in his righteousness as in his crimes. He was permitted to win the laurel of victory in the grand legal struggle with his "equals in his own nation," only that he might fling it, as a withered, worthless thing, at the foot of the Cross. He was permitted to outstrip all in the dark career of guilt, only that he might exemplify the power of the love of God and the efficacy of the blood of Christ. Saul was no nearer to Christ as the chief of legalists than he was as the chief of sinners. There was no more justifying merit in his noblest efforts in the school of legalism than in his wildest acts of opposition to the name of Christ. He was saved by grace, saved by blood, saved by faith. There is no other way for sinner or legalist.

There is another point in Paul's history at which we must briefly glance, in order to show the practical results of the grace of Christ wherever that grace is known. This will present him to our notice as *the most laborious of apostles*.

If Paul learned to cease working for righteousness, he also learned to begin working for Christ. When we behold on Damascus' road the shattered fragments of this worst and best man — when we hear those pathetic accents emanating from the depths of a broken heart, "Lord, what wilt *Thou* have

me to do?" — when we see that man who had left Jerusalem in the mad fury of a persecuting zealot, now stretching forth the hand of blind helplessness to be led like a little child into Damascus, we are led to form the very highest expectations as to his future career; nor are we disappointed.

Mark the progress of that most remarkable man, behold this gigantic labours in the vineyard of Christ; see his tears, his toils, his travels, his perils, his struggles; see him as he bears his golden sheaves into the heavenly garner, and lays them down at the Master's feet; see him wearing the noble bonds of the gospel, and finally laying his head on a martyr's block, and say if the gospel of God's free grace — the gospel of Christ's free salvation, does away with good works? Nay, that precious gospel is the only true basis on which the superstructure of good works can ever be erected.

Morality, without Christ, is an icy morality. Benevolence, without Christ, is a worthless benevolence. Ordinances, without Christ, are powerless and valueless. Orthodoxy, without Christ, is heartless and fruitless. We must get to the end of *self* whether it be a guilty self or a religious self, and find Christ as the satisfying portion of our hearts, now and for ever. Then we shall be able to say, with truth,

Thou, O Christ, art all I want,

More than all in Thee I find.

And again:

Love so amazing, so divine,

Demands my soul, my life, my all.

Thus it was with Saul of Tarsus. He got rid of himself and found his all in Christ; and hence, as we hang over the impressive page of his history, we hear, from the depths of ruin the words, "I am *chief*" — from the most elevated point in the legal system, the words, "*I more*" — and from amid the golden fields of apostolic labour, the words, "I laboured *more abundantly* than they all."