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Paul, the Christian hero

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Paul The Christian Hero.

Not the dash and daring of a Hannibal, nor the prowess of a Napoleon but self sacrifice and self denial are the elements of Christian heroism. It is personality at white heat - a great soul keenly alert to duty's call yet under the guidance of a consecrated and enlightened conscience. Not a character that would sacrifice friends, country and kingdoms to wear a crown, but one that would sacrifice all self to bear the cross for others. As such an individual, Paul, the apostle, will compare favorably with any of the sons of men. Measured by the world's standard, the Apostle to the Gentiles would be a mere pygmy. Alexander, Caesar and Charlemagne would tower like giants above him but judged by his masterly qualities of head and heart and the results of his life, no man, save the Divine Son of God, ever trod the world as his superior. Drop his record out of history and the world would become eternally impoverished.

Long before his conversion to Christianity, the spirit of self negation had been the dominant factor in his life. Coupled with this suppression of self was the overmastering purpose to make Judaism the ~~the~~ supreme and only religion among his countrymen and their Gentile friends. With this end in view, whether on the banks of the Cydnus, or on the public squares of Tarsus, or sitting at the feet of ~~Ganelis~~ ^{Gamaliel}, all other pursuits must be secondary.

It so happened then, that when Christianity began its conquest of the world it found in this champion of Judaism a sworn and deadly enemy. Persecution from other quarters might be desultory and intermittent but from this foe there could be expected nothing else than a war of extermination. How zealously Saul contended for the old faith resting neither night nor day in his pursuit of the saints of God, his own words best tell; "I punished them oft in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities."

But God ^{often} makes the wrath of men to praise Him and brings to pass the unthinkable. Stephen, the New Testament deacon, witnesses a good confession for Christ and is condemned to die at the hands of the mob, and as he falls amid a shower of pelting stones, Saul reads upon the martyr's countenance the secrets of a peace that not all his self tortures to keep the ritualistic law nor all of his lauded zeal as a Pharisee for the religion of his fathers had given him. The memory of that face, he carries with him as he journeys toward Damascus. Never before, had he had leisure to examine his doubts and call up to recollection the scenes of his past life. But six days of desert travel with an uncongenial escort and the doubts and fears of years are the preparations needful for the revolution of the

mightiest character in Apostolic history. The fair city of the East had already dawned upon his view and the glittering cupolas and luxuriant landscape lay at his feet. It was high noon and the Orient sun shone with intolerable splendor when suddenly an unearthly light enveloped him, an unseen power smote him to the earth and a voice came to him saying, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" Looking up at the radiant figure, the astonished Pharisee cried out, "Who art thou, Lord?" and the answer came, "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest." And from that moment, Christianity dates the rise of her noblest defender. Saul of Tarsus, the persecutor, became Paul the apostle and slave of Jesus Christ. There on the sands of Damascus, the overmastering impulse to champion the rights of the Jewish church is superseded by a nobler vow, "To live for Christ," and if it be God's will, to herald the glad tidings of the Gospel to the whole world - to both Jew and Gentile.

From his new point of view, Paul saw that all philosophy was wrong and needed reconstruction. The moral world was wrong side up and must be righted. The intellectual and moral forces of the world ^{as were} ~~were~~ thoroughly organized and intrenched in Paganism and Judaism. The Jews oppressed Christianity because it meant the annihilation of the religious dreams and aspirations of the ages; The Greeks because of their philosophy. On the

one hand, our new convert would have to face his own countrymen - the Hebrew Jesuits of the day; on the other hand the versatile Greek who controlled the culture and the wealth of the world. But what were these obstacles to one who counted not his life dear that he might win Christ - to one whose sole mission now, was to preach the faith he once destroyed. Driven from the Damascus synagogues, he goes to Jerusalem, but even Jerusalem will not hear his testimony. Strange fate! the most gifted son of the race an alien and an exile! But that son was to suffer great things for Christ's sake and these were the experiences necessary to reveal to the world the heroic fiber of the man of Tarsus.

See the hero as in the prosecution of his God-like mission, he journeys from city to city and from province to province over the vast Roman Empire and the outlying Gentile world. No obstacles can daunt him. No sufferings or pains from his frail body can stop him. No danger can appall him. No enemies can conquer him. He must be about his Master's business. Cyprus, Antioch in Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe hear the Gospel and the first great tour of suffering and witnessing for Christ is accomplished. Back, he goes to Jerusalem with the news that the Gentile world is white for the harvest. But contention and reward await this eminent servant of God. As the Jew catches sight of this travel stained hero who in reality carried the fo-

ture of the world beneath his robe, he remembered that this tentmaker had preached the Gospel to the Gentiles. It was enough. The man who could run counter to the cherished hopes and traditional glories of well nigh twenty centuries—who should dare to abandon the chosen race for the heathen and teach that the Law should no longer be kept—such a man ought to be held in everlasting contempt, and as the enemy of all.

But undaunted, Paul contends for the "Brotherhood of men" and wins the victor's crown. For in that Counsel chamber, Jewish prejudice succumbed to Christian Catholicity and the Church Universal is forever indebted the Apostle of Progress.

Having secured a triumph for the new faith, Paul stops not to rest but hero like sets out to conquer more worlds for Christ. This journey undoubtedly is the most momentous recorded in the annals of the human race. It far out-~~triv~~als the expedition of Alexander the Great and had for its object not the wreck and ruin of Empires but the capture of the frontier posts of the world for God. Few ~~of~~ the details of the trip are given but of the dangers and hardships we may well judge when we read "Are they ministers of Christ? I am more; in labors more abundant, in stripes oft above measure, in prisons more frequent, and in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Twice was I beaten with rods. Once was I stoned. Thrice I suffered shipwreck. A night and a day, have I been in

the deep. In journeyings, often; in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren, In perils through my own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in cold and nakedness." In this journey, Paul added Athens to his trophies. The battle with the ^gGods on Mar's Hill was one of the grandest conflicts in the history of man. Here he confronts the genius of the world. Philosophers, poets, orators and cultured critics composed this St Paul's most learned audience. His own people had answered his heartsearching and burning appeals with stones and stocks, and jeers and gibes and jails and mobs. But these cultured Pagans met him with art and argument and learning. With the Acropolis for his pulpit, Paul preached to their consciences. It was the great occasion of his life. The inhabitants of this proud city had endeavored to placate the Gods of the whole world. Thirty thousand altars were erected to as many divinities and for fear of leaving out a deity an altar had been erected with this inscription upon it, "Agnosto Theo," With superb caution, rich vocabulary, dialectic skill and almost superhuman sagacity, Paul leads these day dreamers up to an exalted conception of the true God. With splendid audacity, he declares that "there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek." But when he touched upon the resurrection, his audience dispersed

saying that at some other time they would hear him again. Little did they imagine the weight and significance of the words addressed to them by this lonely Jew. If the future could have been known, they would have beheld the foremost thinker and hero of the Christian church reviewing Pagan philosophy and polytheism and writing as his estimate of it an eternal anathema.

The second great tour is completed, and a third one begun almost immediately. How could the ⁱⁿ dust stained, weary, travel-worn man of God rest when every breeze that swept the Mediterranean bore to him the Macedonian cry, "Come over and help us." With a strong desire to reach the perishing masses of the great cities, Paul enters Ephesus. His time is not passed in the enjoyment of culture which he so much loved. How could he when so much degradation ^a abounded even amidst the beautiful. His devotion and self sacrifice ^{are} ~~is~~ answered by scorn and taunts and mobs. The Jewish fanatic seems to be ubiquitous. But what was that to him whose unfaltering zeal would establish Christian churches every where and who could say, "Ye know from the first day that I came into Asia, after what manner I have been with you at all seasons, serving the Lord with all humility of mind and with many tears and temptations, which befell me by the lying in wait of the Jews; and how I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have showed you, and have taught you

publicly, and from house to house, testifying both to the Jews and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ."

With the resolution, "I must also see Rome" animating his whole being, Paul returns to Jerusalem. He is now an old man of sixty years. He has been travelling and preaching almost continually and carrying upon his heart a crushing weight of cares. His body is maimed and marked with punishments and abuse. And yet, he is not a superannuate. His spirit yet burns with enthusiasm and his whole demeanor is that of one who has more worlds to conquer. Alas, he was nearing his Gethsemane. The same city that had murdered the prophets and crucified his Lord, arrests him. The Tower of St. Antonio is the way to the city upon the Tiber. But no matter, his passion for souls compels him to preach to strange audiences in strange places. Today, he is the manacled accuser of profligate Roman governors and guilty Jewish rulers who cringe before him. Tomorrow, he becomes the Master Spirit on that Mediterranean corn ship. Tossed for fourteen days and nights without compass or stars, he stands forth and above the howling of the gale and roar of the surge, and tells the crew to "Fear not." He alone, is the hero of these 276 terrified corn merchants and sailors. At Malta while waiting with his shipwrecked companions he tells the story of the

risen Christ, wins converts, and plants a Christian church. At length, he appears before Caesar at Rome. He is acquitted but only to be tried a second time and convicted. What a commentary! How startling often is the irony of human life! In the tribunal as judge sat the wickedest man of a wicked age - one who was guilty of incest, matricide and of every crime mentioned in the decalogue and whose whole life had been spent in damning himself and in cursing the world, with an evil example. At the bar, as a prisoner, stood the noblest man of the age. His head was whitened by the frosts of many winters. His whole life had been one of self-denial and love service for humanity. Even during his brief imprisonment when he could no longer reach men with his voice, he spared not the pen. The trial ends; Paul is condemned. One beautiful June day, he is led in chains down the Appian Way. Scourgers, lictors and soldiers guard the prisoner. The fatal spot is reached. The scourge is applied. The sword of the executioner flashes in the sunlight and St. Paul rests from labors but his work goes on unto eternity.

Shaw