

SOME CHARACTER TRAITS OF PAUL, THE APOSTLE

1 CORINTHIANS 15:10

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PERSISTENT

In assembling an approximate chronology of the apostle's labor, Ramsay calculated that Paul was converted around A.D. 34, and likely was executed at Rome about A.D. 67. If this dating is fairly accurate, the apostle's earthly life and labors spanned some thirty-three years.

Yet within the thirteen epistles known to have been written by Paul, and penned over an era of maybe just under twenty years, there is no complaint of fatigue, no whimpering at the hardships, no disappointment expressed of having been "*crucified with Christ*," or of wasted years, or lack of family, wealth, or fame—just adulation. There was the simple joy in serving his Lord, and for the blessed hope of life to come. Paul was a "*stick-tight*" who could not be budged from his resolute course.

PATIENT

The thought of Paul's patience may not readily enter one's mind due to his more dominant qualities that easily engage one's attention. But patience is there—if one looks for it. When the militant persecutor of Christ was brought to the Lord by means of the gospel (see the accounts of his conversion in Acts 9, 22, and 26), he was informed that he would be an instrument of mercy to "all men," especially to the Gentiles (**9:15; 22:15; 26:17**). "*Paul was an apostle to the Gentiles par excellence, so much so that the church became predominantly Gentile by the end of the first century*" (Ferguson 2005, 37).

The militant apostle was scarcely dry from his immersion when he began his preaching to the Jews of Damascus (**Acts 9:20**), with no apparent success entered into the record. It was at this point that many believe Paul made his journey into Arabia, which consumed, at the very least, portions of three years (cf. **Galatians 1:17**).

Later Paul would return to Damascus where persecution by the Jews awaited him, and forced his flight to Jerusalem. Here again the Jews sought to kill him (**Acts 9:29**). But as he prayed in the temple, the Lord appeared to him and told of the immediate plan to send his apostle "*far hence unto the Gentiles*" (**22:21**). Some of

the Jerusalem saints escorted Paul to Caesarea and dispatched him to Tarsus of Cilicia (some 225 miles to the northwest), where he would spend almost a decade doing mission work among the folks of his native land (cf. 9:30).

It is not unreasonable to assume that Paul's earlier training contributed to the amazing patience he exhibited in his letters to fledgling churches, whose problems he attempted to address. All younger preachers could well benefit from some education in patience.

COURAGEOUS

It is scarcely necessary to argue the case for Paul's courage, and this quality cannot be passed over in silence.

It is unrealistic to imagine that Paul was never afraid. In Corinth the Lord spoke to his apostle in a night vision, cautioning: "*Be not afraid*" (**Acts 18:9**). The force of the Greek expression is: "*Stop being afraid.*"

Courage is not the absence of fear; it is doing what is right even when you are afraid!

On the initial missionary campaign with Barnabas (Acts 13:4ff), these brothers came to the city of Lystra in Asia Minor. There they encountered a man who had been crippled all his life. By God's power Paul healed the man, and the crowds that witnessed the event were enthralled, attempting even to worship the apostle and his companion. But the brothers restrained them. Mere humans are not proper objects of worship.

Presently, though, a confederation of Jews from Antioch and Iconium arrived and stirred up the fickle multitude. Paul was stoned, dragged outside the city, and left for dead.

According to the Jewish Mishnah (*Sanhedrin* 6:1-4), a stoning victim was substantially stripped of his clothes, thrown from an elevated place twice the height of a human person, positioned with his heart upward, and huge rocks were then dropped (or thrown) upon him until he was dead (Arnold 2002, 276; Boismard 1992, 209). The vicious mob at Lystra "supposed" Paul was dead and obviously left the site.

But the apostle "*rose up*" (a hint, perhaps, of a miraculous recovery). The following day he and Barnabas left the city, proceeding toward Derbe some sixty miles to the southeast. Apparently they worked in Derbe for some time, for "many disciples" were won for the Lord. Presently, however, they determined they would return to Antioch of Syria, from where they had begun their gospel adventure.

They might well have taken a more direct route, thus avoiding the dangerous cities visited earlier. But no, they would revisit the churches previously established—even the deadly Lystra—in order to confirm the disciples and exhort them to

continue in the faith (14:22). What courage this required on the part of the battered apostle. Never mind though; the cause of Jesus was paramount.

HUMBLE

While many character traits of Paul readily come to the student's mind, likely humility is not the first of these. But the humble Pauline disposition clearly is there for the perceptive reader.

After Paul and Barnabas had completed their missionary campaign in Asia Minor, they settled for a while in Antioch of Syria.

Presently, certain men from Judea arrived. Incredibly, they were teaching a "Judaistic gospel," namely that unless one submits to the Hebrew rite of circumcision, in addition to the fundamentals of the gospel, he cannot be saved (**Acts 15:1**).

This doctrine, so adverse to the message that Paul and Barnabas had proclaimed in their previous preaching, required a response. There was much "dissension and questioning" about this issue, and the peace of the church was in jeopardy. A suggestion thus was made that the two missionaries, in the company of several other brothers, should proceed to Jerusalem and inquire there of the "apostles and elders" about this matter (v. 2). Hence the investigative party was dispatched to the holy city. Now here is a question of interest. Why did not Paul interject himself into the initial discussion by demanding: "*Listen, there is no need for a deputized group to consult with Jerusalem. I myself am an apostle of Christ, and not a whit behind any of the others [cf. 2 Corinthians 11:5]. I am perfectly capable, therefore, of settling this issue on my own. Circumcision will not be required!*" But the sensitive apostle knew this was a volatile situation. If the Christians at Antioch felt the need of consulting the broader band of apostolic authority, Paul would not insist on thrusting himself to the forefront. The larger cause of Jesus was more important on this occasion than his own ego. He would humbly recede into the shadows for the moment that the gospel might not be damaged. This was not the last time that this gracious servant of Christ would yield in a matter of expediency for the sake of his kinsmen in the Lord (cf. **1 Corinthians 9:12**).

UNCOMPROMISING

To suggest that Paul was the epitome of humility is not to affirm that he was a pushover and a compromiser of truth. Far from it! When Paul, Barnabas, and Titus went to Jerusalem (**Galatians 2:1**), some misguided members of the congregation there secretly brought in "false brothers."

These propagators of error attempted to bind the Law of Moses as an appendix to the gospel. They sought to deprive the Jerusalem Christians of their legitimate "liberty" in Christ and bring them into the bondage of the Mosaic regime. Some

clearly wanted to demand that Titus, a Greek, submit to circumcision. But Paul, and those who supported his leadership, would not stand for this defection from the truth. They refused to yield to the heretical clique.

On another occasion, when Paul was in Antioch (of Syria), Peter arrived on the scene. Having learned of a previous episode in which Peter had yielded to Jewish prejudice and withdrew from Gentile association, refusing to share in common meals with them, Paul chastised the wayward apostle. He wrote: “*I resisted him to the face because he stood condemned*” (**Galatians 2:11**).

Other Jews, and even Barnabas, had been caught up in this “dissimulation” (v. 13). “Dissimulation” derives from the Greek, *hupokrisis*—the basis of the English, “hypocrisy” (cf. ESV).

Paul would not have the truth compromised and the cause of Christ endangered by weak church members who gave in to social pressure. This unpleasant situation does have a couple of happy footnotes. Paul will later commend the support of Barnabas (**1 Corinthians 9:6**), and Peter would write of “our beloved brother Paul” (**2 Peter 3:15**). No grudges held!

YIELDING

While we admire Paul for his backbone of steel in doctrinal matters, no one should draw the erroneous conclusion that he was stubborn and non-pliable at the expense of honest souls who were struggling to grow in knowledge and practice of the truth. When coping with a stubborn, anti-Paul faction within the church at Corinth (cf. **1 Corinthians 4:1ff**), the apostle was forced to defend himself against malicious charges hurled against him. A portion of that defense is found in **1 Corinthians 9:19-23**.

For though I was free from all men, I brought myself under bondage to all, that I might gain the more. And to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, not being myself under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; to them that are without law, as without law, not being without law to God, but under law to Christ, that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might gain the weak: I am become all things to all men that I may by all means save some. And I do all things for the gospel’s sake, that I may be a joint partaker thereof.

A concrete example of this accommodating disposition on the part of the grand apostle is found in **Acts 21:17-26**. In that context, Paul did not hesitate to “purify” himself in the temple in order to ameliorate the Jerusalem Jews and create a friendlier environment for the spread of the gospel in the holy city.

For a more detailed discussion of this incident, and an analysis of some of the alleged problems associated with Paul's activity, see my discussion elsewhere (Jackson 2005, 270-276).

ETHICAL

Paul was not one of the many whose practice is inconsistent with their teaching. He diligently strove to “take thought for things honorable in the sight of all men” (Romans 12:17).

In Rome, during a two-year span of house arrest—awaiting his case to be heard before Caesar—Paul came in contact with a man whose name was Onesimus (the name means “profitable”). Onesimus was a slave who had fled from his master, Philemon, a Christian in the city of Colosse (cf. Colossians 4:9). Onesimus had made his way to the refuge of the crowded imperial city. Apparently the vagabond had wronged his master in some fashion—perhaps taking money from him, or rendering some other form of evil (cf. *Philemon 18*).

Somehow, likely under the Hand of Providence (v. 15), the servant had come into contact with the noble apostle to the Gentiles, and Paul converted him (v. 10). He thus became a “slave” of Jesus Christ! But that was not to be the end of the matter. While Onesimus had received pardon from the Lord, he still had a moral obligation to his master, Philemon. And Paul was conscientious to see that this responsibility be fulfilled.

Accordingly, the apostle prepared a short letter to Philemon (to be delivered by Onesimus). Paul begged Philemon to forgive this wayward soul who had been so “unprofitable,” but who now has been transformed into a precious, profitable treasure (v. 11). He asks that Onesimus might be received, just as Paul would be, should he make the journey (v. 17).

He gently reminded his friend that he was indebted to him as well (v. 19). Many would complain that Paul should never have sent the fugitive brother back to a life of servitude, but two things must be borne in mind: first, it was the “*ethical*” thing to do, given the social and legal situation of the day; second, Paul had every confidence that Philemon would receive Onesimus not merely as a servant, but as a brother in Christ (v. 16)—and that would make all the difference in the world!

FORGIVING

Finally, there is this character trait that scarcely can be ignored. In his final epistle to Timothy, Paul writes: “At my first defense no one took my part, but all forsook me: may it not be laid to their charge” (4:16). I have discussed this text in my book, *Before I Die—Paul's Letters to Timothy and Titus*, and for convenience's sake, reproduce that material here.

First, there is the matter of the historical context. What is meant by “my first defense”? The term *apologeia* clearly seems to refer to a legal proceeding. But what defense? That is by no means a fully settled question. While a few have argued that the phrase alludes to the apostle’s earlier two-year confinement in Rome (**Acts 28**), most scholars are persuaded that the reference is to a preliminary trial in connection with Paul’s present imprisonment.

In A.D. 64, a week-long fire had engulfed the Imperial city. The emperor Nero was rumored to have set the blaze to cover his own ineptness as an administrator. He maliciously blamed Christians for the catastrophe, and Christianity became an “illicit religion.” Paul’s arrest is believed to have taken place a couple of years following these events. It appears the apostle had been brought to trial initially, but was cleared of a preliminary charge. It is likely, however, that another allegation was pending, and he was waiting for a second trial phase—from which he expected no deliverance. His looming fate seems fairly certain in his mind (**2 Timothy 4:6**).

Second, it is clear that when this valiant brother was brought before the authorities in the initial segment of his trial procedure, no one—available and in a position to do so—was willing to stand with him. It may be that he had sent forth an appeal to brethren for character witnesses, but, for fear of their lives, many had “turned away” from him (cf. **1:15; 4:16**). Where were those of the Roman church who had traveled out so joyously to meet the apostle when he first approached the seven-hill city (**Acts 28:13-15**)? Had many of these been martyred already? Certainly no assistance could be expected from the “anti-Paul” faction in Rome (cf. **Philippians 1:15ff**).

Third, the most amazing thing about this circumstance is Paul’s attitude with reference to those who “forsook” him. He wrote: “. . . may it not be laid to their account.” “Account” (*logizomai*) is a commercial term, used metaphorically; it signifies here “to place on one’s record.” Clearly, he is referring to a **final settlement** at the Judgment (cf. **1:16-18**).

Amidst the mystery of this passage, a few facts seem plain. (a) Paul was not petitioning God to ignore a willful, arrogant disdain of divine law, pursued with no inclination of repentance. (The verb is in the optative mood; it does involve a wish, a request.) Such a view would disregard other passages of emphatic import (**Luke 17:3; Acts 8:22; 1 John 5:16**). Within this same context the apostle refers to Alexander, of whom he says, “*the Lord will render to him according to his works.*” [The King James rendition, which makes this a wish, does not have the best textual support.] There was no petition for mercy on behalf of such a one.

On the other hand, it seems that Paul did consider the neglect on the part of some as one of human weakness, rather than overt rebellion. Fear can cause one to panic under extreme conditions, which might not be the case under less stressful

circumstances. It does appear that in this situation, the apostle at least sees the **possibility** that God will extend mercy on account of the human element (see *Psalm 103:13-14*).

Perhaps he might extend grace to those who have not been as valiant as they could have been ideally. This text, therefore, may not only be a commentary upon the forgiving spirit of Paul, it may also underscore the mercy of the One who knows the true character of our hearts (2007, 294-296).

CONCLUSION

What a spiritually rewarding experience it would be to have a complete “album” of “character snapshots” of Paul, the apostle who has forever left his image upon the world. We can learn much from this remarkable man; may we exert the courage and energy to apply ourselves to his schoolroom of instruction.

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