

Living with the Past

Barry O'Dell

Standing before Agrippa Paul said, “I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Which thing I also did in Jerusalem: and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them. And 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” (Acts 26:9-11). On another occasion he recalled, “And I persecuted this way unto the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women. As also the high priest doth bear me witness, and all the estate of the elders: from whom also I received letters unto the brethren, and went to Damascus, to bring them which were there bound unto Jerusalem, for to be punished (Acts 22:4-5). Paul, as we say, “had a past.” There were things he did as a Pharisee that later, as a Christian, he was ashamed of and deeply regretted. It was not that he just persecuted Christians either - he was actively involved in their murder! For instance, when Stephen was dragged out of the city and stoned to death for preaching we are told, “...and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man’s feet, whose name was Saul” (Acts 7:58). That is our biblical introduction to the man that would eventually be known as an apostle of Jesus Christ! Don’t you think this event haunted him for the rest of his life? We don’t have to imagine what would go through his mind in times of quiet reflection because he wrote it down. When writing to Timothy he recalled that prior to his conversion to Christ he had been, “...a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious...” (1 Tim. 1:13). A blasphemer is one who speaks out against something or someone. Not only was he a blasphemer himself, but he also “compelled” (*forced with violence*) Christians to do the same (Acts 26:11). The word *injurious* (Strong’s 5197) is from a Greek term that means Saul of Tarsus damaged others by lashing out with a nasty spirit. Paul found pleasure in damaging Christians! How is that possible? Because, being trained as a Pharisee (Phil. 3:5-6), he felt it was the right thing to do. He had a clean conscience in his persecution of Christ and the church (Acts 23:1). How did he live with his past?

“...when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them.”

Paul lived in thankfulness for the exceeding abundant grace of our Lord (1 Tim. 1:14). He also wrote this, “I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on Him to everlasting life” (1 Tim. 1:16). When confronted by Jesus on the road to Damascus Saul asked, “Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?” (Acts 9:6). As he obeyed Jesus we are told that he spent three days in fasting and prayer (Acts 9:9, 11). As he told the churches of Galatia he had been called by the grace of God (Gal. 1:15) for a very specific purpose: “To reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the heathen” (Gal. 1:16). When reading the account of his conversion as recorded in Acts 9 we find that after he was baptized he, “preached Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God” (Acts 9:18-20). Paul did not relish in his past life. He was not reliving the “good old days” when he stood before Agrippa or when he wrote to Timothy. He was, in fact, rejoicing in the grace of God that permitted him to live and preach the gospel he had once tried to silence.

When Rahab spoke to the two spies from Israel she said, “For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you...And as soon as we had heard these things, our hearts did melt...” (Jos. 2:10-11). In a similar way, when Paul stood before Agrippa and urged him to obey the gospel, he spoke of his past life as a persecutor, of God’s grace toward him, and of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. He adamantly stated “For the king knoweth of these things, before whom also I speak freely: for I am persuaded that none of these things are hidden from him; for this thing was not done in a corner” (Acts 26:26). Saul learned of Christ through a direct and miraculous confrontation (Acts 9:1-6). He spoke of those events to others and preached the gospel to them in an effort to save their souls. God’s people should do the same today. What has God done for us? Are we recipients of God’s grace? Can we point others to Christ and urge them to obey the truth as we have? There will not be anyone directly and miraculously confronted today. Only obedience to the word of God can save the soul (Jas. 1:21), but God’s people must do their part in scattering the seed (Lk. 8:11). What are we doing to convince the lost of their need for the grace and mercy of God?

What seems like fun in the beginning will cause nothing but pain in the end. That's the outcome for all who choose to live a life of sin. I hope to show you the progression of sin and how it takes everything from you (II Tim. 3:13).

In my case this is due primarily from the use of alcohol and drugs (Prov. 20:1). Although my parents were not Christians at the time, they were good people morally who did not use alcohol or drugs (I Cor. 15:33). In spite of this, by the age of 15 I was beginning to drink when hanging out with friends. I was married at the age of 18, but my lifestyle drove a wedge in my marriage and ultimately she left me for another man. Divorce fueled my use of alcohol and drugs as I tried to escape the heartache of my failed marriage. I totaled my truck when I was drunk, but I was not hurt. I quit my job as a route driver for Budweiser and spent my savings staying drunk for the next year. They rehired me about a year later but I walked off the job. Somewhere around age 23 I began selling marijuana and cocaine for a sports gambler. I sold enough to support my drinking habit along with some narcotics and cocaine for my "friends" and me. Around age 27 I was jailed for a felonious reckless endangerment charge. At this low point I decided to join military service to straighten out my life. There is a lot of drinking in the military and I was involved. Around 28-29 I met the girl who would become my second wife, but she used pain and nerve medicine. I was back to using drugs on the weekends along with drinking every day. I was deployed to Iraq at 29 and married my second wife during a two-week leave. I continued drinking for two to three months while in the desert as we were able to buy vodka from an Iraqi. I also had drugs mailed to me a few times in Iraq. However, it was pretty much the cleanest I had been in my adult life. I felt the most freedom in life even though I was in enemy territory. I've often thought how crazy it was to be at peace in such a dangerous place.

I returned to the states around age 30, and used heavy painkillers daily (OxyContin and Opana "oxymorphone"). I was selling drugs and dealing them to keep up with my habit. I also found a doctor who would overprescribe narcotics. This led to my first really bad physical and mental dependence. My wife and I began selling and trading our possessions to

keep up with the increased addiction. The marriage was doomed due to the drugs and we separated after about two years. After about a month she started seeing another man and I told her it was over with us. Within a couple of years I was drinking about a fifth of liquor a day. This led to pancreatitis. I did recover, but doctors said I lost the use of part of my pancreas. I decreased the drinking but increased drug use to compensate. This progressed and later the same year I began IV drug use. This was primarily morphine and meth but I would inject anything to get high. This led to contracting Hepatitis C and the beginning of kidney failure. Around this time I missed a court appearance which led to a warrant for my arrest. I ran from the law for about a year. They caught me on New Year's Eve. I had a half gram of meth and about 17 syringes. I spent 6 months in jail. About two weeks after I was released I fell right back into using. My use progressed and I stole from my parents and got kicked out of the house. I stayed on the streets for the next couple of years. I stayed in places with no electricity and no running water, with rats running around me. Some people call these "trap houses." They are places to acquire/do your drugs. My mental state was such that friends were telling me to get help and dealers would not sell to me. I had paranoia issues. I carried knives and guns thinking people were going to get me. By the grace of God I also made it through multiple overdoses. After losing pretty much everything but my life I went to Alvin C. York psychiatric ward seven days for detox.

My son, college-aged by now, found Nashville Rescue Mission's recovery program and I got into that. At this point I started reading the Bible and getting my mind back. It started making sense and most importantly, I believed it to be God's Word (II Tim. 3:16-17). I read Matthew 6:33 and have tried to hold to that ever since. In doing so, things have happened and fallen into place like clockwork. I believe God's providence has worked strongly in my life. The Rescue Mission does not teach the truth. However, it was a place that caused me to study the Bible. So without a clue as to which direction to go after the program I just prayed to know more about and serve God. The first place I checked was Tennessee Bible College in Cookeville, TN.

"On a positive note, there is hope for all who will turn to the Lord."

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Saul of Tarsus

Clovis Ragsdale - from FCGN, December 1954

The life of Saul of Tarsus, later known as Paul the apostle, is an illustration of what Jesus Christ can do for a man. Saul, the brilliant, and educated young Jew, put forth much effort in persecuting and attempting to stamp out the movement of Christianity. One thing that can be said in Saul's behalf - he was no slacker, but gave his best for the cause he believed to be right. This, however, did not justify Saul's opposition to the truth. He often referred to himself in later years as having been the "chief of sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15). This proves false the teaching of men today that honesty and sincerity is all that is necessary to live pleasing unto God.

Before his conversion, Saul took a belligerent attitude toward those he opposed (Acts 9:1). His conversion to Christianity caused him to become a meek and humble servant of Jesus Christ. Before the event on the Damascus road Paul hated the name of Christ. But, after he saw the light and heard the voice of Christ speak

unto him, he was constrained to call Him Lord.

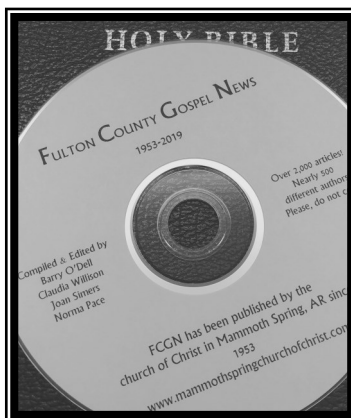
After his conversion Paul became the greatest proclaimer of Jesus Christ that the world had ever known. His ability and tremendous energy was put to work for preaching "Christ and Him crucified." The great contrast or change in his life was brought about by his acceptance of Christ. No matter how sinful and degraded

one may be, if he will accept Christ as his Savior and conform his life to the teachings of our Savior, his life and his outlook on life will be changed. His goal in life will be to

live pleasing unto God in this present world so that he may live forever with God in the great forevermore. Then we can say, as did this battle-scarred soldier of the cross as he neared the end of life's way, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith; henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge shall give me at that day; and not to me only, but unto all them also that love His appearing" (2 Tim. 4:7-8).

"...he was no slacker, but gave his best for the cause he believed to be right."

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...A Difficult Journey...

Cookeville is where my oldest son was attending Tennessee Technological University. I would have gone to the first place mentioned on the internet. What do you know? I ended up finding the truth at TBC. What a treasure and blessing this school has been to my life. I turned to God since that point but still struggle from time to time. My hepatitis has been cured through the VA's treatment. My past life I would not wish on my worst enemy. I have some health issues (tinnitus and vertigo) that bring stress that makes sobriety much harder. I have struggled through two divorces and many other things, but nothing can come close to touching the power of addiction. I'm absolutely convinced that God, the Bible, and the church are the only way to really come out of it. This includes me taking my journey with God and helping others that are in similar situations. Ultimately our hope is to get to heaven because things here do get hard from time to time. I pray things get easier. I believe it's my duty to find a way to reach out to others before it gets so hard for them that they greatly suffer or get to a point of never coming back. On a positive note there is hope for all who will turn to the Lord. As long as we are under the power of any substance it's impossible to be sober minded (1 Pet. 5:8). As Romans 1:16 so wonderfully says concerning the Bible, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek." The power to change even the worst of things comes from within.

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The Churches of Christ

- Bible only (2 Pet. 1:3)
- Name of Christ (Rom. 16:16)
- Began in Jerusalem (Isa. 2:2-3; Acts 2:1-4)
- Established by Jesus (Matt. 16:18)
- Purchased with Jesus' blood (Acts 20:28)
- Established in the 1st century (Acts 2:47)
- Jesus is the Head of the one body (Eph. 1:22-23; 4:4; 5:23)
- Added by God to the church (Acts 2:41, 47)

Salvation

- Saved by grace, though faith (Eph. 2:8-9)
- Not by faith alone (Jas. 2:20-26)
- Not by grace alone (Matt. 7:21)
- Belief and baptism (Mk. 16:16)
- Repentance and baptism (Acts 2:37-38)
- Belief, confession, and baptism (Acts 8:37-38)
- Hear, belief, baptism (Acts 18:8)
- Faith in the operation of God (Col. 2:12)
- Faith and baptism (Gal. 3:26-27)
- Baptism does save us (1 Pet. 3:21)

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