

The Surrendered Life

Paul had been a Jesus-hater, a self-righteous persecutor of Christians. He said he literally breathed hatred toward Christ's followers. He was also a man of great self-will and ambition. Paul was well educated, having been trained by the best teachers of his time. And he was a Pharisee, among the most zealous of all Jewish religious leaders. From the very start, Paul was on his way up, headed for success. He had the acceptance of the religious order of that day. And he had a clear mission, with commendations from his superiors. Indeed, he had his whole life planned out, knowing exactly where he was going. Paul was confident he was in God's will. Yet the Lord took this self-made, self-determined, self-directed man, and made him a glowing example of the surrendered life. Paul became one of the most God-dependent, God-filled, God-led people in all of history. In fact, Paul declared his life a pattern for all who desire to live fully surrendered to Christ: "For this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting" (1 Timothy 1:16). The apostle was saying, "If you want to know what it takes to live a surrendered life, look at mine. Have you set your heart to go deeper with Jesus? Here's what you can expect to endure." Paul knew that not many would be willing to follow his pattern. But his life is a blueprint for all who choose the fully surrendered life.

1. The path of surrender begins with a God-led sense of utter helplessness.

God begins the process by knocking us off our high horse. This literally happened to Paul. He was going his self-assured way, riding toward Damascus, when a blinding light came from heaven. Paul was knocked to the ground, trembling. Then a voice spoke from heaven, saying, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" (Acts 9:4). The words took Paul back to an event from months before. Suddenly, this upright Pharisee understood why his conscience was turning inside him. Paul had endured long nights of turmoil, plagued with unrest and confusion, because he'd seen something that shook him to the core. Paul had stood by as the apostle Stephen was stoned. He remembered the look on Stephen's face while facing death. Stephen had a heavenly countenance, a holy presence about him. And his words held such power. They were penetrating and convicting. This humble man clearly cared nothing for the approval of the world. He was unimpressed with religious dignitaries. And he had no fear of death. It all exposed the emptiness of Paul's life. This most devoted of Pharisees realized Stephen possessed something he didn't. Paul had come face to face with a fully God-surrendered man, and it made him miserable. He probably thought, "I trained for years reading the Scriptures. Yet this unlearned man speaks God's Word with authority. I've had a hunger for God my whole life. But Stephen has the very power of heaven, even while dying. He clearly knows God, like no one I've ever encountered. Yet all this time, I've been hunting down him and his kind." Paul knew something was missing in his life. He had a knowledge of God, but no firsthand revelation, like Stephen's. Now, on his knees and trembling, he heard these words from heaven: "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest" (Acts 9:5). It was a supernatural revelation. And the words turned Paul's world upside down. At that point, he must have been on his face for hours, weeping, as if to say: "I've totally missed it. I spent all those years in education and study, doing good works. But the whole time, I was on the wrong road. Jesus is the Messiah. He came, yet I missed knowing him. All those passages in Isaiah make sense now. They were about Jesus. Now I realize what Stephen possessed. He had an intimate knowledge of Christ." Scripture says, "Trembling and astonished [Paul] said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" (9:6). Paul's conversion was a dramatic work of the Holy Spirit. And what an unlikely convert this man was. He was the persecutor of God's people. His testimony would be a powerful, irrefutable witness for the gospel of Jesus Christ. Surely God would use Paul in incredible ways. "The Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do" (9:6). This highly educated Pharisee was now dumb-struck and blind. He had to be led by his friends into the city. Everything in his life seemed to have fallen apart. But the reality was, Paul was being led by the Holy Spirit into the surrendered life. When he asked, "Lord, what would you have me to do?", his heart was crying out, "Jesus, how can I serve you? How can I know you and please you? Nothing else matters. Everything I've done in my flesh is dung. You're everything to me now." Paul spent the next three days fasting and praying. Yet not a word came from heaven. He had taught and preached to others, but none of his learning could aid him now. He was utterly helpless. He must have prayed, "Oh God, you've put such a desire in me to know you. Please, show me what to do. I'm so blind and confused, nothing makes sense." Take note of this scene. Here is the pattern for the surrendered life. When you decide to go deeper with Christ, God will put a Stephen in your path. He'll confront you with someone whose countenance shines with Jesus. This person isn't interested in the things of the world. He doesn't care about the applause of men. He cares only about pleasing the Lord. And his life will expose your complacency and compromise, deeply convicting you. Like Paul, you'll suddenly feel your bankruptcy. You'll realize that no matter how many godly labors you've pursued, you've missed Jesus. And you'll end up in a blind alley: dumbfounded, directionless, unable to make sense of all past revelation. But it will all be God's doing. He'll bring you to this place of utter helplessness.

2. The path of surrender leads to much suffering.

"He is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel: for I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake" (Acts 9:15-16). Paul was promised a fruitful ministry. But he would have to endure great suffering to fulfill it. The subject of suffering is broad, including many different kinds of pain: physical agony, mental anguish, emotional distress, spiritual pain. According to Scripture, Paul experienced every one of these. He suffered a thorn in his flesh, shipwrecks, stonings, beatings, robberies. He faced rejection, mockery, malicious gossip. He endured persecutions of all kinds. And at times he felt lost, confused, unable to hear from God. This pattern of suffering in Paul's life won't be experienced by all who seek the surrendered life. But in some manner, every devoted believer is going to face pain. And there is a purpose behind it all. Suffering is an area of life over which we have no control. It's the realm where we learn surrender to God's will. Such suffering is the school of surrender. It's a training place where, like Paul, we fall on our faces, and end up crying, "Lord, I can't handle this." He responds, "Good. I'll handle it. Surrender all to me, your body, soul, mind, heart, everything. Trust me fully." If you enter the path of full surrender, you'll suffer much more than the average, complacent Christian. If a compromised believer suffers, it will be for his benefit alone. The Lord may be using pain to wean him from some particular sin. And no one else will benefit from his lessons. But if you desire the surrendered life, your suffering will eventually become a great comfort for others. Paul states: "Blessed be God...the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ. And whether we be afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effectual in the enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer: or whether we be comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation" (1 Corinthians 11:3-6). Paul is speaking here

of suffering that's allowed by Christ. Our Lord permits such pain in our lives, to make us witnesses to others of his faithfulness. He wants to prove himself as "the God of all comfort" (3:3). Our suffering is meant not only to bring us to full surrender to his will. It's also for "your [others'] consolation and salvation" (3:5). Simply put, the greatest ministries of comfort come from our greatest sufferings.

3. The path of surrender leads to a single ambition.

Paul had no other ambition, no other driving force in his life, than this: "That I may win Christ" (Philippians 3:8). By today's standards of success, Paul was a total failure. He didn't construct any buildings. He didn't have an organization. And the methods he used were despised by other leaders. In fact, the message Paul preached offended large numbers of his hearers. At times he was even stoned for preaching it. His subject? The cross. When we stand before God at the Judgment, we won't be judged by our ministries, achievements or number of converts. There will be but one measure of success on that day: were our hearts fully surrendered to God? Did we lay aside our own will and agenda, and take up his? Did we succumb to peer pressure and follow the crowd, or did we seek him alone for direction? Did we run from seminar to seminar looking for purpose in life, or did we find our fulfillment in him?

4. The path of surrender brings contentment in wherever you are and with whatever you have.

Many Christians live in continual discontent. They're never satisfied with what they have. They're forever looking to the future, thinking, "If I can just do this, or have that, I'll be happy." But their fulfillment never comes. Contentment was a huge test in Paul's life. After all, God said he would use him mightily: "He is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel" (Acts 9:15). When Paul first received this commission, "straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God" (9:20). The apostle grew bolder with every sermon: "Saul increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ" (9:22). What happened next? "The Jews took counsel to kill him" (9:23). So much for Paul's call to preach to the children of Israel. They not only rejected his message, but plotted his death. What a disastrous start to a ministry God said would be mighty. Paul then decided he would go to Jerusalem, to meet Jesus' remaining disciples. "But they were all were afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple" (9:26). Now Paul endured an even worse rejection. His own brothers in Christ turned him away. Finally, Paul reasoned, "At least I can reach the Gentiles." Yet, when a prominent Gentile, Cornelius, sought a preacher to share the gospel with him, he didn't ask for Paul. Instead, he turned to Peter. No doubt, Paul heard the glorious reports coming from Cornelius' house: "The Holy Ghost has fallen on the Gentiles. The Lord has revealed Christ to them!" Afterward, Paul had to sit by at the Jerusalem conference as Peter declared, "Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe" (15:7). Apparently, God had determined the revival among Gentiles would come through someone else. As far as Paul knew, he would be on the sidelines, watching it all happen. What do you think went through Paul's mind as he experienced these things? The truth is, through it all - the disappointment, the pain, the threats to his life - God was teaching his servant something crucial: Paul was learning to be content one step at a time. Later, when Paul preached in Antioch, his message was disputed by the Jewish leaders. So Paul declared, "Lo, we turn to the Gentiles" (Acts 13:46). Paul preached to the non-Jews there, and large numbers were converted; "and the word of the Lord was published throughout all the region" (13:48-49). Yet, before Paul could savor the victory, "the Jews stirred up the devout and honourable women...and raised persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them out of their coasts" (13:50). Next, Paul turned his sights on Iconium. When he preached there, once more "a great multitude both of the Jews and also of the Greeks believed" (14:1). Revival fell on the city. Yet, again, "there was an assault made both of the Gentiles, and also of the Jews with their rulers, to use them despitefully, and to stone them" (14:5). Can you imagine Paul's confusion and discouragement? At every turn, his calling seemed thwarted. God had promised him a fruitful ministry of evangelism. But each time he preached, he was cursed, rejected, assaulted, stoned. How did he respond? "I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content" (Philippians 4:11). Paul didn't question or complain. He didn't demand to know when he would get to preach to kings and rulers. He said, in essence, "I may not be seeing now what the Lord has promised me. But I'm moving on in faith, because I'm content in having Jesus. Because of him, I can live every day to the fullest."

Paul's contentment through everything was the result of a surrendered life.

Paul was in no hurry to see everything fulfilled in his life. He knew he had an ironclad promise from God, and he clung to it. For the present moment, he was content to minister wherever he was: witnessing to a jailer, to a sailor, to a few women on a river bank. This man had a worldwide commission, yet he was faithful to testify one-on-one. Nor was Paul jealous of younger men who seemed to pass him by. While they traveled the world, winning Jews and Gentiles to Christ, Paul sat in prison. He had to listen to reports of great crowds being converted by men he'd battled with over the gospel of grace. Yet Paul didn't envy those men. He knew that a Christ-surrendered man knows how to abase as well as abound: "Godliness with contentment is great gain...and having food and raiment [clothing] let us be therewith content" (1 Timothy 6:6, 8). The world today might say to Paul, "You're at the end of your life now. Yet you have no savings, no investments. All you have is a change of clothes." Paul's answer would be: "Oh, but I've won Christ. I have true life indeed." "But the devil is always harassing you, Paul. You live in constant pain. In fact, you suffer like no one else I know. How could this be?" "I glory in my afflictions. When I'm weak, that's actually when I'm strongest. I don't measure my strength by the world's standards, but by the Lord's." "What about your rival, Apollos? He has the ear of the crowds. Yet you minister only to small groups, or just one person. Apollos is an eloquent speaker, but your speech is contemptible, Paul." "None of that bothers me. I don't seek glory in this life. I have a revelation of the glory that awaits me." "But what about God's promise to you? He said you would witness to kings. The only time you ever did that was in chains. You had to preach while you were a prisoner. Where's the fulfillment of God's promise in your life?" "My Lord kept his word to me. It wasn't in the way I expected, but in his way. Regardless of my chains, I preached Christ in fullness. And those rulers were convicted. When I finished preaching, they trembled. The Lord gave me favor, in his way." "Paul, you've ended up a fool. Everybody in Asia has turned against you. The more you love others, the less you're loved. You've labored all this time to build up God's church, even doing menial tasks. But nobody appreciates it. Even the pastors you mentored now mock you. Some have even banned you from their pulpits. Why do you keep going in this ministry? You haven't been a success in any sense of the word." "I've already quit this world, with all its ambitions and flattery. I don't need the praises of men. You see, I was caught up in paradise. I heard unspeakable words, words not lawful for men to utter. So, you can have all the competition of this world, with all its strivings. I've determined to know nothing among you but Christ and him crucified. I tell you, I'm the winner. I've found the pearl of great price. Jesus granted me the power to lay down everything, and take it up again myself. Well, I laid it all down, and now a crown awaits me. I have only one goal in this life: to see my Jesus, face to face. All the sufferings of this present time can't be compared with the joy that awaits me." May our hearts be like Paul's, as we seek the surrendered life!