**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**ACTS-051. WHY SAUL BECAME PAUL by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Saul (who also is called Paul)."*

*Acts 13:9*

Hitherto the Apostle has been known by the former of these names, henceforward he is known exclusively by the latter. Hitherto he has been second to his friend Barnabas, henceforward he is first. In an earlier verse of the chapter we read that Barnabas and Saul were separated for their missionary work, and again, that it was Barnabas and Saul for whom the governor of Cyprus sent, to hear the word of the Lord. But in a subsequent verse of the chapter we read that Paul and his company loosed from Paphos.

The change in the order of the names is significant, and the change in the names not less so. Why was it that at this period the Apostle took up this new designation? I think that the coincidence between his name and that of the governor of Cyprus, who believed at his preaching, Sergius Paulus, is too remarkable to be accidental. And though, no doubt, it was the custom for the Jews of that day, especially for those of them who lived in Gentile lands, to have, for convenience sake, two names, one Jewish and one Gentile--one for use amongst their brethren, and one for use amongst the heathen--still we have no distinct intimation that the Apostle bore a Gentile name before this moment. And the fact that the name which he bears now is the same as that of his first convert, seems to me to point the explanation.

I take it, then, that the assumption of the name of Paul instead of the name of Saul occurred at this point, stood in some relation to his missionary work, and was intended in some sense as a memorial of his first victory in the preaching of the Gospel.

I think that there are lessons to be derived from the substitution of one of these names for the other which may well occupy us for a few moments.

**I. First of all, then, the new name expresses a new nature.**

Jesus Christ gave the Apostle whom He called to Himself in the early days, a new name, in order to prophesy the change which, by the discipline of sorrow and the communication of the grace of God, should pass over Simon Barjona, making him into a Peter, a Man of Rock. With characteristic independence, Saul chooses for himself a new name, which shall express the change that he feels has passed over his inmost being. True, he does not assume it at his conversion, but that is no reason why we should not believe that he assumes it because he is beginning to understand what it is that has happened to him at his conversion.

The fact that he changes his name as soon as he throws himself into public and active life, is but gathering into one picturesque symbol his great principle; If any man be in Christ Jesus, he is a new creature. Old things are passed away and all things are become new.

So, dear brethren, we may, from this incident before us, gather this one great lesson, that the central heart of Christianity is the possession of a new life, communicated to us through faith in that Son of God, Who is the Lord of the Spirit. Wheresoever there is a true faith, there is a new nature. Opinions may play upon the surface of a man's soul, like moonbeams on the silver sea, without raising its temperature one degree or sending a single beam into its dark caverns. And that is the sort of Christianity that satisfies a great many of you--a Christianity of opinion, a Christianity of surface creed, a Christianity which at the best slightly modifies some of our outward actions, but leaves the whole inner man unchanged.

Paul's Christianity meant a radical change in his whole nature. He went out of Jerusalem a persecutor, he came into Damascus a Christian. He rode out of Jerusalem hating, loathing, despising Jesus Christ; he groped his way into Damascus, broken, bruised, clinging contrite to His feet, and clasping His Cross as his only hope. He went out proud, self-reliant, pluming himself upon his many prerogatives, his blue blood, his pure descent, his Rabbinical knowledge, his Pharisaical training, his external religious earnestness, his rigid morality; he rode into Damascus blind in the eyes, but seeing in the soul, and discerning that all these things were, as he says in his strong, vehement way, but dung in comparison with his winning Christ.

And his theory of conversion, which he preaches in all his Epistles, is but the generalisation of his own personal experience, which suddenly, and in a moment, smote his old self to shivers, and raised up a new life, with new tastes, views, tendencies, aspirations, with new allegiance to a new King. Such changes, so sudden, so revolutionary, cannot be expected often to take place amongst people who, like us, have been listening to Christian teaching all our lives. But unless there be this infusion of a new life into men's spirits which shall make them love and long and aspire after new things that once they did not care for, I know not why we should speak of them as being Christians at all. The transition is described by Paul as passing from death unto life. That cannot be a surface thing. A change which needs a new name must be a profound change. Has our Christianity revolutionised our nature in any such fashion? It is easy to be a Christian after the superficial fashion which passes muster with so many of us. A verbal acknowledgment of belief in truths which we never think about, a purely external performance of acts of worship, a subscription or two winged by no sympathy, and a fairly respectable life beneath the cloak of which all evil may burrow undetected--make the Christianity of thousands. Paul's Christianity transformed him; does yours transform you? If it does not, are you quite sure that it is Christianity at all?

**II. Then, again, we may take this change of name as being expressive of a life's work.**

Paul is a Roman name. He strips himself of his Jewish connections and relationships. His fellow-countrymen who lived amongst the Gentiles were, as I said at the beginning of these remarks, in the habit of doing the same thing; but they carried both their names; their Jewish for use amongst their own people, their Gentile one for use amongst Gentiles. Paul seems to have altogether disused his old name of Saul. It was almost equivalent to seceding from Judaism. It is like the acts of the renegades whom one sometimes hears of, who are found by travellers, dressed in turban and flowing robes, and bearing some Turkish name, or like some English sailor, lost to home and kindred, who deserts his ship in an island of the Pacific, and drops his English name for a barbarous title, in token that he has given up his faith and his nationality.

So Paul, contemplating for his life's work preaching amongst the Gentiles, determines at the beginning, I lay down all of which I used to be proud. If my Jewish descent and privileges stand in my way I cast them aside. "Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews, as touching the law, a Pharisee,"--all these I wrap together in one bundle, and toss them behind me that I may be the better able to help some to whom they would have hindered my access. A man with a heart will throw off his silken robes that his arm may be bared to rescue, and his feet free to run to succour.

So we may, from the change of the Apostle's name, gather this lesson, never out of date, that the only way to help people is to go down to their level. If you want to bless men, you must identify yourself with them. It is no use standing on an eminence above them, and patronisingly talking down to them. You cannot scold, or hector, or lecture men into the possession and acceptance of religious truth if you take a position of superiority. As our Master has taught us, if we want to make blind beggars see we must take the blind beggars by the hand.

The spirit which led the Apostle to change the name of Saul, with its memories of the royal dignity which, in the person of its great wearer, had honoured his tribe, for a Roman name is the same which he formally announces as a deliberately adopted law of his life. To them that are without law I became as without law ... that I might gain them that are without law ... I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.

It is the very inmost principle of the Gospel. The principle that influenced the servant in this comparatively little matter, is the principle that influenced the Master in the mightiest of all events. He who was in the form of God, and thought not equality with God a thing to be eagerly snatched at, made Himself of no reputation, and was found in fashion as a man and in form as a servant, and became obedient unto death. For as much as the children were partakers of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise took part of the same; and the mystery of incarnation came to pass, because when the Divine would help men, the only way by which the Infinite love could reach its end was that the Divine should become man; identifying Himself with those whom He would help, and stooping to the level of the humanity that He would lift.

And as it is the very essence and heart of Christ's work, so, my brother, it is the condition of all work that benefits our fellows. It applies all round. We must stoop if we would raise. We must put away gifts, culture, everything that distinguishes us, and come to the level of the men that we seek to help. Sympathy is the parent of all wise counsel, because it is the parent of all true understanding of our brethren's wants. Sympathy is the only thing to which people will listen, sympathy is the only disposition correspondent to the message that we Christians are entrusted with. For a Christian man to carry the Gospel of Infinite condescension to his fellows in a spirit other than that of the Master and the Gospel which he speaks, is an anomaly and a contradiction.

And, therefore, let us all remember that a vast deal of so-called Christian work falls utterly dead and profitless, for no other reason than this, that the doers have forgotten that they must come to the level of the men whom they would help, before they can expect to bless them.

You remember the old story of the heroic missionary whose heart burned to carry the Gospel of Jesus Christ amongst captives, and as there was no other way of reaching them, let himself be sold for a slave, and put out his hands to have the manacles fastened upon them. It is the law for all Christian service; become like men if you will help them,--To the weak as weak, all things to all men, that we might by all means save some.

And, my brother, there was no obligation on Paul's part to do Christian work which does not lie on you.

**III. Further, this change of name is a memorial of victory.**

The name is that of Paul's first convert. He takes it, as I suppose, because it seemed to him such a blessed thing that at the very moment when he began to sow, God helped him to reap. He had gone out to his work, no doubt, with much trembling, with weakness and fear. And lo! here, at once, the fields were white already to the harvest,

Great conquerors have been named from their victories; Africanus, Germanicus, Nelson of the Nile, Napier of Magdala, and the like. Paul names himself from the first victory that God gives him to win; and so, as it were, carries ever on his breast a memorial of the wonder that through him it had been given to preach, and that not without success, amongst the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.

That is to say, this man thought of it as his highest honour, and the thing best worthy to be remembered about his life, that God had helped him to help his brethren to know the common Master. Is that your idea of the best thing about a life? What would you, a professing Christian, like to have for an epitaph on your grave? He was rich; he made a big business in Manchester; He was famous, he wrote books; He was happy and fortunate; or, He turned many to righteousness? This man flung away his literary tastes, his home joys, and his personal ambition, and chose as that for which he would live, and by which he would fain be remembered, that he should bring dark hearts to the light in which he and they together walked.

His name, in its commemoration of his first success, would act as a stimulus to service and to hope. No doubt the Apostle, like the rest of us, had his times of indolence and languor, and his times of despondency when he seemed to have laboured in vain, and spent his strength for nought. He had but to say Paul to find the antidote to both the one and the other, and in the remembrance of the past to find a stimulus for service for the future, and a stimulus for hope for the time to come. His first convert was to him the first drop that predicts the shower, the first primrose that prophesies the wealth of yellow blossoms and downy green leaves that will fill the woods in a day or two. The first convert bears in his hand a glass which showeth many more. Look at the workmen in the streets trying to get up a piece of the roadway. How difficult it is to lever out the first paving stone from the compacted mass! But when once it has been withdrawn, the rest is comparatively easy. We can understand Paul's triumph and joy over the first stone which he had worked out of the strongly cemented wall and barrier of heathenism; and his conviction that having thus made a breach, if it were but wide enough to let the end of his lever in, the fall of the whole was only a question of time. I suppose that if the old alchemists had turned but one grain of base metal into gold they might have turned tons, if only they had had the retorts and the appliances with which to do it. And so, what has brought one man's soul into harmony with God, and given one man the true life, can do the same for all men. In the first fruits we may see the fields whitening to the harvest. Let us rejoice then, in any little work that God helps us to do, and be sure that if so great be the joy of the first fruits, great beyond speech will be the joy of the ingathering.

**IV. And now last of all, this change of name is an index of the spirit of a life's work.**

Paul means little; Saul means desired. He abandons the name that prophesied of favour and honour, to adopt a name that bears upon its very front a profession of humility. His very name is the condensation into a word of his abiding conviction: I am less than the least of all saints. Perhaps even there may he an allusion to his low stature, which may be pointed at in the sarcasm of his enemies that his letters were strong, though his bodily presence was weak. If he was, as Renan calls him, an ugly little Jew, the name has a double appropriateness.

But, at all events, it is an expression of the spirit in which he sought to do his work. The more lofty the consciousness of his vocation the more lowly will a true man's estimate of himself be. The higher my thought of what God has given me grace to do, the more shall I feel weighed down by the consciousness of my unfitness to do it. And the more grateful my remembrance of what He has enabled me to do, the more shall I wonder that I have been enabled, and the more profoundly shall I feel that it is not my strength but His that has won the victories.

So, dear brethren, for all hope, for all success in our work, for all growth in Christian grace and character, this disposition of lowly self-abasement and recognised unworthiness and infirmity is absolutely indispensable. The mountain-tops that lift themselves to the stars are barren, and few springs find their rise there. It is in the lowly valleys that the flowers grow and the rivers run. And it is they who are humble and lowly in heart to whom God gives strength to serve Him, and the joy of accepted service.

I beseech you, then, learn your true life's task. Learn how to do it by identifying yourselves with the humbler brethren whom you would help. Learn the spirit in which it must be done; the spirit of lowly self-abasement. And oh! above all, learn this, that unless you have the new life, the life of God in your hearts, you have no life at all.

Have you, my brother, that faith by which we receive into our spirits Christ's own Spirit, to be our life? If you have, then you are a new creature, with a new name, perhaps but dimly visible and faintly audible, amidst the imperfections of earth, but sure to shine out on the pages of the Lamb's Book of Life; and to be read with tumults of acclaim before the angels of Heaven. I will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth save he that receiveth it.