

September 21, 1986

POWER FOR PURPOSEFUL LIVING

I Timothy 2: 5-7

Papillon, the French prisoner who was condemned to life imprisonment on Devil's Island, was disturbed by a recurring nightmare. Repeatedly, he would dream that he stood before a harsh tribunal. "You are charged," they would shout, "with a wasted life How do you plead?" In his dream he would reply, "Guilty. I plead guilty." How do we avoid the feeling that our lives have been wasted, that there was really no point to it all? Is there a way whereby we can know that our lives really do matter? Is there some secret source of power upon which we may tap to put more life into our days?

I don't believe that anyone would have ever charged the Apostle Paul with having wasted his life. He was charged with many other things. He was beaten and thrown into prison because of numerous confrontations with political and religious authorities, but never could he have been charged with wasting his life. Indeed, few men have ever made the contributions to human existence that St. Paul made.

It was St. Paul who took the gospel to the Gentiles. It was St. Paul who gave us the most beautiful description of love ever written—in I Corinthians 13. It was St. Paul who gave us the definitive statement of life after death in I Corinthians 15. St. Paul was certainly one of the most influential men who had ever lived. Ironically, he would receive much more credit for his contributions if he had not been so effective in convincing us that he was but an instrument of the risen Christ.

The secret to his purposeful and powerful life is contained in these words from I Timothy 2:5-7: "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all. . . For this I was appointed a preacher and apostle . . . a teacher of the gentiles in faith and truth."

Let's consider for a moment that first clause: "FOR THERE IS ONE GOD . . ." You and I take that great truth for granted, but the writers of the Bible could not. They knew what a struggle it had been for their fathers to declare the unity of God, for mankind has always worshipped many gods.

It was these stubborn Jews who maintained that there was but one God, Yahweh, and that mankind should have no other gods but him.

They declared the unity of God, and they declared the universality of God. Yahweh is the God of all creation. Indeed, he is the creator of all that lives and moves

and has its being. Who could doubt the truthfulness of that proposition? The one-hundredth birthday of the Statue of Liberty brings to mind an observation of Oscar Hammerstein II. He was privileged to view this inspiring statue close-up from a helicopter. He was quite impressed by the great painstaking detail that the sculptor had employed even on the very top of the head. Every strand of hair was in place. What impressed Hammerstein so was that the sculptor lived before helicopters or airplanes. He could not know that the top of the statue's head would ever be viewed by anyone except perhaps a few seagulls—yet he went to the trouble to do his work right. Of course, the handiwork of the greatest human sculptor of all time pales in comparison to the actual creation of a human being. Talk about painstaking detail! Who would be foolish enough to declare that there was no superior intelligence behind the creation of this world?

The children of Israel declared his unity, his universality, but even more importantly, they declared his unique intimacy with the world he had created. Yahweh was no remote god who had created a world and then forgotten it. He was involved in the life of his people in a very personal way. I got a chuckle out of a story that Tip O'Neill tells on himself. O'Neill had a chance encounter with a man while waiting in an airport not too long ago. After a few minutes the man said to O'Neill, "Say, you don't recognize me, do you?" "No, I really don't think so," said the senator. "You see, I'm so well known. I have this big shock of white hair and this large red nose, and I'm on the TV news two or three times a week. A lot of people recognize me, but I can't keep track of all the people I meet. Who are you?" The man answered, "We met at a dinner party about six weeks ago in Washington. My name is Robert Redford."¹

I'm glad that someone else besides me has difficulty with names. Tip O'Neill may not remember you, my friend, but God does. He is intimately involved with his world and in the lives of each of his children. "There is one God," declares St. Paul.

"AND THERE IS BUT ONE MEDIATOR BETWEEN GOD AND MEN, THE MAN JESUS CHRIST, WHO GAVE HIMSELF A RANSOM FOR ALL . . . " We have moved now from the universal to the specific. Our Muslim friends declare that there is but one God. Our Jewish friends declare that there is but one God. Most thinking people in the world today declare that there is but one God, but it is the unique claim of the people called Christians that there is but one mediator between God and human beings, the man Jesus.

Again, this was no frivolous claim. Most of the early Christians had been Jews.

The God they worshipped was a God of power, majesty and strength. To look upon God was to die. To even touch the things of God with unclean hands was to risk awful retribution. The Jewish God was no "man upstairs." He was a God whose glory could not even be properly contemplated by mere mortals. And yet, St. John writes in the prologue to his Epistle, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son of the Father. . . ." Old John's hands must have trembled as he wrote those words.

The early disciples believed with all their hearts that there was but one mediator between God and humanity. There was one way, one truth, one life, one shepherd, one door—and that was Jesus.

They heard him teach, they saw him heal people's hurts, they witnessed his death upon Golgotha, and they encountered him in his eternal glory on the road to Emmaeus, in the Upper Room and on the mountain where he ascended to the Father. And throughout the New Testament they tried to sum up the impact of his life on theirs. They called him Prophet, High Priest, Servant of God, Lamb of God, Son of David, Son of man, Holy One of God, Son of God, Savior, Messiah, King of Kings and Lord of Lords. E. Stanley Jones, that great missionary/evangelist/writer once said that this is the great divide between Christianity and the world religions. Not that they do not have truth, not that they lack noble sentiments, gracious teaching, or gifted leaders. But in them, said Jones, the Word became word—a set of teachings, a morality, a religious framework. Only within Christianity does the Word become flesh. And it is that Word become flesh that offers human beings access to the Father.

In his great work Four Quartets, T. S. Eliot pictures the entire human race as patients in a hospital ward. There we lie sick and dying. Ministering to us, however, is a physician, the most splendid physician of all. Only, if you look closely, the physician himself is wounded. He bends over us with "bleeding hands." Only he can heal us—only he can save. That physician, of course, is Christ.

"There is one God . . . there is one mediator . . ." writes St. Paul. "For this I was appointed a preacher and apostle . . . a teacher of the gentiles in faith and truth . . ." Now what does all this have to do with St. Paul's sense of power and purpose? St. Paul's life was grounded in his knowledge of God and his experience of Christ. That knowledge and that experience had two effects on St. Paul's life. We may call the first effect the focal effect and the second, the funnel effect.

We know now that great accomplishments in this world are made by persons who are totally dedicated to a single cause. St. Paul's great cause was to glorify God—whether he was making tents or writing letters to young churches, or preaching on street corners, the object was the same. He did all things to the glory of God. And, my friends, that is your task and mine as well. To do everything we do—whether it be in an office, on a construction site, in a classroom, at home or wherever—to do everything we do to the glory of God. We are concerned in our land right now with the pursuit of excellence. Here is the key: We need to center in on everything we do and ask ourselves, Is this something I can do to His glory? If it is, we ought to give ourselves to it with total abandon. That is one secret of a super, successful life—to have a focal point for our lives that we can believe in without reservation and to give all we have to it. That is the focal effect.

The second effect we may call the funnel effect. St. Paul saw himself as a funnel through which God's purpose and power could flow. Someone did a study of the lives of great people and they discovered that invariably these monumental achievers did not consider the path of greatness as leading from them but rather as leading through them. The source was somewhere other than themselves. Have you ever completed a task and looked at it and thought to yourself, "Wow. I couldn't have done that! And felt that behind your work was an unseen hand? St. Paul believed that about his life. He was but a channel through which God's power flowed.

A brawny man stood in front of a painting by the great artist Sargent in an art gallery in New York City. He kept muttering to himself, "I've been given a place at last. I have a place at last." Artist Robert Henri was standing nearby. Henri was mystified at the man's words. "Art you in this sort of work?" he asked the man. "Oh, yes," said the man, "but this is the first time I've been displayed like this." Now Henri really was disturbed. "But I thought that this work was by the great painter Sargent," he said. "That's right," said the man, "but it was me that made the frame." St. Paul saw himself as the frame, but Christ was the painting. It was the power of the risen Christ working through him that was the source of his great accomplishments. "I live," he wrote on one occasion, "but not I, but Christ Jesus liveth through me." (Galatians 2:20) Is that a truth too great for our little hearts? It is to say that if we will but surrender our lives, there is a source of power available to us—that can flow through us—and help us to accomplish more than we ever dreamed possible.

No, St. Paul could never have been accused of wasting his life. That great scholar Augustine once said that there were three things he would like to have seen:

1. Jesus in the flesh.
2. Imperial Rome in its splendor.
3. St. Paul preaching.

It is no wonder. St. Paul preached as he did everything else—to the glory of God. St. Paul believed that divine energy flowed through him. That is what a renewed faith in God and in Christ can do for us—it can give us new power, new purpose for the living of our lives—to the extent that men may see our good works and glorify our Father which is in heaven.

¹ Bruce Larson, ed., The Power to Make Things New (Waco: Word Books, 1986).