



Rembrandt's self-portrait as Paul

For the seminary student, life is often a rollercoaster. Some classes which, on the surface seem mundane can, in the blink of an eye rocket you through shattered barriers into a different reality. You can find yourself in unknown regions, bouncing off the mountaintops of weird landscapes, in previously unexplored realms of the spiritual. That's what happened to me early one morning in, of all places, Greek Class. That morning just after Chapel, The Cambridge Professor and world-class scholar, Dr. Rodney Whitacre decided to take us on a trip through the Beatitudes, those verses found in today's section of Luke 6, which some people call the "Sermon on the Plain," the shorter, parallel passage to the well known "Sermon on the Mount" in Matthew. And as he explained the meaning and beauty of these verses, Dr. Whitacre said something amazing; something like this: "You need to understand that here Jesus wasn't just talking to the humans gathered around him. Because when Christ walked and talked among us, those who nudged in to catch His every word weren't just the human beings crowding 'round to hear him speak...Because the Saints were listening too." And Jesus knew that; he certainly didn't want to leave the **heavenly** members of his congregation out of the conversation. So when the Christ begins to describe what he is looking at in the Beatitudes, he isn't just describing what he surveys here on earth. He's also addressing those gathered around him in heaven. The Beatitudes are actually Our Lord's address to the Saints. Isn't that amazing! To suspend time and transcend space; to stand in a meadow of this world and yet address a congregation in earth **and** in heaven? Can you imagine that type of power? That's what All Saints Sunday is about – the power of God to reach across the chasm of death and waltz arm-in-arm with men **and** Angels. This day is all about that kind of awesome power.

Paul understood that power perhaps more fully than any other human that has ever lived. At the start of his *Letter to the Ephesians*, he describes with wonderful completeness this power of God. He tells the Ephesians of his fond hope that, "*With the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power*" (Eph. 1:18-19) Paul, you see, understood more than anyone else the awesome power that the Holy Spirit can unleash in the lives of those who believe, in the lives of those who live as people called to be Children of the Most High God.

After more than 70 years, what is it that still makes the *Narnia* stories by C. S. Lewis strike such a resonating chord? Could it be that these wonderful stories fill a hole deep within us, an empty space that yearns to be filled. Isn't there a longing inside us all for the great Lion, Aslan to lead us into a cosmic battle, where good does indeed triumph over evil; a hunger for that morning when, with the roar of the great lion the bright dawn of truth finally **does** break upon our world to bathe us all in a light of goodness and joy and victory. Isn't that what we – all of us – isn't that what we are all **really** waiting for in this world of heartache? But with the letter to the Ephesians, we see that we are waiting no longer. Because as Paul proclaims, "*God has put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead*" (Eph.1:20a) Paul was certainly intimately familiar with the enormous power that comes from the anointing of the Holy Spirit. In Acts 13, we read that Paul, by the power of the Holy Spirit struck blind the false prophet Elymas. (See Acts 13:7-11) In the next Chapter, by the power of that same Spirit, Paul healed a cripple in the town of Lystra. (See Acts 14:8-10) In Acts 16, we read that he cast out a demon from a slave girl in Philippi. (See Acts 16:16-18) And in Acts 19, we find that the Holy Spirit was working so powerfully through Paul, that even his garments, even the touching of Paul's handkerchief was enough to heal the sick. (See Acts 19:11) Has anything that has ever happened at the fantasy magical school of Hogwarts come even close to miracles that Paul **really** performed through the immense power of Spirit of the one High God?

But then, I think we have to ask ourselves, "Why?" Why would The Lord God go to so much effort to pour out the awesome power of His Holy Spirit on us? So that we could perform these sorts of miracles? Is it just to prove who's really boss?

Is the objective of the awesome power of the Holy Spirit just to make clear to us who's really in charge down here? Isn't that taking an awful lot of trouble to manifest the timeless power of the Holy Spirit of God down here in this world, which is such a temporary place? Why go to that extreme to change the brief lives of mortal men, humans, when Scripture tells us clearly that we are here only for a single season and then, like the grass, wither away? (See Is.51:12) Why would God Almighty go to so much trouble over creatures whose lives are so very fleeting?

Well maybe, just maybe The Lord God is spending so much of his divine time and effort to impact and transform our fleeting, earthly lives with the immense power of the Holy Spirit because...you and I are in boot camp. Theologians such as N. T. Wright are only now beginning to write seriously about the fact that maybe, just maybe when you and I shuffle off this mortal coil, our real work is only just beginning. It's quite possible that this entire earthly life is nothing more than our training course for a role in the great, cosmic battle that is to be, that glorious final struggle when good does triumph over the powers of darkness.

Now, you may be wondering right now, at my house just what kind of mushrooms have they been puttin' on the pizza. But I need to tell you that there is sound evidence, Biblical evidence that this cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil is no metaphor. Not only does this battle take place, but it is already in progress, and has been in progress for thousands of years. It rages around us we sit here in this place today, although you cannot see it with human eyes or hear its clash and cry with mortal ears. Yet, the struggle is, even now in progress. (See 1Pet.5:8)

We still make reference to this cosmic battle today, although we have shrouded it in metaphor to make it less disturbing to our "enlightened," secular minds. You may have seen a film which came out almost 35 years ago entitled, *Chariots of Fire*. You may not know that the title of the film, inspired by the poetry of William Blake actually comes from verses in Scripture. In 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 6, as Elisha is surrounded by Israel's enemies, the Arameans, his servant despairs for their lives. But Elisha calmly prays that the Lord will permit the prophet's servant to see with heavenly eyes, and for a moment the young man is able to glimpse the forces of the heavenly host which are gathered all around the hills to protect them **in their chariots of fire**. (See 2Ki.6:15-17)

Paul was under absolutely no illusion that there is this cosmic battle between good and evil on-going. In 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians he clearly tells us, "*We do not wage war according to human standards; for the weapons of our warfare are not merely human, but they have divine power to destroy strongholds*" (2Cor.10:3b-4a). And even more clearly at the end of *Ephesians* he writes, "*For our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*" (Eph.6:12) No, it is difficult to read the Bible with any seriousness and come away with the conviction that the cosmic war between light and dark is only a metaphor. No, this struggle is ongoing. It is a very real battle in which you and I will have our own, powerful part to play.

Of all the prophecies in the Old Testament, those in the Book of Daniel which start with the passage we head this morning from Chapter 7 are probably the most intriguing. Over the centuries the "four beasts" and the "little horn" that we hear about have been given different interpretations. But let me suggest that to focus on a precise identity of these Biblical characters (either a future identity or a historical one) is to miss the main point. Because the real message of this chapter is that for the Saints of God there is inevitably a time of suffering and persecution. But their eventual victory and the destruction of evil is assured. And this victory is achieved by the Son of Man to whom will be given by the Ancient of Days dominion over all the peoples, and his reign will be an everlasting kingdom. (See Dan.7:13-14)

In the final book of the Bible, in the 19<sup>th</sup> Chapter of *Revelation*, John of Patmos is permitted to glimpse the armies of heaven. And they are all clothed in the same fine, white linen of the Saints of God. And the battle, that last battle is so very clearly described, as is its victory. (See Rev.19:11-21) So, you see, I have come to believe that this present life is indeed, only our proving ground. We are to be tested here, some of us sorely tested. But, as gold is refined by great fire, so are we being prepared for our own place in heavenly realms, being prepared for a place among the Saints of God, citizens of a Kingdom that shall never pass away. Blessed All Saints Day!

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