

He was a man of dedication. His training had been under the best of teachers. Each morning he began his day with prayer, praising God and asking that he would be found faithful to the God who had given him all things. ~~He was a man full of energy.~~ With intensity he studied God's law, concentrating on how he could keep it day after day. He spoke to others about God, he went here and there seeing to it that God was honored and obeyed. As he grew, his mother and father were proud of him, all the folks in his home town smiled when his name was mentioned. ~~His success helped make them somebody in the eyes of this world.~~

Best of all he was just what he seemed, in no way phony or hypocritical, a real man of God. His name was Saul.

He was conservative. Always there were people who came with changes, seeking to make the faith given through Moses ~~and~~ into something different than it was. Lately there had been a group who followed after a man named Jesus. They claimed that he who had been crucified ^{or crucified} was the ~~the~~ Son of God, The Lord. Armed with the scriptures and with centuries of tradition, Saul set out to wipe out this false teaching, and ^{to wipe out} those who held to it.

He did it all for God.

But ^{as he} journeying to Damascus, where he was headed to attack these followers of Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ appeared to Saul. Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? he asked. And Saul, blinded by the glory of the risen Christ, ceased to be. And a new man was given life, a man named Paul.

"Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.

I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing

For years Paul might have rehearsed the day when he would stand before God. With his arms full of all of his good work and accomplishments, standing before God he would present them. Here God is all that I have done, my love, my prayers, my deeds of mercy, my obedience to your will. Here God is my sincerity, my devotion.

But having seen Christ, Paul let go of it all. He let it fall, trash, ~~was~~ rubbish. He had planned to come with his gift to God, but God's gift of Christ to him left him ashamed of any gift he could offer. I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord.

From then on only one thing mattered, that more and more would know of God's gift of his Son. Paul preached that more and more might have their arms emptied of their accomplishments, that they might cling to God's work in Jesus Christ through faith.

As I think of the man Saul giving up his whole life, letting it go, I think of how many have their life stripped from them. The man ^{or} and woman who has invested years in a marriage, until part of who he or she is is to be married to his this person. Then through divorce or death it is gone. The ~~farm~~ ^{farm family that} ~~who~~ invests decades in land and a way of life until they can no longer think of themselves apart from that place, until one day it is gone. The parent who devotes herself to her child until death robs her of what has been most important. The man losing his job, the woman betrayed by a friend. We think of all of these as tragedies. Yet they are all part of life in this world.

I suppose that man named Saul could have closed his eyes. He could have declared, If I can't have the world my way, I do not want it at all. Stripped of all he had hoped for and believed in, ~~Saul~~ ^{Saul} could have made bitterness and self pity his closest friends. But he let go. And God made him a new man.

God who took the worst that this world could do to Jesus and made it into our hope and salvation, is still doing that very same thing in our world this day. The world crushed our dreams, it strips us of all we have lived for,

but God takes his Son Jesus Christ and fills our arms. Again and again God takes people broken and dead, dried up, weary, and makes them new and fresh and alive by filling them with faith in Jesus Christ.

Truly in this world with its many tragedies, its broken dreams and disappointments, there is truly only one tragedy. It is when we cling to what is broken and is passing away and was ours only for a time, and keep God with from filling us with faith in Christ. When we despair, when we declare, if the future is not the future I dreamed of then I want no future, that is a tragedy. But when we believe ^{in Jesus Christ} though every tragedy crash down upon us, suffering, pain, loss, and death, even then we are victorious. The victory won by Christ is ours. Life forever with our God.

And so with Paul press on toward that goal. Forget what lies behind and strain forward to what lies ~~ahead~~ ahead. Press on toward the goal of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.