

Pardoning The Blasphemer

By: Keith Keyser

Sebastian Horsley – a child of privilege turned artist, author, and all-around self-promoter – died of a drug overdose yesterday, merely forty-seven years old. His sad life was marred by dysfunctional family life, followed by illicit self-indulgence in sexual promiscuity and heroin addiction. As an adult he engaged in shameless exhibitionism, as revealed in a dangerous and blasphemous stunt which he pulled a decade ago. His obituary comments:

The pinnacle of his career in this regard came in 2000, when he travelled to the Philippines and was crucified ("Christ, after all, had profound style"), fainting when the nails were driven in and falling when his footrest fell away. It was a gruesome and ignominious end to what some had viewed as a stunt in extremely poor taste, but Horsley's name was trumpeted around the world, and even, he seemed to suggest, to the heavens. **'I'd been rejected by a god I didn't believe in,'** he noted.ⁱ

His last comment was particularly tragic, given that it was entirely untrue. God exists, and was willing to receive Horsley, if he would repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. The obituary goes on to cite a recent interview where Horsley cynically assessed his life, saying: "I haven't really had a life...I've just sat in a room and died. That's what we all do."ⁱⁱ How different it would have been if he had turned to Christ in his desperation. For those who come to Him for salvation, the Lord Jesus promises life that is eternal in quality as well as in duration. As He said: "...I am come that they might have life, and that they might have *it more* abundantly" (Jn. 10:10.)

A Case Study In Extreme Forgiveness

Saul of Tarsus was the most unlikely candidate for conversion to faith in Christ. After all, his career as a rising star in rabbinic Judaism was marked by his rejection of the claims of Jesus and His followers. He defined his zeal for his religion in terms of his assault on the church (Phil. 3:6.) For instance, when the dynamic preacher Stephen was violently silenced through an impromptu execution, Saul affirmed that this was the right course of action. Acts 8:1 records his attitude, saying: "And Saul was consenting unto his death." Elsewhere he describes his efforts to stamp out this nascent faith which he regarded as heretical in this famous phrase: "And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry; **Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious:** but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief." (1 Tim. 1:12-13; emphasis mine.)

Saul was a "blasphemer": one who spoke evil regarding the Lord and His people. Additionally, he was a "persecutor": he violently attacked Christians, as he later noted: "...I persecuted this way unto the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women" (Acts 22:4.)

Lastly, his attitude was “injurious” – meaning that he was an insolent man who delighted in demeaning and injuring others.ⁱⁱⁱ Clearly, he was not an unbiased seeker, open to embracing a new belief system. Nevertheless, the awe-inspiring sight of the risen Christ’s glory on the road to Damascus stopped him in his tracks, and changed his mind on everything that he thought he knew. Jesus is Lord, and Saul – subsequently known as Paul – would follow wherever He led until he himself died a martyr for the truth of Christ.^{iv}

The Prototype Of Christ’s Patient Mercy

Casting a backward glance at his life before meeting and receiving Christ, Paul declared that God used him as an object lesson of a recipient of 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 Tim. 1:16.) Other translations bring out the nuances of the verse, emphasizing the Lord’s incomparable patience:

“I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life” (ESV.)^v

“But here is why I was treated with mercy: so that in me as the worst, Christ Jesus could demonstrate his utmost patience, as an example for those who are going to believe in him for eternal life” (NET.)^{vi}

That the Lord Jesus could save such an overbearing, religious tormentor was evidence of His inexhaustible patience. As one commentator aptly remarks:

Although Paul’s conversion had a number of unique features (the heavenly light, the audible voice, the Hebrew language, Paul’s fall and blindness), it was also a ‘prototype’ (*hypotypōsis*, BAGD) of all subsequent conversions, because it was an exhibition of Christ’s infinite patience. In fact the conversion of Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus road has proved to be just that. It remains a standing source of hope to otherwise hopeless cases. Paul seems to speak to us across the centuries: ‘Don’t despair! Christ had mercy even on *me*, the worst of sinners; he can also have mercy on *you!*’^{vii}

Those who fancy themselves too far gone for God need to consider well Paul’s conversion and what it says about the Almighty. The Lord is willing and able to pardon and free the most wretched, desperate sinner. His death and resurrection assure us that the redemption price that God’s holy standard demands has been received. God now offers salvation exclusively in Christ to whoever will receive it. As 1 Tim. 2:3-6 puts it: “For this *is* good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For *there is* one God and one Mediator between God and men, *the* Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time” (NKJV.)^{viii} A life of blasphemy and

dissipation – such as lived by Paul and the unfortunate man at the beginning of this article – can be changed in an instant by receiving by faith the gift of eternal life in Christ.

ⁱ *The Telegraph*, electronic edition: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/culture-obituaries/art-obituaries/7839061/Sebastian-Horsley.html> Published 18 June, 2010; accessed 6/18/10. Emphasis mine.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ “One who insults in an arrogant manner” 33.392, “*hubristes*.” Louw, Johannes P., and Eugene Albert Nida. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament : Based on Semantic Domains*. electronic ed. (Logos.) of the 2nd edition. New York: United Bible societies, 1996. The word only occurs twice in the New Testament, the other occurrence coming in the catalogue of horrible sins in Rom. 1:30 (rendered “despiteful” in the KJV.)

^{iv} His death is anticipated in 2 Timothy 4:6-8. Later extra-biblical writings refer specifically to his execution, e.g. 1 Clement 5, which says: “Owing to envy, Paul also obtained the reward of patient endurance, after being seven times thrown into captivity, compelled to flee, and stoned. After preaching both in the east and west, he gained the illustrious reputation due to his faith, having taught righteousness to the whole world, and come to the extreme limit of the west, and suffered martyrdom under the prefects. Thus was he removed from the world, and went into the holy place, having proved himself a striking example of patience.”

(<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/1clement-roberts.html> ; accessed on 6/18/10.) One scholar cites further evidence: “Clement of Rome said that both Peter and Paul died in Rome after Paul had gone to the limits of the West (1 Clem. 5). Ignatius of Antioch indicates the importance of both Peter and Paul for Rome (Rom. 4:2). Dionysius of Corinth describes how both Peter and Paul died at the same time (*Historia Ecclesiastica*, II.25.5-8). Irenaeus traced the apostolic succession of Rome from Peter and Paul (*Against Heresies*, III.1.2; 3.1). Some details of Paul’s death at Tre Fontane and his burial outside the wall are perhaps preserved in the apocryphal Acts of Paul before the end of the second century. Tertullian says Paul suffered death in Rome, but he is not clear on a second imprisonment (*Apology*, 5; *Prescription Against Heresies*, 35). After Eusebius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Epiphanius, John Chrysostom, and others support this tradition against which there is no evidence.” (Dale Moody, “A New Chronology For The New Testament,” *Review and Expositor* Volume 78:2 [Spring, 1981]. Louisville, KY, p. 223.)

^v *The Holy Bible : English Standard Version*. Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001; emphasis mine.

^{vi} *The NET Bible First Edition; Bible. English. NET Bible.; The NET Bible*. Biblical Studies Press, 2006; emphasis mine.

^{vii} Stott, John R. W. *Guard the Truth : The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus*. The Bible speaks today. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996; electronic ed. (Logos.)

^{viii} *The New King James Version*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982.