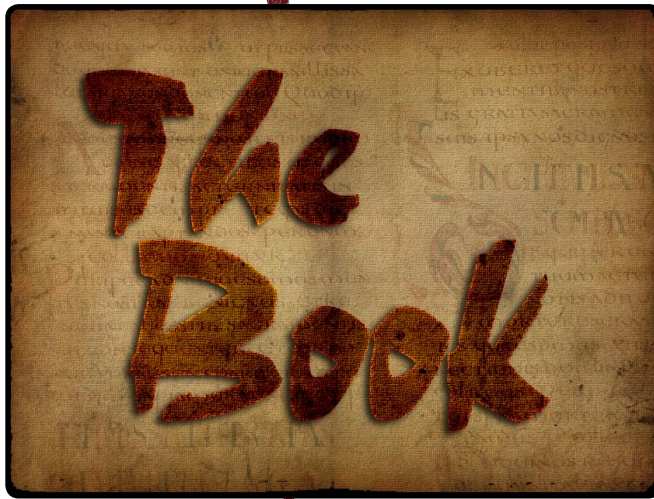


# Very Real People

Last in a series



I have worked over the Bible,  
prayed over the Bible for more  
than sixty years, and I tell you  
there is no book like the Bible.  
  
It is a miracle of literature, a  
perennial spring of wisdom, a  
wonderful book of surprises,  
a revelation of mystery, and  
infallible guide of conduct, and  
unspeakable source of comfort.

*Samuel Chadwick*

**I**T IS EASY FOR THE CASUAL CHRISTIAN to set the apostle Paul—evangelist to the Gentiles, and writer of most of the doctrinal epistles in the New Testament—on an exalted pedestal. Some are tempted to add him to the throne room of God, setting him across from Jesus, to the Father's left. But God always drew imperfect souls to Himself, and Paul was, before his conversion, about as bad as they come.

For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it.

*Galatians 1:13*

I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison...

*Acts 22:4 NIV*

Saul of Tarsus (Paul's name until sometime early in his ministry) had as his occupation the elimination of this new sect that threatened the traditions and foundation of Judaism. The early portions of the book of The Acts contain a catalogue of his vehement hatred for anyone associated with Jesus Christ.

But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at [Stephen] with one impulse. When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at

the feet of a young man named Saul.

Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.

*Acts 7:57-58; 8:1-3*

Even after his roadside conversion by the Lord, Paul was thoroughly human in his imperfections. He didn't always get along with people, and could be less than patient when confronted by the imperfections in others.

On their first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas had taken along with them a young man called John Mark—son of Mary, Barnabas' relation, who owned the house in Jerusalem where an early church met. For whatever reason Mark (later to write the gospel account that bears his name) left the two missionaries to return home. Paul considered Mark's leaving to be abandonment, so when preparations were being made for their second journey, and Barnabas suggested taking John Mark again, Paul refused. This disagreement caused a rift between the two missionaries, and they went their separate ways.

## THE COUNCIL

With the rose-tinted vision of hindsight, it is also easy for today's believer to imagine the early church as a unified whole—a cohesive collection of wise, saintly souls who, because of their closer proximity to Christ and His disciples, were in possession of a profound faith of which we can only be envious. The truth, however, is a picture that bears a closer resemblance to our own ungainly congregations today.

The early church, not surprisingly, pursued a debate over doctrine—especially whether believers in The Way should be required to follow, as well, the dictates of Jewish law.

But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses." The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter.

"Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are."

So far so good. Peter is arrested and the church prays for his deliverance. Sounds familiar—and entirely appropriate. There was little the small community of believers could do against the power of the king, so they gathered together in Mary's house for sustained, "fervent" prayer. Only their faith wasn't quite as fervent as their words.

God worked a miracle that night. He sent an angel to rouse the sleeping Peter and to cause his manacles to fall away. The angel told him to get dressed and follow him outside—right through the guards! My, how this must have strengthened Peter's faith; how it must have validated his belief that God would rescue him. Well, actually, his first thought was that he was dreaming.

And he went out and continued to follow, and he did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision.

Acts 12:9

But Peter quickly came to his senses and realized his rescue was real. He went straight to Mary's house, where he knew the people would be waiting. He knocked at the front gate for

God's word is made more real by its cast of very real people. It is populated by characters just like us: people both remarkable and common, brilliant and stupid, poor and wealthy; those blithely innocent, as well as those wily and clever. In its pages people are born, they live imperfect lives, and then they die. Righteous people do wrong and sinful people do right. Innocent people are betrayed and evil people get away with murder.

In the pages of the Bible there is unabashed joy, anger, cruelty, lust, holiness, depravity, incest, goodness, greed, treachery, and sacrificial love. These are people cut from the same cloth as we, and their unvarnished, believable lives bring to God's Book an authenticity that, along with the translation of the Spirit, stamps indelibly into the reader's mind the truth of Scripture. These imperfections—and trust in God—endear their owners to the attentive reader.

Reading God's Book we see all of them as they were: just like us. We draw strength and encouragement from the realization that God works His perfect plan through imperfect people.

*O God of Light, Thy Word, a lamp unfailing,  
Shines through the darkness of our earthly way,  
O'er fear and doubt, o'er black despair prevailing,  
Guiding our steps to Thine eternal day.*

*From days of old, through swiftly rolling ages,  
Thou hast revealed Thy will to mortal men,  
Speaking to saints, to prophets, kings, and sages,  
Who wrote the message with immortal pen.*

*Undimmed by time, the Word is still revealing  
To sinful men Thy justice and Thy grace;  
And questing hearts that long for peace and healing  
See Thy compassion in the Saviour's face.*

*To all the world the message Thou art sending,  
To every land, to every race and clan;  
And myriad tongues, in one great anthem blending,  
Acclaim with joy Thy wondrous gift to man.*

Sarah E. Taylor

Acts 15:5-6, 10-11

Just as today, the early church could be divided over issues both large and small.

## A FRAGILE FAITH

The members of the early church didn't always demonstrate the sort of unfaltering faith we often ascribe to them. There is an almost comical account in The Acts that reveals a collection of believers with a faith as fragile as our own.

When [Herod Agrippa] had seized [Peter], he put him in prison, delivering him to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out before the people. So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God.

Acts 12:4-5

entrance, and through the closed gate told the servant-girl who he was.

When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her joy she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter was standing in front of the gate. They said to her, "You are out of your mind!" But she kept insisting that it was so. They kept saying, "It is his angel." But Peter continued knocking; and when they had opened the door, they saw him and were amazed.

Acts 12:14-16

No, the saints of old were no more pious, no more spiritual than their modern brethren. They were just normal folk carrying around all the same doubts, questions and guilt common to us all.

But then, along with all the imperfect characters, God's Book reveals the true nature of His perfect Son. Here in its pages we learn of Him—Messiah, Savior, Lord—through the Spirit-breathed words of His only authorized biography.