



## Thomas ('Stonewall') Jackson: saint, servant, soldier

The name of Stonewall Jackson will forever be remembered in U.S. history in connection with the Civil War between the northern and southern states in the mid 19th century. Jackson was a leading lieutenant-general in the southern confederate army under General Robert E. Lee. It is as a soldier that Jackson has been remembered. Yet to remember him only as a confederate general is to have a very inadequate picture. What is generally not known is that Jackson was one of the saintliest men and finest Presbyterians the south ever produced. The fact is, *'The piety of Stonewall Jackson has become as historic as his wonderful military career.'*<sup>1</sup>

### Early life

It was to Jonathan and Julia Jackson that Thomas was born on January 21, 1824. God's providence came early and hard for Thomas with his father and oldest sister dying when he was only four, and his mother three years later. Julia's influence on her son produced a godly, lasting impression. Thomas witnessed her death, and her dying instructions and prayers left a powerful influence which he never forgot.

Young Thomas lived for a period with various family members before settling with a loving uncle, Cummins Jackson, who treated his young nephew as his own son. Here on the farm Thomas lived until sixteen to eighteen years of age, passing his time between school and the work on the farm. Though he held a brief job for the county, he was soon to be offered the opportunity of an education, an education which would be formative in his future military career.

At eighteen, he entered West Point Academy in July 1842, and was there until his graduation in 1846. Jackson's strongest subjects proved to be ethics, philosophy and mathematics. R. L. Dabney points out:

*'the same thoroughness and honesty which had appeared in the school boy were now more clearly manifest. If he could not master the portion of the textbook assigned for the day, he would not pass over it for the next lesson, but continued to work on it until it was understood.'*<sup>2</sup>

It was during his time at West Point that Jackson matured into manhood, evidencing strong character, diligence, and faithfulness. These were wonderful days for him which he always remembered. Here was a man to whom God gave much common grace before his conversion:

*'It is plain that he habitually nourished the honourable ambition to make himself the greatest of which his nature was capable. Beneath his modest reserve and silence, there burned the steady and intense purpose of placing his character and name high on the scale of true merit!'*<sup>3</sup>

### His conversion

It was not until Jackson was gone from West Point that he came under the influence of experiential Christianity. He was now 22, a West Point graduate, and was assigned to military duty in Mexico. The U.S. — Mexican war was in progress, and Jackson began a military career which was to last only seventeen years. It was in Mexico that a devout colonel, Frank Taylor, became Jackson's first spiritual counsellor and teacher. *'During the summer campaigns, his instructions and prayers produced so much effect as to awaken an abiding anxiety and spirit of inquiry in Jackson's mind.'*<sup>4</sup>

He began diligently to study the Bible, endeavouring to search the scriptures with an unbiased honesty. In Mexico, being surrounded by educated papists, he turned to an honest evaluation of Roman Catholicism. It did not take him long to see that Romanism, weighed in the balance of biblical truth, was found wanting. *'Jackson saw clearly that the Bible and Rome's system were irreconcilable, and that the true faith of Jesus Christ was to be sought elsewhere.'*<sup>6</sup>

The next spiritual influence which came into his life was a chaplain, Parks, whom he met at Fort Hamilton. Parks was a zealous gospel minister and a gifted preacher. It was under Parks' ministry that Jackson came to a genuine assurance of salvation. He now attended his first communion.

### **A teaching career**

After a brief period of service in Florida, Jackson came to Lexington in 1851. He was elected professor of natural and experimental philosophy and artillery tactics in the Military Academy of Virginia. He was twenty-seven, and began almost ten settled years of teaching at the Academy. He was an adequate rather than a brilliant teacher. Dabney makes this comment on Jackson's teaching skill:

*'His career as a professor was respectable, but never popular. While his better students asserted his competency, there was discontent with his work both among students and alumni. He lacked some of the peculiar tact of the eminent teacher. This was precisely because of the greatness of his endowments as a soldier and commander.'*<sup>6</sup>

It was here during this period that his personal and spiritual character began to blossom.

### **Moral and spiritual character**

Although Thomas was soon to gain fame as a commander in the confederate army, it was the quality of his godly life which emerged that bears eternal significance. Humility, truthfulness, diligence, self-denial, and personal piety were among his outstanding qualities. Dabney could speak in this way:

*'One of the most marked traits of his religious character was his conscientiousness. It ruled in every act and word, in things great and small. Duty was, with him, the ever present and supreme sentiment, however trivial the affairs about which they were concerned. A prominent trait of his mind in this regard was the sentiment of reverence supremely toward God as the standard of perfection, the rightful source of all authority, and the embodiment of infinite greatness.'*<sup>7</sup>

*'There was another trait which Jackson possessed — his constant recognition of God's particular and special providence. No man ever lived who seemed to have a more practical and living sense of this truth. He earned the titles of superstitious, unthinking, and fatalistic from some people, but he was none of these. His belief in the control of divine providence was most logical and scriptural. In every blessing or calamity of private life, or in every order received and military victory, he was prompt to ascribe the result to the Lord of Hosts.'*<sup>8</sup>

*'Prayer was one of the most striking traits of his religious life. He prayed much, had real faith in prayer, and took much delight in it. Morning and night he bent before God in secret prayer. Those who passed by his common tent at an early dawn and bedtime were likely to see his kneeling form cast upon the canvas by the light of his candle.'*<sup>9</sup> *Entering the general's room at midnight, one of his officers found him at prayer. After half an hour the major stepped to the door and asked his aide if he did not think the general had fallen asleep on his knees. "Oh, no, you know the general is an old Presbyterian, and they all make long prayers." The major returned, and after an hour, the general rose from his knees.'*<sup>10</sup>

*'Thankfulness stood out as a real point in Jackson's life. "What I need," he said, "is a more grateful heart to the Giver of every good and perfect gift. I have great reason to be thankful to our God for all his mercies which he continues to shower upon me. Our hearts should*

*overflow with gratitude to the God who has blessed us so abundantly and over-abundantly. Oh that my life could be more devoted to magnifying his holy name.*"<sup>1</sup>

## **Church membership and service**

In 1851, Jackson began to attend the ministry of the godly William White, the pastor of the Presbyterian church in Lexington. On November 22, he was received as a member upon profession of faith in Christ. Jackson did not seek membership until he had closely studied the church's confession of faith and catechism. He struggled through months of personal difficulty with various doctrinal issues, particularly the decrees of God, and his absolute sovereignty. He disclosed so serious a difficulty in his views concerning God's decrees and his sovereign providence that a friend jokingly concluded, *'Major, if you have these opinions, you had better become a Methodist.'* He did not, but rather all his difficulties gave way before honest, prayerful, and persistent inquiries. He became one of the firmest advocates of the Calvinistic as distinguished from the Arminian scheme.<sup>12</sup>

Jackson excelled in two areas of service in the church in Lexington. He began a Sabbath class for young men which grew to around one hundred. Jackson taught the class from 1855 until 1861.

In December 1857, Jackson was chosen unanimously by the church to the office of deacon. He was very diligent and faithful in his labours as a servant to God's people, and expected the same from those whom he served with. He once rebuked a fellow deacon who excused himself from a meeting because he did not have time to attend. *'I see not'*, said Jackson, *'how we can possibly lack time for this meeting, seeing it is set apart for this business.'*<sup>13</sup> Jackson proved in all things exemplary as he served as a deacon for four years before leaving Lexington for the war.

## **Family life**

When he was 29 he married Eleanor Junkin in the summer of 1853, having been at Lexington two years. Their marriage was short lived due to her sudden death after only fourteen months. His grief was extremely deep. Four years later he married Mary Morrison from South Carolina. They established their home in Lexington where Jackson was teaching. They found great joy in their home life. The law of love reigned supremely there. They were given to sincere and warm hospitality toward others. Jackson showed special kindness to friends who came, especially toward their children. After a period, the Jacksons settled on their own farm in Lexington.

A typical day at home was as follows: up at dawn, secret prayer, a private walk, family prayers, breakfast, then to the classroom from 8.00 to 11.00 a.m. After class, there was personal study of scripture and textbooks until lunch; in the afternoon, there was work on the farm or church duties. The evening consisted of mental review for the next day's classes, and light reading or conversation, with retirement promptly at 10.00 p.m. Jackson sought as a husband to bring spiritual influence and encouragement to his wife. In May 1857, while away from home, he wrote to her:

*'When in prayer with you last Sabbath, the tears came to my eyes, and I realised an unusual degree of emotion. I have not yet fully analysed my feelings, as to why, but I think it was the reality of the intimate relation existing between you as the object of my affection, and God, my Heavenly Father. I felt that day as if it were a communion day for myself ... try to live near to Jesus, and secure that peace that flows like a river.'*<sup>14</sup>

As the 1850s drew to a close, so did the tranquil life of Stonewall and Mary Jackson. The time was drawing near when his life and military feats would be known in the whole nation as well as abroad. When he left Lexington to fight for the Southern cause, he never saw his beloved city or home again.

## **The military officer**

Any attempt at a complete review of Jackson as a soldier and commander in the confederacy is impossible and not our purpose here. It suffices to say that he applied his Christianity daily in his

military life, the truth permeating all areas of his work. As an officer and military strategist, he was a seasoned veteran and expert. He lived out his faith as a soldier, consistently exemplifying the Christian life. It is said that he was as often found leading his men in the prayer meeting as on the battle field.

He was witness to a small revival which broke out among the army. He wrote of this on December 5th, 1862:

*'While we were near Winchester, it pleased our ever merciful Heavenly Father to visit my command with the rich outpouring of His Holy Spirit. There were probably more than one hundred inquiring concerning the way of life in my old brigade. It appears to me that we may look for growing piety and many conversions in the army.'*<sup>15</sup>

Jackson seemed to hold a fine balance between firm authority as a commander, and sensitivity and kindness to his soldiers. If within his power, he would go out of his way to meet any legitimate need any of his men might have. This won not only the respect, but also the love of his men. It was this type of virtue which bound the hearts of his men to him.

Not everyone, of course, approved of Jackson. He, like all great men, had his own quirks, and was thought strange by many. President Jefferson Davis himself stated that he *'respected Jackson, but did not like him'*.<sup>16</sup> One of Jackson's officers, Elijah White, a Primitive Baptist elder from Maryland, stated that he felt *'Jackson was fanatical in his views'*.<sup>17</sup> Regardless of what people felt, however, it was impossible to be neutral toward him.

*'During a visit to the army around Centreville in 1861, a friend remarked to Dr William Brown: "The Truth is, sir, that old Jack is crazy. I can account for his conduct in no other way. I frequently meet him in the woods walking back and forth muttering to himself incoherent sentences, and gesticulating wildly, utterly oblivious of everything else." Dr Brown happened the next night to share Jackson's blanket, and in a long and tender conversation the general said to him: "I find that it greatly helps me to give articulate utterance to my prayers, and hence I am in the habit of going off into the woods where I can speak audibly to myself the prayers I would pour out to my God." And thus Dr Brown got the explanation concerning Jackson's "crazy" conduct.'*<sup>18</sup>

If Jackson had a reputation as a Christian, he had just as much a reputation as a military commander. During the war between the states, he was promoted up the ranks finally to lieutenant-general under General Lee. Jackson never sought promotion, but it came through his diligence, courage and brilliance as a soldier. Tender as a Christian, he was firm and authoritative as a commander. Dabney mentions an incident which shows Jackson's ability to take vital decisions in a flash:

*'One incident occurred while the army paused while marching at McDowell. A part of the men of the 27th regiment in the Stonewall brigade who had volunteered for twelve months now found their year just expired. Suddenly they laid down their arms, demanded discharge, and refused to go on. Their commander, at a loss concerning what to do, went to Jackson for instructions. On hearing the details, he exclaimed, eyes flashing, "What is this but mutiny? Why does the colonel refer to me to know what to do with a mutiny? He should shoot them where they stand." He then dictated an order to bring the whole regiment with loaded muskets, and bring these men in front of the company, offering them the choice of returning to duty, or be shot on the spot. The order was obeyed, the scene unfolded, and the men promptly reconsidered their resolution. This was the last attempt at organised disobedience in the army.'*<sup>19</sup>

He loved to take part in public worship during the war period. He was not able to regularly attend public worship, which made the times he could attend all the sweeter. He loved the effect of the truth upon his heart and upon the soldiers.

*'Mr. G \_\_\_\_\_ invited me to be present at communion in his church, but I was prevented. But I heard an excellent sermon on 1 Timothy 2:5-6. It was a powerful exposition of the Word of God. When he came to the words, "who gave himself for our sins",' he*

*placed an emphasis on the word **himself**, and gave to it a power that I never before felt. I felt with an intensity never before realised that the sinner who does not, under gospel privileges, turn to God, deserves the agonies of perdition.*<sup>20</sup>

Among the chaplains, Jackson would quickly turn the conversation to things spiritual. It is said that his favourite subjects were the importance of an unshaken faith, of casting all of our care upon God, of the evidence of divine faithfulness in providence, and redemption. He spoke much of conforming our will to God's, and of having a full obedience. He often declared that it was his first desire to command a converted army.

The conversion of Lieutenant-General Ewell, Jackson's veteran assistant, came about in this way. At a council of war one night, Jackson had listened intently to the views of his subordinates but waited until the next day before presenting his own. As the officers came away that evening from the council of war, one man laughingly said to Ewell, *'Well, I suppose Jackson wants time to pray over it.'* Having occasion to return to his quarters, Ewell was astonished to find Jackson on his knees in prayer. Ewell was so deeply impressed by this incident and by Jackson's character, that he said, *'If that is religion, I must have it.'* He made a profession of faith not long after, attributing his conviction to the influence of Jackson's piety.<sup>21</sup>

## **Final days**

In the spring of 1863, his command were heavily involved in manoeuvres and battles. On a day in early May, they were attempting to regain control of a particular barricade. Jackson and a few of his men were fired upon. They rode quickly back toward their own troops. Most unfortunately their troops mistook them for the enemy, and opened fire on them. Several died instantly. Jackson and others were fatally wounded. In the days following, he received the best medical care available. One arm had to be amputated.

His chaplain, Mr Lacy, came to his side.

*'You see me severely wounded, he said, but not depressed, not unhappy. I believe that this has been done entirely according to God's will. You may think it strange, but you never saw me more perfectly contented than I am today. I am sure my Heavenly Father designs this affliction for my good.'*<sup>22</sup>

This was certainly true. God was preparing in this way to give him the 'far better' joy of being with Christ.

His 'entrance' was, as the scripture says, an 'abundant' one, with rich peace. He and Mrs. Jackson spent Saturday, May 9th, together, reading and singing the Psalms and making plans for her and their daughter after his decease should come. The next day, Sunday, was his last day on earth. He had often stated that he desired to die on the Sabbath, and his desire was granted. His last conscious minutes were spent with wife and daughter. He devoted a special time to his baby girl before finally drifting into unconsciousness. While sleeping restlessly, he was heard to say, *'Let us pass over this river, and rest under the shade of the tree'*. His last words spoken, he passed into the presence of his Saviour.

From the army headquarters, General Robert E. Lee sent this bulletin:

*'With deep grief the commanding general announced the death of Lieutenant-General Thomas J. Jackson who expired on the 10th at a quarter past three p.m. The daring skill and energy of this great and good soldier, by the decree of an All-Wise Providence, is now lost to us. Let his name be a watchword to his corps, who have followed him to victory on so many fields. Let his officers and soldiers emulate his invincible determination to do everything in defence of our beloved country.'*<sup>23</sup>

Two years after Jackson's death, Dabney wrote:

*'His soul dwelt habitually upon the plain and familiar promises of gospel blessings with the faith of a little child. The eminence of his Christian character was in this, that he embraced*

*the truth with a faith entire and prevalent. Men recognised in him the force and power of true greatness.*<sup>24</sup>

Others who knew him put it in a simpler way. They said he was the holiest man they had ever known.

## Mack Tomlinson

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<sup>1</sup> J. W. Jones, *Christ in the Camp*. Sprinkle Publications, Harrisonburg, Virginia, 1986, p. 82.

<sup>2</sup> R. L. Dabney, *The Life and Campaigns of Lieutenant-General Stonewall Jackson*. Sprinkle Publications, Harrisonburg, Virginia, 1983, p. 37

<sup>3</sup> Dabney, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>10</sup> Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 92

<sup>11</sup> Dabney, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Gordon Cotton, Southern historian, Vicksburg, Mississippi, December 1990.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Jones, p. 89.

<sup>19</sup> Dabney, *op. cit.*, p. 354.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 485-86.

<sup>21</sup> Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

<sup>22</sup> Dabney, *op. cit.*, p. 207.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 733.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 541.