

SYMPOSIUM: STARING INTO SPACE

*Reflections on Rembrandt's 'Saint Paul in Prison' (1627)*

By The Rev. Marq Toombs



**“Life etches itself onto our faces as we grow older,  
showing our violence, excesses, or kindness.”**

**Rembrandt van Rijn**

In the spirit of Henri Nouwen, I want to share a few reflections on Rembrandt's 'Saint Paul in Prison'. Nouwen's book *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* (which I cannot recommend highly enough) inspired me to take my love of the Scriptures and my love of art and mix and mingle them together in contemplative ways.

Christian artist and author Makoto Fukimura argues that "art makes possible our experience of the new creation on this side of eternity. In order to truly live, we must learn to see through the 'eyes of our hearts,' through the veils of our darkening reality into the illuminations of what artists have painted."<sup>1</sup>

That's what I hope we can do with our reflections on 'Saint Paul in Prison'. That's certainly what Nouwen was able to do with his reflections on Rembrandt's beautiful painting 'The Return of the Prodigal'. His patient and painstaking reflection on the prodigal's return home moved him to say, "Our brokenness has no other beauty but the beauty that comes from the compassion that surrounds it." Echoing that sentiment, Russ Ransey says in his book, *Rembrandt is in the Wind*, "our wounds are not beautiful in themselves; the story behind their healing is."<sup>2</sup>

I hope we will see not only the wounds of Saint Paul, but the story behind their healing. More than that, I pray we will see beyond our wounds to the story behind our own healing as well.

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<sup>1</sup> *Rembrandt Is in the Wind : Learning to Love Art through the Eyes of Faith*. Zondervan Reflective 2022.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p 2

“Rembrandt goes so deep into the mysterious  
that he says things for which there are no words in any language.”<sup>3</sup>

– Vincent Van Gogh

## **SPIRITUAL REALISM: CHIAROSCURO & IMPASTO**

Rembrandt's spiritual realism is seen in his works on the apostle Paul. "Saint Paul in Prison" (1627) was one of several paintings of the apostle. Curiously, it was Rembrandt the young painter who depicted Saint Paul as an old man. Later in his career, the older Rembrandt depicted the apostle as a younger man in the more famous painting "The Apostle Paul" (1657).

So why Paul? Rembrandt was a lifelong student of the Bible. Like his mother, he read and reflected on the Bible. Some argue that he was fascinated with the apostle Paul "perhaps because Paul's writings were the most important source for Reformation theology, or perhaps because he personified the Christian ideal of grace received independently of merit."<sup>4</sup> Perhaps.

Rembrandt was brought up in a religious family, but he was not beholden to any particular church. His father and mother were Roman Catholic in their youth before they married. By the time they married, they had already become Protestants and members of the Dutch Reformed tradition. As a result, Rembrandt was instructed in Calvinistic school and interacted with religious people from a variety of traditions.<sup>5</sup> Later scholars have come to realize that he was not only a brilliant painter, but a broad-minded reader and student of life, history, art, and scripture.

Rembrandt's artistic spiritual realism is marked by (at least) two techniques that characterize his style of painting: Chiaroscuro and Impasto.

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<https://davidgerken.medium.com/rembrandts-lesson-channeling-the-spirit-within-brings-success-and-peace>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.1198.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://merceruniversitypress.wordpress.com/2014/07/15/rembrandt-as-christian-artist/>

**Chiaroscuro** is an Italian term which literally means 'light-dark'. In paintings the description refers to clear tonal contrasts which are often used to suggest the volume and modeling of the subjects depicted.<sup>6</sup>

**Impasto**, (from the Italian for dough) describes areas of the surface of a painting which are heavily built up with paint layers. Impastoed paint is highly textured; brush or palette knife marks are usually clearly evident. The intention is to make the light falling across the painting reflect in a particularly noticeable way. Highlights, or perhaps jewels on a costume, may be heavily impastoed for this reason, as in some of the works of Rembrandt.<sup>7</sup>

Rembrandt loved to lay it on thick, then use tools to scratch and cut into the wet paint. This technique enabled him to create textures, add dimension, cast shadows, bend light, and give directions. Without words, Rembrandt shows us where to look first, and where to go next. Like Saint Paul's gospel preaching, his paintings call us out of the domain of darkness into the kingdom of light.

'Saint Paul in Prison' is an earlier work that reflects the influences (and differences) of the Italian masters. The characteristic techniques that came to mark his style – chiaroscuro and impasto – are featured in this early painting. The painting is an early signal that Rembrandt will make a name for himself as an artist whose use of technical expertise creates "the extension of the light and dark accents from tangible to intangible things."<sup>8</sup> As Jakob Rosenberg writes:

Voids as well as solids are emphasized; space gains an expressive life, and becomes an inseparable part of the figures' existence...He seems to have felt that light and dark are magic elements which the painter can employ to veil or to reveal, to create drama and mood, to open the spectator's mind to the unknown depths of vision and feeling (Rosenberg).

This depth of vision and feeling is seen with the deep, thoughtful gaze of the apostle.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/glossary/chiaroscuro>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/glossary/impasto>

<sup>8</sup> [https://thirdmill.org/paul/impact\\_rembbrandt.asp](https://thirdmill.org/paul/impact_rembbrandt.asp)

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*

## SAINT PAUL IN PRISON: STARING INTO SPACE

### DISCUSSION

- + What do you think Rembrandt wants you to see first – and perhaps feel most?
- + As you reflect on this painting, what (if anything) does it make you think and feel?

### DEVOTION & DISCIPLINE

- + Try to imagine yourself in Paul's place, sitting on the edge of that bed, suffering alone, staring into space, struggling to make sense of it all, straining towards what is ahead. What's on your mind? What are some of your doubts and fears, your joys and peace?
- + If you knew you were at the end of your life, on the edge of eternity, what would you write for the people you love the most? Practice putting pen to paper now before it's too late.