

Vying for the Title “The Chief of Sinners”

Nathan Bedford Forrest

Susan Verstraete

Nathan Bedford Forrest had a mean temper. He loved to gamble, often winning and losing thousands of dollars in a single evening. He made his fortune as a slave trader and was a leader in the Ku Klux Klan. He cursed, was given to violence and thought religion was only for women. Had the apostle Paul known him, he might have hesitated before declaring himself the chief of sinners.



Forrest was born into poverty in a Tennessee log cabin in 1823. He and his seven brothers and sisters grew up with a strict, dominant mother who feared God. His mild-mannered father died when Forrest was 16, leaving Forrest to work the farm and provide for the family.ⁱ

When his mother eventually remarried, Forrest left home to make his fortune. And make a fortune he did! It seemed everything he touched turned to gold. First he joined his uncle in a horse trading business. He was elected town coroner and eventually became an alderman. He made millions as a slave trader and in real estate. He and his godly wife, Mary Ann, retired to a beautiful Mississippi plantation in 1858.

When the Civil War broke out in 1861, Forrest enlisted as a private and quickly became one of the most feared and respected generals in the Confederate army. Even though Forrest was uneducated, he had an uncanny ability in military strategy. He summed up his philosophy as, "Get there first with the most men" and he usually did.

The one thing Forrest couldn't stand was a coward. After Lt. Andrew Gould gave the order to abandon two artillery guns in battle in order to avoid heavy casualties, Forrest scathingly accused him of cowardice. Gould went to talk to the General about this offense to his honor. His mistake was carrying a loaded gun along with him to the conversation.

Things got heated, and when Gould made a move to his pistol, Forrest blocked the shot and stabbed Gould with his pen knife. The errant shot hit Forrest just above the hip and the wounded Gould fled for his life.

The doctor was called and declared Forrest fatally shot. Forrest rose up from the table, red faced and eyes blazing. He roared, "No d_____ man kills Nathan Bedford

Forrest and lives!" He stumbled into the street, grabbed a gun from his saddlebag and shot toward Gould. He missed, wounded a bystander and went on to make sure Gould was finished.

Later, Forrest would learn that the doctor had been mistaken in the excitement of the moment. It was only a flesh wound. Gould received no such reprieve, and died that day. Forrest joked about the incident, wishing Gould had shown as much bravery in battle as he did in the confrontation. He was without remorse.

After the South lost the Civil War, Forrest returned home to his family a physically broken man. Everything he put his hand to now turned to dust. His railroad business failed, as did the life insurance company he worked for next. He agreed to take over leadership of the newly formed Ku Klux Klan, but the organization proved to be little more than a cover for cowards and bullies. Forrest called for the Klan to disband and for all members to burn their cowls and robes, but they refused. He walked away a failure. He lost his plantation, and he and his wife Mary moved back into a log cabin. He had come full circle.

A softer Forrest began attending church with his wife. Under the preaching of the Word, he saw that clearly everything he invested his life in—money, the war effort, and power—had trickled away. Completely broken, he came to his pastor and confessed, with tears, "I am the fool that built on the sand; I am a poor miserable sinner."

Forrest publically confessed his belief in Christ and joined the church. He was not perfect, but he evidenced a real change of heart. He quit gambling and asked forgiveness when his temper got out of hand. He spoke to a civil rights group in Memphis, and pledged to help them—perhaps even the same people he had bought and sold—saying, "[I] shall do all in my power to elevate every man, to depress none." He canceled litigation against businesses that had wronged him. He forgave, as he was forgiven.

On his deathbed, Nathan Bedford Forrest pointed his finger to his chest and told his pastor, "Just here I have an indescribable peace...I have put my trust in my Lord and Savior." Just like another chief sinner, he found grace.

Copyright © 2012 Susan Verstraete. Permission granted for reproduction in exact form. All other uses require written permission. Find more free articles at www.BulletinInserts.org, a ministry of Christian Communicators Worldwide: www.CCWtoday.org

ⁱ Most of the information and quotes used in this article came from the book *Nathan Bedford Forrest's Redemption* by Shane Kastler, Pelican Publishing 2010