

THE CONVERSION OF SERGIUS PAULUS

Acts 13:1-12

Concerning the call of Barnabas and Saul to be missionaries, the Holy Spirit called them to the task and then made it known to the church that these particular men were the ones who should do this work. While their work in the church at Antioch was prospering abundantly, the Holy Spirit said to the church: "Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them." Without hesitation or murmuring, with fasting and prayer, they laid their hands on Barnabas and Saul, ordaining them to the high and holy task to which He had called them and then sent them away. Indeed that was an auspicious occasion.

These two missionaries, with their young assistant John Mark, went down to Seleucia, Antioch's seaport, located at the mouth of the Orontes River. From there they sailed to Salamis, the most important port on the southern shore of the island of Cyprus, and its commercial center. There they began their preaching in one of the synagogues. After spending some time in Salamis, they continued their journey on foot westward across the island, preaching in each town and village through which they passed. Eventually they arrived at Paphos in the western end of the island. Here they entered vigorously upon their work of preaching the gospel.

Paphos was the capital of Cyprus and the residence of its Roman ruler, the proconsul Sergius Paulus. He had been sent by the Roman government to administer the affairs of the province of Cyprus. He was, therefore, a man of great dignity and power and held, of course, the first place among the people of the island. Luke's account reflects credit upon his character, for it represents him as a man of inquiring and discerning mind.

In those days there were many Syrians and Jews who were pretenders to wisdom, seers of the future, fortune-tellers, sorcerers, magicians and soothsayers, men who played upon the superstitious credulity of the Romans and wormed themselves into the confidence of their princes and rulers. It was the custom then for exalted personages to retain the services of astrologers. A man of this sort was at the elbow of Sergius Paulus, described in this chapter as a magician and a false prophet. His professional name was Elymas, meaning one powerful in secret wisdom. He startled the people by his tricks and by his predictions for the future. He was a magician; therefore, he was wise. He was a soothsayer; therefore, he was given a place of honor. He was a prophet; therefore, he was respected. He was a Jew; therefore, he was accepted. He was intimate with the proconsul or governor, Sergius Paulus.

As a Roman, Sergius Paulus had been brought up in the state religion of the Roman Empire. At that time that religion was the most vile, corrupt and criminal heathenism on earth. Paphos was the seat of the licentious worship of Aphrodite. It was the scene of frequent profligate processions and abominable rites. It might well have been called, "the place where Satan's seat is." Athanasius styled its religion "the deification of lust." People could not resort to its ancient temple erected to the worship of Venus without being defiled in mind and depraved in character. Venus was the goddess of sensuality, and the practices connected with this temple were abominable. Satan always prospers where sensuality abounds.

Sergius Paulus was a prominent man, the proconsul and governor of Cyprus. He was a very intelligent man, something of a philosopher. He was prudent, judicious, cautious and circumspect. He had position, possessions and the praise of men. Seemingly he had everything that money could buy and heart could wish. But, he lacked one thing—soul contentment. He was conscious of the hollowness of the heathen faith. He longed for more light. Being a searcher for the truth, he did not accept everything that he had heard Elymas say. Disappointed and disgusted with many things about the religion of the Roman Empire, he had the conviction that somewhere there must be a true religion; one that could satisfy the cravings of the human heart.

Highly dissatisfied with the pretensions, tricks and teachings of Elymas, and, having been informed of the activities and preaching of the missionaries during their ministry across

the island and in the capital city, Sergius Paulus desired to hear the Word of God shows the working of preparatory grace in his heart. It is always a very hopeful thing when any sinner, who is weary of the vagaries and speculations of men, seeks out ministers of the truth and desires from them light from the Scriptures.

Desiring to hear the Word of God from the missionaries themselves, Sergius Paulus sent for Barnabas and Paul, the men who professed to be the servants of God and to be the bearers of a message from His throne. Doubtless there were all kinds of rumors in reference to Barnabas and Paul and their mission--rumors exaggerating, disparaging, caricaturing or falsifying their words. No doubt there were some who contented themselves with these flying reports and perhaps helped to distort and spread them still more. Very likely there were those who greedily swallowed all that was told them and then added something of their own. To say the least, it was an important step towards his conversion when he sent for these preachers of the gospel.

Barnabas and Paul were exceedingly grateful for the invitation to preach the gospel to the governor. When they came the Lord accompanied them and filled the place with His glory. They gladly expounded the gospel to him, and he listened to it with a keen interest. But here, as everywhere they went, they soon discovered that the devil had been there ahead of them. So it always has been, is today, and ever shall be. The prince of this world gets in his work first. Men are born under the dominion of Satan.

Elymas was standing by when they preached to the governor, and, when he observed how his master was impressed by what he heard from them, he became alarmed. He feared that they might supplant him in his master's favor and oust him from his lucrative office. Sergius Paulus sought to hear about the will of God, and the spirit of the devil in Elymas attempted to keep him in darkness. There was a clear-cut issue between truth and falsehood, between light and darkness, between Christ and the black arts which infested the ancient world, and between life and death.

When the Word of God was preached in all its plainness and with all its power, Sergius Paulus felt himself convinced, convicted and drawn. Seeing that he was in danger of losing his influential and profitable position, Elymas kept interrupting Barnabas and Paul with arguments, denunciations and contradictions. He called in question their facts, disputed their conclusions, maligned their motives, sought to cast doubt and suspicion upon their whole mission, his aim being to turn the mind of the governor away from the gospel of Christ.

Satan does not give up his votaries and victims without an effort to hold them. The governor was too valuable an adherent to give up. He must be held at all hazards. That is always the case. As the proverb says, "Where the Lord builds a church the devil puts up a chapel alongside it." There are always those, who like this sorcerer, oppose the Word of God and try to turn every prospective convert away and keep him from becoming a Christian. In this case, Sergius Paulus did not harden his heart. He did not resist the truth. He did not stifle conviction, or resist the Holy Spirit or send the missionaries away. Instead, he saw and felt the superiority of the truth. He saw the trickster and liar confounded.

Clothed for the moment in a godlike majesty, Paul was led by the Holy Spirit to stop the mouth of Elymas and to impose upon him a punishment that would demonstrate his hypocrisy and selfishness. Paul fixed his eyes on Elymas and said, "O full of all subtilty and all mischief, thou child of the devil, thou enemy of all righteousness, wilt thou not cease to pervert the right ways of the Lord? And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon thee, and thou shalt be blind, not seeing the sun for a season. And immediately there fell on him a mist and a darkness; and he went about seeking some to lead him by the hand." Paul's words to Elymas were severely searching and scorching. However, they were not a flare of human passion but a demonstration of divine indignation. They were not the

contentious accusation of an embittered man but the righteous denunciation of a holy God through His messenger. The Apostle used such words because Elymas was standing in the way of a soul receiving the truth and the light. The most severe words in the Bible are reserved for those who stand between men and God. Elymas was partaker of the devil's nature and resembled him in character and disposition. He was especially like him in perverting the truth. He was hostile to all that was pleasing to God.

A total but temporary blindness fell upon Elymas and he went about seeking a hand-leader. Note the fitness of the punishment in that he who deceived and blinded others and led them astray should himself be made blind and dependent on others to lead him. Of course, Sergius Paulus was impressed tremendously. The one thing which the Romans revered was power. They had little taste for the speculations of the philosophers or for the tenderness of the poets. They were not fascinated by the arts, except in the creation of stately and massive buildings, but they were profoundly impressed with power, and this miracle of punishment was a divine manifestation of power.

With his proud conception of the might of Caesar and the majesty of Rome, one would expect that a gospel preached by a couple of poor Jews, having for its object a crucified Jew, would naturally appear to Sergius Paulus a weak and contemptible thing, which no eloquence could render worthy of his notice. But, when Paul, speaking in the name of the living God, hurled the divine thunderbolt of vengeance against an impostor, enshrouding him with a midnight darkness at noontide, the pride of the Roman was subdued into a humility of wondering reverence. He saw that beneath the plain garb and strange story of the Apostle there was hidden a hand mightier than all the strength of imperial Rome. The majesty of almightiness had gleamed forth, the presence of the true and living God had revealed itself, and the governor trembled with the birth throes of a faith in their mission.

In the stern rebuke of Elymas, Sergius Paulus must have felt himself rebuked for harboring such a child of the devil and an enemy of righteousness. The punishment must have moved him to shame and contrition, otherwise he would have been angry. The Holy Spirit vindicated the truth which Paul and Barnabas were declaring. God's Word says, "Then the deputy, when he saw what was done, believed, being astonished at the doctrine of the Lord." It is doctrine, or faithful teaching, then, which brings men to Christ. Let those who despise doctrine mind what they are doing, for the doctrine of the cross is only foolishness to them who perish. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, the plain teaching of the Word of God leads men to repent toward God and to believe on Christ. The proconsul was astonished to see Elymas blinded but much more so at the doctrine which Paul preached when he began to tell him that salvation was not by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ; that the way to be accepted of God was not by presenting to the Lord anything performed by us or felt within us, but by laying hold upon the righteousness which Jesus Christ has wrought out and brought in. Sergius Paulus believed on the Lord Jesus Christ and was saved. There are always conversions when hearts bow to the power of the Word as used by the Holy Spirit.

Surely this was a very important conversion, the first prominent one under the ministry of Paul of which we have a record. All conversions are important, but some are more so than others. This is not true because one soul is of more value in God's sight than another. Since He is no respecter of persons, the soul of Sergius Paulus was not worth any more than the soul of one of his slaves, because both were purchased at the same price, the precious blood of Christ. But, still the conversion of Sergius Paulus was of greater value to the church because his position and authority enabled him to wield a greater and wider influence for the Lord. He could do more for the cause of Christ than one of his slaves. We must never become respecters of persons in our soul-winning efforts, but it is not unchristian to covet the leadership of our day for Christ.