

THE HEAVENLY VISION

"I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision." Acts 26:19.

Paul inherited Hebrew blood and Roman citizenship, both of which contributed much to him. His reference to his Roman citizenship indicate that he was justly proud of it and appreciated it to the full. In his early manhood when he found Jerusalem full of controversy concerning "the Way," he gave himself to persecution of the Christians with honest and passionate enthusiasm. He was a man of intense enthusiasm. He never did things by halves. Whatever he entered into, he did whole-heartedly. He believed that whatever his hand found to do was worth doing with his might. After all, little is accomplished by anybody apart from enthusiasm.

Paul was one who had felt the thrill of the world's busy and far-reaching life in the impressionable years of childhood and of youth; one who was thoroughly versed in the law of God, and devoted to the religion in which he had been trained; and one who was strong in conviction, tenacious in purpose, and willing to stand alone for the truth that he knew.

1. His conscientiousness. Acts 26:9-11.

We admire Paul's transparent honesty and genuine sincerity. He said, "My manner of life from my youth, which was at the first among mine own nation at Jerusalem, know all the Jews." His life had been lived in the open. He did not attempt to live a double life. In him there was a strong individuality, the product of his intense conviction. He said, "I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth." In his efforts to oppose, hinder, persecute and kill the Christians, he really thought that he was rendering a great service to God. He claimed that he was as conscientious before his conversion as he was after it. In the light of his example, it is very evident that it is not enough, as some suppose, for a person to be sincere. Neither is conscience a safe guard. Paul was entirely sincere and conscientious in his conviction that he ought to persecute the Christians but he was absolutely wrong and definitely anti-Christian.

2. His conviction. Acts 26:12-13.

In Paul's judgment Christianity was harmful to the Jewish people and very injurious to their religion, so he thought it ought to be abolished. Filled with hatred for the believers and bent upon their persecution, Paul was journeying along the road to Damascus on a mission against the Christians when a light shone about him and a supernatural, startling and sudden revelation of the Lord came to him. When this brilliant heavenly light came upon Paul, it brought to him a two-fold conviction; first of the holiness of God, and secondly, of his own sinfulness. Thus it has ever been when men have been brought into the conscious presence of the holy God. Just as particles of dust are revealed in the sunshine so his sinfulness, until then unsuspected, was revealed to Paul for what it really was.

3. His Call. Acts 26:14.

Stricken to the ground by the brilliant heavenly light, humbled and helpless, he heard a voice in the gentle expostulation of wounded love saying, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me?" It was the love which rang through that utterance that broke his heart. When he inquired who was calling, he was informed that it was Jesus, the name that speaks of grace, love, forgiveness and salvation. The Master's question, "Why persecutest thou Me?" indicated that He was so closely identified with His people that when they suffered He also bore their hurt. Therefore, all should refrain from bringing untrue accusations against or laying unkind hands upon any of God's children.

4. His Conversion. Acts 26:15.

Instead of further striving to obtain salvation through his own efforts, he simply believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, and trusted Him to do everything for him that needed to be done. Because of his simple trust in Christ he ceased to be a lost sinner and became a child of God. By God's grace the old life was displaced by the new life in Christ, and he passed from a state of condemnation to one of safety. This change was wrought by the will and power of God. One is impressed with the plain language with which Paul related his Christian experience and told what happened to him on the Damascus Road. There isn't any sermon like that. If Christ has saved us, we can at least tell that even though we cannot preach like Paul. Paul's Christian experience brought about a complete right-about-face in both his beliefs and his actions. Ever after he was a different man.

One of the secrets of Paul's life, and the lives of all others who live to the glory of God, is the fact that he was not disobedient to the heavenly vision which he received. Let us note the five-fold vision which God gave to Paul and the manner in which he so willingly and fully obeyed it.

I. It was a Vision of Salvation.

"And I said, Who art thou, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest. But rise, and stand upon thy feet." Acts 26:15-16. Paul had a clear vision of Christ Jesus risen and glorified. What the Lord did for Paul is what He does for each one of us. He lifts us out of the miry clay and establishes our going.

No man can stand on his feet and walk to the glory of God until he has met Jesus Christ. No matter who he is, outside of Jesus Christ he is "A down and outer" until the Lord picks him up. Life's real journey begins only with the obedience of faith in Jesus Christ as personal Saviour. What a glorious journey was Paul's after that experience on the Damascus way!

II. It was a Vision of Service.

Our Lord had a great commission awaiting Paul as soon as he was ready for it. He appointed him to be a minister and a witness. He had an experience to relate and the world needed to hear it. God saves men for a purpose. Paul's vision wasn't given to him merely for his own benefit any more than God saves men for their own comfort. Paul's conversion was the beginning of a beautiful and bountiful life.

Did it ever occur to you that because of the endowments of personality, man is the only creature on earth that can say "no" to God? The planets do the bidding of their Maker with unvarying regularity. Not one of them can disobey the Creator, but each one of us is greater than all the planets. You and I have the power to say "no" to God. That is why man sinned in the first place. He willed to disobey God. He said "no" when he should have said "yes." Paul no sooner had a vision of the Saviour than he caught the vision of service, and we can thank God that he was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision.

III. It was a Vision of Stewardship.

"And a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee." Here we see a stewardship committed unto Paul. He was to make known, by witnessing what he had experienced and what God was going to reveal to him in days to come. There never was a moment when he was disobedient unto this phase of the heavenly vision. He regarded himself as a debtor to all men because of what he possessed for them.

IV. It was a Vision of Safety.

He was assured by Almighty God that he would be delivered "from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee." Vs. 17. God knew what His servant would have to suffer for the truth's sake, and He made it plain to Paul but also assured him that he would be delivered. Everywhere Paul went there were tormentors who abused him. The message of pure grace always arouses the opposition of the flesh. When any man is loyal to the truth about Christ, the devil always attempts to discredit his ministry. God has not promised an easy time for His servants. They will not find their path strewn with roses. But no child of God need fear because He will never leave us nor forsake us. The Book of Acts is the fascinating story of how God cared for His servant and delivered him from his enemies until He was ready to take him home to be with Himself. When his work was done God called him higher.

V. It was a Vision of A Sinful World.

He was commissioned to go to the Gentiles "To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive the forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me." Note how clearly God revealed the spiritual condition of the people to whom Paul was to minister. He often went among the cultured and the highly educated of his day. Yet their spiritual condition was one of blindness, bondage and sin. When Paul saw Jesus then it was that he saw the true needs of the world. He saw it as God sees it and understood it from the divine view point. Oh, that God would help us to realize that all men everywhere out of Christ are without God and without hope in the world.