

VESSELS OF THE LORD

Acts 9:15

"But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel." Acts 9:15.

When measured by consequences, next to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the conversion of Saul of Tarsus is the greatest event of all history. When we read the story of his Christian life and ministry we are made to be ashamed of our Christian service. His sublime faith, great courage, consuming passion for lost souls, willingness to be anything or nothing in the eyes of men, and joy in suffering for Christ's sake place him in a category by himself.

The change in the man himself and the results of that change extending to all subsequent generations are the things that warrant the statement that his conversion to Christianity is the greatest event in history since the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The transformation was instantaneous and complete. One moment he was breathing out threatening and slaughter and the next he was prone on his face crying, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" From that hour, his whole life throbbed with a passion like that of his Lord. It swayed his purpose, it commanded his action, and it dominated his sacrifice. He counted not his life dear unto himself that he might prove faithful in his ministry. By a remarkable adjustment, he made himself "all things to all men" that he might win some. He warned men night and day. In his ministry he was ever enduring hardship, suffering persecution and privation, yet always sounding a lofty note of triumph.

This man of gigantic intellect and ripe culture found no employment for his great ability so congenial as the preaching of the gospel of the grace of God. It should never be forgotten that his ministry, which was the greatest of all ministries of the Christian centuries, including as it did both the preaching of the gospel of Christ and the writing of the inspired Epistles, resulted in the salvation of millions. It was a great day for Saul himself, because the world would never have heard of him if he had not received Christ as his Saviour and surrendered himself to Him as Lord.

Saul learned that Jesus of Nazareth, whom he had hated and persecuted, was none other than the Messiah for whom the Hebrew people had been waiting, and that day he accepted Him as his personal Saviour. Saul also discovered that God had a plan for his life. He did not know that before, and he never would have found it out had he not yielded himself to the control of the Spirit of God. He cried, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" "And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do." Cecil Rhodes, of South African fame, once said, "If there is a God and He cares for men, then the most important thing for me is to find out what He wants me to do, and go and do it." Surely there can be no more important thing for any one of us to do than to find out what the plan of God is for our lives and conform to it. Some of us have lived long enough to know that His will is not only the holiest and safest thing for us, but it is the happiest. The power of God, the love of God, the grace of God and the wisdom of God are all back of the man who lives his life in the will of God.

Saul was not chosen because of his talents or brilliant gifts. We are

very apt to magnify the man rather than the grace of God. After he was saved, Paul never thought of glorying in his native or acquired ability. He said, "By the grace of God I am what I am." But, before he had a soul vision of Christ, he thought very highly of himself. When he saw his Lord he revised his opinion of himself. He felt it an honor to be able to say, "I am the chief of sinners" and "less than the least of all saints." When we come face to face with our Lord, we are cured of self-righteousness. A vision of Him kills human pride and conceit. When God would do a great work, He always looks for a servant who is small enough in his own estimation to allow God to use him.

How may one know the plan of God for his life? There is just one way to discover it, the way that Saul did - by an absolute surrender to Christ, to go as He leads, to go where He leads, and to go when He leads. Surrender your life to the Lord and He will surely use you.

You will recall that after the conversion of Saul, when Ananias was wondering about going into his presence, he was reassured by the Lord's statement, "He is a chosen vessel unto me." All that is implied in that sentence cannot be fathomed by the mere human mind.

A vessel is a container in which something is held. To be a chosen vessel of the Lord means that one is to be a container for Him. He is to be filled with that which the Lord pleases to place in him. Paul was the type of vessel that the Lord needed to carry the gospel of Christ to the Gentiles. He was a clean vessel. He was faithful and did not refuse the Lord what He asked of him. He was ready to do and to dare to any degree. He never feared anything that might come to him. He trusted the Lord and went ahead. He was not moved by anything that came his way. He said, "None of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself" (Acts 20:24). That was the testimony of his lips and the secret of his great and successful ministry.

The statement of our text, "He is a chosen vessel unto me," suggests an earthenware jar bearing water to thirsty and dying people. It also implies that we are to hear and know and receive the truth as a living message and living power, and that we are to be vessels taking the water of truth to those who are perishing in their ignorance and famishing in their thirst. Just as Paul was chosen to be such a vessel of truth, so we too are to be honored, so wonderfully privileged in conveying that same life-giving and life-saving water to perishing souls around us. If you are a real believer in Christ, you are a chosen vessel. Then, in what condition are you?

God's Word mentions the vessels of the Lord which had such a wonderful history. I am wondering at what stage of this history, symbolically, we have arrived. Let us study this history and discover our own condition.

I. The Vessels Of The Lord Were Dedicated.

"So was ended all the work that king Solomon made for the house of the Lord. And Solomon brought in the things which David his father had dedicated; even the silver, and the gold, and the vessels, did he put among the treasures of the house of the Lord" (I Kings 7:51). These vessels were dedicated to the Lord, just as you have been. That is the purpose of God in your redemption -- not only that you yourself shall be saved, but that you shall be used of the Lord to take the water of truth-life to others.

Sometimes the purpose of God for our lives is strangely thwarted for a time. In II Chronicles 31:12 we are informed that "they brought in the dedicated things faithfully." It is possible for dedicated things to be left aside and not brought in as they should be. There was a transaction with God. These things were dedicated the moment that transaction took place, just as we were dedicated.

There are two transactions in the life of the Christian; one of them taking place when he receives Christ as the Saviour of his soul, and the other when He takes the Christian for use as an instrument in bringing about the salvation of other souls. Even though this is the purpose in our being saved, is it really being carried out? Transaction must be followed by translation. We are to translate into the ordinary days and lives and circumstances this mighty thing that has happened, that we have been dedicated to the Lord for His service. Has there been that translation?

II. The Vessels Of The Lord Were Deported.

The time came when the people of God were taken into captivity. We are told that Nebuchadnezzar actually took the holy vessels of the house of the Lord and brought them with the captives and placed them in his own temple in Babylon. So these vessels which had been dedicated to the Lord were deported to the temple of the devil. What a strange thing! What a sad thing to see that such things happen in the Christian life! It is entirely possible that one or more of my listeners used to be a useful vessel for the Lord. You may have been used by Him to take the water of life and truth to different souls, but you have been deported. You are now in the wrong hands and in the wrong place. Somehow you have been taken captive by Satan and are not now performing your rightful task of bearing God's truth to others who need it.

Nebuchadnezzar placed the vessels of the Lord in his temple, just as some Christians are now worshipping money, popularity or pleasure. Do not imagine that money is wrong. You can do so much good with money. Many a person has used his money to advance God's cause and glorify the Lord. Oh, the joy that comes to Christians when they are right with God!

In I Samuel 29:3 we read, "What do these Hebrews here?" They had no business in being where they were. They had been deported from the place where they belonged. Likewise, some people view professing Christians mingling wrongfully among them, in places where they ought not to be, and they would say to them, "What do these Christians here?"

III. The Vessels Of The Lord Were Desecrated.

In Daniel 5 we are told how the vessels which had been dedicated to the Lord were sent for by that drunken, debauched prince, Belshazzar. These holy vessels had no business being in Babylon at all, but they had been deported there and were in danger. Belshazzar, his wives and concubines, were drinking wine out of them, when they were supposed to contain the pure water of life. In that orgy they were being used in that befouled atmosphere. Oh, the danger to which the deported Christian is laying himself open; oh, the depths to which he may sink! I have known those who at one time were much used of God as vessels but now are not being employed in useful tasks for the Lord. They were deported, and now they are desecrated.

IV. The Vessels Of The Lord Were Delivered.

Thank God, the story does not end with the desecration. There is a fresh chapter. There are many applications of Hosea's message, "I will heal their backsliding." It is in Ezra 7 that we find the last reference to these vessels. There we are told that Darius and Cyrus conspired to see that these holy vessels were sent back with the people who returned. The vessels were delivered to their own place.

If I am talking to some backslider, I want to tell you that God wants you back. You remember that Jonah ran away from his God-given task. Then the Bible says, "The word of the Lord came unto Jonah a second time." Perhaps you began to be the distributor of God's truth to others, but you allowed yourself to be side-tracked. If so, your place is still ready for you. Those to whom you should have ministered may not suffer especially, for God has found or will find other vessels to meet their thirst, but you will suffer by missing the "well done" at the end unless you come back and get busy for Him. If you are conscious of your backsliding, the Lord stands ready to receive you, forgive you, deliver you, and use you when you come back to Him in penitence.

The vessel of the Lord can be delivered. Is that what you want? God grant that, as we search our hearts under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we may realize the true state in which we now are. Then, if we see that things are wrong, that we bring these vessels back to Him, asking Him to forgive us, cleanse us, take us and use us in taking His Word to those who need it and thereby glorify Him. It is God's desire that we be channels through which He can work and pour out His blessings to needy souls. He is far more anxious to use us than we are anxious to be used.