

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. He was justly proud of both and appreciated them immensely.

In the impressionable years of his childhood and youth, Paul felt the thrill of the world's busy and far-reaching life. He became thoroughly versed in the law of God and was devoted to the religion in which he had been trained. He was strong in his convictions, tenacious in purpose, and willing to stand alone for what he believed.

Paul 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.

We admire Paul's transparent honesty and genuine sincerity. His life had been lived in the open. He did not attempt to live a double life. He gave himself to persecution of the Christians with determination and enthusiasm. In his efforts to oppose, persecute and kill the Christians, he really thought he was rendering a great service to God. He was as conscientious before his conversion as he was after it. That fact makes it very evident that it is not enough, as some suppose and say, for a person to be sincere. Neither is conscience a safe guide. Paul was sincere and conscientious in his conviction that he ought to persecute the Christians, but he was absolutely wrong in doing so.

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, sudden and startling revelation of the Lord came to him. When this brilliant heavenly light came upon him it brought to him a two-fold conviction—that of the holiness of God and of his own sinfulness.

Stricken to the ground by the brilliant heavenly light, humbled and helpless, he heard a voice in the gentle exhortation of wounded love saying, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" The love which rang through that utterance broke his heart. The Lord's question, "Why persecutest thou me," indicated that when His people suffered He also bore their hurt. That is why all should refrain from bringing untrue accusations against or laying unkind hands upon any of God's children.

Instead of further striving to obtain salvation through his own efforts, Saul simply believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, and trusted Him to do everything for him that needed to be done. Because of his personal acceptance of 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.

I. A Vision Of Salvation.

This appearance of Christ to Saul was necessary. Such a credential from heaven was necessary to convince him and to change his views and convictions. He had a clear vision of Christ Jesus risen and glorified. That vision caused him to see himself for the first time as a lost sinner. Prior to this he had regarded himself as a righteous man because he had been faithful in his observance of the rules of the synagogue. Such a vision is tremendously important to any man. It is vitally important that people come to see themselves as lost sinners.

What the Lord Jesus did for Paul He will do for each of us. He lifts us out of the miry clay of sin, sets our feet on a solid foundation and establishes our goings. No matter who one is, outside of Christ he is "a down-and-outer," and will continue to be until the Lord picks him up.

II. A Vision Of Service.

What did the heavenly voice say? It identified Christ as living. Paul had thought that Jesus was but a man among men, and he believed that He was dead. Now he knew better for he saw Him in His glory and heard His own voice declaring that He was alive. Christ identified Himself with His people. He informed Paul that to persecute them was to do the same for Him. He then identified Himself as the Lord of Christian service.

Christ 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. The Lord saves men for a purpose. Paul's vision was not given to him merely for his own benefit. His salvation was the beginning of a beautiful and useful life. Hitherto he had made his own plans as to what he would do, but those plans were hostile to Christ, injurious to Christians and harmful to Paul.

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 can. 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 had a vision of service, and we can be thankful to God that he was not disobedient to it.

III. A Vision Of Stewardship.

"I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister 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 the future. There never was a moment when Paul was disobedient to this phase of the heavenly vision. He regarded himself as a debtor to all men because of what he possessed. As a witness, he was not to philosophize nor theorize about the gospel, but to tell it forth in all its wondrous power and glory.

IV. A Vision Of Safety.

God assured Paul that He would deliver him "from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee." God knew what Paul would have to suffer for the sake of the truth, and He made it plain to His servant, but He assured him that he would be delivered. Everywhere Paul went there were tormentors who abused him. If the people in one city accepted him and his message, it was not long until his enemies swept down from the neighboring city to abuse him. The message of pure grace always arouses the opposition of the flesh.

God has not promised an easy time to His servants. They will not find their paths strewn with roses. But God is faithful and His faithfulness will never fail. No child of God need fear because He has promised that 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 Him. When Paul's work was done, the Lord called him to come up higher, but not until then.

From the day of his conversion until his death Paul lived to the glory of God. He received a heavenly vision, made a holy venture and realized a happy victory. He was

obedient to the heavenly vision that enlightened him, that equipped him, and that empowered him for service to Christ. He understood full well that God had a purpose for him; somewhere He wanted him to be, something He wanted him to do, and if he were anywhere else and doing other things he would certainly miss God's best.