

THE CONVERSION OF SAUL

Acts 9:1-19

One of the most outstanding and profoundly significant events in Bible history was the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. Of his early life we know but very little. However, what we have learned about him is very interesting and inspiring.

Saul was born in Tarsus, the capital of Cilicia. Tarsus was a self-governing, cultured, university city. Evidently, Saul's parents were prominent and important people, thus enabling him to enjoy numerous advantages. Probably his father had rendered some notable service for the government, for which he had been given full Roman citizenship, which would have made Saul a freeborn Roman citizen. His ancestry, which he was able to trace for generations, was the very best. His parents were orthodox Jews, so their son was well versed in the Scriptures. He grew up in an atmosphere of culture, took full advantage of the educational facilities of the city, became a diligent student of Judaism, mastered the traditions of the elders and the philosophies of the Greeks, and thus became one of the best educated men of his time. Moreover, at the proper time, he went to Jerusalem and was trained under the great and learned Gamaliel, one of the most renowned Jewish teachers of that day. Quite likely he was regarded as one of the most distinguished scholars produced by the Gamaliel school.

As an intensely partisan and ambitious Pharisee, Saul was scrupulously careful to observe all the requirements of the law. He was a strong and bitter opponent of everything that seemed to belittle the Mosaic economy. The first mention of Saul's name in the Scriptures is in connection with the martyrdom of godly Stephen. Even though he did not throw a stone at Stephen, but left the actual killing to others, he highly favored his being murdered. By standing guard over the cloaks of those who stoned Stephen to death, which incident he ever remembered with burning shame, "Saul was consenting unto his death." So far as others could observe, Saul was not touched by the resignation of Stephen to his fate, by the shining of his face, by his earnest declaration that he saw the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God, or by his dying prayer for the forgiveness of his murderers. Nevertheless, it was a scene which he never forgot.

Saul was such a zealot for his Pharisaical conceptions and convictions that he put forth every possible effort to stamp out Christianity and to exterminate all of the followers of Christ. He sincerely believed that the gospel of Christ was an assault upon the faith of his fathers and that the Lord Jesus was an impostor. That conviction accounted for the fact that he spoke and worked against all Christians. He was determined to destroy all of them if possible. In tremendous activity Saul made known his bitter enmity toward Christ and His followers. The fact that he could make it his business to ferret out, arrest and persecute a number of poor, innocent and defenseless Christians who had not committed any crime against him, against the state, or against anyone else, and see them put to death in cold blood shows the bitter, satanic hatred of education without God and religion without Christ. In Saul we see a splendid illustration of the hardness and impenitence of the human heart, yea, the enmity of the carnal mind against God in spite of much religious zeal. Even though most of the Christians had been driven out of Jerusalem, Saul's zeal against them remained unabated. Knowing full well that unless Christianity was stopped or exterminated it would supersede Judaism, Saul resolved that he would see to it that it was annihilated completely.

Upon receiving the tidings that some of the Christians had found refuge in Damascus, and looking for new fields to conquer, Saul went to the high priest and secured permission and authority to go there and arrest them and bring them to Jerusalem for trial and punishment. Panting with rage, he began his memorable march thither, armed with authority to arrest and imprison all who claimed to be Christians. His blind zeal for Pharisaism caused Saul to think that such a purge was a real service to God, but in subsequent years he deplored it. In his fury, which spared neither age nor sex, he "persecuted this way even unto the

death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women." Later, he confessed his sin with inexpressible shame and humiliation. For it he was never able to forgive himself, even though he did receive a little consolation from the fact that he "did it ignorantly in unbelief." When Saul started on his journey to Damascus, little did he think that before long he would be one of the despised and hated followers of Christ.

Imagine Saul going toward Damascus, turning over in his mind the thought of what he would accomplish when he arrived there. As he was nearing the city something very unusual took place. While his heart was filled with the spirit of bitter hatred toward Christ and His followers, a brilliant, heavenly light, which was far brighter than the noonday sun, shone round about him and blinded him to the world about him. Physically overcome, Saul fell to the ground. To the blind and prostrate persecutor there came in clear ringing tones the voice which was unmistakable to him, but apparently inaudible to his companions. The voice spoke personally to Saul saying, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" Recognizing the divine presence, the astonished and trembling persecutor asked this simple question, "Who art thou, Lord?" Instantly there came the startling answer, "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest."

Saul had gone far enough, so the Lord interfered and halted him in his mad career. Saul had thought that he was serving God by inflicting punishment unmercifully upon the Christians, but he finally discovered that he was persecuting the Son of God instead. Christ informed him that in treating the Christians as he did he was literally persecuting Him. He who lays unkind hands upon, or brings untrue accusations against, God's children had better beware, for so closely is our Lord identified with His people that when they suffer, it is He who bears the hurt. When the redeemed of Christ suffer, He reckons it His own; when they are persecuted, He also endures persecution.

Saul was kicking against the goads. The figure used here is that of the eastern ox driver following an ox with a sharp iron fixed to the end of a pole. If the animal rebels and kicks against the sharp iron, it but injures itself. This is the picture of Saul as he was madly fighting against Christ Jesus. It must have been with Saul as it was with John Newton who wrote:

"In evil long I took delight
Unawed by shame or fear,
Till a new object struck my sight
And stopped my wild career.

"I saw One hanging on a tree,
In agonies and blood:
He fixed His languid eyes on me,
As near the cross I stood.

"O never till my latest breath
Shall I forget that look!
It seemed to charge me with His death,
Though not a word He spoke.

"A second look He gave, which said,
'I freely all forgive;
This blood is for thy ransom paid:
I died that thou may'st live.'

"Thus while His death my sin displays
In all its blackest hue,
Such is the mystery of grace,
It seals my pardon too."

While prostrate on the ground, Saul inquired, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" This question revealed the fact that all of his opposition to Christ had collapsed. The very temper of this inquiry was that of submission to the will of Christ. He surrendered on the spot, and that unconditionally, or without any reservations. He had a sincere desire to obtain divine direction concerning what he should do. He was ready and eager to accept the will of the Lord for his life.

Christ Jesus did not leave Saul's question, as to what he should do, unanswered. Having disposed of the persecuting zeal and the sinful skepticism of this proud young Pharisee, Christ told him to arise and go into Damascus, where information would be given him as to what he should do. When Saul arose from the ground, and his eyes were opened, he could not see. So, his attendants took him by the hand and led him into the city. Blinded by the light, led by the hand and aided by his companions, Saul entered Damascus in a very different plight from what he had expected.

After the trembling and astonished Saul entered Damascus, he spent three full days in the house of Judas on the street called Straight. Waiting for light, he spent the time in contrition and confession. Sightless and oblivious to his surroundings, he was completely shut in with his own soul and God, not caring to eat, but entering fully into communion with God. By God's grace the old life of sin and persecution was pulled up by the roots and displaced by the new life in Christ Jesus. What a transformation had been wrought in his life! After those days of fasting, meditation and prayer Saul was a very different man.

Our Lord chose an humble layman through whom to do His work with Saul. Ananias, whose name means "Jehovah has shown grace," was commanded to go to Saul for the purpose of leading him into fuller light. Ananias was an obedient disciple to whom the Lord could commit His important business. All that we know of him is what is recorded in our scripture lesson, but it is a beautiful and enviable record. Ananias was living in such close fellowship with God that the Lord was able to make known to him His will. When the Lord called him by name, his response was immediate and complete, "Behold, I am here, Lord." When he was commanded to go to the house of Judas and inquire for Saul, it is not difficult to understand why this devoted Christian servant was somewhat hesitant, reluctant and cautious about approaching the persecutor. He was fearful that Saul might still be a worker of iniquity. When Christ assured him that Saul was no longer his enemy, he went and did as he had been directed.

Beautiful indeed was that scene when Ananias betook himself to the house of Judas. In his obedience there shines a beautiful triple fidelity; that of Christian love, Christian loyalty and Christian humility. His Christian love is seen in his attitude towards Saul. He went in to the arch-persecutor with the eloquently affectionate greeting, "Brother Saul!" Thus, he claimed him as a fellow-Christian. "He put his hands on him," which was a very gracious act because Saul had come to lay the hand of violence on Ananias, but Ananias laid the gentle hand of brotherliness on Saul. There was not a trace of resentment in the entire demeanor of Ananias. While his Christian love was revealed in his attitude towards Saul, his loyalty is seen in his attitude towards his Lord. He would not let his expression of brotherliness toward Saul cause him to shrink from affirming the Lordship of Christ Jesus, even though that was the very thing against which Saul had been fighting so madly.

Note also this good man's humility. He did not obtrude himself into his message. The very opposite was the case. His only reference to himself was the very one that was needful, "The Lord, even Jesus . . . hath sent me." He was content to be the faithful messenger of his Master. This was the man the Lord used; ready, willing and faithful, yet just an ordinary, humble, obscure working man. He ministered to Saul in a great way—he took him a word of brotherhood, of human cheer, of assurance of the good will of the Master and of the high calling of his life. He opened his eyes. He gave him encouragement and hope. He baptized him. He brothered him. Who can evaluate the ministry of Ananias except the Lord? He is a splendid example of someone in an humble position being greatly used by the Lord.

What a remarkable transformation was wrought in the life of Saul! He was not disobedient to the heavenly vision which he received. He dethroned self and enthroned Christ as the Lord of his life. Saul the Pharisee became Paul the Christian Apostle. Saul the Hebrew became Paul the Christian. Saul the persecutor became Paul the soul-winner. Saul the arrogant became Paul the humble and obedient saint. Christ alone can do that for a person. That which happened to him revolutionized his whole life, changing its outlook and its course. He was ready and anxious to go anywhere and to do anything his Lord wanted him to do. Nothing is any more appropriate for our consideration than the question of what the Lord would have us to do in our daily lives. "Somewhere beneath the stars is a work which you alone were meant to do. Never rest until you have found it."