

THE PURPOSE OF PREACHING

"To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me." Acts 26:18

The life of Paul is an important part of the history of the continuance of the work which Christ began to do on earth in His body of flesh. The book of Acts reaches a high point of record in the conversion of Paul and the contribution he made to the truth of the Gospel of Christ. The scriptural story of which our text is a part is a picture of the progress of Paul as he moved toward Rome for the climax of his ministry in the city center of government in what was then the capital of the world.

The story starts with a vision of promise at Jerusalem: "And the night following the Lord stood by him, and said, Be of good cheer, Paul: for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome" (Acts 23:11). Here was the Lord's presence and peace and promise assuring Paul that he would go to Rome for his largest witness, assuring Paul that his desire to go to Rome was also God's purpose for him. God's "Also at Rome" could not fail. No opposition could thwart it.

The story continues with a conspiracy at Jerusalem: "And when it was day, certain of the Jews banded together, and bound themselves under a curse, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul" (Acts 23:12). Hard on the heels of God's promise to him in the night there came the next morning a plot against Paul's life -- a plot to kill him and keep him from going to Rome.

Which would succeed -- the promise of God or the plot of the Jews? The story makes significant answer. Paul's sister's son heard of the plot and exposed it to the Roman captain who set about to defeat the scheme. Why should such a secret scheme get out and be conveyed to Paul's nephew? The providence of God was at work to take Paul to Rome.

The story continues with the protection which he received at Caesarea: "So the chief captain then let the young man depart, and charged him, See thou tell no man that thou hast shewed these things to me. And he called unto him two centurions, saying, Make ready two hundred soldiers to go to Caesarea, and horsemen threescore and ten, and spearmen two hundred, at the third hour of the night; and provide them beasts, that they may set Paul on, and bring him safe unto Felix the governor" (Acts 23:22-24).

The story concludes with a hearing of interesting experiences at Caesarea. The first experience at Caesarea shows Paul accused before Felix. A certain orator, Tertullus, spoke first informing the governor against Paul. Then Paul spoke in defense of himself. Felix deferred the case and left it to his successor in office, who was Porcius Festus. The second experience was Paul's hearing before Festus. Three days after Festus came into office he went to Jerusalem and there heard accusations against Paul and a request to bring Paul back to Jerusalem

for trial. The Jews were wanting to kill Paul on the way but Festus ordered that Paul be kept at Caesarea and promised that he would hear the case there. After some eight or ten days Festus went down to Caesarea and heard both the accusers and Paul appealing to Caesar. Festus wanted to gain favor with the Jews and he therefore asked Paul if he was willing to go to Jerusalem to be tried there. Paul answered by appealing to Caesar. There was but one thing Festus could do and that was to grant the appeal. This meant that Paul must go to Rome. Thus the promise of God was moving in line with His purpose for Paul.

The fourth experience at Caesarea shows Paul before King Agrippa. Agrippa paid a visit to Festus and heard about the prisoner Paul. He wanted to hear him for himself. Paul was brought in before the pompous assemblage and there made the marvelous and last recorded defense. It is from this defense that our text is taken. The fifth and last experience at Caesarea shows Paul acquitted by Agrippa. When Paul had finished his defense King Agrippa and his party withdrew and the King declared Paul innocent and said to Festus: "This man might have been set at liberty, if he had not appealed unto Caesar" (Acts 26:32). But Paul had appealed unto Caesar and to Rome he must go. Thus God's statement to him, "Also at Rome," was moving nearer to realization.

In his marvelous speech to Agrippa Paul recounted his own conversion on the road to Damascus and declared the fact that the Lord had said unto him: "But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for 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" (Acts 26:16).

Behold the amazing sight of the persecutor at the feet of Christ inquiring, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" A great work had been wrought upon him by Almighty God. The minister whom He was going to send to preach His gospel first had to be subdued and made obedient to the will of the Lord. While a man is a rebel the Lord does not appoint him to act as an ambassador; while he is dead in sin He does not commission him to preach the way of life. The uplifting work having been done, it remained that Paul should now be made, constituted and ordained a minister, and to this end he must see the Lord for himself. The Lord said, "I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness."

In the words of verse eighteen, "To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me," the Lord gave a clear condensation of the purpose of preaching. Concerning this statement Oswald Chambers said, "This verse is the grandest condensation of the propaganda of a disciple of Jesus Christ in the whole of the New Testament." It was God's purpose of preaching for Paul and it is still God's purpose of preaching. May He help the preacher to be true to this purpose and help each hearer to be responsive to the preaching.

In his defense before King Agrippa Paul recounted the experience of his conversion and commission to preach the Gospel of Christ. Paul declared that the Lord told him from heaven what His purpose was for his life and service as a Christian. He said unto Paul, "For I have appeared unto thee

for this purpose." Paul knew what the Lord wanted him to do and what He wanted him to preach. To the Galatians he wrote: "The Gospel which was preached by me is not after man. For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ" (Galatians 1:11-12).

I. The Picture of the Sinner.

Our text gives a striking picture of the sinner's state:

1. Blind.

The sinner is blind. His eyes are closed. He cannot see where he is going or what he is doing. He cannot tell right from wrong, nor truth from falsehood. He cannot see beyond the corruption of the world in which he lives. There is no blindness comparable to that of the unsaved person.

2. In darkness.

The sinner is in darkness. He likes the darkness because his deeds are evil. Because he is in darkness the sinner is dangerous and in danger. There is no hope ahead for him.

3. In Satan's power.

The sinner is in the power of the devil. The word here used for power means more than the ability to do. It means the authority to command. Satan is in charge of the sinner to tell him what to do and to make him do it. What a pitiful picture of a person who is under the authority of Satan. He may want to do better but he can't. He may resolve and promise to do better but he won't.

This is the dark side of the text's picture of the state of the sinner.

II. The Promise of Salvation.

Fortunately the text does not stop with this dark picture of the sinner. It goes on to the promise of the gifts of grace.

1. Illumination.

This verse promises the gift of grace to open eyes that are blind. One was blind for many years and then a surgeon opened his eyes and he was enabled to see. He told of being shut up in darkness and afraid to venture out. But how happy he became when he could see. How much happier is the person whose spiritual eyes are opened.

However, natural man will never see his depravity until his eyes are opened by the truth of God. Paul would have been a poor preacher of the Gospel had his eyes not been opened on the road to Damascus. No gospel of compromise, or of man's merit or might can ever open a sinner's eyes. It takes the work of the Holy Spirit through true gospel preaching to show man his depravity and to open his eyes. Men are born blind and will continue in their blindness until sight is given to them by the Lord. What a difference is made by divine illumination! Whereas a moment ago a man was in darkness, he has been brought suddenly into marvelous light.

2. Conversion.

This text promises the gift of grace to turn men from darkness to light. It is not enough to see the light. We must turn from darkness. Because people are in darkness the gospel is sent to them to open their eyes and to turn them from darkness to light. They are in the darkness of ignorance respecting the necessity and the way of salvation. They have closed their eyes by a deliberate rejection of divine light. They are blinded by Satan.

How heavy is the darkness of the night to those who are confined to beds of sickness and to seasons of sorrow! To them it looks as though day will never come, but when it does how glad is the dawn of it! How much gladder is the dawn of the spiritual day when we are turned from darkness to light.

3. Emancipation.

This text tells us about the gift of grace to turn those who are under Satan's power unto God. How strange and amazing that some American boys chose to stay under communism's power rather than come back to freedom's life. Not even a mother's prayers or a wife's plea could change them! But even more strange and shocking is the case of sinners who prefer to stay in the devil's power rather than to accept the gift of grace to turn them to God.

II. The Possession of Satisfaction.

1. Forgiveness of sins.

"That they may receive forgiveness of sins." True forgiveness implies the full pardon of all our secret and open sins, past, present and future.

King Agrippa heard a great gospel preacher and saw the light but ran from it and failed to receive the forgiveness of sins.

Salvation is a gift. It cannot be worked for and earned. It can only be received as a gift. The glorious purpose of preaching is to bring sinners to the reception of God's gift of forgiveness.

Only a sovereign work of grace can effect the remission of sins. Oswald Chambers said, "The first sovereign work of grace is summed up in the words -- 'that they may receive the remission of sins.' When a man fails in personal Christian experience, it is nearly always because he has never received anything. The only sign that a man is saved is that he has received something from Jesus Christ."

2. Inheritance among the saints.

The very moment that one receives Christ he receives the forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among the saints. Think of it! This mighty work of grace makes us eternally rich. Men seek for earthly inheritances to make them rich here but grace gives an inheritance that makes us rich there. What a blessing to become an heir of God!

IV. The Plan of Faith.

"Them which are sanctified by faith that is in me." These are the words of the Lord to Paul when He showed him the purpose of preaching. The

whole process of salvation is by faith. The preacher is to preach in faith. Men's eyes are opened through their believing on Christ. They are turned from darkness to light by God's giving them faith in Christ. By faith they receive the forgiveness of sins and the divine inheritance. It is all of faith from first to last.

Not all that God wants us to have and is ready to give to us will ever be ours without faith in Him to receive it. We can look at a gift and admire it but it will never be ours until we believe in the Giver and receive the gift through faith in Him. How quick we ought to be to take what God offers to give to us! Won't you who are unsaved receive Christ as your Saviour now? If so, you will enjoy the salvation which He will give you.