

A NEW CREATION

Acts 9:1-20

This message has to do with the conversion of Paul, which is the most extraordinary one in the scriptures. Paul was the most remarkable Christian of all the centuries. His life presents one of the most striking examples of the transforming power of our Lord Jesus Christ to be found in all the New Testament. The completeness of this transformation is suggested in the change of his name from Saul to Paul.

Of his early life our knowledge is limited. His birthplace was Tarsus, which he once said was "no mean city", the metropolis and capital of Cilicia, a province in south-eastern Asia Minor. Tarsus was famous for its schools of philosophy and learning, and regarded by many as a city equal in culture to Athens or Alexandria. It was also a city of great commercial and military importance. Specifically, Saul was of the tribe of Benjamin from which tribe Israel had chosen her first king, after whom he was named. Saul's father had probably done some good service for the Empire, for which he and his children were given the rights of full-blooded Romans, even though they were actually part of the conquered Jewish nation.

Saul's parents were "Hebrews of the Hebrews," which means that they had not been contaminated by any intermarriages with Gentiles in the line of their ancestry. They were strict Pharisees. The Pharisees composed the most patriotic party. They were noted for their orthodox creed and their punctilious observance of the Jewish ritual. They were proud, exclusive, boastful of their good deeds, strict adherents to traditional beliefs, and precise in their religious worship. Being orthodox Jews, Saul's parents saw to it that their son was well versed in the Old Testament Scriptures, and especially in those Bible stories which are always so attractive to the young.

As a boy, Saul was taught a trade. This was in compliance with the custom of the Jews that all boys should learn a trade. It is important to remember that, among the Jews, the learning of a trade was a vital part of education. Children of well-to-do families, as well as children of the poor, learned to work with their hands. One of the rabbis said, "He that teacheth not his son a trade doth the same as if he had taught him to steal." Saul's trade was that of tentmaking, and it stood him in good stead in later years. Saul was reared in an atmosphere of culture. He also took full advantage of the educational facilities of his native city, and then went to Jerusalem, where he studied under Gamaliel—one of the most famous teachers of his day. Thus, we see that he was educated in the best that the Jewish nation had to offer.

Nobody ever said of Saul of Tarsus that he was unlearned and ignorant. He was a man of trained mind, a great scholar, a man whose learning was so massive that some said his learning had made him mad.

Saul of Tarsus was also a religious man. He had reverence for sacred things. His religion was not devoid of ethics. It had some effect upon his character and conduct.

In the gospel of Christ he saw only a blasphemous assault on the faith of the fathers, and in Jesus one whom he considered an impostor. Everywhere he spoke and worked against the disciples of Christ, and at the stoning of Stephen he held the garments of those who murdered him. He was exceedingly angry against all of the followers of Christ. Because of his zeal and energy he soon became the chief enemy of the early Christians. He was so bitterly opposed to them that he knew no bounds nor limits in his persecution of them. And he was thoroughly sincere in his conduct, earnestly striving to do what he thought to be the right thing. An outstanding trait of his character, both before and after his conversion, was his absolute loyalty to the light he had. Indeed, he is a striking example of the fact that conscience is not a safe guide, that a person may be very conscientious and absolutely wrong at the same time.

Having heard that Christianity was being propagated at Damascus, he obtained letters of permission to go there and to bind with chains anyone he might discover to be followers of Christ, and bring them to Jerusalem to be punished and killed if they refused to renounce their faith in Him. With the proper credentials, he and his companions went forth on their mission. Upon approaching their destination, he was arrested by Christ. Saul was dazed and smitten to the ground by the brightness of the light which shone round about him. When that dazzling light burst, and that voice spoke to him, Saul knew that he was face to face with deity. In the blazing light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, Saul was convicted of the truth of the gospel which he had despised, of his sin in opposing it and putting its messengers to death, and of the fact that this Jesus was both Christ and Lord--the promised Jewish Messiah, who had arisen from the dead and ascended into heaven.

1. A New Birth.

Up to the moment when he caught that remarkable vision of the Lord Jesus Christ, Saul believed Him to be an impostor and a blasphemer; but in that moment he recognized Him as the Lord, and trusted Him as his Saviour. In a moment he passed from unbelief concerning the Saviour to genuine faith in Him, and was changed from a relentless persecutor of the Christians into a penitent child of God. He instantly passed from a state of condemnation, which was due to the fact that he had refused to believe on Christ, to one of salvation and security. He had received light from above and heard a voice from the sky. After he met Christ on the way to Damascus, Saul was a completely changed man.

2. A New Behavior.

Paul's meeting with Christ wrought miraculous changes in him. His planned undertaking was permanently disrupted. He bade farewell to his endeavors and humbled himself at the feet of a new Master. His threats of slaughter vanished forever. He was changed from a maddened state of bloodthirstiness to the making of melody in his heart unto the Lord. His unholy aim disappeared as a bubble bursting in the air. One of the outstanding things about his conversion was the completeness of his surrender to Christ. His whole opposition collapsed like a great fortress whose foundation has been undermined.

Just as soon as he had trusted Christ as his Saviour, he was transformed from a bitter enemy of Christ to a devoted friend and follower of the Master. Having trusted Christ, he was anxious to discover His will for his life, so he inquired, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" Immediately he received the information which he requested, and quickly placed his life at the Lord's disposal.

When Christ sent His servant, Ananias, to see Saul in Damascus he assured him that he would not have any difficulty in finding him, for he gave him the location of the street, and the name of the man with whom he was living and then said this of Saul: "Behold, he prayeth." What a transformation! Saul had been a man of persecution; now he is a man of prayer. He was actually praying. When the Lord assured Ananias that he would find Saul down on his knees praying, he had no hesitancy or fear about going to him, who had previously wrought such havoc among the Christians. Nothing but the power of Christ could have wrought such a mighty change in the behavior of this man. He had been changed from a self-centered, self-seeking and self-assertive person to a man of prayer.

In dealing with this man who had accepted Christ as his Saviour, there was a great task which needed to be done. Someone was needed to do it. Our Lord, as usual, had His man for the job. That man was Ananias of Damascus. He was a Christian, as well as a pious Jew. He was the Lord's man in the right place and at the right time. So the Lord used him mightily. Ananias is an inspiring example of Christian

godliness to all who are called to live the Christian life amid the ordinary circumstances of work-a-day life. The ordinary life is often the most difficult one. The great need in these days is for Christians to live the ordinary life in a really out-of-the ordinary way. Ananias shows us how the glory of the upper world may be brought to flash upon the dismal details of our daily tasks. He was just an ordinary, humble disciple, who wanted to glorify Christ Jesus by a consecrated life amid the customary circumstances in Damascus.

"Ananias had a good report of all the Jews that dwelt there." Such a reputation had not been made in a few days. Those with whom he had lived and worked and transacted business thought very highly of him. In a very drab environment he had lived excellently. Such people are grand sermons. Such life sermons are for more convincing than mere lip advertisements.

It was not an easy thing which Christ commanded when He said, "Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight and enquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul, of Tarsus; for, behold, he prayeth." Without delay Ananias went his way. He was obedient as to time, as to place, and as to result.

3. A New Business.

Paul was chosen to be a "witness" for Christ. Although he was a straight-laced Jew, his first assignment was to work among the hated Gentiles. When he said to Christ, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do," all bridges were burned and all personal choices were thrown overboard. Cost what it might, he resolved to be a true and loyal disciple of Christ.

Any student of the Bible knows that God chooses, calls, commissions and sustains men. God's call does not make unnecessary the best preparation which chosen men can make for the divine task. Let no man conclude that, because he was divinely called to a task, he does not need careful preparation for it. The preparation is a part of God's plan as much as the doing of the task.

Shocking surprises often await God's chosen men. The work of God's chosen will not all be ease; there will be times of defeat and failure. It will not all be rewarded with good will and praise; sometimes it will be criticized and condemned, but that does not deny the divine guidance in it and blessing upon it.