

OBEYING THE HEAVENLY VISION

"I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision" (Acts 26:19).

In Acts 26 we have the testimony which Paul gave before a pagan king, Agrippa. Here he reviews his life -- partly before his salvation, but for the most part afterwards. 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. We admire his honesty and sincerity. He did not attempt to live a double life. He gave himself to the persecution of Christians with determination and enthusiasm. In his efforts to oppose, persecute and kill the Christians, he really thought that he was rendering a service to God. He was just as conscientious before his conversion as he was after it.

Paul's testimony concerning his Christian experience is recorded in the following passage, Acts 26:12-23. We are impressed with his statement to Agrippa, "I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision." In the English language, vision is used in more than one way. If an optometrist or an oculist says to you, "You have 20-20 vision," he means that your vision is normal; you are thankful that he does say this particular thing. But people can have 20-20 vision and go through life tragically blind. Paul was doing that before he was saved by Christ. Physical sight is one thing and insight is another. Paul became a man of insight with respect to Jesus Christ, the Christian gospel, and the purposes of God in this world and for eternity.

For some time Paul gave himself with abandon to frightful, murderous hostility toward the Christians and the Christian faith. On this particular day, having vented his rage around Jerusalem, and having heard that there were Christians in Damascus, some one hundred and fifty miles to the north, Paul was armed with authority from the chief priests to go up to this Syrian city to deal with the Christians there and get rid of them. He was so bent on his murderous errand that he didn't even stop to rest a bit in the middle of the day, as was the custom in that part of the world. As he approached Damascus a light shone about him, and a supernatural, sudden and startling revelation of the Lord came to him. This brilliant heavenly light brought to him a twofold conviction -- of the holiness of God and of his own sinfulness.

I. The Vision of Life's Deliverer.

Saul 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 every person. It is vitally important that people come to see themselves as lost sinners.

When Saul received Christ as his Saviour, 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. In writing about God the Father, Paul told the Colossians that He "hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son" (1:13). There is deliverance from sin's tyranny, with the dominion of darkness broken and the kingdom of light ushered in. Christ has done it.

In Galatians 1:3-4 Paul said: "Grace be to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord Jesus Christ, Who gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil world, according to the will of God and our Father." There is deliverance from the world's tentacles. The world is essentially godless. There is a vast complex of evil that surrounds us. The heart of the world is set on the perishable. Its ego is the center of its life. Its grip is like a vise. It shapes us, dictates to us, and dominates us until Christ sets us free. Many people are

molded by their environment. "Don't let the world squeeze you into its own mold." That is what this world is always trying to do. It is wonderful to be delivered from sin's tyranny. It is also wonderful to be delivered from the world's tentacles.

In I Thessalonians 1:9-10 Paul reviews the remarkable way in which the gospel of Christ transformed his readers, saying, "How ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; And to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come." There you have deliverance from judgment's terror.

It was in the light of this Vision of Life's Deliverer, delivering from sin's tyranny, the world's tentacles, and the judgment's terror, that Paul proclaimed the unsearchable riches of Christ.

II. The Vision of Life's Design.

The voice from heaven identified Christ as living. Paul had thought that Jesus Christ 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. This fact was clearly revealed in His question, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?"

In verse sixteen the Lord said to Paul: "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." Life in Christ is invariably life with a purpose. One of the great tragedies of our day is the sheer aimlessness, purposelessness, of so many young people.

When you are captured by Jesus Christ, as Paul was that day on the Damascus road, you may be sure that God has a design for you. He gives to your life a meaning and a goal. Christ expects from you a witness that strikes home as light: "to open their eyes." It was so with Paul; it is so with us. Christ also expects of us a witness that is creative of repentance: "that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God." Repentance is an inward change of mind and attitude towards sin which leads to a change of behavior. Moreover, Christ expects from us a witness that speaks of pardon: "that they may receive forgiveness of sins." Still again, Christ expects from us a witness that points to sanctity: "and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me."

III. The Vision of Life's Destiny.

From the time of his salvation Paul knew that his mission was to testify "that the Christ must suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should show light unto the people, and to the Gentiles." Paul found in the resurrection of Christ the pledge and the pattern of his own resurrection and that of all of God's people. Death is conquered through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and they who are "in Christ," though they die, will rise again.