

THE CONVERSION OF SAUL

The Lord Jesus Christ, when sending his disciples out to preach the word, warned them of the dangers that lay ahead:

“Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves. But beware of men: for they will deliver you up to the councils, and they will scourge you in their synagogues: And ye shall be brought before governors and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them and the Gentiles” (Mat 10:16-18).

The apostles were sent forth “as sheep in the midst of wolves”. The dangers of their mission were great as they were sent forth to testify against governors, kings and Gentiles, preaching the Word and exhorting those with ears to hear to turn from their iniquities. The wolves would seek to destroy the sheep that were sent forth: men ravaging as beasts against the truth-holders, seeking to extirpate the early ecclesia before it gained a foothold in the land. Saul of Tarsus was a leading persecutor, pursuing those who were of The Way, “breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9:1). Being of the tribe of Benjamin (Rom 11:1), he ravaged as a wolf (Gen 49:27) against the ecclesia, “entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison” (Acts 8:3). Later on in life, the converted Apostle Paul, cited this as evidence of the zeal he had for the Law:

“If any man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the ecclesia; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless” (Phil 3:4-6).

And again:

“Ye have heard of my conversation in time past in the Jews’ religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the ecclesia of God, and wasted it: and profited in the Jew’s religion above many my equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers” (Gal 1:14).

Here was Saul’s tremendous zeal for the Law as he sought to uphold the traditions of his fathers, even to the extent of persecuting those who taught that Christ was the end of the law to everyone that believed. The position of the believers was that the Law was to pass away, that the entire Mosaic system, temple and all, would be destroyed by the invading Roman forces in AD70 (Dan 9:26; Mat 24; Luke 21; 2 Pet 3:10), and such teachings did not go down well at all with those who desired to cling on to the ministrations of condemnation. Stephen was cited as having spoken “blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law: for we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us” (Acts 6:13-14). He was stoned for holding fast the testimony of Jesus Christ, and Saul consented to his death (Acts 8:1).

In his zeal to suppress and destroy the growing ecclesia, Saul went to Jerusalem, to the high priest “and desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this

way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem” (Acts 9:2). So, he went on his journey to Damascus, with one objective: to persecute the believers there.

THE SHINING LIGHT

At midday, as he drew near to Damascus, there was a sudden bright light which shone from heaven, “above the brightness of the sun” (Acts 26:13). Such was the glory of that light, that Paul fell to the ground in fear. Then there was a voice, the voice of the Messiah “saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks” (Acts 9:4-5). Saul, in fear and great trembling, recognised that in persecuting the Master’s brethren, he was persecuting the Master himself (Cp. Mat. 25:40) “He trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do” (v 6). Then Saul arose from the ground, but when he opened his eyes, he could see no man. The glory of the light had blinded him (Acts 22:11), and he had to be led by the hand into the city, where he abode for three days without sight.

In this incident, Saul had lost his natural sight – but in reality, the moment he was made blind was the moment he was made to see. At that point, he came to see the greatness of the One whose brethren he was persecuting. This moment was the turning point in his life, where his zeal was totally reversed, from persecuting The Way, to preaching it. Three days after his arrival at Damascus, he was visited by Ananias, who put his hands upon him, causing his sight to return “and he arose, and was baptized”. So was accomplished the conversion of one of the greatest ministers of the Gospel that the world has ever seen.

But the Apostle Paul himself speaks of these events as setting a pattern for others:

“Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting” (1 Tim 1:16).

In these events therefore, it is clear that we are intended to see a “pattern” of benefit to ourselves; in Saul’s conversion, we are to see principles, for us to follow. Let us therefore go on to consider these events in more detail!

Saul was converted by the sudden appearance of a “great light”, and a voice. The light, as we have seen, was far brighter than natural lights, for it was “above the brightness of the sun”, the brightest of all lights in the natural arena of things. It was a divine light, which far surpassed the glory of all natural things. So, in alluding back to the circumstances of his conversion, the apostle Paul later speaks of the believers’ hearts being enlightened:

“if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: in whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them ... for God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 4:6).

The Apostle himself had witnessed the light of the glory of God shining through the face of Jesus Christ for in seeing the great light on the road to Damascus, he is said to have “seen the Lord in the way” (Acts 9:27). The light which he saw, was the glory of the Lord. The light of the glorious gospel of Christ far surpasses any light that can come from man’s own philosophising. It greatly surpasses the wisdom of men; in fact it makes man’s wisdom foolishness, for it has so pleased Yahweh to predicate the salvation of men, by believing the apparent foolishness of the Gospel, preached and believed (cp 1 Cor 1:17-27). The light which the Apostle saw blinded his natural sight, so that he could not look upon any man. He thus became totally dependant upon others, and had to have his companions lead him by the hand to the city. What a humiliation this must have been, for the great man who had led many into the prison house! That now he was lost in the mists of darkness, unable to find his way without reliance upon the help of others. Even so was Saul humbled, that he might show reliance upon the Master who had appeared to him. He was being taught to trust not in his own abilities, and standing, but to trust in the Master, in whose service he had been enlisted. It is written that “God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble” (Jas. 4:6), and the arrogant Saul of Tarsus became the humble apostle to the Gentiles, called ‘Paul’ – which very appropriately means “small”.

The words of Isaiah 42:16 seem to be most appropriate here:

“I will bring the blind by a way that they knew not; I will lead them in paths that they have not known: I will make darkness light before them, and crooked things straight. These things will I do unto them, and not forsake them”.

So, the Apostle in his blindness was led along new paths which were previously unknown to him; even the paths of wisdom in Christ Jesus. The darkness was made light before him, in both his seeing the glory of Christ, enlightening his otherwise darkened heart, and in the healing of his sight by Annas, who proclaimed to him that which the Master would have him to do.

In response to the shining light, Saul humbled himself:

“And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?” (Acts 9:6)

This is the correct response of those who have eyes to see and ears to hear the Gospel message (see Lu. 3:10, 12, 14). So the multitudes who heard Peter and the Apostle preaching responded:

“Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the Apostles, Men and Brethren, what shall we do?”

Then the answer came – as with Saul:

“Then Peter said unto them, Repent and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins ...” (Acts 2:38).

Despite being a persecutor of Messiah’s brethren, Saul was described to Annas (who was to restore his sight) thus:

“Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name among the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel: For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name’s sake” (Acts 9:15-16).

So it is, that the persecutor was to become the persecuted, suffering much in the Name of the One he has previously sought to destroy. As Paul himself declared:

“... it pleased God who had separated me from my mother’s womb, and called me by his grace, To reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen ...” (Gal. 1:15-16).

In him is exemplified the principle described by John:

“Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins”

“We love him, because he first loved us” (1 Jno. 4:10, 19).

In the example of the Apostle, he was loved of Christ, and chosen by him, even whilst he was a blasphemer and persecutor. He was chosen by grace, and spent the rest of his life in faithful service to the One who had called him.

The final Epistle of the Apostle Paul describes how he looked back on his life – that is, his new life in Christ:

“For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing” (2 Tim. 4:6-8).

This will be the ultimate end of the converted Paul. He allowed the light of the glorious Gospel of Christ to enter into his heart, transforming his character and strengthening him with a vision of things yet future. Following his conversion, he lived his new life in total dedication to the things of the Lord Jesus Christ, and was able to look to the future in faith and confidence. In him, we have a tremendous example to follow – we, like he, must war the warfare of faith, and look forward to the victorious crowning of the faithful. That is all our hope – and is all our life.

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