

Sabbath School Lesson #1 – Paul: Apostle to the Gentiles – 24-30 June 2017

Christ commissioned Paul as an Apostle to the Gentiles. The Jews had difficulties in accepting the Gentiles. Peter was one of the apostles the Lord used to break into the partition walls of prejudice, and preach the Gospel to the Gentiles. Peter explained this to Jewish brethren. “When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life” (Acts 11:18).

The Gospel was preached also to Gentiles before the first advent of Christ, as well as it was afterwards. Paul was known as the Apostle to the Gentiles, yet everywhere he went he preached to the Jews first, and as long as they would hear him. So it was before Christ. By many agencies the Lord made Himself known among all nations, yet Jeremiah was specially chosen as the prophet to the Gentiles, or heathen. In Jeremiah 1:5, “Before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations,” the Hebrew word from which the word “nations” is translated is the very same that is regularly translated “heathen.” “Why do the heathen rage?” (Psalm 2:1). “Proclaim ye this among the Gentiles: Prepare war,” etc. “Assemble yourselves, and come, all ye heathen” (Joel 3:9-11). The words “heathen” and “Gentile” in these texts are the same as the word “nations,” in Jeremiah 1:5. So the Lord said to Jeremiah, “I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee, a prophet unto the Gentiles.” Let no one say that the Lord ever at any time confined His truth to any one people, whether Jew or Gentile. “There is no difference between the Jew and the Greek; for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon Him” (Romans 10:12).

As was Jeremiah specially called to minister to the Gentiles in the Old Testament, so was Paul called to be the Apostle to the Gentiles. Paul was “called to be an apostle” (Romans 1:1). That the Lord chose Saul to be an apostle, before Saul had any thought that he should ever be even a Christian, is evident from the sacred narrative (see Galatians 1:15). On his way to Damascus, “breathing out threatening and slaughter” (Acts 9:1), he was proceeding with full authority to seize, bind, and drag to prison all Christians, both men and women, Saul was suddenly arrested, not by human hands, but by the overpowering glory of the Lord. We note the interesting response of Saul: “Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?” (Acts 9:6).

These were the words by which Saul, the persecutor of Jesus of Nazareth, showed his acknowledgment of that same Jesus as his Lord and Master, the one who had the right to command his service. Up to the moment of his arrest while on the way to Damascus, Saul had been deliberately and persistently fighting against the Lord Jesus. He knew the name of Jesus of Nazareth, and thought that he ought to do many thing contrary to it (Acts 26:9), which he also did; yet when, in response to his question, from the ground where he had been thrown, “Who art Thou, Lord?” the reply came, “I am Jesus, whom thou persecutest,” immediately all thoughts of persecution vanished, and Saul acknowledged Jesus as Master.

What a marvellous change! Here was a man who for weeks and months before had been possessed of but one thought, namely, to fight against Jesus of Nazareth, yet as soon as Jesus met him and said, “I am Jesus,” instead of replying, ‘Aha, you are the one I am after,’ he asked, “Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?” as meekly as though he had never had any thought but to serve this Jesus. What could have effected this change? The answer is plain: Saul had felt the hand of power upon him. Power such as he had never before experienced had laid hold on him, and he needed no one to tell him that it was supernatural. When the Spirit of Christ takes hold of a man, that man needs no formal introduction to the Holy Spirit. When the Spirit sends strong conviction of sin, the man who a moment before might have been justifying himself, and might have been denying the existence of God, at once knows that it is the Spirit of God who is speaking to him, and he acknowledges the truth of what is said. So as soon as Saul learned that this Jesus whom he was persecuting was the one whose Spirit had seized him, he was as ready to serve as he had before been to persecute.

But while Saul was now a willing servant, he had not yet learned the conditions of service. His thought was of something that he should do, whereas the experience that he was even then passing through was intended to show him that it is the Lord who works with His servants, since He alone has the power. The Lord did not tell Saul what he should do, but told him to go and listen to what should be told him later. Three days later the Lord sent

Ananias to give Saul sight. Ananias demurred, hesitating for fear of Saul, but the Lord overruled his objection. "But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto Me, to bear My name before 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). And mark this: the Lord did not say that He would show Saul how great things he must do for Him, but how great things he must *suffer*, or *experience* for Him. This means not trouble merely, but joy as well; for the apostle learned that the suffering of tribulation means the sharing of joy.

Paul was "a chosen vessel," to bear the name of the Lord. A vessel does not itself do anything; it receives and gives out what is put into it. The work is done by the one using the vessels. So the Apostle Paul, writing of the wondrous privileges of the servant of Christ, in ministering the Spirit, said, "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us" (2 Corinthians 4:7). It was a grand thing for Saul of Tarsus to say, "Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do;" for it showed that he recognised Jesus as his Master; but as he became acquainted with the Lord, he did not talk about what he had done or was to do. Although he could say in later life that he had laboured "more abundantly" than all the other apostles, he did not fail to add, "Yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me" (1 Corinthians 15:10). So when he and Barnabas came up to the conference in Jerusalem, "they declared all things that God had done with them" (Acts 15:4).

"What miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them" (verse 12). This is the language of every servant of Christ. "Not I, but Christ." When Paul was asked, "What must I do to be saved?" he replied, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ." This was in harmony with the words of Christ, who, in reply to the question of the Jews, "What shall we do that we might work the works of God?" said, "This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent" (John 6:28-29). Belief is not a substitute for work, but it is the work. Faith works, because it lays hold of the Word of God, which is "living, and active."

Christ is the example of faithfulness in work. "I must work the works of Him that sent Me, while it is day" (John 9:4). "My meat is to do the will of Him that sent Me, and to accomplish His work" (John 4:31). Yet He declared, "I can of Mine own self do nothing" (John 5:30), "the Father that dwelleth in Me, He doeth the works" (John 14:10); and He was shown to be approved of God, "by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by Him" (Acts 2:22).

So it is God who worketh. If Christ had seen fit to correct Saul's language, when Saul had yielded himself as His servant, He might have said, 'What you are to do is to let Me do what I will.' Our highest prayer is, "Thy will be done." Christ accepted Saul's tender of service without any reference to the language, because it was sincere. And oh, now think of the wondrous possibilities before the one who thus yields himself to the Lord! Nothing is too hard for the Lord. All we have to do is to settle two things. First, whose we are, and second, His power. If we know that we belong to the Lord, so that He alone has the right to control us, and we have no voice in the matter, for we are not our own, and then realise that He is Almighty, there is no limit to what the Lord can do with us. And so long as we remember that we are His, and that we have no power to do anything, being only vessels for the Master's use, we shall not become vain-glorious over the great things the Lord may do with us.

If we continually acknowledge that we are the Lord's, and know that what He wants us to do is what He will do in us, we shall be kept from sin; for He will work in us, and in Him is no sin. Christ has "power over all flesh" (John 17:2), therefore if you "yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God;" it is certain that "sin shall not have dominion over you" (Romans 6:13-14).

The Lord can do no wrong. The Lord is "able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think" (Ephesians 3:20). He "worketh all things after the counsel of His own will" (Ephesians 1:11). "His work is honourable and glorious" (Psalm 111:3). "The works of the Lord are great" (verse 2). "Whatsoever God doeth, it shall be done for ever" (Ecclesiastes 3:14). Does it not follow as plain as the day, that he who once and for all, and always, acknowledges that he belongs to the Lord, for the Lord to do with him as He will, must be righteous to eternity? Settle it then, to whom you belong, and if you decide that you belong to God, which is the fact, your whole future is clear. Only one thing would God have you do, and that is to acknowledge that you are His, and to adhere to it. Whose are you?