

Sabbath School Lesson #5 – The Conversion of Paul – 28 July-3 August 2018

Christ called Paul to be His apostle. Christ appeared to Saul of Tarsus on Damascus road, Saul got blinded, Ananias was asked to go and heal Saul's blindness, Ananias hesitated for fear of Saul, "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).

"Concerning zeal persecuting the church" (Philippians 3:6) – to Saul (later named Paul), how great his zeal was he himself says he persecuted the church of God "beyond measure," and "wasted it" (Galatians 1:13), "made havock of the church" (Acts 8:3). Before Agrippa he said: "I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Which thing I also did in Jerusalem; and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them. And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities" (Acts 26:9-11). Addressing the Jews in Jerusalem, who knew his life, he said, "I persecuted this way unto the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women" (Acts 22:4). This he did because he was "zealous toward God" (verse 3). So full of this sort of zeal was he that he breathed nothing but "threatening and slaughter" (Acts 9:1).

It seems almost incredible that any one professing to worship the true God, can have such false ideas of Him as to suppose that He is pleased with that kind of service; yet Saul of Tarsus, one of the most bitter and relentless persecutors of Christians that ever lived, could say years afterward, "I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day" (Acts 23:1). Although kicking against the pricks (Acts 9:5), and endeavouring to silence the growing conviction that would force itself upon him as he witnessed the patience of the Christians, and heard their dying testimonies to the truth, Saul was not willfully stifling the voice of conscience. On the contrary, he was striving to preserve a good conscience, and so deeply had he been indoctrinated with the Pharisaic traditions, that he felt sure that these inconvenient pricking must be the suggestions of an evil spirit, which he was in duty bound to suppress. Pricking of the Spirit of God had for a time only led him to redouble his zeal against Christians. Saul, the self-righteous Pharisee, had no bias in favour of Christianity.

"Profited in the Jews' religion above many my equals in mine own nation" (Galatians 1:14) – above those of his own age, among his countrymen. He had possessed every advantage that was possible to a Jewish youth. "A Hebrew of the Hebrews" (Philippians 3:5), he was nevertheless a free-born Roman citizen (Acts 22:26-28). Naturally quick and intelligent, he had enjoyed the instruction of Gamaliel, one of the wisest doctors of the law, and had been "taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers" (Acts 22:3). After the "strictest sect" among the Jews, he lived a Pharisee, and was "a Pharisee of the Pharisees," so that he was "more exceedingly zealous of the traditions" of the fathers than any others of his class. Grown to manhood, he had become a member of the great council among the Jews, – the Sanhedrim, – as is shown by the fact that he gave his vote (Acts 26:10) when Christians were condemned to death. Added to this, he possessed the confidence of the high priest, who readily gave him letters of introduction to the rulers of all the synagogues throughout the land, with authority to seize and bind any whom he found guilty of "heresy." He was, indeed, a rising young man, on whom the rulers of the Jews looked with pride and hope, believing that he would contribute much to the restoration of the Jewish nation and religion to their former greatness. There had been a promising future before Saul, from a worldly point of view; but what things were gain to him, those he counted loss for Christ, for whose sake he suffered the loss of all things (Philippians 3:7-8). What caused this great change? No less than the power of the everlasting love and patient forbearance of God.

"Separated unto the Gospel of God" – Paul was "called to be an apostle" (Romans 1:1). That God chose Saul to be an apostle, before Saul himself had any thought that he should ever be even a Christian, is evident from the sacred narrative. On his way to Damascus, whilst, "breathing out threatening and slaughter," 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. Three days afterward the Lord said to Ananias, when sending him to give Saul his sight, "He is a chosen vessel unto Me, to bear My name before the Gentiles" (Acts 9:15). God arrested Saul in his mad career of persecution, because He had chosen him to be an apostle. So we see that the pricks against which Saul had been kicking were the strivings of the Spirit to turn him to the work to which he had been called. How long before this had Saul been chosen to be the messenger of the Lord? – from his mother's womb (Galatians 1:15). From his birth Saul had been "separated unto the Gospel of God." This was no new thing. The work of Samson and of John the Baptist was laid out for them before they were born (Judges 13:2-14; Luke 1:13-17). Jeremiah was chosen before his birth for a prophet of God (Jeremiah 1:4-5). Pharaoh, the haughty, defiant king of Egypt, had also been chosen to make the name of God known throughout all the earth (Exodus 9:15-16), but he refused to do it as the acknowledged servant of the Lord, and so the work had been accomplished through his obstinacy.

Christ revealed – "When it pleased God ... to reveal His Son in me" (Galatians 1:15-16); note the exact words – the apostle does not say that it pleased God to reveal His Son *to* him but *in* him. There is a great truth in this, which stands out very plainly in connection with some other texts. Read the whole of Deuteronomy 30. There we see that two things were placed before the people for them to choose between, namely, life and good, and death and evil. This, together with the fact that they were exhorted to keep the commandments of God, shows that they had not yet attained to righteousness. Then in verses 11-14 we read that the commandment is not far off so as to make it necessary for some one to bring it to them, in order that they might do it; "but *the Word* is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth, and *in thy heart, that thou mayest do it.*" We see, therefore, that the Word is in the hearts of men before they do it, and that it is there in order that they may do it. But what is the Word?

We read in John 1:1-14, where we learn that the Divine "Word was made flesh." That this is what is meant in the passage just quoted in Deuteronomy is seen from Romans 10:6-9, where it is quoted, and the Word is plainly declared to be Christ. Christ dwells in the heart, in the flesh, of every believer, and has come thus near to all men in order that they may be made the righteousness of God. Most men are ignorant of this divine presence, and live as though God were not, and that they were their own creators and preservers. But when the Spirit of truth brings a man to the knowledge of the truth, then Christ dwells in his heart "*by faith*" (Ephesians 3:17). Then is Christ *revealed in him*, and he fulfils the divine purpose of showing "forth the excellencies of Him that called him out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). Only by such a revelation of Christ in a man can he preach Him among the heathen with that revelation, his whole life is a Gospel sermon, even though he does not utter discourses. So we see that the work of the human preacher is exactly the same as that of the heavens: to declare the glory of God (Psalm 19:1-5), to be done in the same manner.

There is no question that Paul's conversion was a miracle; but so is every conversion. Do not suppose that Paul's conversion had something *more* of the miraculous in it *than* ordinary conversions; the fact is that exactly the same elements entered Paul's conversion as does in all other conversions. Paul saw the Lord, and thereby learned his own wretched condition; this at once humbled him, and he accepted the Lord. That was the whole of it, and it is the same thing that occurs in every conversion, although not necessarily with the same outward manifestations. 'Was it not marvelous that he should at once be able to preach powerfully?' – Indeed it was, but for anyone to preach Christ in very truth, it takes no less a mystery than Christ manifest in the flesh. Do not suppose that Paul got his knowledge instantaneously, without any study. He had all his life been a diligent student of the Scriptures and had made more advancement than any others of his age, hence familiar with the words of the Bible as a bright schoolboy is with the multiplication table. But his mind was blinded by the traditions of the fathers, which had been drilled into him at the same time. The blindness which came upon him when the light shone round him on the way to Damascus, was but a picture of the blindness of his mind; and the seeming scales that fell from his eyes when Ananias spoke to him, indicated the shining forth of the Word within him, and the scattering of the darkness of tradition. Paul's case was very different from that of a new convert who has never read the Bible. Given the case of Saul of Tarsus, let no one look on opposers of truth as incorrigible.