

## **"WHY PERSECUTEST THOU ME?"**

– MARCH 14. – ACTS 9:1-12,17-20.–

"This is a faithful saying, and worthy of acceptance, that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief." – 1 Tim. 1:15.

SAUL'S transformation, from an enemy of Christ and his Church to a friend and zealous servant, is generally termed his conversion. In our opinion, however, the term "conversion" would scarcely be appropriate in such a case. Saul of Tarsus was either a bad man and a hypocritical Pharisee, a money-lover and self-lover, as were many, or else he was an Israelite indeed, whose aim and object was the service of God, and whose persecution of the early Church was prompted by his fidelity to God. We believe that the latter description is the one which fitted his case; it is in harmony with his own testimony on the subject: "I verily thought that I did God service." If then Saul was not only a member of the favored nation of Israel, but a true and loyal member of it, thoroughly consecrated to the Lord and serving him to the best of his knowledge and opportunity, but merely blinded for the time by prejudice and misconception, we can no more think of his case as a conversion than the cases of the other apostles. The Lord chose the original twelve because they were Israelites indeed; and he gave them the needed instruction for his service; and this he did also for Saul, though in a more striking manner. The word convert signifies to turn about in an opposite direction. But Saul was already going in the right direction; namely, in a whole hearted service of God, though his efforts were expended upon the wrong thing in the right direction. The Lord merely opened the eyes of his understanding and showed him the better how his efforts should be used. Saul needed no conversion and needed merely to be shown aright; and he proved this by as much fidelity and energy in the Lord's service afterward as he had ignorantly misused previously.

Saul was one of those Israelites who lived amongst the Gentiles, but who occasionally went up to Jerusalem to certain of the feasts. His home was in the city of Tarsus, one of the notable cities of that date – said to have been excelled in scholarship and fine arts by the cities of Alexandria and Athens only. He not only had the advantages of a home in such a city, but his family was one of the influential ones, as is implied in the fact that he was not only a citizen of Tarsus but also a citizen of Rome. In addition to the education of his home city he had received a special course in theology or Jewish Law at Jerusalem, under Gamaliel, one of the greatest teachers of that time. His early training, therefore, and all of its conditions were favorable to producing in him a breadth and refinement of thought equaled by few; and these conditions combined with his honesty of heart and his zeal for God, though not at first according to knowledge, fitted him to become just what the Lord subsequently made of him; namely, "A chosen vessel unto me to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings and the Children of Israel." – Acts 9:15.

(1) It would appear that the circumstances connected with the stoning of Stephen only incited Saul to the greater energy in stamping out what he believed to be a very injurious doctrine – a heresy. Our own experience confirms the thought that an earnest, conscientious opponent is more to be respected than a cold, indifferent professed friend, and we are reminded of the Lord's words, "I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew thee out of my mouth." Let us have respect, therefore, for all who are warm-hearted and zealous; remembering that there is more hope of their being pleasing to God, and being accounted worthy to receive the truth, than for the lukewarm.

(2) The Jewish priesthood was granted and exercised considerable power under the arrangements of the Roman government. It had come to exercise very much of the power subsequently used by the Popes of Rome. They had power to authorize arrests and imprisonments for the infractions of their religious rules and regulations. Saul, exercising the

same respect to law and authority that subsequently marked all of his dealings and teachings as a Christian, did not attempt to take matters into his own hands in the persecution of the Christians, but went about it in the manner recognized as legal – under the sanction and authority of the highest religious tribunal. Let us remember that nearly [R2117 : page 73] all persecutions have been sanctioned by some human law, and regulate ourselves under the divine code.

(3-9) The account here given of the opening of the eyes of Saul's understanding is that of Luke, and was doubtless received directly from the Apostle Paul himself – with whom he traveled for a time. Two other accounts are given by the Apostle Paul himself. (See Acts 22:6-11; 26:12-20.) The three accounts are in practical agreement, and show only such variations as might reasonably be expected, considering the fact that they were delivered under different conditions; as it was sought to emphasize or elaborate different points. Had the three accounts been exactly alike, word for word, there would have been just ground for supposing a special preparation of the text with this harmony in view. Even the seeming discrepancy of the account, when rightly seen, are additional evidences of the truthfulness of all. The account itself being simple, we need give attention only to those points which apparently conflict. All three accounts say that Saul himself heard the voice, saw the light and fell to the ground. One of the accounts adds that all with him fell to the earth as well. The account in our lesson tells that the men of his company "*stood* speechless, *hearing a voice* but *seeing no man*." Another account says, "They beheld indeed the light, but they *heard not the voice* of him that spake to me." These accounts can be harmonized in this way: Saul himself was evidently the center of manifestation – "a great light shone round *me*." His companions doubtless saw something of this light in a general way, but they did not see the source of the light; they did not see the glorious body of our Lord Jesus – "seeing no man." Saul, however, saw the glorious body of our Lord Jesus, as he himself subsequently testified, "last of all he [Jesus] was seen of me also." Although none but Saul was smitten to the ground, the others who

stood speechless and terrorstricken no doubt soon kneeled reverently about their leader. Respecting the voice – Saul and all that were with him heard a sound, "the voice," but only Saul could distinguish the **words** – which were meant for him alone. A similar case is recorded in John 12:28,29, where it is stated that our Lord Jesus heard a voice from heaven, saying, "I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again." But the people that stood by and heard the voice understood not the words, but said that "it thundered." Saul and all of his company in one sense of the word heard the sound or voice, but in another sense of the word he alone heard the voice. We use this same form of expression in our daily conversation to day. If some one speaks to us in a low or indistinct voice, we say that we did not hear – we mean that although we heard the voice we did not understand or comprehend it.

The feelings of Saul, as he heard from the Lord of glory a reproof of his misdirected zeal, can be better imagined than described. Nevertheless, we can but admire the promptness with which he at once laid down the arms of his opposition, and placed himself on the side of the one whose cause he had so recently persecuted. We can imagine him praying, Lord, teach me! In my blindness and ignorance I have been fighting against thee, the Only Begotten of the Father, the Messiah; while "I verily thought I did God service." Having made such a great mistake I **[R2118 : page 73]** am thoroughly humbled, I can no longer trust to my own wisdom nor to the wisdom of those in whom I have heretofore confided; – the chief priests, the scribes and Pharisees. Now Lord, I come to thee: Show me how I can undo some of the great wrong I have done ignorantly: show me, and I will be glad to promptly follow and obey.

How deep a hold the matter took upon the mind of Saul may be judged from the fact that he neither ate nor drank for three days. He could not think lightly of his own blinded course. Deep contrition is always a good evidence of genuine repentance of wrong. No doubt his thoughts were busy, and, well educated in the Law and in the Prophets, and familiar with what he had learned concerning the Nazarene and his

teachings, we may reasonably suppose that those three days of blindness and fasting were days of prayer and reflection, in which he diligently compared the testimony of the Law and the Prophets with what he knew of the Nazarene and his teachings. His natural sight had been destroyed, but his mental vision had been opened, and he now saw matters in a new and wonderful light.

(10-17) The name Ananias in a previous lesson was associated with ungodliness and falsehood, but here we find another Ananias of a totally different character – a true servant of the Lord. His hesitation (vs. 13-16) does not seem to have been caused by opposition, nor faithlessness, but rather a reasonable caution. He had heard of Saul and possibly also knew Saul's host to be an enemy of the cause of Christ, and therefore wanted to assure himself that he was not misunderstanding the Lord. The Lord very graciously made the matter clear to him, as he always does to his faithful ones, and Ananias promptly fulfilled his mission. Here again is an illustration of divine methods: The Lord sent upon this important errand one who apparently was a very humble member of the Church. He did not send Peter and John and James the apostles from Jerusalem with great pomp and show to receive the penitent enemy of the cross and to make a public triumph, but used an instrument ready and willing that was nearby. This should be a lesson to us that the Lord is both able and willing to use in his service **[R2118 : page 74]** the humble ones who are ready and waiting – "Emptied, that he might fill them, as forth to his service they go; Emptied, that so unhindered his life through them might flow."

(18-20) The scales which fell from the eyes of Saul would seem to indicate that a certain portion of the eye had been thoroughly destroyed by the great light; and the healing may be said to have been in a natural way by the removal of the injured cornea. [Please see editor's correction of this phrase – R2489 – site Editor] Although informed that he received his sight, we are not informed that his eyes were made whole. Indeed, it seems very evident, from subsequent statements, that to his dying day his eyes never recovered their

soundness and his sight was never again normal. It has been surmised, and we think with good reason, that the continued weakness of his eyes constituted what he terms "a thorn in the flesh." Although under the power of the holy spirit he was granted many gifts of the spirit, amongst others the gift of healing, and although he exercised this gift of healing upon many (see Acts 19:11,12), yet the Lord did not relieve him from his own weakness in this respect. This must have been all the greater trial; it would seem all the more strange that he who could heal others could not heal himself; that he who had divine power for the blessing of others in this way, should not have the divine power for his own blessing. Our Lord's answer to his petition was, "My grace is sufficient for thee, my strength is made perfect in weakness." The noble Apostle exclaims, Therefore most gladly will I suffer, if thereby the grace of God toward me shall be the greater: and thereafter he never requested the removal of this "thorn." Several incidents in his experience confirm this conclusion. (1) Although an educated man, he seldom wrote his own letters; and of the one letter which he did write, although one of the briefest, he remarks (Gal. 6:11), "Ye see how large a letter I have written unto you with *my own hand*." The Greek would even give the thought that these words apologize for the use of very large characters in the writing, – such as a semi-blind person would use; (2) the Apostle comes down to us in history as "the bleared-eye Jew;" (3) when standing before the tribunal of the chief captain he declares that he did not know Ananias as the high priest; whereas, if his eyesight had been good, he could not have well helped knowing him, on account of his gorgeous apparel (Acts 23:5); (4) in writing to the Galatians he tells them (4:15) that, when he first met them, their love and sympathy for him were such that they would willingly have plucked out their own eyes for him – an expression which would be meaningless, unless his eyes were defective.

After a few days to gain strength from his fasting and the nervous excitement incidental to his experiences, days of communion with those whom he had come to persecute, and whom now in his renewed condition of mind he recognized and fellowshiped as dear brethren, he

promptly began to preach Christ as the Son of God – publicly using the opportunities afforded in the Jewish Synagogues.

Those who think of the Apostle Paul's experiences as on a par with the conversion of sinners greatly err. Such conduct as is here related is not the conduct of sinners, enemies of God. The account of the Apostle's enlightenment in the gospel is the account of a most noble character which commends the respect of every class in every time. And we are inclined to regard the Apostle Paul as in some sense of the word a figure, or likeness, or type of his race – Israel – and the opening of their eyes now shortly due to take place. Amongst the Jews are many who seem to be Israelites indeed, merely blinded, as the prophet and the apostle have described. (Rom. 11:7-12.) That nation whose blinding took place in the fifth (1,000 year) day, and which has been blinded throughout the sixth (1,000-year day), is to have its eyes opened on the third day, which will be the seventh (1,000 year) day – the Millennial Day. Israel also has been without food or drink of a spiritual kind during all this time. Israel also is to be a chosen vessel in the Lord's hand as connected with the earthly agencies in bearing the message which shall bless the Gentiles and all the families of the earth. We are near to the time for the opening of Israel's eyes. When the time shall have fully come, the Lord will send some Ananias whose touch and blessing under divine favor shall bring sight. The name Ananias signifies, "Jah is gracious."

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