

"WHY PERSECUTEST THOU ME?"

– APRIL 2. – ACTS 9:1-31. –

A NOTABLE ILLUSTRATION OF ZEAL WITHOUT KNOWLEDGE – REPROVED FROM ON HIGH – SAUL'S DEEP CONTRITION AN EVIDENCE OF GENUINE REPENTANCE – HIS EYES OF UNDERSTANDING OPENED – ST. PAUL'S "THORN IN THE FLESH" – THE GREAT APOSTLE TO THE GENTILES A TYPE OF THE NATION OF ISRAEL.

**"Faithful is the saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief." –
1 Timothy 1:15. R.V.**

WHOEVER thinks of Saul's transformation from an enemy of Christ and His Church to a friend and zealous servant as an experience on a par with the conversion of sinners is greatly in error. Such conduct as is related in today's Study is not the conduct of sinners, enemies of God. 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, a self-lover, or else 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 the case of Saul; for it is in harmony with his own testimony on the subject. – Acts 26:9-11.

If, then, Saul was a true and loyal member of the favored nation of Israel, thoroughly consecrated to God and serving Him to the best of his ability and knowledge, 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. Our Lord chose the original Twelve because they were Israelites indeed; and He gave

them the instruction necessary for His service. This He did also for Saul, though in a more striking manner.

The word convert signifies the turning about in an opposite direction. But Saul was already going in the right direction; namely, in a whole-hearted service of God, although his efforts were expended upon the wrong thing in that right direction. The Lord merely opened his eyes of understanding, and showed him the better how his efforts should be used. Saul needed merely to be shown aright; and this he demonstrated by as much fidelity and energy in the Lord's service afterward as he had ignorantly misused previously.

CONSCIENTIOUS WRONG-DOING

Saul was one of those Israelites who lived amongst the Gentiles, but who occasionally went up to Jerusalem to certain of the feasts. (Deuteronomy 16:16.) His home was in the city of Tarsus, a notable city of that time – said to have been excelled in scholarship only by the cities of Alexandria and Athens. Not only had he the advantages of a home in such a city, but his family was an influential one, as is implied in the fact that he was a citizen, not only of Tarsus, but also 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.

Saul's early training, therefore, and all of its conditions were favorable to producing in him a breadth and refinement of thought equaled by few. These conditions, combined with his honesty of heart and his zeal for God, although not at first according to knowledge, fitted him to become just what the Lord subsequently made him; namely, "a chosen vessel" unto the Lord, to bear His name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.

Apparently the circumstances connected with the stoning of St. Stephen only incited Saul to greater energy in stamping out what he

believed to be a very injurious doctrine – heresy. Our own experience confirms the thought that an earnest, conscientious opponent is more to be respected than a cold, indifferent professed friend. We are reminded of our Lord's words, "I would that thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew thee out of My mouth." (Revelation 3:16.) 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.

Under the arrangements of the Roman government, the Jewish priesthood was granted considerable power, and had come to exercise very much of the power subsequently used by the Popes of Rome. The religious rulers had power to authorize arrests and imprisonments for the infraction of their rules and regulations. Saul, exercising the same respect to law and authority which subsequently marked all of his dealings and teachings as a Christian, did not attempt to take matters into his own hands in regard to 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 all persecutions have been sanctioned by some human law, and regulate ourselves according to the Divine code.

THE THREE ACCOUNTS HARMONIZED

The account given in today's Study regarding the opening of the eyes of Saul's understanding is that of St. Luke, and was doubtless received directly from the Apostle Paul himself, with whom St. Luke traveled for a time. Two other accounts are given by St. Paul himself. (See Acts 22:6-11; 26:12-20.) The three accounts [**R5874 : page 91**] 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. When rightly viewed, even the seeming discrepancy of the account is additional evidence of the truthfulness of all. The account itself being simple, we need to give attention only to those points which apparently conflict.

All three accounts say that Saul himself heard a voice, saw a light and fell to the ground. One account adds that all with him fell to the ground as well. The account in our lesson declares 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 about me." Doubtless his companions 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 Christ – "seeing no man." Saul, however, saw the glorious body of our Lord Jesus Christ, as he himself subsequently testified. – 1 Corinthians 15:8.

Although no one but Saul was smitten to the ground, the others, who stood speechless and terrorstricken, no doubt soon knelt reverently about their leader. Respecting the voice – Saul and all 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. In one sense of the word Saul and all of his companions heard the sound, or voice; but in another sense of the word Saul alone heard the voice. We use this same form of expression in our daily conversation. If some one addresses 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 what was said.

OPENING OF SAUL'S MENTAL VISION

Saul's feelings, 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 ceased 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 verily I thought that I did God service. Having made such a great mistake, I am thoroughly humbled. I can no longer trust either to my own wisdom or to the wisdom of those in whom I have heretofore confided – the chief priests, the scribes and the Pharisees. Now, Lord, I come to Thee. Show me how I can undo some of the great wrong which I have done ignorantly. Show me; and I will gladly and promptly follow and obey."

How deep a hold the matter took upon Saul's mind may be judged from the fact that for three days he neither ate nor drank. 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; for he was well educated in the Law and in the Prophets and was familiar with what he had learned concerning the Nazarene. It is reasonable to suppose that those three days of blindness and fasting were days of prayer and reflection, during which he diligently compared the testimony of the Law and the Prophets with what he knew of the Nazarene and His teachings. Saul's natural sight had been destroyed; but his mental vision had been opened, and he now saw matters in a new and wonderful light.

AN ILLUSTRATION OF DIVINE METHODS

In a previous lesson the name Ananias was associated with ungodliness and falsehood. But in today's Study we find another Ananias of a totally different character – a true servant of the Lord. His hesitation to go to Saul does not seem to have been caused by opposition or by 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. Therefore he wished to assure himself that he had not misunderstood the Lord. But the Lord 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 St. Peter, St. James and St. John, the Apostles, from Jerusalem, with great pomp and show to receive the penitent enemy of the Cross and to make a public triumph. He merely used a ready and willing instrument that was nearby. This should be a lesson to us that the Lord is both able and willing to use in His service the humble ones who are ready and willing.

The scales which fell from Saul's eyes would seem to indicate that a certain portion of the eye had been destroyed by the great light; and the healing may be said to have been in a natural way. Although informed that he received his sight, we are not informed that his eyes were made whole. Indeed, it seems evident, from subsequent statements, that to his dying day his eyes never recovered soundness, and his sight was never again normal.

It has been surmised, and with good reason, that the continued weakness of his eyes constituted what the Apostle terms "a thorn in the flesh." (2 Corinthians 12:7-10.) Although under the power of the Holy Spirit he was granted many gifts of the Spirit, amongst which was the gift of healing, and although he exercised this gift of healing

upon many (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; for 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 of this way should not have the Divine power for his own blessing.

To St. Paul's petition our Lord's answer was, "My grace is sufficient for thee; My strength is made perfect in weakness." The noble Apostle exclaims, "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." Thereafter he never requested the removal of this "thorn."

Several incidents in St. Paul's 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, "Ye see how large a letter I have written unto you with *my own hand*." (Galatians 6:11.) 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) When standing before the tribunal of the chief captain, St. Paul declared that he did not know Ananias as the high priest; whereas, if his eyesight had been good, he could not have well helped knowing the high priest, on account of his gorgeous apparel. [**R5874 : page 92**] (Acts 23:5.) (3) 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 eyes for him – an expression which would be meaningless unless his eyes were defective.

After a few days in which to gain strength from his fasting and from 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 fellowshipped as dear brethren – Saul promptly began to preach

Christ as the Son of God – publicly using the opportunities afforded in the Jewish synagogues. The account of his enlightenment in the Gospel is that of a most noble character, which commands the respect of every class in every time.

ST. PAUL AS A TYPE

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 of understanding which is now shortly due to take place. Amongst the Jews are many who seem to be Israelites indeed, merely blinded, as both the Prophet and the Apostle have described. (Romans 11:7-12.) That nation, whose blinding took place in the Fifth Thousand-year Day, and which has been blinded throughout the Sixth Thousand-year Day, is to have its eyes opened on the Third Day, which will be the Seventh Thousand-year Day – the Millennial Day. "After Two Days will He revive us; in the Third Day He will raise us up." – Hosea 6:1-3.

During all this time Israel has also been without food or drink of a spiritual kind. 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 that time shall have fully come, the Lord will send some Ananias, whose touch under Divine favor shall bring sight. The name Ananias signifies, "Jah is gracious."

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