

CONVERSION STUDIES

CONVERSION OF A PERSECUTOR

Example six of thirteen

Next to the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, the conversion of Saul is perhaps the greatest event in the history of the world. So outstanding was it that many early disciples did not believe when they were told. We know him after his conversion as Paul, the apostle. In order to evaluate properly his conversion, we need to know something of his early life and his attitude toward Christ and His church.

Saul, the persecutor, was a well educated, zealous adherent of the religion of the Jews (Acts 22:3). He had gone to Jerusalem for his education that he might learn the finest points of Jewish doctrine. Saul was an excellent student (Gal. 1:14). It is as a persecutor of Christians that he is introduced to us in the New Testament (Acts 7:58, 8:1). He showed no mercy to any, but imprisoned men and women (Acts 8:3). He even voted for their execution (Acts 26:10). So great was his zeal he persecuted disciples even unto foreign cities (Acts 22:5). His method of persecution was to make disciples blaspheme since the penalty was death (Acts 26:11). He was a persistent persecutor. He had heard Stephen's prayer for forgiveness of his killers, yet he was unmoved.

We must understand that Saul was a conscientious persecutor (Acts 23:1; 26:9). This explains why he was zealous and determined. To him the persecution of Christians was what God wanted him to do. There was no indication that he ever doubted the correctness of his actions until the Lord appeared to him. How often do we hear, "Let your conscience be your guide." Saul was following his conscience, but was dead wrong. While we should not violate our conscience, it alone is not a guide to how to please God. Surely if sincerity and zeal are enough, Saul stood blameless in God's sight. This, however, was not true. His mistakes were honest, but they were still sin in God's sight. Can such a man as this be converted?

He leaves Jerusalem seeking disciples of Jesus in other places (Acts 9:1,2). He had no forboding. He did not realize he would meet Jesus on the way. His mission is to find disciples in Damascus, and bring them bound to Jerusalem where they will be quickly condemned. But on the road he is

stopped by Jesus Christ calling to him from heaven. The Lord allowed him to get almost near enough to strike (Acts 9:3). The manner of the Lord's appearing was miraculous. There was a light. This light was supernatural as it was brighter than the noon day sun (Acts 22:6). Then the Lord spoke, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" (Acts 9:4). Saul sought the identity of the great power over him. He was informed that Jesus of Nazareth was speaking to him.

The purpose of the vision of Jesus was unique. There is no record of any other such appearance in all history (I Cor. 15:8). The Lord's plan was to make Saul a witness and an apostle. "But arise, and stand upon thy feet: for to this end have I appeared unto thee, to appoint thee a minister and a witness both of the things wherein thou hast seen me, and of the things wherein I will appear unto thee" (Acts 26:16). To be an apostle he must see Christ after His resurrection. This would enable Saul to testify of His resurrection. Paul was to be an apostle especially for the Gentiles. Although Peter and others had preached to Gentiles, Paul was to make Gentiles the special recipients of his ministry. Many people want the Lord to appear to them in this manner, but it isn't necessary. It will not happen as Christ is not calling apostles today.

After this experience, Saul resumed his journey as a different man. "And Saul arose from the earth; and when his eyes were opened, he saw nothing; and they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and did neither eat nor drink" (Acts 9:8,9). God then calls Ananias to go to Saul and lay his hands on him that he might receive his sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit. "And straightway there fell from his eyes as it were scales, and he received his sight; and he arose and was baptized" (Acts 9:18). He had been "chief of sinners" (I Tim. 1:15). God told him that in Damascus he would be told what he "must" do (Acts 9:6). Thus by obedience to the command given, he was forgiven. Ananias had told him, "Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on his name" (Acts 22:16). If we are to be forgiven of our sins, it will be in the same plan of

obedience. His physical strength was supplied by food, and he immediately began to preach his new found faith (Acts 9:20).

His conversion is complete and we can see the contrast. "He that once persecuted us now preacheth the faith of which he once made havoc" (Gal. 1:23). His whole life is changed. From extreme antagonism to extreme devotion; from bitter opposition to passionate advocacy of the cause of the Person he had opposed. Instead of arresting the non-resisting Christians, he advocates their cause.

The conversion of Saul of Tarsus was truly a great event. It changed the history of the entire world. Paul went out to establish churches in many parts of the world, to write thirteen books of the New Testament, and to lead countless thousands to Christ through his personal efforts and his writings. Conversion is not an end, but a beginning. It is the planting of a tree that bears fruit for years to come. See it in this man. One conversion may be the winning of thousands.

(B. G. ECHOLS)

CHURCH OF CHRIST

412 East King Street
Shippensburg, Pa. 17257