

Sabbath School Today

With the 1888 Message Dynamic

The Book of Acts

Lesson 5. The Conversion of Paul

As the party descended the winding grade to the fertile oasis, their long, hot journey was nearly at its end. Below them lay the beautiful expanse of green fields and ripening orchards that surrounded Damascus. Suddenly, a light “above the brightness of heaven” shone round about them. The leader of the group, Saul, was overcome by the intensity of the light and fell to the ground.

Saul was a Roman citizen by birth and a Jew by ancestry. He had received the finest education available at the time. He was well versed in the Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and Aramaic languages. For his education, he sat at the feet of Gamaliel, the illustrious Jewish theologian, and had learned the “perfect manner of the law” (Acts 22:3). He was the “Pharisee’s Pharisee,” the brightest young lawyer on the Sanhedrin (Phil. 3:5, 6).

His current mission to Damascus was fully backed financially and theologically, by the high priest and the Sanhedrin council. They had given him letters of authority that he might breathe “out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord,” to bring them bound to Jerusalem to be punished for heresy (Acts 9:1; 22:5). Now, lying face down in the dust, he heard a voice. “Saul, why do you persecute Me? It is hard for you to fight against your conscience!” (Acts 9:4, 5). He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The same voice answered, “I am Jesus of Nazareth.”

These words struck Saul’s heart like a thunderbolt. Jesus of Nazareth was dead, dead and buried! Saul firmly believed that it was only lies circulated by His disciples that stirred the people to think that Jesus was risen from the dead. Trembling with fear, he said, “What shall I do, Lord?” Jesus answered him, telling him to go into the city and wait for further instructions. The glory was withdrawn and Saul got up, but he found himself totally deprived of sight. He stumbled on the last few miles of his journey “being led by the hand of them that were with [him].”

For three days Saul was “without sight, and neither did eat or drink.” During this time, he closely examined his former beliefs regarding Jesus of Nazareth. He recalled how he had fought against Stephen’s witness and consented to his unjust execution. How he had personally dragged many of Jesus’ disciples before the Sanhedrin for prosecution. In soul agony, he reviewed the prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah. He was certain that the Messiah was to bear the people’s sins, free them from oppression, and renew the nation of Israel to its former glory.

But, in a flash other prophecies blasted through Saul’s mind. The Messiah was to be despised and rejected, and wounded for the transgressions of the people; made an

offering for sin and cut off from the land of the living (Isa. 53:3-9). Saul knew that Daniel foretold that when the Messiah came He would confirm the covenant with the people for seven years, and "in the midst" of those seven years, He would cause the sacrifice and offerings to cease (Dan. 9:27). But the Temple still stood, and the offerings continued to pour into it. All things continued as they had before, except for the small group of men who called themselves "disciples" of that dead Man, who were going about spreading lies about His power over death.

Tormented by his thoughts, Saul cried out, "Oh Lord, have I been wrong? Have I been fighting against You instead of for You? Help me to understand!" Saul was completely alone in his struggle. He could not appeal to the unconverted Jews of Damascus. They would never believe his story. The followers of Jesus shunned him as a deceiver, refusing him all sympathy. Imprisoned by his blindness and rejected by men, his only source of help and comfort was a merciful God. To this source, he appealed with a broken and contrite heart.

"Lord, explain to me how Jesus can be the Messiah. The Law plainly teaches that anyone hung on a tree is cursed by You forever" (see Deut. 21:22, 23). "How can Jesus now be the Exalted One, the Consolation and Redemption of all Israel?" (Luke 2:25).

As he reflected on the meaning of these prophecies, Saul's darkened mind was illuminated by the Holy Spirit. He was astonished at his former lack of understanding and ashamed that he had been persuaded by others to reject the truth of who Jesus was. As Saul yielded himself to the convicting power of the Holy Spirit, he was able to bow in humility before God and confess his unworthiness. He pleaded the merits of the crucified and risen Saviour, asking forgiveness for his sins. With the simplicity of a little child, he began to comprehend the love of God. He saw that Jesus of Nazareth was the embodiment of all the "law and the testimonies," the fulfillment of every sanctuary service.

Saul left Damascus a changed man. He was as zealous as ever, but now he was compelled by a different Spirit. The love of God exhibited on the cross of Calvary gave him no choice. He realized that Jesus died once for all, as corporate humanity, being "made sin for us," and that if "One died for all, then were all dead" (2 Cor. 5:21, 14). In that one sacrifice, salvation was given to the entire human family (Rom. 5:15-19). The only way anyone can be lost is by rejecting this most precious gift. Henceforth, Saul could only live for Jesus and the vindication of His name.

Saul realized that Jesus died for him, as him. It was no longer Saul who existed, but Paul. Saul and his sins died *in Christ* on the cross, and how could he live any longer in that old life of rebellion? (see Romans 6:6, 7). Because Christ was risen from the dead, Paul was assured of eternal life. He was alive *by the faith* of Christ (Gal. 2:16, 20). Forever more Paul could only preach "Christ and Him crucified," declaring the unbounded grace of God toward sinners. The conversion of Saul is a striking evidence of the power of the Holy Spirit to convict men of sin. Saul met the crucified and risen Saviour face to face on the Damascus road and he was changed forever.

In 1888 God sent His message of the risen Saviour to confront His church with their sin of legalism. For forty years, the church had slidden gradually into a spiritual pride that almost excluded the need for faith. We had become Pharisees of the first order. Relying on the power of rhetoric and knowledge of the Bible, preachers could convince a crowd to accept the seventh-day Sabbath and the need to keep the Law of God. But they had preached the Law until they had become “as dry as the hills of Gilboa that had neither dew nor rain.” [1] What was needed by the church to finish the work of God was some much needed rain—*Rain* sent down from heaven to mature the crop and prepare God’s people for translation.

Just as the Jews did while Christ was personally walking this earth, and as they continued to do after the Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost upon the spiritually humbled disciples, we corporately have been resistant to the outpouring of the Latter Rain. “A woe is pronounced upon all such unbelief and criticism as was revealed in Minneapolis and as was revealed in Battle Creek [leadership of the church]. By their fruits ye shall know them. Evidence at every step that God was at work has not changed the manifest attitude of those who in the very beginning pursued a course of unbelief which was an offense to God. With this barrier they themselves had erected, they—like the Jews—were seeking something to strengthen their unbelief and make it appear they were right. Therefore they could not drink in the great salvation that the Lord proffered them. The riches of divine grace they refused.” [2]

The Holy Spirit was insulted by the way He was treated then and since, and Christ has suffered profound disappointment. “In every church in our land, there is needed confession, repentance, and reconversion. The disappointment of Christ is beyond description. Unless those who have sinned speedily repent, the deceptions of the last days will overtake them. Some, though they do not realize it, are preparing to be overtaken. God calls for repentance without delay. So long have many trifled with salvation that their spiritual eyesight is dimmed, and they can not discern between light and darkness. Christ is humiliated in his people. The first love is gone, the faith is weak, there is need of a thorough transformation.” [3]

It was for the same reason as the Jews that the 1888 message of Christ and His righteousness was resisted and rejected—pride of position and preconceived opinions. “An unwillingness to yield up preconceived opinions, and to accept this truth, lay at the foundation of a large share of the opposition manifested at Minneapolis against the Lord’s message through Brethren [E. J.] Waggoner and [A. T.] Jones. By exciting that opposition Satan succeeded in shutting away from our people, in a great measure, the special power of the Holy Spirit that God longed to impart to them. The enemy prevented them from obtaining that efficiency which might have been theirs in carrying the truth to the world, as the apostles proclaimed it after the day of Pentecost. The light that is to lighten the whole earth with its glory was resisted, and by the action of our own brethren has been in a great degree kept away from the world.” [4]

Through prayer and heart searching, Saul came to understand and appreciate God's great love for mankind. He could have rejected the message given to him on the Damascus road. He could have continued on in the power and authority of the Jewish church and climbed to great heights in the society of Jerusalem. He had all the world before him if he stayed with his old convictions. If he followed his new faith, life was, at best, uncertain. Would he trade the certainty of an ambitious life for the surety of persecution? It was his choice.

We too have a choice to make. We can continue on in this world's glory or we can kneel at the foot of the cross. One way gives immediate satisfaction, the glory of position and approbation from men. The other path brings possible condemnation from those who oppose the truth, but it also brings the certainty of eternal life. If the love of Christ compels us (2 Cor. 5:14, 15), we will make the right choice.

Let us be like Saul when he came face to face with God on the road to Damascus—"O, Lord, what would You have me do?" "Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3:19).

—Ann Walper

Endnotes (Ellen G. White):

[1] *Review and Herald*, March 11, 1890.

[2] *The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials*, pp. 369, 370.

[3] *Review and Herald*, December 15, 1904.

[4] *Selected Messages*, book 1, pp. 234-235.

Notes:

Pastor Paul Penno's video of this lesson is on the Internet at:

<https://youtu.be/QamlzPguffo>

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