

THE CONVERSION OF SAUL OF TARSUS

By Johnny Ramsey

The most influential Christian in the first century was the apostle Paul. Apart from Jesus Christ, he was the dominant character in the apostolic era. In fact, Paul wrote half of the New Testament! But, he had not always been a Christian. He had once been a persecutor of the followers of the Lord. In this booklet we shall be presenting several tremendous truths that can be gleaned from the Biblical account of his conversion. When these points are applied to the religious scene of the twentieth century, vital lessons come shining through for us. After briefly reviewing the scriptural background to this inspiring account of salvation, we shall discuss the following practical points:

- (1) God's Power to Save
- (2) Morality Is Not Enough
- (3) Man's Conscience Can Be Wrong
- (4) "Calling on the Name of the Lord"
- (5) Living for Christ.

Persecution

But now, let us turn to the book of Acts. The story actually begins toward the end of the seventh chapter in this fifth book of the New Testament. Stephen, a faithful servant of God, had delivered a stirring address that elevated Jesus to His rightful place as Savior and Redeemer. The audience on that occasion was filled with hostile Jews who rejected the Messianic claim of the Christ. Stephen's speech cut them to the quick (Acts 7:54). An angry mob cast him out of the city and stoned him. Stephen died with a prayer on his lips for those who had persecuted him.

In Acts 7: 58 we learn that one of the enemies of the gospel on that occasion was a young man named Saul. This was the Hebrew name of the man who would later become the peerless apostle to the Gentiles. It is significant, however, that the very first time he is referred to in the Scriptures, Paul is an enemy of righteousness. And, even as devout men prepared for the burial of Stephen, the persecution led by Saul of Tarsus continued in its intensity. Notice the following reading in Acts 8: 3:

"As for Saul, he made havoc of the church."

Indeed, "at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem" (Acts 8: 1). But this was not enough to satisfy the zeal of the young man Saul. He was so determined in his opposition to Christianity that he determined to extend his efforts to Damascus which was 150 miles from Jerusalem. Read carefully this important passage from Acts, the ninth chapter:

"And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of the way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem. And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks. And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do."

Jesus Was the Christ

What a shock this leader of the Jews must have received upon learning *that Jesus really was the* Son of the living God! Prior to this reading in Acts 9, we find that Paul had opposed *the church*. This coincides with his own admission in Galatians 1:13:

"For ye have heard of my conversation in time past in the Jews' religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it."

Yet, when the voice from heaven spoke, Paul heard Jesus say: "Why persecutest thou *me*?" Evidently Christ and the church are inseparably bound together. The idea that the church is not important is foreign to the Bible. Our Lord died for the church, purchasing it with His own blood (Acts 20:28). He adds the saved to the church (Acts 2:47), and is, Himself, the head of the church, His spiritual body (Ephesians 1:22-23). When Saul of Tarsus warred against the church, he was fighting the Savior as well.

Not Saved by Faith Alone

Some have suggested that Paul was saved by faith alone. If this is true, why did Jesus tell him to "go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do"? If that enemy of the way of Christ were saved upon acknowledging Jesus as Lord, then he was the most miserable saved man in the history of the world! For, in Acts 9:9 we learn that three days of anguish, without food or drink, followed Saul's encounter with the Redeemer on the road to Damascus. No, Paul was not saved on the road-but in the city-for *there* he was told what he *must* do to have remission of sins. The only faith that saves is "faith that works by love" (Galatians 5: 6). Yes, an obedient faith (Romans 1: 5; James 2: 19). Ananias, a servant of the Lord commanded him:

"And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord."

This verse, from Acts 22: 16, comes from Paul's own account of his conversion to Christ.

Prejudice vs. Humility

One point that constantly thrills me as I read of the obedience of Saul of Tarsus is the fact that he was honest and humble enough to let Jesus break the chains of prejudice in his past life. We can almost see the fetters of pride and the shackles of bias crumble into dusty Palestinian soil as the blinded Saul realizes that he has been mistaken. He was courageous enough to allow the truth to replace "the traditions of my fathers" (Galatians 1: 14). Although Paul had a great spiritual heritage in Judaism, he was willing to "count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord" (Philippians 3:8). Even though Saul had received a scholarly education from the noted Rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 22: 3), he was willing to start anew at the feet of Jesus, the Master Teacher! His devotion to divine mandates meant that he would leave a place of *leadership* among the Hebrews to become a lowly, persecuted *servant* of the Christ. Indeed, Paul was obedient to the challenging thought of Proverbs 23: 23:

"Buy the truth and sell it not."

No man has ever given up more to become a follower of our dear Savior. Unlike his fellow Jews, who would not "submit themselves to the righteousness of God" (Romans 10:3), Saul turned from darkness to light (Acts 26: 18) that he "might win Christ" (Philippians 3: 8). Such a beautiful, spiritual prize awaits all who will meekly surrender their pride and prejudice and lovingly obey the Lord of Glory.

Friend, let us sincerely appeal to you: Do not allow *anything-tradition*, position, loved ones-to keep you away from Christ. Our Savior spoke clearly upon this theme in Matthew 10: 37-38:

"He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me."

When a person is concerned enough about his own redemption to ask in deepest solemnity, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" he is on the road to salvation. What others may think will not hinder a sincere seeker. Just as Saul "conferred not with flesh and blood" (Galatians 1: 16), so will men today, convicted of sin, rush to obey the Redeemer.

Let us now give our attention to the salient points connected with this beautiful story of conversion.

The Power of the Gospel

One of the most unlikely candidates for conversion in the first century was Saul of Tarsus. He "was an avowed

enemy of Christianity. He was a strong leader in a well-entrenched religious order. Saul aggressively fought against the gospel. Many members of the church of the Lord had come to fear his name (Acts 9:13). Evidently, even the most optimistic Christians never considered that Paul would ever be on the Lord's side. However, the very message he opposed so fervently had enough power to transform this "chief of sinners" (I Timothy 1: 15) into an ambassador for Christ (II Corinthians 5:20). Later, he "preached the faith which once he destroyed" (Galatians 1:23).

Do you know how this climactic event was accomplished? In Romans 1: 16 we have the answer. In that verse we learn that "the gospel is the power of God unto salvation." From the Greek word for *power* in the text, we derive our English expression *dynamite*. *The gospel of Jesus Christ is God's dynamite to blast sin out of a man and replace it with righteousness!* Since God is no respecter of persons (Romans 2:11), Saul of Tarsus had to obey the gospel (I Peter 4: 17) or be forever lost (II Thessalonians 1:7 -9). All accountable beings, since the Christian era began, must believe the gospel, repent of their sins, and be baptized into Christ (Matthew 28: 18-20; Luke 24:47; Acts 2: 38). This is exactly what came to pass in the conversion of Saul. This ruins the false position of many who try to wait "for a still, small voice, an experience better felt than told, or a direct intervention from heaven" to save them. Saul of Tarsus was not delivered from his sins until he was baptized into Christ (Acts 22: 16; Galatians 3:27; Romans 6:1-6). Anyone stopping short of that same process today is yet in an unsaved position. From Matthew 3 and Acts 8 we see that Bible baptism is immersion in water.

Morality Is Not Enough

Since Saul earnestly believed that Jesus of Nazareth was an imposter, he zealously endeavored to stamp out the followers of the Man of Galilee. Concerning the law of Moses, he was blameless (Philippians 3: 6). Following the code of the Jews, he was indeed a hero. But from heaven's vantage point (Psalms 14: 2) Paul was guilty of rejecting the Lord of Glory! Sincerity alone does not save. To be acceptable in the eyes of one's own civilization does not necessarily prove that one is pleasing unto the Creator. In fact, the Bible teaches that devout, prayerful individuals often need to be converted in order to be saved. We read in Acts, chapters eight and ten, of two extremely religious men-Cornelius and the Ethiopian who needed to hear and obey the gospel of Christ. We must not put our trust in our own morality or feelings (Jeremiah 10: 2 3; Proverbs 14: 12) but in the words of Christ (John 12:48; Romans 2: 16). As Moses said many centuries ago:

"Ye shall not do after all the things that we do here this day, every man whatsoever is right in his own eyes" (Deuteronomy 12: 8).

Conscience Can Be Wrong

Paul had "lived in all good conscience" (Acts 23: 1) and "verily thought. . . that he should do many things contrary to the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 26:9). Nonetheless, he was in the grossest error. He found himself, although honest, to be fighting against God! The only way that our conscience can be our guide in spiritual matters is for it to be in perfect accord with the Scriptures. Only the truth of God's holy word can make us free from sin (John 8: 32; 17: 17; I Peter 1: 22). In order to be saved, Christ said that we must "do the will of our Father which is in heaven" (Matthew 7:21).

Calling on the Name of the Lord

Several times in the New Testament we read that "Whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Acts 2: 21; Romans 10: 13). Some preachers, like Billy Graham, affirm that this involves only "accepting Christ as your personal Savior." But, in this classic example of Saul's conversion, we forever learn exactly how to call upon the Lord. Previously we have read that God's power to save is contained in the *gospel* (Romans 1: 16). We should not, therefore, be surprised to notice that the Bible says that we are *called by the gospel* (II Thessalonians 2: 14). The practical application of these points can be ascertained by carefully focusing attention upon Acts 22:16. According to Paul's own testimony concerning his conversion from persecutor to saint we read that he was told that he must "arise and be baptized and wash away thy sins, *calling on the name of the Lord.*" There it is--the divine heaven-approved way of having one's sins remitted. This is what is involved in calling upon the name of the Lord. Christ plainly stated in Luke 6:46:

"And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?" In I John 2:4, we learn that a person is a liar when he claims to belong to the Savior without doing what Jesus demands! Truly, if we love Him we will keep His directives (John 14: 15). The imploring words of Hebrews 5:9 should compel us

to genuinely call upon the Master. Yes, "He is the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him."

Friend, have you, in the light of Saul's conversion, truly obeyed the Lord Jesus Christ? Those who teach salvation before baptism run into a permanent road-block here. Popular theories of "salvation by faith alone" cannot be harmonized with the account of Paul becoming a Christian. Preachers who advocate that redemption is solely by God's grace face the dilemma of arguing with the *experience* of the very man who wrote Ephesians 2: 8- "For by grace are ye saved." Yes, Paul was saved by grace *when* he was obedient to "the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24). Do not be misled by false teachers; obey the God of heaven and earth today. Indeed, "it is time to seek the Lord" (Hosea 10: 12).

Living for Christ

The most noble example of Christian living portrayed on the pages of the Bible was the conduct of Paul. When he was converted, he became a shining illustration of what it means to walk with God. The secret of his success is found in I Corinthians 11:1:

"Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ."

Truly, Christ lived within him as Paul gloried only in the cross (Galatians 2:20; 6:14). The result of this one conversion echoed around the Roman Empire. Thousands rejoiced in the salvation which the Son of God made possible as a consequence of the untiring efforts of Paul. The man of Tarsus knew that he had been saved to serve. He had been won to the Lord that he might win others to the cause of righteousness. *Living for Christ today involves this same awareness of duty.*

On the walls of an educational institution in America, there are words which demand immediate attention of all who view them. They are: "On the plains of hesitation lie the blackened bones of countless millions, who at the dawn of victory sat down to rest, and resting, died."

Too many who profess to be Christians have forgotten their responsibilities in the Lord. A passage that sums up this challenging aspect of Christianity quite vividly is I Corinthians 15: 58:

"Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord."

Some members of the church are similar to the little boy who fell out of bed one night. His mother rushed over and asked the lad what had happened. He replied, "I guess I went to sleep too close to where I got in." How sad that not a few who have been redeemed by Christ are gradually going back to the beggarly elements of the world. Soldiers of the Lord must awaken to godliness and be dead unto sin (Romans 6: 11; Ephesians 5: 14). The apostle Paul was certainly devoted to the service of his Savior.

There are many wonderful lessons we can glean from the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. We should be spiritually enriched from the points of this booklet. It is not surprising that toward the end of the first century Peter referred to Paul as "our beloved brother" (II Peter 3: 15).

Do *you* desire to be saved like Paul was saved? Then you, too, must have the humility to say, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" Are you ready to obey the same commandments that he did? If so, you can share the glorious reward Paul mentions in II Timothy 4: 8:

"Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing."

"Why tarriest thou? Arise and be baptized and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord."