

The Conversion of Saul

EXHORTATION WALTON OCT. 30, '05.

My dear Bre. & Srs.,

Whilst we all appreciate that God is in control of nations and individuals, they, at the same time, have a high degree of free will, but can only go as far as God allows. He, indeed, makes and deposes not only kings, but all in any form of authority.

Strange things happen in promotion and demotion, not only in positions but also in assets.

In Acts ch. 8 we have brethren of contrasts: Paul humbly acknowledged in Romans that he was “a servant (slave) of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle”. He says there came a time when “it pleased God, who separated me from my mother’s womb, and called me by His grace to reveal His Son in me.” This, of course, happened in his sudden conversion from a Pharisee to a Christian. Paul refers to himself as “one born out of due time” (1 Cor. 15:8) or, as in the NIV, “one abnormally born”. It is not referring to a natural, premature birth, but the dramatic way he was born a new creature in Christ. It was a quick and total change from the old to the new man in Christ, and every one of us has been called (predestinated) to likewise become Sons of God.

Before his abnormal birth into Christ, Paul had good reason for confidence in the flesh: he had a natural advantage over others, born doubtless of well-off parents who could afford for his education at Jerusalem, indeed under Gamaliel himself. It was inevitable that with such a sheltered upbringing and education he passionately defended the law in - the oral law and the traditions – in every detail, becoming, in his own words, “exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers”, so that he felt able to claim himself “blameless” concerning the righteousness of the law. His training had blinkered his mind down a very narrow way of thinking, and anything deviating from the ‘traditions’ was anathema to him.

Paul was a fanatic, persecuting the Christians, sending them to prison and to death. He was the ringleader instigating the reign of terror against the Christians, causing them to flee or face the defenceless fury of the storm. Paul caused havoc amongst the ecclesias; that word ‘havoc’ conveys the idea of a wild beast ravaging the body of its victim. In v. 3 of Acts ch. 8 we read of him destroying the church, “going from house to house he dragged off men and women and put them in prison”. Just imagine it happening to ourselves – a knock at the door, an inquisition, torture, trying to make us blaspheme against Christ, chaining us up and dragging us to prison.

Was God in control? Had He forsaken the believers? Well, they were so convinced of the Truth that although they fled persecution, and left everything behind, they preached the Truth wherever they went. Although Paul was only about 30, the rulers had him in high regard. He was a rising star and possibly even a member of the Sanhedrin, a potential leader. What encouraged him to become such a ferocious persecutor? What is it that makes a person become a terrorist, or a suicide bomber, a fanatic Moslem or Shiite? Or, come to that, a raving Thomasite or a Catholic or Mormon? They all sincerely believe they are serving God, but possibly devoid of the real Truth of God and His Word. It is no doubt the way they have been trained and brain-washed so that they are convinced they are right and everyone else wrong.

It is easy to see this in extremists, but perhaps all of us can, at times, have smaller, but nonetheless extreme, ideas on which we can become so dogmatic. It is a failure to see any good in others and a negation of the command in Philippians . 2:3,4, “Do nothing out of selfish

ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others”.

In his ambition to exterminate the Christians Paul got authority to go to Damascus in Syria, a foreign country 120 miles away, to search out any Christians and take them prisoners to Jerusalem. They would have been roughly treated, chained together to walk that 120 miles. Imagine how Ananias and the Brethren and Sisters in Damascus felt when they knew Paul was coming to get them.

God heard their prayer. Saul was stopped in his tracks by Jesus’ intervention. Paul arrived in Damascus blind, a broken man, and fasted for three days and was humble and repentant in prayer. God told Ananias to go to him. To go to this murderous man, whom they all knew about, required incredible faith. That is something we, too, have to develop, absolute faith in God – ‘Dare to be a Daniel’ or Dare to be an Ananias.

We read Paul’s account of what happened. Ananias said, “Brother Saul, receive your sight”, and at that very moment Paul was able to see him. And Ananias said, “The God of our fathers has chosen you to know His will...You will be His witness to all men...Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away” (NIV Acts 22:13:15?). We think of the enormity of Saul’s sins, even making others blaspheme against Christ . - yet all were instantly forgiven. We may not see ourselves in the same bad light, but before God we are all wretched sinners, yet repentent, forgiven sinners providing we forgive others. It is not just a casual forgiveness but seventy times seven a day, that’s once every three minutes

Having been converted Paul, from that hour, was a changed man; everything he thought and did was dedicated to the Lord; his intention was, as he says in Philippians, “that Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life, or by death” (1:21), that is, in a way, like our baptism; we died to the past and started a new life – an abnormal birth into Christ – but how much have we been transformed into the image of Christ? We think of Paul’s wonderful life, yet, like us, he realized his failings, saying, “O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God, through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 7:24). We must not let our failings weight us down, but thank God that, in His mercy, we will attain to the Kingdom, because he wants us..

In our training, God sees fit at times to give us what appears to be adverse circumstances. Take, for example, Stephen’s death: -, dreadful, but it resulted in the spread of the gospel and played a part in Paul’s life. He never forgot that he was responsible for Stephen’s death. but he was forgiven

There are tragic incidents in our lives and sometimes, in this life, we cannot see the reason for them, but ultimately we will see there was a purpose behind them, for God is in ultimate control of everything, we know that not even a bird of the air falls to the ground without His knowledge.

Stephen’s dying prayer and plea was, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (NIV Acts 7:60). That prayer was heard and Stephen and Paul will rejoice together in the Kingdom. One can imagine the tears of joy as they see and embrace each other. And I guess it will be the same with us: we may have had sharp disagreements with some, but then there will be complete reconciliation and perpetual happiness, with the things of the past seeming as nothing compared to the glory that will be revealed in us.

Saul, the Pharisee, with the glittering career prospects, gave them all up for something better. Let us just look at Phil. Ch. 3 vs. 7-9... Phil. Ch. 3 v 7: "But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea, doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, and be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith."

Paul was not the only one to give up something. We read of Jesus, "For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). Jesus gave everything, including his life, so that we might be saved.

What have we really given up? We live in a highly affluence, materialistic part of the world. Some, elsewhere, are, as we know, in dire need. But it is not just material things that are needed. Paul says, "If I give all I possess to the poor, and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing". We are told in Rom. (12:1), to "present your bodies (lives) a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service". Micah puts it like this, "What does the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God" (ch. 6:8). These are the qualities God delights to see in our lives, and I guess there is room for improvement in all of us regarding these things.

Getting back to Acts ch. 8 we have Philip going to preach in Samaria, this, of course, being the home of the Samaritans with whom the Jews had no dealings, so this is the beginning of the extension of the gospel to all nations. Later in the chapter we have the Ethiopian eunuch, a Gentile, being baptised. The response to the gospel in Samaria was tremendous, v. 6, crowds eagerly listened, indeed, v. 8, there was great joy in the city. The Truth was the 'talk of the town', as it were, and many miracles demonstrated the Truth of what Philip was saying. Even Simon the sorcerer was baptised and followed Philip. The Brethren at Jerusalem were excited about the results and sent Peter and John, who laid their hands on some of them, to receive the miraculous gifts of the spirit. Simon coveted this power to give such gifts to others and offered the apostles money for it, but earned a severe rebuke (v. 20), "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money" (NIV).

Whilst we all appreciate we are saved by grace, I sometimes wonder if we put too much emphasis on money. For example, about four out of every hundred baptisms in the UK are associated with advertising, the other 96% are from personal contacts, yet we spend, as a community, vast sums of money on advertising. We are happy to give money to such things, but really it would seem it is more personal effort that is needed. Not just giving a bit of our surplus money to an effort.

The next section deals with Philip going to Gaza, some 60 miles away, several days' journey. Why Philip and not one of the twelve? The 12 disciple were all native Jews and needed to be gradually introduced to the fact that now the gospel was to be preached into all the world. Philip was a Hellenistic Jew and so more amenable to the non-exclusiveness of Israel's Jews. He was to meet an Ethiopian, a black man, who would carry the gospel into Africa. As the eunuch had been up to the temple to worship, one assumes he was a proselyte Jew. He was an influential man in charge of the Ethiopian treasury. It would have been very unusual for a black man to enter the temple; inwardly many Jews would not have accepted him, but he was a sincere worshipper of God.

As his chariot slowly made its way across the desert towards Egypt and thence on to Ethiopia, he was on his way to Gaza. As he was sitting in his chariot he was reading the scroll of Isaiah; he certainly wasn't wasting his time. And as the custom was, he was reading aloud, so Philip ran up to the chariot and asked him, v. 30, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' How can I, he said, unless someone else explains it to me? So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him." The man was obviously sincere and puzzled as to the meaning of what he was reading. In spite of his high position he was humble enough to acknowledge he could not understand what he was reading and allowed Philip to explain it to him.

Being such an important person, there would have been others with him and I guess they would have shooed this potential hitch-hiker away, but not so the eunuch. Here was an honest seeker after the Truth and God arranged for Philip to be there at exactly the right moment, it was no chance meeting. Paul says, "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to his purpose. For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover, whom he did predestinate, them he also called, and whom he called, them he also justified, and whom he justified, them he also glorified" (Rom. 8:28-30).

And also this applies to us. We did not come to a knowledge of the Truth by chance. God arranged our various circumstances that at a certain time we would accept the call and be justified. When we type on the computer the lines can be uneven; we press the 'justifying' key and they will straighten up. Once we accept the call of the gospel we are all straightened up – justified – in God's sight.

The place the Ethiopian was reading was Isa. ch. 53, from which it was easy to preach Christ and explain the whole gospel. It is, of course, likely that he had been in contact with Christians in Jerusalem and heard a lot about Jesus and knew the Scriptures, and Philip would have enabled him to fit everything into place and really see the purpose of God and how could share in it. However, he knew that he lacked one thing; as the chariot proceeded along to Gaza, there is an area with pools of water. He exclaimed, "Look, here is water, why shouldn't I be baptised?" (vs. 36). And so they stopped and he was baptised. He died to self and rose a new creature in Christ and one with the believers everywhere. Soon, Stephen, Paul, Ananias, Philip the Ethiopian, and ourselves and countless others will all be together in the eternal bliss of the Kingdom.

The final conviction of the Ethiopian was Isaiah 53. And so let's have a look at v32 and see what is said of Jesus' humble and obedient life.

"He was led as a sheep to the slaughter and as a lamb before the shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth".

Just think of the untruthful statements they made against him, the mockery of a trial and the physical and verbal abuse they gave him. All contrary to the law they so piously claimed to maintain. Pilate knew it was for envy they wanted to crucify him – They were ambitious men directing all their energies to gain power and control over others. Jesus was so different, he washed the disciples' feet, and we should also take on the role of slaves and not lord it over each other. Jesus certainly teaches us a lesson of humility.

In v 33 "In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from him". Why did God allow His only begotten morally perfect obedient son to be so horribly treated and be murdered by the religious Jews? The enigma is even deeper when it says in Isaiah "It was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer" Why, Why. "He was

cut off from the land of the living, for the transgression of my people he was stricken---- By his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many and he will bear their iniquities.” He had to die because of our sins and to open up the way of salvation for us. There was no other way to save us from perishing for eternity and we need to show our appreciation of what He has done for us. Loving mercy to others and walking humbly with our God who has truly done wonderful things for us and we are just not in a position to repay in any way for his mercy, but can just show our appreciation by humbly trying to glorify him – howbeit with many imperfections.