

When Saul Became Paul

We cannot study the conversion of the most famous apostle without talking about Stephen. In the listing of the first seven deacons of the church, Stephen was the first mentioned. Acts 6:8, 10: "And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people.... And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake." Stephen was a Spirit-filled servant of the Lord. Even his enemies were in awe, before they turned him into a martyr. Acts 6:15: "And all that sat in the council, looking stedfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel." In Acts 7, Stephen gives one of the most famous, in depth and thorough sermons in the Bible going from Abraham, the patriarchs, and Joseph, to Moses, to David, then to Solomon, culminating in Christ, the Just One whom they betrayed and murdered. Immediately after Stephen's Spirit-filled sermon, they stoned him to death, as he prayed. Acts 7:60: "And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep."

The next chapter begins with Acts 8:1: "And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles." When public debate took place in Israel at this time, the witnesses removing their outer garments and laying them at the feet of the victor determined the winner. If determined to be a heretic, the victor could determine the penalty. Removing their garments also gave the witnesses freedom to begin the stoning once the penalty had been determined. Acts 7:58: "And cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul." This is spoken of by Paul later in Acts 22:20. After Stephen's martyrdom, Saul went on a rampage to destroy Christianity. No doubt, one Christian after another, one martyr after another were saying the same thing Stephen was saying the day he died.

1. SAUL GOES OUT OF HIS WAY TO FIND THE WAY

Acts 9:1, 2

Saul was breathing like a wild snorting beast to complete his demonic mission, i.e, to root out Christianity. N.T. Wright said, "...Some Jews had come back from Babylon, while others were scattered all over the known world. But the cry went up from generation to generation, between the time of the Babylonians and the time, four centuries later, when Roman soldiers marched through the sacred land: We are still in exile. 'Exile' wasn't just geographical. It was a state of mind and heart, of politics and practicalities, of spirit and flesh. As long as pagans were ruling the Jews, they were again in exile. As long as Roman soldiers could make obscene gestures at them while they were saying their prayers in the Holy Place, they were still in exile. And, since the exile was the result of Israel's idolatry (no devout Jew would have contested the point, since the great prophets had made it so clear), what they needed was not just a new Passover, a new rescue from slavery to pagan tyrants. They needed

forgiveness.” Another time, Wright referred to Saul of Tarsus as “head full of Scripture, heart full of zeal”. He was not satisfied with ridding Jerusalem of the Christians; with missionary fervor, he gets the permission and blessing from the high priest to carry his mission to Damascus (Acts 26:2-5, Acts 23:6). It appears that Saul interprets the rise of Christianity to be one of reasons Israel remained in exile.

At this time the followers of Jesus were known to be the people of “The Way.” Although Saul was attempting to go out of his way to stop The Way, he was soon to discover that he was in the way and in a short period of time, he will become the greatest proponent of “The Way” (John 14:6).

2. GOD CAPTURES SAUL’S ATTENTION

Acts 9:3-5a; Acts 22:6-8a; Acts 26:13-15a

The sun at noon in the mid-east is so strong that even to this day, if one is traveling out of doors, he or she seeks shelter. But even in the brightness of this high noon sunshine, he was overwhelmed with the light of He who is the Light of the world! At this time, our Lord has not yet identified Himself by name, but Paul quickly addresses Him as “Lord.” We see also that our Lord is uniquely identifying Himself with those whom Saul is persecuting. This is confirmed in Matthew 25:40, when Jesus says, “And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto Me.”

Sometimes in life God proverbially places us on our backs. It is imperative that we give Him our undivided attention, to find out what He is saying to us.

3. CHRIST IDENTIFIES HIMSELF TO SAUL

Acts 9:5; Acts 26:14; Acts 22:6, 7

It was important that Paul knew exactly with whom he was speaking. The Lord Jesus pinpoints Saul’s problem when He says in Acts 22:8: “...I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom thou persecutest.” There were others using the name “Jesus” at this time, so our Lord gets very specific, it is Jesus of Nazareth. It is always important that we understand in Christianity that our Lord is entitled to and requires total exclusivity. Acts 4:12: “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved. “

In the three places we observe Paul’s road to Damascus experience, we see that the Lord tells him before and after full disclosure, “...it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks” (Acts 26:14; Acts 9:5). This is most revealing explanation of Holy Spirit conviction. When our Lord makes reference to the pricking, He meant the uncomfortable pain that comes to the tough hide of the ox when penetrated ever so slightly by the piecing and goading of the ox goad. This is not a gentle tool; Shamgar from of the book of Judges used it as a weapon in battle: “And after him was Shamgar the son of Anath, which slew of the Philistines six hundred men with an ox goad: and he also delivered Israel (Judges 3:31).

I believe Paul often relived that moment, such as when he wrote in II Corinthians 4:6, “For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness,

hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

4. SAUL BECOMES PAUL

Acts 9:6-16; Acts 22:9-16; Acts 26:15-18

The first time Saul is mentioned as Paul is found in Acts 13:9a: “Then Saul, (who also is called Paul,)....” From this point onward we see that this is how the great apostle was mentioned. The name of the first King of Israel is “Saul,” from where no doubt Paul’s name came from, especially since Paul was of the tribe of Benjamin (Romans 11:1). Saul means “desired,” or “asked for.” This reminds us that Saul was the king Israel had requested. It was told King Saul in 1 Samuel 15:17, “And Samuel said, When thou wast little in thine own sight, wast thou not made the head of the tribes of Israel, and the Lord anointed thee king over Israel?” The name Paul means “little.” In essence, God was admonishing his apostle to stay humble before me. James 4:6: “But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble.” Luke 14:11: “For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.” Saul was Paul’s Hebrew name, whereas, Paul was his Roman or Gentile name, which reflects God’s specific commission to Paul. Acts 9:15, 16; Acts 22:21; Acts 26:16-18; Romans 11:13b: “...inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify mine office.”

CONCLUSION:

II Corinthians 3:18: “But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.” Thankfully, Paul never got over his Damascus Road experience. When Paul wrote of “beholding as in a glass,” he is referring to the Scriptures. He never forgot his personal transfiguration moment; he kept seeing the loving face of Jesus when he opened the Torah and Prophets. And that vision he longed to share with the world. Acts 9:8: “And Saul arose from the earth; and when his eyes were opened, he saw no man: but they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus.” For three days, all he saw was the face of Jesus. Matthew 17:8 says about the Mount of Transfiguration moment: “And when they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no man, save Jesus only.” After Paul’s sight was restored, he never forgot who He saw on that road to Damascus. This became the message of Paul: “And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (I Corinthians 2:1, 2).

-Pastor Pope-