

went to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests, at midday, I king, I saw in the way a light from heaven, above the brightness of the sun, shining round about me and them which journeyed with me. And when we were all fallen to the earth, I heard a voice speaking unto me, and saying in the Hebrew tongue, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? [it is] hard for thee to kick against the pricks. And I said, Who art thou, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest. But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee; Delivering thee from the people, and [from] the Gentiles, unto whom I send thee, to open their eyes, [and] to turn [them] from darkness to light, and [from] the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me.” (Acts 26:9-18).

The conversion of Saul of Tarsus was nothing short of a miracle of God’s redeeming grace. Its *unexpected nature*, so contrary to all human probabilities and possibilities and to Saul’s determined course of action; its *suddenness*, as he was apprehended by Christ while yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord (Acts 9:1); and the *radical reversal* it effected in the life of Christianity’s chief opponent, are wholly inexplicable apart from the supernatural intervention of the almighty, resurrected Christ. Paul would later describe the supernatural nature of his conversion in the terms of God’s creative command: “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” (II Cor. 4:6), thus underscoring the omnipotent and gracious character of the Divine act that made him a “new creation in Christ Jesus” (II Cor. 5:17).

But conversion, for such a one as Paul, was not an experience to be concealed within the privacy of inward religious reflections. He had to tell the world, and the first-love fervor of his encounter with Christ constrained him to do so. We read of the after-effect of his mighty transformation in Acts 9:20: “And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God,” as well as in his life-summary in Gal. 1:22-24: “And was unknown by face unto the churches of Judaea which were in Christ: But they had heard only, That he which persecuted us in times past now preacheth the faith which once he destroyed. And they glorified God in me.”

A Pattern for All Time

The Apostle Paul viewed his conversion immensely more than a personal miracle. In his sincere estimation, the hard path of prick-kicking; sudden flash of light from heaven; the prostration in the Divine presence; the Divine apprehension and communication of God’s will—in a word, the radical reversal wrought in his life by Christ, were but a pattern for all time and prototypical of the divine longsuffering exercised in the conversion of every believer after him. He writes of this conviction in I Tim. 1:15,16: “This [is] a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief. Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all longsuffering, for a pattern [ὑποτύπωσις—‘outline, sketch,

model, example’] to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting.” Because Christ Jesus had exhibited such superabundant grace, mercy, and longsuffering in the life of this chief of sinners, his conversion would become a model from which the weak and heavy-laden might draw courage and find confidence for like-acceptance with God. A look at the particulars pointed out in his conversion sketches recorded in the book of Acts will help us as we seek to comprehend the essential meaning of Christian conversion.

Prick-Kicking and Contrary

“I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Which thing I also did in Jerusalem: and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against [them]. And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled [them] to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted [them] even unto strange cities” (Acts 26:9-11).

Thus Paul describes his life-course as an enemy in his mind by wicked works (Col. 1:21). Piecing together autobiographical fragments from other places in Scripture, we come away with a clear picture of Paul’s pre-conversion antipathy toward Christianity. Blinded by religious prejudice and spurred by fanatical zeal, he considered all Christians apostates from pure religion, and it his bounden duty to exterminate the pernicious sect from the face of the earth. And this he proceeded to systematically do with uncommon zeal and brutality. Here we have no case of passive indifference to Christ, but rather of active opposition willing to resort

to the most radical measures, as Paul himself confessed, “And I persecuted this way unto the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women,” (Acts 22:4), and as the Lord Jesus later asserted in His heart-rending question, “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? [it is] hard for thee to kick against the pricks” (Acts 26:14).

The latter sentence of the above quoted verse raises an interesting thought. Throughout Paul’s frantic career as a persecutor, the resurrected Jesus of Nazareth had ever and anon sought entrance into his life by making His will known through a series of inducements here styled “pricks” (κέντρον—oxgoads, iron punching bars designed to urge oxen in the right direction, cf. the contemporary cattle-prod). God had been provoking Paul to reconsider his contrary ways. There was perhaps the memory of the martyr Stephen’s cherubic countenance (Acts 6:15) and his selfless, nonresistant prayer, “Lord, lay not this sin to their charge” (Acts 7:60). The Spirit of God Who was sent at Pentecost to “reprove the world of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment” (Jn. 16:8) had been pricking Paul’s religious prejudice and seeking to convince him of the madness of his present course. And is it not the same with us today? Does not the same Savior, in a gracious exhibition of *all* longsuffering (I Tim. 1:16) seek to redeem us from the vain manner of life received by tradition from our fathers (I Pet. 1:18) and from the sinful and senseless course of this present evil world (Eph. 2:2)? Who is so hardened as to not sense His Spirit daily striving against every wayward impulse (Gen. 6:3) and His longsuffering love daily knocking at the door of our heart (Rev. 3:20)? Surely, as Christ intimated to Paul on

the Damascus road, it is “hard” (futile and dangerous) to resist the rule of Christ over our lives (Luke 19:14).

Apprehended by the Light

“And it came to pass, that, as I made my journey, and was come nigh unto Damascus about noon, suddenly there shone from heaven a great light round about me. And I fell unto the ground” (Acts 22:6,7a).

The divine encounter that changed Paul’s life forever took place as he neared his Damascus destination. Though preceded by urgent pricks, his turning point came suddenly. As by a heavenly blitz, in a moment of time that breathed eternity, this persecution-bent rabbi was subdued, submitting his will to the all-conquering Christ. The “Light of the World” (Jn. 8:12) now flashed about him and enveloped him, bringing an inward comprehension that lifted the veil of spiritual ignorance from the eyes of his understanding. Paul later referred to his conversion as both an apprehension and an inward illumination (Phil. 3:12 with II Cor. 4:6). It was the divinely initiated apprehension by Christ that revealed God’s Son in him and gave him the needed insight to behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (Gal. 1:16). Oh! To be laid hold of by this selfsame Jesus! What a difference the effulgence of His glory makes in the dense, sin-darkened mind of mortal man. Every true conversion fits the pattern of Paul’s at this crucial point. There is an unmerited laying hold of the sinner by Christ, arresting his contrary course, and the inward shedding abroad of spiritual understanding that enables us to comprehend Who Christ is. To every sincere inquiry of “Who art thou

Lord?” there will be the transforming reply “I am Jesus,” in all its saving power (Jn. 17:3; Matt. 16:17; I Jn. 5:20). Such a revelation to the inward eyes of our understanding is essential to true conversion.

The Radical Reversal

“And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God. But all that heard [him] were amazed, and said; Is not this he that destroyed them which called on this name in Jerusalem, and came hither for that intent, that he might bring them bound unto the chief priests? But Saul increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ” (Acts 9:20-22).

Paul’s conversion encounter with the resurrected Christ resulted in an abrupt change in life course. Immediately he began to preach the Christ Who had so gloriously dawned upon the horizon of his soul and to uphold the veracity of the faith he once sought so vehemently to destroy (Gal. 1:22-24). The former blasphemer and injurious persecutor (I Tim. 1:13) had now obtained mercy and was entrusted with a commission to preach a gospel with power to turn men from their spiritual ignorance and moral darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God (Acts 26:16-18).

But, lest we forget, the radical transformation so evident in this man’s conversion is but a “pattern” for us (I Tim. 1:16), and unless our lives are radically altered, and a “new creation” in Christ (II Cor. 5:17), we have no right to claim a salvation in common with Paul. For how can we legitimately claim to be converted from a selfish, worldly course,

if our life-style, interests, ambitions, and dress differ little, if any from the unregenerate world about us? If we desire the same amusements, follow the same materialistic philosophy, seek the same status symbols of success, and gyrate to the same rock, rap or razzmatazz, how can we be said to differ from the world at large? No, my neighbor, if we have been soundly converted by the risen Christ, there will be a radical reversal in our life-style and a new inspiration to live on a higher plane. We will seek to live the faith that we once ignored or despised, much as Paul preached the faith that he once destroyed, and herein will lie the proof of our conversion and the fruit of our salvation.

What Must I Do To Be Saved? (Acts 16:31)

Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ (Jn. 3:16; Acts 16:31)

Repent (turn from) your sins (Mk. 1:15; Acts 20:21)

Confess the Lord Jesus with your mouth (Rom. 10:9,10; Matt. 10:32)

Continue in His Word (Jn. 8:31; Acts 2:42)

Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Jesus in day-to-day obedience (Discipleship) (Matt. 16:24; Luke 9:23)

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One Man’s Conversion

The Apprehension and Radical Reversal of Saul of Tarsus

It all began with a 140-mile journey from Jerusalem to Damascus in pursuit of fugitive or native Christians who were either hiding or residing in one of the world’s oldest cities. Saul of Tarsus, a rising rabbi within Judaism and the Sanhedrin’s specially commissioned inquisitor-general, was nearing Damascus under the heat of the midday Syrian sun. This journey, however, was to be like no other journey he had undertaken; for here, in the madness of a course of persecuting zeal, he was to encounter the risen, ascended, and glorified Jesus Christ, Who would melt his Pharisical heart and change his life forever. Imagine his amazement, as he and his traveling companions were prostrated and stupefied by the presence of the very One they despised and vilified as a false prophet and imposter. But let us permit him to tell his own wonderful story, as he recounts the happenings of that eventful day in 36 A.D. *“I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Which thing I also did in Jerusalem: and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against [them]. And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled [them] to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted [them] even unto strange cities. Whereupon as I*