



Saul's Conversion

GEORGE WHITEFIELD (1714-1770)

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Contents

1. Persecution.....	3
2. Saul in Jerusalem.....	4
3. Saul on the Road.....	6
A. Conviction	6
B. Jesus.....	7
4. Saul's Companions.....	8
5. Saul in Damascus	9
A. Humility	9
B. Prayer	10
C. Ananias	10
D. Election	11
E. Endearment	12
F. Enlightenment.....	12
G. Fellowship.....	13
H. Preaching.....	14
I. Response	15
6. Conclusion	16

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SAUL'S CONVERSION

“But Saul increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ.”—Acts 9:22

1. Persecution

It is an undoubted truth, however it may seem a paradox¹ to natural men, that all who “will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution” (2Ti 3:12). Therefore, it is very remarkable that our blessed Lord—in His glorious Sermon on the Mount, after He had been pronouncing those blessed who were poor in spirit, meek, pure in heart, and such like—immediately adds (and spends no less than three verses in this beatitude): “Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake” (Mat 5:10).

No one ever was or ever will be endowed with the aforementioned graces in any degree, but he will be persecuted for it in a measure. There is an irreconcilable enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent (Gen 3:15). And if we are not of the world, but show by our fruits that we are of the number of those whom Jesus Christ has chosen out of the world, for that very reason the world will hate us.

As this is true of every particular Christian, so it is true of every Christian church in general. For some years past, we have heard but little of public persecution. Why? because but little of the power of godliness has prevailed among all denominations. The strong man armed has had full possession of most professors’² hearts (Mat 12:29), and therefore he has let them rest in a false peace (Mat 25). But we may assure ourselves, when Jesus Christ begins to gather in His elect³ in any remarkable manner, and opens an effectual door for preaching the everlasting gospel—persecution will flame out, and Satan and his emissaries will do their utmost (though all in vain) to stop the work of God. Thus it was in the first ages, thus it is in our days, and thus it will be till time shall be no more.

Christians, and Christian churches must then expect enemies. Our chief concern should be to learn how to behave towards them in a Christian manner; for unless we take good heed to ourselves, we shall embitter our spirits and act unbecoming of the followers of that Lord “Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not,” and, “as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth” (1Pe 2:23; Isa 53:7).

¹ **paradox** – statement or proposition seemingly self-contradictory, and yet able to be explained as expressing a truth.

² **false professors** – those who claim to know Jesus Christ, but who do not have new hearts, i.e., have not been “born again” (Joh 3:3).

³ **elect** – those chosen by God for salvation (Rom 8-9; Joh 6:27, 39, 65; Eph 1:4-5, 11).

But what motive shall we make use of to bring ourselves to this blessed lamb-like temper? Next to the immediate⁴ operation of the Holy Spirit upon our hearts, I know of no consideration more conducive to teach us long-suffering towards our most bitter persecutors than this: for all that we know to the contrary, some of those very persons who are now persecuting may be chosen from all eternity by God—and hereafter called in time to edify and build up the church of Christ!

2. Saul in Jerusalem

The persecutor Saul, mentioned in the words of the text—whose conversion, God willing, I propose to treat of in the following discourse—is a noble instance of this kind. I say a “persecutor,” and that a bloody one, for see how he is introduced in the beginning of this 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 this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem (Act 9:1-2).

“And Saul yet breathing out.” This implies that he had been a persecutor before. To prove which, we need only look back to Acts 7:58, where we shall find him so very remarkably active at Stephen’s death that the “witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man’s feet, whose name was Saul.” He seems, though young, to be in some authority. Perhaps for his zeal against the Christians he was preferred in the assembly, and was allowed to sit in the Sanhedrin,⁵ for we are told that “Saul was *consenting* unto his death” (Act 8:1). Again, he is brought in as exceeding all in his opposition, for thus speaks the evangelist, “as for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison” (8:3).

One would have imagined that this should have satisfied, [or] at least abated,⁶ the fury of this young zealot. No; being “exceedingly mad against them,” as he himself informs Agrippa (Act 26:11), and having made havoc of all in Jerusalem, he now is resolved to persecute the disciples of the Lord even to strange cities—and therefore yet “breathing out threatenings.”

“Breathing out.” The words are very emphatic, and expressive of his bitter enmity. It was as natural to him now to threaten the Christians as it was for him to breathe; he could scarcely speak but it was some threatenings against them. Nay, he not only breathed out threatenings against the disciples of the Lord, but also slaughter. Those who threaten would also slaughter if it were in their power.

Insatiable therefore as hell, finding he could not refute or stop the Christians by force of argument, he is resolved to do it by force of arms. He therefore went to the

⁴ **immediate** – direct, without middle agents.

⁵ **Sanhedrin** – Jewish civil council in Jerusalem; highest Jewish authority in Palestine before AD 70.

⁶ **abated** – reduced in intensity.

high priest (for there never was a persecution yet without a “high priest” at the head of it) and desired of him letters, issued out of his spiritual court, to the synagogues or ecclesiastical⁷ courts at Damascus. These would give him authority, “that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem”—I suppose [in order] to be arraigned and condemned in the high priest’s court.

Observe how he speaks to the Christians. Luke, who wrote the Book of Acts, calls them “disciples of the Lord,” and Saul styles them men and women of “this way.” I doubt not but he represented them as a company of upstart enthusiasts

- that had lately gotten into a new method or way of living,
- that would not be content with Temple service;
- but they must be righteous over much,
- and have their private meetings, and break bread, as they called it, from house to house

—to the great disturbance of the established clergy, and to the utter subversion of all order and decency. I do not hear that the high priest makes any objection. No, he was as willing to grant letters as Saul was to ask them. And [he was] wonderfully pleased within himself to find he had such an active zealot to employ against the Christians.

Well then, a judicial process is immediately issued out, with the high priest’s seal affixed to it. And now methinks I see the young persecutor finely equipped, and pleasing himself with thoughts how triumphantly he should ride back with men and women of this way, dragging after him to Jerusalem.

What a condition may we imagine the poor disciples at Damascus were in at this time! No doubt they had heard of Saul’s imprisoning and making havoc of the saints at Jerusalem; and we may well suppose [they] were apprised⁸ of his design against them. I am persuaded this was a growing, because a trying, time with these dear people. O how did they wrestle with God in prayer, beseeching Him either to deliver them from the fury of their persecutors, or give them grace⁹ sufficient to enable them to bear up under it! The high priest and, no doubt, the rest of his reverend brethren, flattered themselves that they should now put an effectual¹⁰ stop to this growing “heresy,” and waited with impatience for Saul’s return.

⁷ **ecclesiastical** – pertaining to the religious system; here, courts for trying offenders against Jewish Law and traditions.

⁸ **apprised** – informed; given notice.

⁹ **grace** – Grace is God’s “undeserved favor bestowed upon those who are positively deserving of the wrath of God. Theologians often speak of grace as the goodness of God dealing with the guilt of the sinner’s condition.”—*Alan Cairns, Dictionary of Theology, published by Ambassador-Emerald International. See God’s Purpose of Grace by Horatius Bonar (1808-1889); available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.*

¹⁰ **effectual** – effective; successful.

3. Saul on the Road

A. Conviction

But “He that sitteth in heaven shall laugh [them to scorn]: the Lord shall have them in derision” (Psa 2:4). And therefore,

As he journeyed, he came near Damascus [perhaps to the very gates, our Lord permitting this to try the faith of His disciples and more conspicuously to baffle the designs of His enemies]: and suddenly [at midday, as he later acquaints Agrippa,] there shined round about him a light from heaven [i.e., a light brighter than the sun]: And he fell to the earth [but why not into hell, except for God’s grace?], and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? (Act 9:3-4).

The word is doubled, “Saul, Saul”; like that of our Lord to Martha, “Martha, Martha”; or the prophet, “O earth, earth, earth” (Luk 10:41; Jer 22:9). Perhaps these words came like thunder to his soul. That they were spoken audibly, we are assured from verse 7: his companions heard the voice.

Our Lord now arrests¹¹ the persecuting zealot, calling him by name—for the Word never does us good till we find it spoken to us in particular. “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?” Put the emphasis upon the word *why* [and you get the meaning:] what evil have I done? Put it upon the word *persecutes*: why do you persecute? I suppose Saul thought he was not persecuting; he was only putting the laws of the ecclesiastical court into execution. But Jesus, Whose eyes are as a flame of fire (Rev 1:14; 2:18; 19:12), saw through the hypocrisy of his heart that, notwithstanding his specious pretenses,¹² all this proceeded from a persecuting spirit and secret enmity against God.

Therefore He says, “Why persecutest thou me?” Put the emphasis upon the word *me*, “Why persecutest thou *me*?” Alas! Saul was not persecuting Christ, was he? He was only taking care to prevent innovations in the church,¹³ and bringing a company of enthusiasts to justice who otherwise would overturn the established constitution. But Jesus says, “Why persecutest thou *me*?” for what is done to Christ’s disciples touches the apple of His eye. And they that persecute the followers of our Lord would persecute our Lord Himself were He again to come and tabernacle¹⁴ among us.

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 (Act 9:5).

I do not find that Saul gives any reason why he did persecute. No, he was struck dumb, as every persecutor will be when Jesus Christ puts the same question to them at

¹¹ **arrests** – stops; gets entire attention of.

¹² **specious** – appearing to be true but actually false;
pretences – pretended reason or excuse

¹³ **church** – here: the religious practice of the Jews at that time.

¹⁴ **tabernacle** – pitch His tent; here: be again incarnated as a man.

the terrible Day of Judgment.¹⁵ But being pricked at the heart, no doubt with a sense not only of this but of all his other offenses against the great God, he said, “Who art thou, Lord?” See how soon God can change the heart and the voice of His most bitter enemies! Not many days ago, Saul was not only blaspheming Christ Himself, but, as much as in him lay, compelling others to blaspheme also.

B. Jesus

But now he who before was [considered as] an impostor, is called “Lord”: “Who art thou, Lord?” This admirably points out the way in which God’s Spirit works upon the heart. He first powerfully convinces of sin and of our damnable state, and then puts us upon inquiring after Jesus Christ. Saul being struck to the ground, or pricked to the heart, cries out after Jesus: “Who art thou Lord?” [This is just] as many of you who so far never were made sensible of your damnable state as to be made feelingly to seek after Jesus Christ. You were never yet truly convicted by, much less converted to, God. May the Lord, Who struck Saul, effectually now strike all my Christ-less hearers and set them upon inquiring after Jesus as their all in all (1Co 15:28)!

Saul said, “Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest.” Never did anyone inquire truly after Jesus Christ but Christ made a saving discovery of Himself to his soul (Mat 11:28-29). It should seem that our Lord appeared to him in person; for Ananias afterward says, “the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest” (Act 9:17); though this may only imply Christ’s meeting him in the way (it is not much matter). It is plain Christ here speaks to him and says, “I am Jesus whom thou persecutest.” It is remarkable how our Lord takes to Himself the name *Jesus*, for it is a name in which He delights. I am Jesus, the Savior of my people¹⁶ from both the guilt and the power of their sins; “Jesus whom thou persecutest.”

This seems to be spoken to convince Saul more and more of his sin, and I doubt not but every word was sharper than a two-edged sword, and came like so many daggers to his heart (Heb 4:12). O how did these words affect him! A Jesus, a Savior, and yet I am persecuting Him! This strikes him with horror; but then the word *Jesus*, [even] though he was a persecutor, might give him some hope.

However, our dear Lord, to convince Saul that he was to be saved by grace, and that He was not afraid of his power and enmity, tells him, “It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.” As much as to say, though he was persecuting, yet he could not overthrow the Church of Christ,¹⁷ for He would sit as King upon His “holy hill of Zion” (Psa 2:6). The malice of men or devils should never be able to prevail against Him.

¹⁵ **Day of Judgment** – day when the works of men will be judged by Christ at the end of time (Mat 25:32-46).

¹⁶ The name *Jesus* means “Savior” (Mat 1:21).

¹⁷ **Church of Christ** – universal church of all true believers throughout all of time and from all countries.

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 (Act 9:6).

“And he, trembling and astonished, said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?” Those, who think Saul had a discovery of Jesus made to his heart before, think that this question is the result of his faith, and that he now desires to know what he shall do out of gratitude for what the Lord had done for his soul. In this sense it *may* be understood, and I have made use of it as an instance to prove that faith will work by love. But perhaps it may be more agreeable to the context if we suppose that Saul had only some distant discovery of Christ made to him, and not a full assurance of faith, for we are told he was “trembling and astonished,” trembling at the thoughts of his persecuting a Jesus [i.e., a Savior]. And astonished at his own vileness and the infinite condescension¹⁸ of this Jesus, Saul cries out, “Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?” Persons under soul-trouble and sore conviction, would be glad to do anything or comply on any terms to get peace with God. “Arise,” says our Lord, “and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou shalt do.”

4. Saul’s Companions

And here we will leave Saul for a while and see what is become of his companions. But what shall we say? God is a sovereign agent; His sacred Spirit blows when and “where it listeth”¹⁹ (Joh 3:8); and He will have mercy on whom He “will have mercy” (Rom 9:15). Saul is taken but, as far as we know to the contrary, his fellow travelers are left to perish in their sins; for we are told that “the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a [confused] voice but seeing no man” (9:7).

I say a confused voice, for so the word signifies, and must be so interpreted, in order to reconcile it with Acts 22:9, where Saul, in giving an account of these men, tells Agrippa, “They heard not the voice of him that spake to me.” They heard a voice, a confused noise, but not the articulate voice of Him that spoke to Saul; and therefore [they] remained unconverted. For what are all ordinances—all, even the most extraordinary dispensations²⁰ of providence²¹—without Christ speaking to the soul in them?

Thus it is now under the Word preached: many, like Saul’s companions, are sometimes so struck with the out-goings of God appearing in the sanctuary, that they even stand speechless. They hear the preacher’s voice, but not the voice of the Son of God, Who, perhaps at the same time, is speaking effectually to many other hearts. This I have known often. And what shall we say to these things? O the depth of the sovereign-

¹⁸ **condescension** – coming down or stooping to things unworthy.

¹⁹ **listeth** – wills.

²⁰ **dispensations** – arrangement of events by divine government and care.

²¹ **providence** – God’s...most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all His creatures and all their actions. (*Spurgeon’s Catechism*, Q. 11; see *God’s Providence* by Charles Spurgeon; both available from CHAPEL LIBRARY)

ty of God! It is past finding out (Rom 11:33). Lord, I desire to adore what I cannot comprehend; “Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight” (Mat 11:26)!

5. Saul in Damascus

A. Humility

But to return to Saul. The Lord bids him arise and go into the city; and we are told, Saul arose from the earth; and when his eyes were opened [for he was so overpowered with the greatness of the light that shone upon them that] he saw no man: but they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink (9:8-9).

Damascus was that very city which was to be the place of his executing or imprisoning the disciples of the Lord. But who can tell what horrors of conscience, what convulsion of soul, what deep and pungent convictions of sin he underwent during these three long days? It was this that took away his appetite, for who can eat or drink when under a sense of the wrath of God for sin? Being to be greatly employed hereafter, he must be greatly humbled now. Therefore, the Lord leaves him three days groaning under the spirit of bondage. [He was] buffeted, no doubt, with the fiery darts of the devil [so] that, being tempted like unto his brethren, he might be able hereafter to succor those that were tempted (Heb 2:18).

Had Saul applied to any of the blind guides of the Jewish church under these circumstances, they would have said he was mad or going beside himself. [This is just] as many carnal²² teachers and blind Pharisees now deal with, and so [they] more and more distress poor souls laboring under awakening convictions of their damnable state.²³

But God often at our first awakenings visits us with sore trials; especially those who are, like Saul, to shine in the church and to be used as instruments in bringing many sons to glory. Those who are to be highly exalted must first be deeply humbled. This I speak for the comfort of such who may be now groaning under the spirit of bondage and, perhaps like Saul, can neither eat nor drink. For I have generally observed that those who have had the deepest convictions, have afterwards been favored with the most precious communications,²⁴ and enjoyed most of the divine presence in their souls. This was afterwards remarkably exemplified in Saul, who was three days without sight and neither did eat nor drink.

But will the Lord leave his poor servant in this distress? No; though Saul persecuted Him, his Jesus promised and will perform that it should be told him what he must do (9:6).

²² **carnal** – fleshly; worldly; unspiritual; sensual; self-centered.

²³ That is, false teachers turn aside those who may be seeking the Lord, without their ever hearing the true gospel.

²⁴ **communications** – communion; sharing of joy and fellowship with the living God. See Free Grace Broadcaster 248, *Communion with God*; available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

And there was a certain disciple at Damascus, named Ananias, and unto him, said the Lord in a vision, Ananias; and he said, Behold, I am here, Lord (9:10).

What a holy familiarity is there between Jesus Christ and regenerate souls! Ananias had been used to such love visits, and therefore knew the voice of his beloved. The Lord says, “Ananias”; and Ananias says, “Behold, I am here, Lord.” Thus it is that Christ now, as well as formerly, often talks with His children “at sundry times and in divers manners,” as a man talks with his friend (Heb 1:1; Exo 33:11).

B. Prayer

But what has the Lord to say to Ananias?

And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight, and enquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus: for, behold, he prayeth (9:11).

See here for your comfort, O children of the most high God, what notice Jesus Christ takes of the street and the house where his own dear servants lodge.

“For, behold, he prayeth”—why is this ushered in with the word *behold*? What! was it such a wonder to hear that Saul was praying? Why, Saul was a Pharisee, and therefore no doubt fasted and made long prayers. And since we are told that he profited above many of his equals, I doubt not but he was taken notice of for his gift in prayer. And yet it seems that, before these three days, Saul never prayed in his life! And why? because, before these three days, he never felt himself a condemned creature. He was alive in his own opinion because, without a knowledge of the spiritual meaning of the Law, he felt not a want²⁵ of—and therefore, before now, cried not after—Jesus. And consequently, though he might have said or made a prayer, as many “Pharisees” do in these days, he never uttered a [real] prayer. But now, behold! he prayed indeed; and this was urged as one reason why²⁶ he was converted.

None of God’s children, as one observes, come into the world still born; prayer is the very breath of the new creature. And therefore, if we are prayerless, we are Christless. If we never had the spirit of supplication, it is a sad sign that we never had the spirit of grace in our souls. And you may be assured you never did pray, unless you have felt yourselves sinners, and seen the want of Jesus to be your Savior. May the Lord, Whom I serve in the gospel of His dear Son, prick you all to the heart, and may it be said of you as it was of Saul: Behold, they pray!

C. Ananias

The Lord goes on to encourage Ananias to go to Saul. Says He,

And hath seen in a vision a man named Ananias coming in, and putting his hand on him, that he might receive his sight (9:12).

Though Christ converted Saul immediately by Himself, yet He will carry on the work thus begun by a minister. Happy are they who under soul troubles have such experi-

²⁵ **want** – lack; need.

²⁶ **reason why** – evidence that he had been converted.

enced guides, and as well acquainted with Jesus Christ as Ananias was. You that have such, make much of and be thankful for them; and you who have them not, trust in God—He will carry on His own work without them.

Doubtless, Ananias was a good man; but shall I commend him for his answer to our Lord? I commend him not; for says he,

Lord, I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he hath done to thy saints at Jerusalem (9:13).

I fear this answer proceeded from some relics of self-righteousness, as well as infidelity, that lay undiscovered in the heart of Ananias. One would think this would have been sufficient to satisfy him:

And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight, and enquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul, of Tarsus: for, behold, he prayeth (9:11).

But says Ananias, “Lord, I have heard by many of this man.” He seems to speak of him with much contempt, for even good men are apt to think too contemptuously of those who are yet in their sins.

How much evil he hath done to thy saints in Jerusalem: and here he hath authority from the chief priests to bind all that call upon thy name (9:13-14).

And what then, Ananias? Is anything too hard for the Lord? Who made thee to differ (1Co 4:7)? Could not He Who converted thee, convert him also? Surely Ananias here forgets himself, or perhaps fears lest this man, who had authority from the chief priests to bind all that call upon Christ’s name, should bind him also if he went unto him.

D. Election

But the Lord silences all objections with a “Go thy way: for he is a *chosen* vessel unto me” (9:15). Here God stops the mouth immediately by asserting His sovereignty and preaching to him the doctrine of election. The frequent conversion of notorious sinners to God, to me is one of great proof, amongst a thousand others, of that precious—but too much exploded and sadly misrepresented—doctrine of God’s electing love. For why is it that such are taken, while thousands not near so vile die senseless and stupid?

All the answer that can be given, is that they are chosen vessels. God says,

Go thy way: for he is a *chosen* vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel: For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name’s sake (9:15-16).

Observe what a close connection there is between *doing* and *suffering* for Christ. If any of my brethren in the ministry are present, let them hear what preferment²⁷ we must expect if we are called out to work remarkably for God. Not great prebendaries²⁸ or

²⁷ **preferment** – advancement or promotion to a better position.

²⁸ **prebendaries** – clergymen who receive a salary based on a designated part of the revenues of the church.

bishoprics,²⁹ but great sufferings for our Lord's name's sake—these are the fruits of our labor. He that will not contentedly suffer great things for preaching Christ, is not worthy of Him. Suffering will be found to be the best preferment when we are called to give an account of our ministry at the great day.

I do not hear that Ananias quarreled with God concerning the doctrine of election. O that all good men would, in this, learn of Him!

E. Endearment

And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul (9:17).

Just before it was “this man”; now it is “Brother Saul.” It is no matter what a man has been, if he be now a Christian, the same should be our brother, our sister, our mother (Mat 12:49-50). God blots out every convert's transgressions as with a thick cloud, and so should we (Isa 44:22). The more vile a man has been, the more should we love him when believing in Christ, because Christ will be more glorified on his behalf.

I doubt not but Ananias was wonderfully delighted to hear that so remarkable a persecutor was brought home to God! I am persuaded he felt his soul immediately united to him by love, and therefore addresses him not with “Thou persecutor! Thou murderer!” who comes to butcher me and my friends; but “Brother Saul.” It is remarkable that the primitive Christians much used the word *brother* and *brethren*. I know it is a term now much in reproach; but those who despise it, I believe, would be glad to be of our brotherhood when they see us sitting at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

F. Enlightenment

Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost (9:17).

At this time, we may suppose, he laid his hands upon him. See the consequences:

Immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales, and he received sight forthwith (9:18)

—not only bodily sight, but spiritual sight. He emerged as it were into a new world. He saw, and felt too, things unutterable:

- he felt a union of soul with God;
- he received the spirit of adoption;
- he could now, with a full assurance of faith, cry, “Abba, Father” (Gal 4:6);
- now was he filled with the Holy Ghost (Eph 5:18);
- now had he the love of God shed abroad in his heart (Rom 5:5);
- now were the days of his mourning ended;
- now was Christ formed in his soul;

²⁹ **bishoprics** – in the Church of England, the church district controlled by a bishop within the church hierarchy.

- now he could give men and devils the challenge, knowing that Christ had justified him;
- now he saw the excellence of Christ, and esteemed Him the fairest among ten thousand (Song 5:10).

You only know how to sympathize with the apostle in his joy—you who, after a long night of bondage, have been set free by the Spirit and have received joy in the Holy Ghost. May all that are now mourning, as Saul was, be comforted in like manner!

The scales then are now removed from the eyes of Saul’s mind; Ananias has done that for him under God. He must now do another office: baptize him and so receive him into the visible church³⁰ of Christ. To me [this is] a good proof of the necessity of baptism where it may be had; for I find here, as well as elsewhere, that baptism is administered even to those who had received the Holy Ghost.

Saul was convinced of this, and therefore arose and was baptized. And now it is time for him to recruit the outward man, which, by three days abstinence and spiritual conflicts, had been much impaired. We are therefore told, “when he had received meat, he was strengthened” (9:19). But oh, with what comfort did the apostle now eat his food! I am sure it was with singleness, I am persuaded also with gladness, of heart. And why?—he knew that he was reconciled to God!

For my own part, did I not know how blind and flinty³¹ our hearts are by nature, I should wonder how anyone could eat even his common food with any satisfaction, who has not some well-grounded hope of his being reconciled to God. Our Lord intimates this much to us, for in His glorious prayer, after He has taught us to pray for our daily bread, He immediately adds that petition, “forgive us our debts³²” (Mat 6:12)—as though our daily bread would do us no service unless we were sensible of having the forgiveness of our sins.

G. Fellowship

To proceed, Saul has received meat and is strengthened; and whither will he go now? To see the brethren: “then was Saul certain days with the disciples which were at Damascus” (9:18). If we know and love Christ, we shall also love and desire to be acquainted with the brethren of Christ. We may generally know a man by his company. And though all are not saints that associate with saints (for tares will be always springing up among the wheat till the time of harvest, Mat 13:24-30), yet if we never keep company, but are shy and ashamed of the despised children of God, it is certain sign we have not yet experimentally³³ learned Jesus or received Him into our hearts. My dear friends, be not deceived: if we are friends to the Bridegroom, we shall be friends to the children of the Bridegroom.

³⁰ **visible church** – all who profess Christ organized into local assemblies.

³¹ **flinty** – hard.

³² **debts** – trespasses; sins.

³³ **experimentally** – through personal spiritual experience.

Saul, as soon as he was filled with the Holy Ghost, was “certain days with the disciples which were at Damascus.” Who can tell what joy these disciples felt when Saul came among them! I suppose holy Ananias introduced him. Methinks I see the once persecuting zealot, when they came to salute him with a holy kiss, throwing himself upon each of their necks, weeping over them with floods of tears and saying, “O my brother, O my sister, Can you forgive me? Can you give such a wretch as I the right hand of fellowship, who intended to drag you behind me bound unto Jerusalem!”

Thus, I say, we may suppose Saul addressed himself to his fellow disciples. I doubt not but they were as ready to forgive and forget as Ananias was, and saluted him with the endearing title of Brother Saul. Lovely was this meeting; so lovely that it seemed Saul continued certain days with them:

- to communicate experiences,
- to learn the way of God more perfectly,
- to pray for a blessing on his future ministry, and
- to praise Christ Jesus for what He had done for their souls.

Saul, perhaps, had sat certain years at the feet of Gamaliel, but undoubtedly learned more these certain days than he had learned before in all his life.

It pleases me to think how this great scholar is transformed by the renewing of his mind: what a mighty change was here! Saul was so great a man, both as to his station in life and internal qualifications. As such a bitter enemy to the Christians, he went and was certain days with the people of this mad way. He sat quietly and was taught of illiterate men, as many of these disciples we may be sure were—what a substantial proof was this of the reality of his conversion!

H. Preaching

What a hurry and confusion may we suppose the chief priests now were in! I warrant they were ready to cry out,

What! Is he also deceived? As for the common people, who know not the Law and are accursed, for them to be carried away is no such wonder. But for a man bred up at the feet of Gamaliel; for such a scholar, such an enemy to the cause as Saul; for him to be led away with a company of silly, deceived men and women, surely it is impossible. We cannot believe it.

But Saul soon convinces them of the reality of his becoming a fool for Christ’s sake (1Co 4:10). For straightway, instead of going to deliver the letters from the high priests as they expected, in order to bring the disciples that were at Damascus bound to Jerusalem, “he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God” (Act 9:20). This was another proof of his being converted. He not only conversed with Christians in private, but he preached Christ publicly in the synagogues. Especially he insisted on

the divinity of our Lord; proving, notwithstanding His state of humiliation (Phi 2:6-8),³⁴ that He was really the Son of God.

But why did Saul preach Christ thus? Because he had felt the power of Christ upon his own soul. And here is the reason why Christ is so seldom preached, and His divinity so slightly insisted on in the synagogues:³⁵ because the generality of those that pretend to preach Him never felt a saving work of conversion upon their own souls. How can they preach unless they are first taught of and then sent by God? Saul did not preach Christ before he knew Him; no more should anyone else. An unconverted minister, though he can speak with the tongues of men and angels, will be but as a sounding brass and tinkling cymbal to those whose senses are exercised to discern spiritual things. Ministers that are unconverted may talk and declaim³⁶ of Christ, and prove from books that He is the Son of God. But they cannot preach with the demonstration of the Spirit and with power unless they preach from experience, and have had a proof of His divinity by a work of grace wrought upon their own souls. God forgive those who lay hands³⁷ on an unconverted man, knowing that he is such: I would not do it for a thousand worlds. Lord Jesus, keep Thy own faithful servants pure, and let them not be then partakers of other men's sins!

I. Response

Such an instance as was Saul's conversion, we may be assured, must make a great deal of noise; and therefore no wonder we are told,

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? (9:21).

Thus it will be with all that appear publicly for Jesus Christ. It is as impossible for a true Christian to be hid as a city built upon a hill (Mat 5:14).

Brethren, if you are faithful too, you must be reproached and have remarks made on you for Christ; especially if you have been remarkably wicked before your conversion. Your friends say,

Is not this he, or she, who a little while ago would run to as great excess of riot and vanity as the worst of us all? What has turned your brain?

Or if you have been close, false, formal hypocrites as Saul was, they will wonder that you should be so deceived as to think you were not in a safe state before. No doubt, numbers were surprised to hear Saul—who was touching the Law blameless (Phi 3:6)—affirm that he was in a damnable condition a few days before, as in all probability he did.

³⁴ **state of humiliation** – Jesus Christ's humanity, a low estate in comparison to His divine glory.

See Free Grace Broadcaster 219, *The Person of Christ*; available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

³⁵ **synagogues** – here: places where God's people gather; churches.

³⁶ **declaim** – deliver a formal recitation as an exercise in rhetoric.

³⁷ **lay hands** – putting hands on someone to accept them into the church fellowship.

Brethren, you must expect to meet with many such difficulties as these. The scourge of the tongue is generally the first cross we are called to bear for the sake of Christ (Luk 14:27). Let not, therefore, this move you; it did not intimidate, no, it rather encouraged Saul.

Says the text,

But Saul increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ (9:22).

Opposition never yet, nor ever will, hurt a sincere convert. [There is] nothing like opposition to make a man of God perfect.³⁸ None but a hireling, who cares not for the sheep, will be affrighted at the approach or barking of wolves (Joh 10:12-13). Christ's ministers are as bold as lions: it is not for such men as they to flee.

And therefore, that I may draw towards a conclusion, let the ministers and disciples of Christ learn from Saul not to fear men or their revilings; but, like him, increase in strength the more wicked men endeavor to weaken their hands. We cannot be Christians without being opposed. No; disciples in general must suffer; ministers in particular must suffer great things.

But let not this move any of us from our steadfastness in the gospel. He that stood by and strengthened Saul will also stand by and strengthen us. He is a God mighty to save all that put their trust in Him. If we look up with an eye of faith, we, as well as the first martyr Stephen (Act 7:56), may see Jesus standing at the right hand of God, ready to assist and protect us. Though the Lord's seat is in heaven, yet He has respect to His saints in an especial manner when suffering here on earth: then the Spirit of Christ and of glory rests upon their souls. And, if I may speak my own experience, I never enjoy more rich communications from God than when "despised and rejected of men" for the sake of Jesus Christ (Isa 53:3). However little they may design it, my enemies are my greatest friends.

What I most fear is a calm. But the enmity that is in the hearts of natural men against Christ, will not suffer them to be quiet long. No; as I hope the work of God will increase, so the rage of men and devils will increase also. Let us put on, therefore, the "whole armor of God" (Eph 6:11). Let us not fear the face of men; let us fear Him only Who can "destroy both body and soul in hell" (Mat 10:28). I say unto you, let us fear Him alone! You see how soon God can stop the fury of His enemies.

6. Conclusion

You have just now heard of a proud, powerful zealot stopped in his full career, struck down to the earth with a light from heaven, converted by the almighty power of efficacious³⁹ grace. And thereupon [he was] zealously promoting, nay, resolutely suffering for the faith that once—with threatenings and slaughters—he endeavored to de-

³⁸ **perfect** – spiritually mature.

³⁹ **efficacious** – producing the intended or desired effect; effective.

stroy. Let this teach us to pity and pray for our Lord's most inveterate⁴⁰ enemies. Who knows but, in answer hereunto, our Lord may give them repentance unto life? Most think that Christ had respect unto⁴¹ Stephen's prayer when He converted Saul. Perhaps for this reason God suffers His adversaries to go on, so that His goodness and power may shine more brightly in their conversion.

But let not the persecutors of Christ take encouragement from this to continue in their opposition. Remember, though Saul was converted, yet the high priest and Saul's companions were left dead in trespasses and sins. And if this should be your case, you will of all men be most miserable, for persecutors have the lowest place in hell. And if Saul was struck to the earth by a light from heaven, how will you be able to stand before Jesus Christ when He comes in terrible majesty to take vengeance on all those who have persecuted His gospel? Then the question, "Why persecutest thou me?" will cut you through and through. The secret enmity of your hearts shall be then detected before men and angels, and you shall be doomed to dwell in the blackness of darkness for evermore.

Kiss the Son therefore, lest He be angry (Psa 2:12), for even you may yet find mercy if you believe on the Son of God. Though you persecute Him, yet He will be your Jesus. I cannot despair of any of you when I find a Saul among the disciples at Damascus. Though your sins are as scarlet, the blood of Christ shall wash them as white as snow (Isa 1:18). Having much to be forgiven, despair not—only believe. And like Saul, of whom I have now been speaking, love much. He counted himself the chiefest sinner of all, and therefore labored more abundantly than all (1Ti 1:15; 1Co 15:10).

Who is there among you fearing the Lord? Whose hearts has the Lord now opened to hearken to the voice of his poor unworthy servant! Surely the Lord will not let me preach in vain. Who is the happy soul that is this day to be washed in the blood of the Lamb? Will no poor sinner take encouragement from Saul to come to Jesus Christ? You are all thronging round, but which of you will touch the Lord Jesus? What a comfort will it be to Saul and to your own souls, when you meet him in heaven, to tell him that hearing of him was a means under God of your conversion!

Doubtless it was written for the encouragement of all poor returning sinners; he himself tells us so: for "in me first Jesus Christ shew forth all longsuffering, for a pattern [i.e., an example] to them which should hereafter believe" (1Ti 1:16). Were Saul here himself, he would tell you so, indeed he would; but being dead, by this account of his conversion he yet speaks. O that God may speak by it to your hearts! O that the arrows of God might this day stick fast in your souls, and you be made to cry out, "Who art thou Lord?" Are there any such amongst you? Methinks I feel something of what this Saul felt when he said, "I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you" (Gal 4:19). O come, come away to Jesus, on Whom Saul believed—and then I care not if the

⁴⁰ **inveterate** – settled in a prejudice; habitual.

⁴¹ **had respect unto** – gave heed to; answered.

high priests issue out ever so many writs⁴² or injuriously drag me to a prison. The thoughts of being instrumental in saving you will make me sing praises even at midnight (Act 16:25). And I know you will be my joy and crown of rejoicing, when I am delivered from this earthly prison and meet you in the kingdom of God hereafter (1Th 2:19).



⁴² **writ** – written order issued by a court, commanding the addressed party to perform or cease performing a specified act.