

Grace and Paul's Conversion, No. 1

During my formative years and earlier years of preaching, my people in the Church of Christ were much more aggressive in evangelism. This zeal was fired more fervently by our conviction that we had restored the true route to salvation which others had abandoned.

Many of our lessons were based on the accounts of conversion recorded in *Acts of the Apostles* which we sometimes described as the *book of conversions*. In strengthening our case, we analyzed each account, pointed to their parallel messages, and charted them all for comparison to show that the same thing was required of each convert.

While it is very questionable that Luke's record in Acts was purposely to show the route to God's forgiveness for us to use in evangelistic sermons, it remains that what he recorded was true. Though he was not teaching us lessons on how to find salvation, he told Theophilus in his historical narratives how different persons obtained that forgiveness. His details are in harmony with the Great Commission in which Jesus offered the benefit of his atonement to every creature (Matt. 28:19-20; Mark 16:15-16; compare Luke 24:44-49).

Many times I used the exciting story of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus as illustrative of how a sinner receives salvation. The points gained from such a study are still valid. What greater authenticity could we look for? Here we see a direct intervention by Jesus, the giving of the Holy Spirit, the divine direction of Ananias, and the witness of the inspired apostle himself narrated toward the close of his ministry about a quarter of a century later. So please look again with me at this part of God's revelation.

Please bear in mind that Paul's "conversion experience" is in harmony with what he much later wrote to the Romans about **the principle of justification by faith** and to the Ephesians about **the principle of being saved by grace through faith**. What is exemplified in his conversion can be a sort of commentary on **the principle or basis of our forgiveness**, that is, unless he later renounced his actions as being misguided. There are unsettling points for our confused religious community along with confirming assurances to be gained.

Some of this treatise will be negative in an effort to clear away much rank growth of theological interpretations which tend to hide the colorful, fragrant flower of truth.

Various details of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus related in Acts 9:1-19; 22:1-21; 26:1-23 are reviewed briefly here. Saul, like a mythical, fire-breathing monster, was "*still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.*" He was on his way to Damascus to arrest disciples and to bring them back to Jerusalem bound. As he approached Damascus, there came a blinding light exceeding the brightness of the noonday sun. He fell to the ground and heard an arresting call, "Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me. You are like kicking against an ox goad hurting yourself." "Who are you, Lord? What will you have me do?" The answer must have been an emotional thunderbolt! "I am Jesus!! Go into the city and it will be told you what to do," the Voice replied.

This blinded, devastated conqueror was led by hand into Damascus where he prayed in deep contrition for three days without eating or drinking. The Lord then sent Ananias, a disciple living in Damascus, to Saul. Fearful of this notorious persecutor, Ananias was reluctant, but the Lord assured him that Saul had been chosen to carry his name before the Gentiles and kings and Israel. Then going to Saul and laying his hands on him, Ananias explained, “*Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you came, has sent me that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.*” After regaining his sight, Saul was urged, “*And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name.*” “*Then he rose and was baptized, and took food and was strengthened.*”

Your full reading of these references is encouraged as we now make some observations about them and relate them to present-day teachings about receiving the grace of God through Christ by faith.

Ineffective Formulas

Paul, addressing the Jewish council many years later, declared, “*Brethren, I have lived before God in all good conscience up to this day*” (23:1). No person should allow himself or herself to be condemned by violation of conscience, yet living with a clear conscience as Paul had done cannot save, for it would be a merited salvation without a relationship in Christ. A person can be conscientious, God-fearing, and zealous while alienated from God. Looking back later, he would see himself as the chief of sinners at that time.

Those who rely upon a “saving experience” have been known to declare that Saul was saved “before he hit the ground.” We have to look outside the Scriptures, however, to find mention of that popular concept of a saving experience. Emotional reactions are not evidences of forgiveness. Forgiveness is in the mind of God and is not felt in the mind of one forgiven. For example, while you read this you might forgive me of some offense but I would not feel it.

Then when Ananias, who received his instructions directly, came to Saul, he did not say, “Good brother, Jesus has appeared to you, so we can be sure you are saved!” If the appearance of Jesus did not save that sinner, what trust can we have in any sort of mystical experience or feeling today?

Neither did Ananias, after laying hands on him, declare, “Saul, you have received the Holy Spirit and a miraculous restoration of eyesight. You, the former enemy of Jesus and his disciples, no longer are burdened by those sins. You are forgiven!” This point is just as true as if the whole world believed it: There is no record of the Spirit saving anyone by a direct operation on the person; there is no record of the Spirit ever even telling anyone directly what to do to be saved. Jesus announced in the Great Commission and confirmed on Pentecost how a sinner might receive salvation, and there is no indication that he varied from that in specific cases. The Holy Spirit guided us into all truth, but the Holy Spirit is not our savior. The Holy Spirit was given as God’s testimony that Saul was being approved as an apostle especially to the Gentiles.

Ananias did not assure Saul that Jesus had already saved him, stating “*if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be*

saved” (Rom. 10:9). Certainly, Saul had become a believer when Jesus appeared to him on the road, and he had expressed his submissive faith in contrition by asking Jesus what he wanted him to do. But he was not yet free from the guilt of his sins!

When the stricken, undone Saul, called out from the ground, “*Lord, what shall I do?*” Jesus did not soothe him with, “Saul, there is nothing for you to do. I have already done it all for you.” Jesus gave him instructions to follow and said that in the city more instructions would be given, but Jesus did not save him on the road to Damascus, nor does he save anyone in such a direct manner.

Ananias told Saul, “Just believe in Jesus and pray the sinner’s prayer,” didn’t he? Those who give that advice today know that Ananias did not give it to Saul. If he had, Saul might have rightly responded, “What do you think I have been doing the last three days and nights?” But Paul says, right there in Romans 10:13, “*For every one who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.*” So what more could be asked of Saul than three days and nights of calling in prayer? His sins were already remitted. Really? Who says so, modern pulpiteers or the inspired writer?

Just look at the assurances Saul had. He was a conscientious worshipper of God. Jesus appeared to him. In recognition of this, Saul cried out to Jesus, asking what he wanted him to do. His life turned around in a moment in repentance and penitence. He fasted and prayed for three days and nights. He received the Holy Spirit when Ananias laid his hands upon him. What greater assurance could anyone have than all that?

With these various experiences in Saul’s favor in which seekers tend to trust for salvation or as evidence of having been forgiven, he still had not received that assurance. If he was saved instantaneously, he did not realize it for he inquired as to what to do and then followed the instructions given. If he was saved then, Jesus did not know it for he sent Ananias to him to tell him how to be rid of his guilt. If he was saved before he hit the ground, the Spirit was not aware of it for he directed Ananias to inform him. Likewise, Ananias was not informed of it because, after those happenings and his explanation of why they happened, he urged Saul, “*And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name.*” His sins still had not been remitted!

Much more is to follow. If you do not agree with what I have written above, please meditate upon it more and keep it in mind as we continue to show that Paul’s conversion was in harmony with what he taught about the principles upon which salvation is based. []

(Cecil Hook, December 2006)