

## Paul's Conversion—Apprehended of Christ

Jesus.  
—Alex. Whyte, D. D.

The first time we see Saul of Tarsus he is silently consenting to Stephen's death. Why the fierce young Pharisee did not take a far more active part in the martyrdom of Stephen we do not know; we can only guess. That a young zealot of Saul's temperament should be content to sit still that day, and merely keep the clothes of the witnesses who stoned Stephen, makes us wonder what it meant. But, beginning with his silent consent to the death of Stephen, Saul soon went on to plan and to perpetrate the most dreadful deeds on his own account. "As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering into every house, and hailing men and women, committed them to prison. Which thing I also did in Jerusalem; and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, and punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme. Beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it; I was a blasphemer, and a persecutor and injurious." And thus it was that Saul actually went to the high priest in Jerusalem, 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 to Jerusalem. And, accordingly on that errand, out at the Damascus gate of Jerusalem he rode with his band of temple police behind him; out past Gethsemane; out past Calvary, where he shook his spear at the face of the Crucified, and cried, Aha, aha! Thou deceiver! and posted on breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord. . . . Gird Thy sword upon Thy thigh, O Most Mighty, with Thy glory and Thy majesty. Thine arrows are sharp in the hearts of the King's enemies, whereby the people fall under Thee.

. . . And thus it was that as Saul journeyed, and came near Damascus, suddenly there shone down upon him a great light from heaven. And he fell to the earth and heard a voice saying to him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me? His eyes were as a flame of fire, and his voice as the sound of many waters. And out of his mouth went a sharp, two-edged sword, and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength. Arise, go into the city and it shall be told thee what thou shalt do. And Saul arose from the earth, and they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and did neither eat nor drink. And Ananias entered the house where Saul lay, and putting his hands on him, he said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee on the way as thou camest, hath sent me that thou mightest receive thy sight and be filled with the Holy Ghost. And immediately there fell from his eyes, as if it had been scales, and he received sight forthwith, and arose and was baptized. Saul of Tarsus, I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. And there was great joy in the presence of the angels of God over the conversion and baptism of Saul of Tarsus.

(1) Now it is the suddenness of Saul's conversion that is the first thing about it to us. It was literally, and in his own words, an arrest and an apprehension. "Suddenly," is his own word about it, as often as he tells us again and again the ever-fresh story of his conversion. The whole subject of conversion is a great study to those who are interested in the supremest of all human experiences. There is such a divine hand in every conversion; there is such a sovereignty in it; taking place within a man, there is, at the same time, such a mysteriousness about it; and, withal, such a transcendent importance, and there is nothing else that ever takes place on the face of the earth for one moment to be compared with a conversion. And, then, there are so many kinds of conversion. So many ways of it, and such different occasions and circumstances of it. Some conversions are so sudden, and as unexpected and as complete as Saul's conversion was; and some are slow and self. Some are such that the very moment, and the very spot can ever afterwards be pointed out; while other men are all their days subject to doubt, just because the change came so easy to them as to be without observation. They were born of the Spirit before they could distinguish good from evil, or could discern between their right hand and their left hand. A good sermon will be the occasion of one conversion, a good book of another, and a wise word spoken in due season of another. Hearing a hymn sung, as was the case one Sabbath evening in this very house; hearing a verse read, as was the case with St. Augustine. Just looking for a little at a dry tree will do it sometimes, as was the case with Brother Laurence. Hopeful saw Faithful burned to ashes; Christiana remembered all her surly carriages to her husband; and Mercy came just in time to see Christiana packing up. Their conversions came to Dr. Donne and Dr. Chalmers long after they were ministers; and after their true conversion, those two great men became the greatest preachers of their day. A man of business will be on his way to his office on a Monday morning, and he could let you see to this day the very shop window, passing which, in Prince street he was apprehended. I was engaged to be married, and she died, said a young communicant to me on one

occasion. It was the unkindness of my mistress, said a servant girl. Just as I am writing these lines this letter reaches me: "When the Lord opened my eyes the sight I saw broke me down completely. I tried to work myself right, till it turned out to be the hardest task I ever tried. But I would not give in till he took me by the coat neck and held me over hell. Oh, sir, it was a terrible time! My sense of sin drove me half mad. But I kept pouring out my heart in prayer!" And then my correspondent goes on to tell me the name of the book that was made such a blessing to him. And then he asks that his mistakes in spelling be pardoned, and signs himself an office bearer in the church of one of my friends. But you will go over yourselves all the cases of conversion you have ever heard about, or read about, and you will see for yourselves how full of all kinds of individuality, and variety, and intensity of interest the work of conversion is, till like Mercy in "The Pilgrim's Progress," you will fall in love with your own.

(2) Some men put off their conversion because they have no sense of sin. But look at Saul. What sense of sin had he? Not one atom. He was an old and heaven-ripe apostle before his full sense of sin came home to him. He was not groaning out the seventh of the Romans when he was galloping at the top of his speed on his way to Damascus. A sensibility to sin so exquisite and so spiritual as that of the apostle, never yet came to any man but after long, long years of holiest of lives. To ninety-nine out of a hundred, even of truly converted men, it never comes at all. How could it? At the same time, who knows? your conversion, both in its present insensibility, and in its subsequent spirituality, may be to be of the same kind as Paul's was, if you will only on the spot submit to it. Accept your conversion, and go home and act at once, and ever after upon it, and trust the Holy Ghost for your sense of sin. And, if you belong to the same mental and moral and spiritual seed of Israel as Paul, your sense of sin will yet come to you with vengeance. And, once it begins to come, it will never cease coming more and more, till you will almost be driven to the pond with it. On the other hand, your conversion may not be to be of the heart-breaking kind. You may not be to be held over open hell by the coat-neck, like my ill-spelling friend; your experience may be to be like that of Lydia. Your conversion may be to steal in upon your heart some night at a prayer-meeting—be it of whatever kind it is to be, take it when and where it is offered to you. And if your conversion is of the right kind at all, and holds, you will, in due time, and in your due order, get your fit and proper share of that saving grace, which you say you are so utterly empty of to-night.

(3) And not only had Saul no sense of sin to prepare him for his conversion: he had no preparation and no fitness for his conversion of any kind whatsoever. He brought nothing in his hands. He came just as he was. He was without one plea. Poor, wretched, blind; sight, riches, healing of the mind. Read his thrice told story, and see if there is any lesson plainer, or more pointed to you in it all, than just the unexpectedness, the unpreparedness, and the completeness on the spot of Saul's conversion. With, on the other hand, his instantaneous and full faith, his trust, his assurance, and his prompt and unquestioning obedience. Yes! it is just the absolute sovereignty, startling suddenness, total unpreparedness, entire undeservingness, and glorious completeness of Saul's conversion that, taken altogether, make it such a study, and, in some respects, such a model conversion to you and to me.

(4) There is another lesson told us three times, as if to make sure that we shall not miss nor mistake it. Saul got his conversion out of that overthrow on the way to Damascus, while all his companions only got some bodily bruises from their fall, and the complete upsetting of their errand out of it. The temple officers had each their own story to tell when they returned without any prisoners to Jerusalem: only, none of them needed to be led by the hand into Damascus, and none of them were baptized by Ananias but Saul only. All of which is written for our learning. For the very same thing will take place here tonight. One will be Saul over again, and those who are sitting beside him will be Saul's companions over again. One will go straight home after this service, and will never all his days have Saul's sudden and unexpected conversion out of his mind, such a divine pattern is it to be of his own conversion. While his companions will be able to tell when they go home who preached, and on what, the fulness of the church, the excellence of the music, and the state of the weather on the way home—and that will be all. And they that were with me saw indeed the light, and were afraid; but they heard not the voice of him that spake with me. And I said, What shall I do, Lord? And he said to me, Arise, and go into the city, and there it shall be told thee of all things which are appointed for thee to do.

(5) "It is a trap set for us," said Ananias. "Lord," he said, "I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he hath done to thy saints in Jerusalem. And how he has come here with authority to bind all that call upon thy name. It is a trap set for our destruction,"

said Ananias. "Go to the street called Straight," said the Lord, "and if thou dost not find him in prayer, then it is a trap as thou fearest it is." The mark of Saul's conversion that silenced Ananias was this, that Claverhouse, on the tanner's testimony, had been three days and three nights in fasting and in prayer without ceasing. Behold he prayeth, said Christ, proud of the completeness and the success of his conversion of Saul. Behold he prayeth. Has Jesus Christ, with his eyes like a flame of fire, set that secret mark on your conversion and on mine? Does he point you out to his ministering angels and sympathizing saints in heaven tonight, as he pointed out Saul to Ananias? How does your conversion stand the test of secret prayer? Behold, he prayeth! said Christ. And unceasing prayer, both for himself and for all his converts, remained to be Saul's mark and token, and seal, down to the end of his day.

(6) The best expositor by far that ever took Paul's epistles up into a pulpit has said that the apostle never fell into a single inconsistency after his conversion. Now, with all submission, I cannot receive that even about Paul, any more than I can receive it about any other man that ever was converted on the face of this earth. That he never fell into a single inconsistency could only be said about one man; and we never speak about his conversion. But the very fact that the profoundest preacher on Paul, that I possess, and the profoundest preacher of conversion-consistency, has said such a thing as that shows us what a splendid, and what a complete, and what a consistent conversion, Paul's conversion must have been. How thoroughgoing it must have been at the time; and how holy in all manner of walk and conversation must Paul ever after have lived. Sp-aking here for myself, and not venturing to speak for any of you, when I read a thing like that, and a thing said by such a master in Israel as he was who said that, and then look at my own life in the searching light of that, I feel as if I can never up till now have been converted myself at all. Unless this also is a sure mark of a true conversion, which I have seen set down with incomparable power by this same master in Israel, this—that it is a sure and certain mark of a true conversion that no man ever understands what inconsistency really is till he is truly converted. To be all but entirely void of offence, as Paul said of himself; to be all but completely consistent in everything, was one of the sure and certain marks of Paul's conversion. But, then, to feel myself to be full to the lips of offence; to see and to feel myself to be the most inconsistent man in all the world, is, by this same high authority, offered to me as a mark of my conversion, as good to me as Paul's magnificent marks were to him. "The disproportion of man" is one of Pascal's most penetrating passages; and the offensiveness, the inconsistency, and the disproportion of my heart and my life, are the most prostrating of all my experiences. Indeed, nothing ever prostrates me, to be called prostration, but these experiences. At the same time, the whole truth on this gravest of all matters is this. The whole and entire truth at its deepest bottom is this. That both things are true of Paul and of his conversion. Paul was at one and the same moment, and in one and the same matter, both the most consistent and the most inconsistent of all Christ's converts. He was both the most blameless and the most blameable; the best proportioned and the most disproportioned, of Christian men. Such was the holiness of his life, and such was the spirituality of his mind and heart. And both experiences, taken together, combine to constitute the most complete and all-round mark of a perfect conversion. And thus there is brought about this absolutely heart-breaking paradox, and increasing contradiction, in every true, and spiritual, and progressive conversion. Now, all that, and far more than all that, combine to make Paul's conversion the most momentous and the most wonderful conversion in all the world. And, yet, no. There is one other conversion, long since Paul's, that will, to you and to me, to all eternity, quite eclipse Paul's conversion, and will for ever completely cast, even it, into the shade.—The British Weekly.

## The Bible and Christian Life.

"If any man will do his will he shall know of the doctrine whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself." In this short Scripture we have revealed a great spiritual law, viz.: The moral attitude of a person will effect his view of the character and teaching of Jesus Christ. The man who is prepared to obey the will of God will see the purity and divinity of Christ's teaching. But the man who is supremely selfish, and full of self-seeking, will look upon the doctrines of Christ through the atmosphere of his own selfish character. In the sacred Scriptures we have God illuminating and enriching human life and experience. In the Old Testament we have him entering the life and experience of patriarch, prophets, priests, kings and other worthies. In the Gospels we have him unfolding himself in the person and work of his dear Son. In the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles we have God in the lives and experience of men chosen and prepared for a special purpose. God entered their lives so fully and took such