

EPWORTH LEAGUE TOPICS

Epoch Makers in Church History

Paul the Apostle of Progress

Lesson: Acts 9: 1-30.

LIBRARY STUDY FOR MAY.

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On the south coast of Cilicia, at the northwest corner of the Mediterranean Sea lies the town of Tarsus. Nineteen centuries ago it was described as "No mean city." It had some political importance, was the seat of a school of philosophy and was the centre of a wide commerce. Ships from all lands came to its harbor. Men of all races and tongues mingled on its busy wharves. To-day the town is of little importance, and but for one man it would hardly be remembered.

About the beginning of the Christian Era there was born at Tarsus, in a Jewish home, a boy named Saul, to whom this town owes all its fame. We know very little of this boy's early life. We may conjecture, however, that he would play upon the streets with other boys, would visit the busy wharves and would have his boyish imagination stirred by the sight of strange ships and foreign faces and the sound of unintelligible tongues.

From his own letters, in later years, we learn that his family prided themselves on the purity of their Hebrew blood. We learn also that Saul's family were Pharisees and that he was sent to the school of Gamaliel, in Jerusalem, to take training for some high religious work among the people of his nation. In this school of Gamaliel the boy imbibed that deep reverence for the Law and the zeal for the traditions of his nation that marked the sect to which he belonged.

By nature Saul was passionate and proud, and he early became bitterly prejudiced against everything that was not Jewish. Gamaliel was known as a man of mild spirit and broad tolerance; but his famous pupil, Saul, seems to have learned none of his teacher's tolerance, for, when he first appears in public life we find him trying fiercely to stamp out what he regarded as a pestilent heresy.

This so-called heresy was what we now call the Christian Religion. Its founder was a Galilean Jew known as Jesus of Nazareth. He had come forth from his quiet village home to startle the Jewish world with his preaching, his teaching and his marvellous healing powers. Saul would hear rumors of this teacher's fame and success while at his home in Tarsus, to which he had returned on the completion of his university course in Jerusalem. He would hear also of the opposition to his teacher on the part of the Jewish authorities.

Then came the climax. This young Galilean prophet was arrested, tried, and with the sanction of the Roman Governor crucified. Thus ended his brief career. A few weeks of quiet ensued. Then suddenly the followers of this Nazarene were found preaching boldly in his name in the streets of Jerusalem. They proclaimed that their Master had risen from the dead; that he had commissioned them to preach in his name; that he was present with them in spirit, emboldening and strengthening them to carry out His commands. In His name they called upon all men to repent of their sins, declaring that only by repentance, from sin and faith in His Jesus could men be saved. Such was the power of their preaching that multitudes were won to their belief.

Enraged at this re-appearance of the Jesus-heresy, the Pharisees took the most stringent measures to suppress it. Imprisonment and even death were meted out to the leaders of this movement. The first to fall was a man named Stephen, one of the most gifted preachers of his new faith. He was tried, convicted of blasphemy and was sentenced to be stoned to death.

We are told that the men who stoned Stephen laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. This was Saul of Tarsus. He had come to Jerusalem to assist in suppressing this heresy. Upon the death of Stephen the followers of Jesus fled in all directions. Satisfied that they had accomplished their end, the Jewish leaders would have let matters rest, but for this fiery young Tarsian Jew. He was for following up the work. From the High Priest he secured letters authorizing him to pursue the followers of Jesus to foreign cities and arrest them. Bent on this murderous mission, Saul set out for Damascus, a city six days' journey from Jerusalem, whither many of his victims had fled.

Now Saul was a conscientious man. He was not by nature cruel. He really thought he was doing God service in undertaking this mission. It is possible, however, that the wonderful speech made by Stephen at his trial had made an impression upon Saul. Stephen had shed from the very beginning that same zeal for, that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah of the Jews and that the guilt of His blood was upon their heads. Saul had ample time to ponder Stephen's words during that six-day journey. Just what change was beginning at that time we can not say, but he tells us that at noon, on the sixth day, when near Damascus, he was struck to the earth by a blinding light and that Jesus appeared to him, rebuked him for his persecution and called him to be His apostle.

Three days later, in Damascus, while he was still in a state of physical blindness and spiritual perplexity, he was visited by a kindly follower of Jesus named Ananias, who led him to faith in Jesus, baptized him in that name and explained to him more fully the meaning of the mission to which the risen Jesus had called him.

His physical sight restored, he went away into Arabia to ponder the meaning of it all. Here he seems to have spent some time. Fully convinced, after this period of reflection, that Jesus really was the Messiah and that he was commissioned to preach salvation through Him, his first impulse was to begin with his own countrymen.

With this end in view he returned to Damascus and began at once to reason in the Jewish synagogues with the Jews, trying, like Stephen, to convince them from their own Scriptures. All he got for his pains was persecution. His very life was threatened. His career would have come to a sudden close but for some friend who hid him down in a basket over the wall of Damascus. He fled to Jerusalem, thinking that there at least he could gain converts from among his countrymen.

It was now three years since he had left Jerusalem. News of his conversion had reached his home; but he failed to get the welcome he hoped for. The followers of Jesus feared him still, and the party he had deserted hated him as a renegade. Turning to the Grecian Jews of the city, who were less prejudiced than

the rest, Saul hoped to make some converts to his new faith. But he had not yet discovered his true field of labor. A plot to kill him forced him to flee again for his life.

This time he returned to Tarsus, where he spent the next five years of his life. These years would not be spent in idleness. They would be spent in still further study of the Jewish Scriptures, but now in the light of his new experience. He would, no doubt, also find opportunity in and near Tarsus to preach his new faith. God was preparing him still further for his life work.

Epoch-making men do not spring suddenly into fame, nor do they accomplish great ends without previous preparation. Men who would turn the tide of events in a new direction must be men of power, and power is not gained in a day. Saul the Pharisee and preacher of legal righteousness could not, in a day, become the apostle of righteousness by faith, the founder of Gentile churches and the greatest theologian of the early Christian Church. Had he rushed to his new work he would have failed. He waited. God opened up the way, and at the end of his eight years of preparation he found his appointed field.

In after years Saul wrote that he was called to be a teacher of the Gentiles. We have reason to believe that, at first he was not so clear about his mission. He was not so zealous for the conversion of his own countrymen that he would probably have spent his life largely among them had success attended his efforts.

Saul was thirty-two years of age at his conversion. He was now forty. Most men are well settled in their life work at that age. Saul was just about to begin his. An opening came for him when Barnabas (who had been called by the Church to take charge of a growing Church at Antioch in Syria), needing a helper, sent for Saul. Numerous communities of the followers of Jesus sprang up as a result of the scattering that followed the death of Stephen. Some of these were at Antioch. Here Barnabas had labored with signal success. After the arrival of Saul the church grew still more rapidly. This was largely a Gentile church, and in the providence of God it was destined to become the centre of the world's mission work. A visit to Jerusalem on the part of Saul and Barnabas, after a year of labor together in Antioch, helped to create a more favorable feeling toward this new Apostle. Antioch and Jerusalem were in sympathy. Saul's work was sanctified.

And now a most important step was taken by the Church at Antioch. It was impressed upon the leaders there that if the Gospel was for the Gentiles, it was for all the Gentiles. Hitherto the preaching of the new faith to the Gentiles had been tolerated, but it had not been advocated. Jerusalem had largely determined what should be done. But now Antioch took the lead. The church there was untrammelled by Jewish prejudices. Barnabas was a broad-minded man. Saul of Tarsus had long since outgrown his Hebrew and Pharisaic narrowness. The time was ripe, and it seemed as though the Holy Spirit said, "Separate me Saul and Barnabas for this work." With the approval of the Antiochian "Christians" (for that is what the followers of Jesus were now called), gave up their loved leaders. And out from Antioch they went upon the first definite mission, to carry the Gospel to other lands. To various Christian cities he preached of Christ in various places and in some places Christian communities had been formed, but this was the first planned and purposed undertaking of his kind.

The next twelve years became the most eventful years of Saul's life. During that time, in company with various com-