

Galatians 1:13-24 : A Zealous Persecutor Arrested

The two lessons already studied, embracing Galatians 1:1-12 have shown us the subject of the epistle and the gravity of the situation that called it forth. The epistle itself, we have seen, deals with nothing less than the whole Gospel, perfect and complete, namely, Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Redeemer, “mighty to save” from the evil of this present world. That which called for a clear, forcible, and direct statement of the Gospel, was the fact that some were perverting it, doing the accursed work of leading the Galatians brethren away from God and Christ, and causing them to rest in a false hope of salvation, which could end only in their destruction. As a contrast to the false gospel, which the Galatians were receiving from men, the apostle assures them that the Gospel, which he preached, did not come from men, but that he received it by the direct revelation of Jesus Christ. As proof of the statement that he was not indebted to any man for the Gospel, Paul gives an outline of his history before and after he became a Christian. Read them in connection with the preceding portion of the chapter:

“For ye have heard of my manner of life in time past in the Jews’ religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and made havoc of it; and I advanced in the Jews’ religion beyond many of mine own age among my countrymen, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers. But when it was the good pleasure of God, who separated me, even from my mother’s womb, and called me through His grace, to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the heathen; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood; neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me; but I went away into Arabia; and again I returned unto Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas, and tarried with him fifteen days. But other of the apostles saw I none, save James the Lord’s brother. Now touching the things which I write unto you, behold, before God, I lie not. Then I came into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. And I was still unknown by face unto the churches of Judea which were in Christ; but they only heard say, He that once persecuted us now preaches the faith of which he once made havoc; and they glorified God in me.” Galatians 1:13-24

“Concerning Zeal, Persecuting the Church”—This is what Paul said of himself, in his Epistle to the Philippians. Philippians 3:6. How great his zeal was he himself tells. He says that he persecuted the church of God “beyond measure,” and “wasted it,” or, as in the Revision, “made havoc of it.” See also Acts 8:3. Before Agrippa he said: “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. In an address to the Jews in Jerusalem, who knew his life, he said, “I persecuted this way unto the death, binding and delivering

into prisons both men and women.” Acts 22:4. This he did because, as the previous verse says, he was “zealous toward God.” So full of this sort of zeal was he that he breathed nothing but “threatening and slaughter.” Acts 9:1.

It seems almost incredible that any one professing to worship the true God, can have such false ideas of Him as to suppose that He is pleased with that kind of service; yet Saul of Tarsus, one of the most bitter and relentless persecutors of Christians that ever lived, could say years afterward, “I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day.” Acts 23:1. Although kicking against the pricks (Acts 9:5), and endeavoring to silence the growing conviction that would force itself upon him as he witnessed the patience of the Christians, and heard their dying testimonies to the truth, Saul was not willfully stifling the voice of conscience. On the contrary, he was striving to preserve a good conscience, and so deeply had he been indoctrinated with the Pharisaic traditions, that he felt sure that these inconvenient prickings must be the suggestions of an evil spirit, which he was in duty bound to suppress. So the prickings of the Spirit of God had for a time only led him to redouble his zeal against the Christians. Of all persons in the world, Saul, the self-righteous Pharisee, had no bias in favor of Christianity.

Paul’s Profiting. —Paul “profited,” made advancement, “in the Jews’ religion,” above many of his equals, that is, those of his own age, among his countrymen. He had possessed every advantage that was possible to a Jewish youth. “A Hebrew of the Hebrews” (Philippians 3:5), he was nevertheless a free-born Roman citizen (Acts 22:26-28). Naturally quick and intelligent, he had enjoyed the instruction of Gamaliel, one of the wisest doctors of the law, and had been “taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers.” Acts 22:3. After the “strictest sect” among the Jews, he lived a Pharisee, and was “a Pharisee of the Pharisees,” so that he was “more exceedingly zealous of the traditions” of the fathers than any others of his class. Grown to manhood, he had become a member of the great council among the Jews, - the Sanhedrim, - as is shown by the fact that he gave his vote (Acts 26:10) when Christians were condemned to death. Added to this, he possessed the confidence of the high priest, who readily gave him letters of introduction to the rulers of all the synagogues throughout the land, with authority to seize and bind any whom he found guilty of “heresy.” He was, indeed, a rising young man, on whom the rulers of the Jews looked with pride and hope, believing that he would contribute much to the restoration of the Jewish nation and religion to their former greatness. There had been a promising future before Saul, from a worldly point of view; but what things were gain to him, those he counted loss for Christ, for whose sake he suffered the loss of all things. Philippians 3:7, 8. What caused this great change? -Nothing less than the power of the everlasting love and patient forbearance of God.

“Separated unto the Gospel of God”—These are the words with which Paul described himself in the Epistle to the Romans: “Called to be an apostle, separated unto the Gospel of God.” Romans 1:1. So here he says that God “separated me from my mother’s womb, and called me by His grace.” Galatians 1:15. That God chose Saul to be an apostle, before Saul himself had any thought that he should ever be even a

Christian, is evident from the sacred narrative. On his way to Damascus, whither, "breathing out threatening and slaughter," he was proceeding with full authority to seize, bind, and drag to prison all Christians, both men and women, Saul was suddenly arrested, not by human hands, but by the overpowering glory of the Lord. Three days afterward the Lord said to Ananias, when sending him to give Saul his sight, "He is a chosen vessel unto Me, to bear My name before the Gentiles." Acts 9:15. God arrested Saul in his mad career of persecution, because He had chosen him to be an apostle. So we see that the pricks against which Saul had been kicking were the strivings of the Spirit to turn him to the work to which he had been called.

But how long before this had Saul been chosen to be the messenger of the Lord? -He himself tells us that he was separated from his mother's womb. From his birth Saul had been "separated unto the Gospel of God." This was no new thing. The work of Samson and of John the Baptist was laid out for them before they were born. See Judges 13:2-14; Luke 1:13-17. Jeremiah was chosen before his birth to be a prophet of God. Jeremiah 1:4, 5. Pharaoh, the haughty, defiant king of Egypt, had also been chosen to make the name of God known throughout all the earth (Exodus 9:15, 16), but he refused to do it as the acknowledged servant of the Lord, and so the work had been accomplished through his obstinacy.

These things but remind us that chance does not rule in this world. It is as true of all men as it was of the Thessalonians, that "God hath from the beginning chosen" them "to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth." 2 Thessalonians 2:13. It rests with every one to make that calling and election sure. And he who "wills that all men should be saved, and come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:3, 4), has also appointed "to every man his work" (Mark 13:34). He who leaves not Himself without witness even in the inanimate creation (Acts 14:17; Romans 1:20), would fain have man, His highest earthly creation, willingly give such witness to Him as can be given only by human intelligence. All men are chosen to be witnesses for God, and to each is his labor appointed. All through life the Spirit is striving with every man, to induce him to allow himself to be used for the work to which God has called him. Only the judgment day will reveal what wonderful opportunities men have recklessly flung away. Saul, the violent persecutor, became the mighty apostle. Who can imagine how much good might have been done by the men whose great power over their fellows has been exerted only for evil, if they had yielded to the influence of the Spirit? Not every one can be a Paul; but the thought that each one, according to the ability that God has given him, is chosen and called of God to witness for Him, will, when once grasped, give to life a new meaning.

The Revelation of Christ. — "When it pleased God . . . to reveal His Son in me." Note the exact words. The apostle does not say that it pleased God to reveal His Son *to* him but *in* Him. There is a great truth in this, which stands out very plainly in connection with some other texts.

Read the whole of Deuteronomy 30. There we see that two things were placed before the people for them to choose between, namely, life and good, and death and evil. This, together with the fact that they were exhorted to keep the commandments of God, shows that they had not yet attained to righteousness. Then in verses 11-14 we read that the commandment is not far off so as to make it necessary for some one to bring it to them, in order that they might do it; “but *the Word* is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth, and *in thy heart, that thou mayest do it.*”

We see, therefore, that the Word is in the hearts of men before they do it, and that it is there in order that they may do it. But what is the Word? -Read John 1:1-14, where we learn that the Word is God. “And the Word was made flesh.” That this is what is meant in the passage just quoted in Deuteronomy is seen from Romans 10:6-9, where it is quoted, and the Word is plainly declared to be Christ. Christ, then, dwells in the heart, in the flesh, of every man, and has come thus near to all men in order that they may be made the righteousness of God. Most men are ignorant of this divine presence, and live as though God were not, and that they were their own creators and preservers. But when the Spirit of truth brings a man to the knowledge of the truth, then Christ dwells in his heart “*by faith.*” Ephesians 3:17. Then is Christ *revealed in him*, and he fulfils the divine purpose of showing “forth the excellencies of Him that called him out of darkness into His marvelous light.” 1 Peter 2:9. Only by such a revelation of Christ in a man can he preach Him among the heathen with that revelation, his whole life is a Gospel sermon, even though he does not utter discourses. So we see that the work of the human preacher is exactly the same as that of the heavens: to declare the glory of God (Psalm 19:1-5) and it is to be done in the same manner.

Conferring with Flesh and Blood. —“Immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood.” This statement is made for the purpose of showing that the apostle did not receive the Gospel from any human being. He saw Christ, and accepted Him, then he went to Arabia, and came back to Damascus, and not till three years after his conversion did he go up to Jerusalem, where he stayed only fifteen days, and saw only two of the apostles. Moreover, the brethren were afraid of him, and would not at first believe that he was a disciple; so it is evident that he did not receive the Gospel from any man.

But there is much to learn from Paul's not conferring with flesh and blood. To be sure, he had no need to, since he had the Lord's own word; but such a course as his is by no means common. For instance, a man reads a thing in the Bible, and then must ask some other man's opinion before he dare believe it. If none of his friends believe it, he is fearful of accepting it. If his pastor, or some commentary, explains the text away, then away it goes; flesh and blood gain the day against the Spirit and the Word.

Or, it may be that the commandment is so plain that there is no reasonable excuse for asking anybody what it means. Then the question is, “Can I afford to do it? Will it not cost too much sacrifice?” The most dangerous flesh and blood that one can confer with is one's own. It is not enough to be independent of others; in matters of truth one needs

to be independent of one's self. "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding." Proverbs 3:5. "He that trusts in his own heart is a fool." Proverbs 28:26. When God speaks, our part of wisdom is to obey at once, without taking counsel even of one's own heart. The Lord's name is "Counselor." (Isaiah 9:6) and He is "Wonderful in counsel." Hear Him.

Paul's Visit to Arabia. —In the record of Paul's conversion, in Acts 9, we are told that as soon as he was baptized, he began to preach in the synagogues, "proving that this is very Christ. And after that many days were fulfilled, the Jews took counsel to kill him, but, being let down over the wall by night in a basket, he escaped them, and came to Jerusalem." Verses 22-26. If we had no other record than this, we should not know but that Paul spent all the time in Damascus until he returned to Jerusalem; but in Galatians 1:17-18 we learn how long a time those "many days" cover, and that in the three years Paul visited Arabia. Returning to Damascus from Arabia, he continued preaching, until his earnestness and power called down on him the wrath of the Jews, and he was obliged to flee for his life. Yet in all this three years' preaching, Paul never saw any other apostle.

Paul's Miraculous Conversion. —There is no question that Paul's conversion was a miracle; but so is every conversion. Men seem to think that Paul's conversion had something more of the miraculous in it than ordinary conversions; but the fact is that exactly the same elements entered into Paul's conversion as in all other conversions. It was more than ordinarily striking, to be sure; because Paul was a more than ordinarily hard case to deal with, and was called to, as he was fitted for an extraordinary work. Paul saw the Lord, and thereby learned his own wretched condition; this at once humbled him, and he accepted the Lord. That was the whole of it, and it is the same thing that occurs in every conversion, although not necessarily with the same outward manifestations.

"But was it not marvelous that he should at once be able to preach so powerfully?" - Indeed it was, as it is marvelous that any man can preach Christ. That anybody should be able to preach Christ in very truth, involves no less a mystery than Christ manifest in the flesh. But do not let anybody suppose that Paul got his knowledge instantaneously, without any study. Remember that he had all his life been a diligent student of the Scriptures. It was not an uncommon thing for a rabbi to be able to repeat the greater portion or the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures from memory, and we may be sure that Paul, who had made more advancement than any others of his age, was as familiar with the words of the Bible as a bright schoolboy is with the multiplication table. But his mind was blinded by the traditions of the fathers, which had been drilled into him at the same time. The blindness which came upon him when the light shone round him on the way to Damascus, was but a picture of the blindness of his mind; and the seeming scales that fell from his eyes when Ananias spoke to him, indicated the shining forth of the Word within him, and the scattering of the darkness of tradition. Paul's case was very different from that of a new convert who has never read or studied the Bible.

The Persecutor Preaching. — Compare the statements in Galatians 1:18-22 with Acts 9:26-30; 22:17-21. Circumstances rendered it impossible that Paul should get any teaching from the Jewish Christians. It was not necessary, to be sure, and it was so ordered that all could see that he was taught of God, and not of man. So for years after his conversion he was “unknown by face unto the churches of Judea which were in Christ; but they had heard only that he which persecuted us in times past now preaches the faith which once he destroyed,” or, “of which he made havoc.” And they glorified God in him. That is what God designs shall be done in each one of us.

In view of the case of Saul of Tarsus, let no one look on any opposer of the Gospel as incorrigible. Those who make opposition are to be instructed with meekness, for who knows but that God will give them repentance to the acknowledgment of the truth? One might have said of Paul, He has had the light as clearly as any man can have it. He has had every opportunity; he has not only heard the inspired testimony of Stephen, but he has heard the dying confessions of many martyrs; he is a hardened wretch, from whom it is useless to expect any good. Yet that same Saul became the greatest preacher of the Gospel, even as he had been the bitterest persecutor. Is there a malignant opposer of the truth? Do not strive with him, and do not reproach him. Let him have all the bitterness and strife to himself, while you hold yourself to the Word of God and to prayer. It may not be long till God, who is now blasphemed, will be glorified in him.

(Next week we will study Galatians 2:1-10. Before beginning the study of the second chapter of Galatians, read the first chapter again carefully. One must necessarily understand and have in mind the contents of chapter 1 in order to understand chapter 2, since the second is but a continuation of the first. There is no break in the narrative in passing from the first to the second chapter.)