

On the Conversion of Saul of Tarsus.

by Thomas Reade

Thomas Reade's sermon explores the profound transformation of Saul of Tarsus from a persecutor of Christians to a devoted apostle through divine grace.

Scripture: Acts 9:1, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Galatians 1:11, Ephesians 2:8, 1 John 4:19

Topics: "Conversion Experience", "Sovereign Grace"

Description

Thomas Reade preaches about the powerful conversion of Saul of Tarsus, highlighting the sovereignty and grace of God in transforming a zealous persecutor into a devoted follower of Christ. He emphasizes the importance of experiencing a true conversion, where the heart is humbled, pride is shattered, and love for Christ and His people is evident. Reade draws parallels between Saul's unconverted state of self-righteousness and zeal for persecution to the worldly opposition faced by Christians today, urging believers to examine their hearts and strive for spiritual mindedness and devotion to the Redeemer.

Transcript

Of all the records of Divine Grace, which are treasured up in the Holy Scriptures, none more strikingly exhibits its sovereignty and power, than the Conversion of Saul of Tarsus. To the believer in Jesus, it must be a source of edification and encouragement, to trace the experience of this chosen vessel, from his first reception of the Savior, to the close of his eventful life. When writing to the Christians at Corinth, he could say, through the grace bestowed upon him, "Be followers of me, even as I also am of Christ." May we have grace to resemble this holy man, in his spiritual mindedness and devotedness to the Redeemer.

Here, is the faith and patience of the saints. As grace brings them out of darkness into light, so will grace conduct them to the realms of glory. Entering the celestial city with songs, and everlasting joy upon their heads, they shall see the King in his beauty, and raise the head-stone of the spiritual temple with shoutings, crying, "grace, grace unto it."

While viewing the character of the Apostle in his UNCONVERTED state, we must be struck with that more than Egyptian darkness which beclouded his mind. He was of the strictest sect of the Pharisees, who, in general, were bigoted, cruel, and high-minded and proud. For the appearance of greater sanctity, they not only fasted often, and made long prayers, but separated themselves from the herd of mankind; from whom they were distinguished by the badges peculiar to their sect- as, long robes, broad phylacteries, and large fringes and borders of their garments. They were active and diligent in what cost them little; and so contrived the scheme of their religion, that what they did might be seen by men to the best advantage.

They coveted, and obtained the praise of men. All their religions and kindness were confined within the bounds of their own party; and the first principle which they taught their new converts was- That none but they were godly, and that all other people were worthless. They therefore endeavored to inspire them with zeal and fierceness against all who differed from them, so that if anyone dared to speak favorably of Jesus of Nazareth, he was put out of the synagogue, and persecuted, even unto death. Such was the character, and such the religion of Saul the Pharisee.

Being brought up at the feet of Gamaliel, he was well acquainted with the writings of Moses and the Prophets; but he knew not the true spiritual meaning of those prophecies which relate to the character, work, sufferings, and glory of the Messiah. So true it is, that "the natural man receives not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned."

Is not this our condition until taught of God to know the misery of our fallen state? We never value the Savior until we feel our need of him; for those who are whole need not a physician, but those who are sick. What cause then have we to bless God, if the Spirit has graciously opened our eyes to see our guilt, and made our hearts to feel a genuine sorrow for sin. Jesus will then be dear, yes, infinitely precious to our souls, His name will be as ointment poured forth.

Saul was zealous for the Law, as a covenant of works; but he saw not the glory of Jesus, who is the end of the Law for righteousness to every one that believes. Though scrupulously exact in Pharisaical observances, he could overcome his scruples, and unite with infidel Sadducees to suppress the religion of Jesus, just as Herod and Pilate overcame their mutual enmity when combining to effect his crucifixion.

In the fullness of time, the Sun of Righteousness arose to bless the earth, with healing in his wings. By good old Simeon he was hailed as "a light to enlighten the Gentiles, and the glory of his people Israel." But, "the light shined in darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not." The promised Deliverer "came unto his own, and his own received him not. He was despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. The kings of the earth took counsel together, against the Lord, and against his anointed, saying, let us break their bonds asunder, and cast away their cords from us."

And in this our day, how many are fighting against Christ and his Gospel. Satan has his emissaries, who are busily employed in attacking Christianity, by bold assertions and daring blasphemies; while others, under the garb of orthodoxy, are opposing the humble, yet zealous preacher of the Truth, that real friend and builder of the Church, as if he were nothing better than a troubler in Israel. The Gospel of peace is the innocent occasion of this fiery opposition, agreeably to our blessed Savior's own declaration, "I have come to send fire on the earth. Do you suppose that I have come to give peace on earth, I tell you no, but rather division. Do not think that I have come to send peace on the earth; I came not to send peace, but a sword."

The real cause of this warfare, lies hidden in the enmity of the carnal heart, and in the influence which Satan exercises over the minds of them who believe not the Truth. How frequently is this verified in worldly families, when any of their members have been brought to a deep concern for the salvation of the soul. No sweetness of spirit, no humility of mind, no act of self-denial, no endeavor to oblige, can render the obnoxious individuals pleasing in the eyes of their carnal relatives. A frown, a sneer, or a laugh, is frequently employed to intimidate or shame the young believer in Jesus. Sometimes this hatred manifests itself by expulsion from the paternal dwelling, and exclusion from the father's will. Even a mother, in her

blinded enmity to the Truth, can deliver her once beloved child into the bloody arms of the Inquisition. Superstition, bigotry, and worldly hatred, have in all ages ravaged the sheep of Christ.

Jesus said to his disciples, "You shall be hated by all men for my name's sake. They shall put you out of the synagogues, yes, the time comes, that whoever kills you will think he does God service; and these things will they do unto you, because they have not known the Father, nor me. You shall be betrayed both by parents, and brethren, and kinsfolks, and friends; and some of you shall they cause to be put to death. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household."

Such has been, and such is the spirit of the world- a determination to retain the forms of Christianity, and to crush its power. The offence of the cross has not ceased. In many countries, where Papal darkness reigns, the old enmity is still in vigorous operation. The Man of Sin cannot endure the light of Truth, nor those who shine as lights in the world. Even in this favored land- this land of Bibles; from where the true light shines with such a glorious luster into surrounding nations, the spirit of persecution is not extinct. It still works in the bosom of the bigoted, the carnal, and the infidel opposer of the Truth.

Through the mercy of our God we have long been protected from open violence, and are yet privileged to serve him without bodily fear. But who can tell how soon the 'concealed evil' may be permitted to break forth into action? Nothing but Almighty Power can restrain the malice of Satan and the bitter enmity of the natural heart. Are not dark clouds gathering around us? Do we not hear the awful sounds of an approaching storm? A persecuting spirit is not from above. Urged on by the powers of darkness, it springs from ignorance of the true God, from pride, and from that deadly root of all evil, unbelief.

James and John felt its workings, when they desired that fire might descend from heaven, and consume a Samaritan village, because its inhabitants refused to receive their Divine Master. Jesus rebuked them, and said; "You know not what manner of spirit you are of; for the Son of Man has not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them." This blinded state of heart, which fills the earth with misery and bloodshed, was awfully displayed in the spirit and conduct of Saul. Luke, the inspired writer of the Acts of the Apostles, informs us, that when Saul was a young man, the clothes of those who stoned Stephen were laid at his feet; that he consented to the death of this holy disciple; that he made havoc of the Church, entering into every house, and binding men and women, committed them to prison.

Whether Saul was any further engaged in the death of Stephen does not appear. However, the circumstance recorded by Luke, of his guarding the clothes of his murderers, loudly proclaims his approbation of the deed. Let us never forget, that God looks chiefly at the heart; and if the vote be passed there, he writes the man guilty, though he stir no farther. It is easy to murder another by a silent wish, or a passionate desire, as Jesus has declared, in his searching Sermon on the Mount, and John, in his first Epistle. In all moral actions, whether good or evil, God regards the will; and accounts the man a companion in sin, who, though he may never actually join in it, yet inwardly applauds and likes it.

The storm thus begun, increased rapidly. A violent persecution afflicted and dispersed the Christians at Jerusalem, who went every where preaching the Word. Like all the dispensations of God towards his Church, it was over-ruled for the more rapid extension of the Gospel, just as a scattered fire increases the conflagration. The rage of Saul was so fierce at this period, that, in the strong language of the sacred historian, he breathed out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord. Not satisfied with his own anathemas, he 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 to

Jerusalem.

How wonderful is the Divine forbearance. Truly God is strong and patient. Though in his wisdom he may permit the persecutor's fury to rage for a season, yet, through his power, he makes the wrath of man to praise him; and in his love, he over-rules all for the purifying and enlargement of his Church. He who said to the mighty ocean, Hitherto shall you come, but no further, and here shall your proud waves be stayed—can order the unruly wills and affections of sinful men. All hearts are under the divine control, and can be chained or changed according to His purpose, who works all things after the counsel of his own will. In every age, God is pleased to manifest his power either in the conversion or the destruction of sinners; for He, who rules over all, must and shall be feared by all intelligent creatures. Oh that the prayers of his Church may speedily be answered, by the ushering in of that period when His name shall be hallowed; His kingdom come; and His will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.

The time was now arrived when Infinite Love purposed to make such a manifestation of its glory, as would fill heaven with joy, and earth with praise. The enemy had come in like a flood, but the Spirit of the Lord was about to lift up a standard against him. While Saul was hastening to Damascus, full of persecuting fury, and intending to strike a deadly blow at the infant Church of Christ, thinking thereby, "to do God service;" Jesus met him in the way. Suddenly there shone from heaven a great light round about him, greater than the brightness of the sun. The fiery bigot, checked in his career, fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? He said; Who are you, Lord? And the Lord said; I am Jesus whom you persecute. But rise, and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared unto you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of those things which you have seen, and of those things in the which I will show unto you; delivering you from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send you, to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith that is in me." Saul, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what will you have me to do? And the Lord said; Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told you what you must do." Being unable to see because of the glory of that light, he was led by the hand of those who were with him, and came to Damascus.

What a display of sovereign grace is here presented to our view. The bloody persecutor now lies prostrate at the feet of Jesus. Though his bodily eyes were darkened, the film of ignorance was removed from his mind, the enmity of his heart was destroyed, the strong-holds of unbelief and pride were thrown down, and he became teachable and submissive like a little child.

"Over the raging waves of human will,

The Savior's Spirit walked; and all was still."

Have we ever experienced this converting grace of Jesus? Has a divine light ever darted into our minds, showing us, by its irresistible power, the wretchedness of our condition, and the glory of Emmanuel? Have we been brought in humble submission to the foot of the cross, and there found pardon, and peace, and joy, and rest to our souls? Until this great work be done, we are exposed to the curses of the Law, and the eternal vengeance of a Holy God. But love invites us to his throne, and all who touch the scepter of his grace shall live.

To prepare the way for Saul's admission into the Christian Church, Jesus appeared in a vision to Ananias, a disciple dwelling at Damascus, and commanded him to enquire at the house of Judas for one called

Saul, that he might put his hand on him, and restore him to sight. Ananias, dreading the interview, replied, "Lord, I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem and here, he has authority from the chief priests to bind all that call on your name." Jesus graciously dissipated his fears; "Go your 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 show him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake."

Then Ananias went his way, and entered into the house, and putting his hands on him, said, "Brother Saul, the Lord, Jesus, who appeared unto you in the way as you came, has sent me, that you might receive your sight, and be filled with the Holy Spirit. The God of our fathers has chosen you, that you should know his will, and see that JUST ONE, and should hear the voice of his mouth. For, you shall be his witness unto all men, of what you have seen and heard. And now why do you tarry? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord. And immediately there fell from his eyes, as it had been scales, and he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized."

Saul, thus adopted into the family of God, through faith in Jesus, was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision; "He immediately preached Christ in the synagogues; that he is the Son of God; showing first unto them at Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the coasts of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, and do works fit for repentance, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the Prophets and Moses did say should come; that Christ should suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should show light unto the people, and to the Gentiles."

Can we then be surprised, that all who heard him preach the unsearchable riches of Christ should be amazed, saying "Is not this he that destroyed those who called on this name in Jerusalem, and came here for that intent, that he might bring them bound unto the chief priests?"

The conversion of the heart to God is the work of Omnipotence. It is described in Scripture by the boldest figures, being compared to a transition from darkness to light, from death to life; to a new birth, and a new creation. The heart of stone is changed into a heart of flesh, and the haughty rebel is converted into an obedient child. O let us adore the infinite loving-kindness of our God and Savior, who delights in mercy, not desiring the death of a sinner, but rather that he should turn from his way and live.

Lord! what is man, that you are mindful of him, or the son of man that you visit him. Wretched fallen man, whose heart rises in rebellion against you, might justly have been left to perish in his sins. But Oh! how infinite is the love which rescues us from deserved woe, and raises us to the highest seat in glory.

Can we meditate on this grace, and not feel humbled and thankful? Alas! so hard are our hearts, that even the agony and bloody sweat, the cross and passion of our loving Savior, can be viewed without emotion. Grace alone can melt the rocky heart. Saul was softened, his obduracy was removed, and his darkness dissipated by the beams of the Sun of Righteousness. Who then need despair, when the bloody Saul is accepted and saved? Oh! that the Eternal Spirit may descend in all his saving influence on this ruined world; then will earth once more resemble heaven, where Jehovah is loved, and honored, and obeyed, with constancy and delight.

Lord! look upon the covenant of peace, that rainbow which surrounds your throne of mercy, for the earth is full of darkness and cruel habitations. Stir up the wills of your faithful people, subdue the wills of your enemies; draw all hearts to yourself, until all the kingdoms of this world shall acknowledge Christ to be the Lord.

The sacred historian informs us that Saul increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that Jesus is very Christ. Thus his growth in grace, and in the knowledge of his God and Savior, evidenced the soundness of his conversion, and the reality of his faith.

The scriptural evidence of saving faith is love; love to Christ, and love to his people. How heart searching was the question of Jesus to Peter; "Simon, son of Jonas, do you love me?" How distinctive the badge which he has given us of our discipleship, "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one to another." The conversion of Saul of Tarsus to the faith of the Gospel, is a standing testimony to the truth of Christianity; and will remain to the end of time, a monument of Almighty Power. With gratitude, he himself declared to the Galatian church this act of the divine sovereignty; "I certify you, brethren, that the Gospel which was preached by me, is not after man. For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ." The whole was from Him, who will be gracious to whom he will be gracious. God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, can also shine into our hearts, to give us the light of the knowledge of his glory in the face of Jesus Christ.

Like Saul, we may be zealous for our own views, and jealous for the interests of our own party; like him, we may blindly attach merit to a spirit of persecution, and think to exterminate those who differ from as is to do God service; but is this the spirit which should dwell and rule in the children of God? Would not such a state of heart prove us to be carnal, however flaming our religious profession might be?

Nothing could be less prepared for a cordial reception of the Gospel than the mind of Saul, when journeying toward Damascus. At this memorable period he was utterly destitute of true repentance and saving faith. He saw in Christ no beauty that he should desire him. The Lambs were daily sacrificed upon the temple-altar, but he never felt the need of a better sacrifice to take away sin, and bring in everlasting righteousness- The high-priest entered every year into the holy place with the blood of others, but he never looked beyond the type to the true Melchisedek, whose atonement and intercession alone could open the gates of heaven, and procure for him an admittance there; the Scriptures were read every Sabbath-day, but to him they were a sealed book- expecting a temporal prince, whose reign should surpass that of David in victories, and that of Solomon in splendor, he spurned at the claims of Jesus of Nazareth to the office of the Messiah- full of overweening thoughts of his own excellence, he could not brook the idea of being saved through the righteousness of another, and especially through Him whom the rulers had condemned as a malefactor, and crucified between two thieves. Scrupulously observant of the letter, he was indifferent to the spiritual requirements of the Law. Hence he felt no humbling convictions on account of the inward workings of evil. His conscience was at ease, so long as he could maintain a decent exterior, and enjoy the reputation of superior sanctity. Every unholy passion, directed against the Son of God, and his redeemed people, was extolled as praise-worthy zeal and meritorious service. The more he ravaged the despised sect of the Nazarenes, the higher he rose in his own estimation, and in that of the rulers.

Such were the self-righteous feelings of Saul, when arrested by the blessed Jesus in his mad career. What power, short of Omnipotence, could have effected so sudden, so great, so universal a change! It was truly the work of that Eternal Word who said, amid the darkness of chaos- "Let there be light, and there was light." He was made a new creature in Christ Jesus; old things passed away, and all things became new. His proud heart was humbled; his breast, so lately filled with rage, now overflowed with love; his mind, once so dark, was now enlightened to see his vileness; and so earnest were his cries for mercy, that the Searcher of hearts himself bore testimony to his sincerity, by declaring to the fearful Ananias, "Behold, he prays."

Strictly moral in his conduct, and well versed in the traditions of the elders- zealous for God, and ready to extinguish every spark of supposed heresy; Saul of Tarsus, before his conversion, was like the whited sepulcher- beautiful to look at. Yet, with all these Jewish attractions, his heart was not right with God. While he made many and long prayers, he never breathed the contrite sigh; while he thanked God that he was not as other men, he never cried from a broken heart- "God be merciful to me a sinner." In this state of blind unbelief and spiritual insensibility, rejecting the mercy of God, and the Savior of mankind, he would have filled up the measure of his iniquities, had not sovereign grace snatched him as a brand from the burning, and made him a vessel unto honor, sanctified and fit for the Master's use.

Is the case of Saul an uncommon one in this our day? Alas! no. Thousands possess the Bible, who are ignorant of the way of salvation through a crucified Redeemer; thousands attend the ordinances of the Gospel, who never feel its power; thousands are very zealous for the religion of their fathers, who yet ridicule such of their brethren, as excel them in the spirituality of their affections, and the holiness of their lives. During the reign of Papal darkness, what thousands glutted themselves with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus, exulting, with Princes and Bishops over the sheep of Christ, rejoicing to see the sacred fires of the Inquisition lighted up, to consume the bodies of the faithful, who protested against the errors of the Church of Rome. The Beast, though wounded, is not yet dead! The ancient enmity to the light of Truth is still in active operation!

In every age, the heart of man is the same unvarying spring of evil. Under every covering, whether it be that of outward morality, or amiability of temper, it is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. Every garment of nature's weaving, how beautiful soever its texture or coloring, is too scanty wholly to conceal the inbred corruption. Divine Truth, with unsparing hand, tears away the flimsy veil, and discovers the heart in all its vileness. "You say I am rich and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and know not that you are wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked." But while he who is THE TRUTH, thus exposes to herself the fallen church of Laodicea, he most graciously adds, "I counsel you to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that you may be rich; and white clothing that you may be clothed, and that the shame of your nakedness not appear; and anoint your eyes with eye-salve, that you may see."

This exposure, however humiliating, was the fruit of covenant love; "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten; be zealous, therefore, and repent." And now, behold a display of condescending mercy, which should move every heart, and awaken every Christian feeling; "Look! Here I stand at the door and knock. If you hear me calling and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal as friends." O! that all may listen to the voice of mercy, inviting the soul to sweet communion with the Savior, before it be exchanged for the thunders of the day of Judgment. Nothing will abide the fiery trial, but the gold which Jesus promises to bestow. True faith, producing its happy fruits, shall be found unto praise, and honor, and glory, at the appearing of Jesus Christ, who, like the refiner's fire, shall try every man's work, of what sort it is.

How painful is the thought, that the hearts of dying creatures should be so averse from that religion which breathes nothing but peace and good-will toward man. The religion of Jesus is emphatically the religion of love- Divine Love embodied in its most endearing form. True happiness increases, as the power of the Gospel in the heart increases. The more we resemble Christ- in his meekness and humility, in his love and obedience, the more we shall enjoy the presence of God, and the sweeter anticipations we shall have of future glory.

Our aversion to holiness proves us to be the children of the fall. Our nature is radically corrupt. We may respect the decencies of religion, while pride, yes, even hatred to real godliness, rankles in our breast. Thus it was with Saul of Tarsus, and so it is with every merely nominal Christian, who is a stranger to the plague of his own heart, and has never felt the need of a better righteousness than his own, to justify him in the sight of God.

There is a little flock, saved by grace, to whom it is the Father's good pleasure to give the kingdom. Saul was brought into the fold, and so will all who betake themselves, through the Spirit, to the good Shepherd. Writing to these redeemed ones, Jude gives this affectionate exhortation; "But you, beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life." May all who read these pages drink deeply into the spirit of this apostolic exhortation, that receiving the end of their faith, even the salvation of their souls, they may join the glorified Church in heaven, in ascribing blessing, and honor, and glory, and power, unto Him that sits upon the throne, and unto the Lamb, forever and ever.

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