

Saul's Conversion. (Acts 9:22)

by George Whitefield

George Whitefield's sermon on Saul's conversion highlights the transformative power of God's grace and the importance of prayer in the life of a believer.

Scripture: Matthew 5:10, Matthew 5:44, Acts 9:22, Acts 26:18, Romans 8:31, 2 Corinthians 12:10, Galatians 2:20, 1 Timothy 1:15, 2 Timothy 3:12, 1 Peter 4:12

Topics: "Spiritual Conversion", "Persecution Faith"

Description

George Whitefield preaches about the powerful conversion of Saul, highlighting the transformative work of God's grace in turning a persecutor into a preacher of Christ. He emphasizes the inevitability of persecution for those who live godly lives and the need for Christians to expect and endure opposition with strength and faith. Whitefield encourages believers to learn from Saul's example of increasing in strength amidst adversity, to fear God alone, and to pray for the conversion of even the most hardened enemies of Christ. He urges sinners to come to Jesus, drawing hope from Saul's remarkable transformation and the boundless mercy of God.

Transcript

Acts 9:22, "But Saul increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ."

It is an undoubted truth, however paradoxical it may seem to natural men, that "whosoever will live godly in Christ Jesus, shall suffer persecution." And therefore it is very remarkable, that our blessed Lord, in his glorious sermon on the mount, after he had been pronouncing those blessed, who were poor in spirit, meek, pure in heart, and such like, immediately adds (and spends no less than three verses in this beatitude "Blessed are they who are persecuted for righteousness sake." No one ever was, or ever will be endowed with the forementioned graces in any degree, but he will be persuaded for it in a measure. There is an irreconcilable enmity between the seed of the woman, and the seed of the serpent. And if we are not of the world, but show by our fruits that we are of the number of those whom Jesus Christ has chosen out of this world, for that very reason the world will hate us. As this is true of every particular Christian, so it is true of every Christian church in general. For some years past we have heard but little of a public persecution: Why? Because but little of the power of godliness has prevailed amongst all denominations. The strong man armed has had full possession of most professors hearts, and therefore he has let them rest in a false peace. But we may assure ourselves, when Jesus Christ begins to gather in his elect in any

remarkable manner, and opens an effectual door for preaching the everlasting gospel, persecution will flame out, and Satan and his emissaries will do their utmost (though all in vain) to stop the work of God. Thus it was in the first ages, thus it is in our days, and thus it will be, till time shall be no more.

Christians and Christian churches must then expect enemies. Our chief concern should be, to learn how to behave towards them in a Christian manner: For, unless we make good heed to ourselves, we shall embitter our spirits, and act unbecoming the followers of that Lord, "who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, threatened not; and, as a lamb before his shearers is dumb, so opened he not his mouth." But what motive shall we make use of to bring ourselves to this blessed lamb-like temper? Next to the immediate operation of the Holy Spirit upon our hearts, I know of no consideration more conducive to teach us long-suffering towards our most bitter persecutors, than this, "That, for all we know to the contrary, some of those very persons, who are now persecuting, may be chosen from all eternity by God, and hereafter called in time, to edify and build up the church of Christ."

The persecutor Saul, mentioned in the words of the text, (and whose conversion, God willing, I propose to treat on in the following discourse) is a noble instance of this kind.

I say, a persecutor, and that a bloody one. For see how he is introduced in the beginning of this chapter; "And Saul yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of our Lord, 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 bound to Jerusalem."

"And Saul yet breathing out." This implies that he had been a persecutor before. To prove which, we need only look back to the 7th chapter, where we shall find him so very remarkably active at Stephen's death, that "the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul." He seems, though young, to be in some authority. Perhaps, for his zeal against the Christians, he was preferred in the church, and was allowed to sit in the great council or Sanhedrin: For we are told, chap. 8, ver. 1, "That Saul was consenting unto his death;" and again, at ver. 3, he is brought in as exceeding all in his opposition; for thus speaks the evangelist, "As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women, committed them to prison." One would have imagined, that this should have satisfied, at least abated the fury of this young zealot. No: being exceedingly mad against them, as he himself informs Agrippa, and having made havoc of all in Jerusalem, he now is resolved to persecute the disciples of the Lord, even to strange cities; and therefore yet breathing out threatenings. "Breathing out." The words are very emphatical, and expressive of his bitter enmity. It was as natural to him now to threaten the Christians, as it was for him to breathe: he could scarce speak, but it was some threatenings against them. Nay, he not only breathed out threatenings, but slaughters also (and those who threaten, would also slaughter, if it were in their power) against the disciples of the Lord. Insatiable therefore as hell, finding he could not confute or stop the Christians by force of argument, he is resolved to do it by force of arms; and therefore went to the high priest (for there never was a persecution yet without a high priest at the head of it) and desired of him letters, issued out of his spiritual court, to the synagogues or ecclesiastical courts at Damascus, giving him authority, "that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem," I suppose, there to be arraigned and condemned in the high priest's court. Observe how he speaks of the Christians. Luke, who wrote the Acts, calls them "disciples of the Lord," and Saul stiles them "Men and women of this way." I doubt not but he represented them as a company of upstart enthusiasts, that had lately gotten into a new method or way of living; that would not be content with the temple-service, but they must be righteous over-much, and have their private meetings or conventicles, and break bread, as they called it, from house

to house, to the great disturbance of the established clergy, and to the utter subversion of all order and decency. I do not hear that the high priest makes any objection: no, he was as willing to grant letters, as Saul was to ask them; and wonderfully pleased within himself, to find he had such an active zealot to employ against the Christians.

Well then, a judicial process is immediately issued out, with the high priest's seal affixed to it. And now methinks I see the young persecutor finely equipped, and pleasing himself with thoughts, how triumphantly he should ride back with the "men and women of this way," dragging them after him to Jerusalem.

What a condition may we imagine the poor disciples at Damascus were in at this time! No doubt they had heard of Saul's imprisoning and making havoc of the saints at Jerusalem, and we may well suppose they were apprised of his design against them. I am persuaded this was a growing, because a trying time with these dear people. O how did they wrestle with God in prayer, beseeching him either to deliver them from, or give them grace sufficient to enable them to bear up under, the fury of their persecutors? The high priest doubtless with the rest of his reverend brethren, flattered themselves, that they should now put an effectual stop to this growing heresy, and waited with impatience for Saul's return.

But "He that sitteth in heaven laughs them to scorn, the Lord has them in derision." And therefore, ver. 3, "As Saul journeyed, and came even near unto Damascus," perhaps to the very gates, (our Lord permitting this, to try the faith of his disciples, and more conspicuously to baffle the designs of his enemies) "suddenly (at mid-day, as he acquaints Agrippa) there shined round about him a light from heaven," a light brighter than the sun; "and he fell to the earth (why not into hell?) and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me/" The word is doubled, "Saul, Saul:" Like that of our Lord to Martha: "Martha, Martha;" or the prophet, O earth, earth, earth!" Perhaps these words came like thunder to his soul. That they were spoken audibly, we are assured from verse 7, "His companions heard the voice." Our Lord now arrests the persecuting zealot, calling him by name; for the word never does us good, till we find it spoken to us in particular. "Saul, Saul, Why persecutest thou Me?" Put the emphasis upon the word WHY, what evil have I done? Put it upon the word PERSECUTEST, why persecutest? I suppose Saul thought he was not persecuting; no, he was only putting the laws of the ecclesiastical court into execution; but Jesus, whose eyes are as a flame of fire, saw through the hypocrisy of his heart, that, notwithstanding his specious pretenses, all this proceeded from a persecuting spirit, and secret enmity of heart against God; and therefore says, "Why persecutest thou me?" Put the emphasis upon the word ME, why persecutest thou me? alas! Saul was not persecuting Christ, was he? He was only taking care to prevent innovations in the church, and bringing a company of enthusiasts to justice, who otherwise would overturn the established constitution. But Jesus says, "Why persecutest thou me?" For what is done to Christ's disciples, he takes as done to himself, whether it be good, or whether it be evil. He that touches Christ's disciples, touches the apple of his eye; and they who persecute the followers of our Lord, would persecute our Lord himself, was he again to come and tabernacle amongst us.

I do not find that Saul gives any reason why he did persecute; no, he was struck dumb; as every persecutor will be, when Jesus Christ puts this same question to them at the terrible day of judgment. But being pricked at the heart, no doubt with a sense not only of this, but of all his other offenses against the great God, he said, ver. 5, "Who art thou, Lord?" See how soon God can change the heart and voice of his most bitter enemies. Not many days ago, Saul was not only blaspheming Christ himself, but, as much as in him lay, compelling others to blaspheme also: but not, he, who before was an impostor; is called Lord; "Who art thou; Lord?" This admirably points out the way in which God's Spirit works upon the heart: it first

powerfully convinces of sin, and of our damnable state; and then puts us upon inquiring after Jesus Christ. Saul being struck to the ground, or pricked to the heart, cries out after Jesus, "Who art thou, Lord?" As many of you that were never so far made sensible of your damnable state, as to be made feelingly to seek after Jesus Christ, were never yet truly convicted by, much less converted to, God. May the Lord, who struck Saul, effectually now strike all my Christless hearers, and set them upon inquiring after Jesus, as their all in all! Saul said, "Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus, whom thou persecutest." Never did any one inquire truly after Jesus Christ, but Christ made a saving discovery of himself, to his soul. It should seem, our Lord appeared to him in person; for Ananias, afterwards, says, "The Lord who appeared to thee in the way which thou camest;" though this may only imply Christ's meeting him in the way; it is not much matter: it is plain Christ here speaks to him, and says, "I am Jesus, whom thou persecutest." It is remarkable, how our Lord takes to himself the name of Jesus; for it is a name in which he delights: I am Jesus, a Savior of my people, both from the guilt and power of their sins; "a Jesus, whom thou persecutest." This seems to be spoken to convince Saul more and more of his sin; and I doubt not, but every word was sharper than a two-edged sword, and came like so many daggers to his heart; O how did these words affect him! a Jesus! A Savior! And yet I am persecuting him! this strikes him with horror; but then the word Jesus, though he was a persecutor, might give him some hope. However, our dear Lord, to convince Saul that he was to be saved by grace, and that he was not afraid of his power and enmity, tells him, "It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks." As much as to say, though he was persecuting, yet he could not overthrow the church of Christ: for he would sit as King upon his holy hill of Zion; the malice of men or devils should never be able to prevail against him.

Ver. 6, "And he, trembling and astonished, said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" Those, who think Saul had a discovery of Jesus made to his heart before, think that this question is the result of his faith, and that he now desires to know what he shall do, out of gratitude, for what the Lord had done for his soul; in this sense it may be understood; "and I have made use of it as an instance to prove, that faith will work by love; but perhaps it may be more agreeable to the context, if we suppose, that Saul had only some distant discovery of Christ made to him, and not a full assurance of faith: for we are told, "he trembling and astonished," trembling at the thoughts of his persecuting a Jesus, and astonished at his own vileness, and the infinite condescension of this Jesus, cries out, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" Persons under soul-trouble, and sore conviction, would be glad to do any thing, or comply on any terms, to get peace with God. "Arise, (says our Lord) and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou shalt do."

And here we will leave Saul a while, and see what is become of his companions. But what shall we say? God is a sovereign agent; his sacred Spirit bloweth when and where it listeth; "he will have mercy on whom he will have mercy." Saul is taken, but, as far as we know to the contrary, his fellow-travelers are left to perish in their sins: for we are told, ver. 7, "That the men who journeyed with him stood, indeed, speechless, and hearing a confused voice;" I say, a confused voice, for so the word signifies, and must be so interpreted, in order to reconcile it with chap. 22, ver. 9, where Saul, giving an account of these men, tells Agrippa, "They heard not the voice of him that spake to me." They heard a voice, a confused noise, but not the articulate voice of him that spake to Saul, and therefore remained unconverted. For what are all ordinances, all, even the most extraordinary dispensations of providence, without Christ speaks to the soul in them? Thus it is now under the word preached: many, like Saul's companions, are sometimes so struck with the outgoings of God appearing in the sanctuary, that they even stand speechless; they hear the preacher's voice, but not the voice of the Son of God, who, perhaps, at the same time is speaking effectually to many other hearts; this I have known often; and what shall we say to these things? O the depth of the sovereignty of God! It is past finding out. Lord, I desire to adore what I cannot comprehend.

"Even so, Father, for so it seemeth good in thy sight!"

But to return to Saul: the Lord bids him, "arise and go into the city;" and we are told, ver. 8, that "Saul arose from the earth; and when his eyes were opened, (he was so overpowered with the greatness of the light that shone upon them, that) he saw no man; but they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus," that very city which was to be the place of his executing or imprisoning the disciples of the Lord. "And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink." But who can tell what horrors of conscience, what convulsions of soul, what deep and pungent convictions of sin he underwent during these three long days? It was this took away his appetite (for who can eat or drink when under a sense of the wrath of God for sin?) and, being to be greatly employed hereafter, he must be greatly humbled now; therefore, the Lord leaves him three days groaning under the spirit of bondage, and buffeted, no doubt, with the fiery darts of the devil, that, being tempted like unto his brethren, he might be able hereafter to succor those that were tempted. Had Saul applied to any of the blind guides of the Jewish church, under these circumstances, they would have said, he was mad, or going besides himself; as many carnal teachers and blind Pharisees now deal with, and so more and more distress, poor souls laboring under awakening convictions of their damnable state. But God often at our first awakenings, visits us with sore trials, especially those who are, like Saul, to shine in the church, and to be used as instruments in bringing many sons to glory: those who are to be highly exalted, must first be deeply humbled; and this I speak for the comfort of such, who may be now groaning under the spirit of bondage, and perhaps, like Saul, can neither eat nor drink; for I have generally observed, that those who have had the deepest convictions, have afterwards been favored with the most precious communications, and enjoyed most of the divine presence in their souls. This was after wards remarkably exemplified in Saul, who was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink.

But will the Lord leave his poor servant in this distress? No; his Jesus (though Saul persecuted him) promised (and he will perform) that "it should be told him what he must do. And there was a certain disciple at Damascus, named Ananias; and unto him, said the Lord, in a vision, Ananias; and he said, Behold, I am here, Lord." What a holy familiarity is there between Jesus Christ and regenerate souls! Ananias had been used to such love-visits, and therefore knew the voice of his beloved. The Lord says, "Ananias;" Ananias says, "Behold, I am here, Lord." Thus it is that Christ now, as well as formerly, often talks with his children at sundry times and after divers manners, as a man talketh with his friend. But what has the Lord to say to Ananias?

Ver. 11, "And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the street, which is called Straight, and inquire in the house of Judas, for one called Saul of Tarsus;" (See here for your comfort, O children of the most high God, what notice Jesus Christ takes of the street and the house where his own dear servants lodge) "for behold, he prayeth;" but why is this ushered in with the word behold? What, was it such a wonder, to hear that Saul was praying? Why, Saul was a Pharisee, and therefore, no doubt, tasted and made long prayers: and, since we are told that he profited above many of his equals, I doubt not but he was taken notice of for his gift in prayer; and yet it seems, that before these three days, Saul never prayed in his life; and why? Because, before these three days, he never felt himself a condemned creature: he was alive in his own opinion, because without a knowledge of the spiritual meaning of the law; he felt not a want of, and therefore, before now, cried not after a Jesus; and consequently, though he might have said or made a prayer (as many Pharisees do now a-days) he never prayed a prayer; but now, "behold! He prayed indeed;" and this was urged as one reason why he was converted. None of God's children, as one observes, comes into the world still-born; prayer is the very breath of the new creature: and therefore, if

we are prayerless, we are Christless; if we never had the spirit of supplication, it is a sad sign that we never had the spirit of grace in our souls: and you may be assured you never did pray, unless you have felt yourselves sinners, and seen the want of Jesus to be your Savior. May the Lord, whom I serve in the gospel of his dear Son, prick you all to the heart, and may it be said of you all, as it was of Saul, behold, they pray!

The Lord goes on to encourage Ananias to go to Saul: says he, ver. 12, "For he hath seen in a vision a man named Ananias, coming in, and putting his hand on him, that he might receive his sight." So that though Christ converted Saul immediately by himself, yet he will carry on the work, thus begun, by a minister. Happy they, who under soul-troubles have such experienced guides, and as well acquainted with Jesus Christ as Ananias was; you that have such, make much of and be thankful for them; and you who have them not, trust in God; he will carry on his own work without them.

Doubtless, Ananias was a good man; but shall I commend him for his answer to our Lord? I commend him not: for says he, ver 13, "Lord, I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he hath done to they saints at Jerusalem: And here, he hath authority from the chief priests to bind all that call upon thy name." I fear this answer proceeded from some relics of self-righteousness, as well as infidelity, that lay undiscovered in the heart of Ananias. "Arise, (said our Lord) and go into the street, which is called Straight, and inquire in the hose of Judas, for one called Saul of Tarsus; for behold, he prayeth!" One would think this was sufficient to satisfy him; but says Ananias, "Lord, I have heart by many of this man (he seems to speak of him with much contempt; for even good men are apt to think too contemptuously of those who are yet in their sins) how much evil he hath done to thy saints in Jerusalem: And here, he hath authority from the chief priests to bind all that call upon Christ's name, should bind him also, if he went unto him; but the Lord silences all objections, with a "Go thy 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." Here God stops his mouth immediately, by asserting his sovereignty, and preaching to him the doctrine of election. And the frequent conversion of notorious sinners to God, to me is one great proof, amongst a thousand others, of that precious, but too much exploded and sadly misrepresented, doctrine of God's electing love; for whence is it that such are taken, whilst thousands, not near so vile, die senseless and stupid? All the answer that can be given, is, they are chosen vessels; "Go thy way, (says God) 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." Observe what a close connection there is between doing and suffering for Christ. If any of my brethren in the ministry are present, let them bear what preferment we must expect, if we are called out to work remarkably for God: not great prebendaries or bishopricks, but great sufferings for our Lord's name sake; these are the fruits of our labor: and he that will not contentedly suffer great things for preaching Christ, is not worthy of him. Suffering will be found to be the best preferment, when w are called to give an account of our ministry at the great day.

I do not hear, that Ananias quarreled with God concerning the doctrine of election; no, (O that all good men would, in this, learn of him!) "He went his way, and entered into the house; and put his hands on him, and said, Brother Saul;" just now, it was THIS MAN; now it is BROTHER SAUL: it is not matter what a man has been, if he be now a Christian; the same should be our brother, our sister and mother; God blots our every convert's transgressions as with a thick cloud, and so should we; the more vile a man has been, the more should we love him when believing in Christ, because Christ will be more glorified on his behalf. I doubt not, but Ananias was wonderfully delighted to hear that so remarkable a persecutor was brought

home to God: I am persuaded he felt his soul immediately united to him by love, and therefore addresses him not with, thou persecutor, thou murderer, that camest to butcher me and my friends; but, "brother Saul." It is remarkable that the primitive Christians much used the word brother and brethren; I know it is a term now much in reproach; but those who despise it, I believe, would be glad to be of our brotherhood, when they see us sitting at the right-hand of the Majesty on high. "Brother Saul, the Lord (even Jesus that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest) hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost." At this time, we may suppose, he laid his hands upon him. See the consequences.

Ver. 18, "Immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales, and he received sight forthwith;" not only bodily, but spiritual sight; he emerged as it were into a new world; he saw, and felt too, things unutterable: he felt a union of soul with God; he received the spirit of adoption; he could now, with a full assurance of faith, cry, "Abba, Father." Now was he filled with the Holy Ghost; and had the love of God shed abroad in his heart; now were the days of his mourning ended; now was Christ formed in his soul; now he could give men and devils the challenge, knowing that Christ had justified him; now he saw the excellencies of Christ, and esteemed him the fairest among ten thousand. You only know how to sympathize with the apostle in his joy, who, after a long night of bondage, have been set free by the Spirit, and have received joy in the Holy Ghost. May all that are now mourning, as Saul was, be comforted in like manner!

The scales are now removed from the eyes of Saul's mind; Ananias has done that for him, under God: he must now do another office, baptize him, and so receive him into the visible church of Christ; a good proof to me of the necessity of baptism where it may be had: for I find here, as well as elsewhere, that baptism is administered even to those who had received the Holy Ghost; Saul was convinced of this, and therefore arose and was baptized; and now it is time for him to recruit the outward man, which, by three days abstinence and spiritual conflicts, had been much impaired; we are therefore told, (ver. 19), "when he had received meat, he was strengthened."

But O, with what comfort did the apostle now eat his food? I am sure it was with singleness, I am persuaded also with gladness of heart; and why? He knew that he was reconciled to God; and, for my own part, did I not know how blind and flinty our hearts are by nature, I should wonder how any one could eat even his common food with any satisfaction, who has not some well-grounded hope of his being reconciled to God. Our Lord intimates thus much to us: for in his glorious prayer, after he has taught us to pray for our daily bread, immediately adds that petition, "Forgive us our trespasses;" as though our daily bread would do us no service, unless we were sensible of having the forgiveness of our sins.

To proceed; Saul hath received meat, and is strengthened; and whither will he go now? To see the brethren; "then was Saul certain days with the disciples that were at Damascus." If we know and love Christ, we shall also love and desire to be acquainted with the brethren of Christ: we may generally know a man by his company. And though all are not saints that associate with saints, (for tares will be always springing up amongst the wheat till the time of harvest) yet, if we never keep company, but are shy and ashamed of the despised children of God, it is a certain sign we have not yet experimentally learned Jesus, or received him into our hearts. My dear friends, be not deceived; if we are friends to the Bridegroom, we shall be friends to the children of the Bridegroom. Saul, as soon as he was filled with the Holy Ghost, "was certain days with the disciples that were at Damascus."

But who can tell what joy these disciples felt when Saul came amongst them! I suppose holy Ananias introduced him. Methinks I see the once persecuting zealot, when they came to salute him with a holy kiss, throwing himself upon each of their necks, weeping over them with floods of tears, and saying, "' my brother, O my sister, Can you forgive me? Can you give such a wretch as I the right-hand of fellowship, who intended to drag you behind me bound unto Jerusalem!" Thus, I say, we may suppose Saul addressed himself to his fellow-disciples; and I doubt not but they were as ready to forgive and forget as Ananias was, and saluted him with the endearing title of "brother Saul." Lovely was this meeting; so lovely, that it seemed Saul continued certain days with them, to communicate experiences, and to learn the way of God more perfectly; to pray for a blessing on his future ministry, and to praise Christ Jesus for what he had done for their souls. Saul, perhaps, had sat certain years at the feet of Gamaliel, but undoubtedly learned more these certain days, than he had learned before in all his life. It pleases me to think how this great scholar is transformed by the renewing of his mind. What a mighty change was here! That so great a man as Saul was, both as to his station in life, and internal qualifications, and such a bitter enemy to the Christians; for him, I say, to go and be certain days with the people of THIS mad way, and to sit quietly, and be taught of illiterate men, as many of these disciples we may be sure were; what a substantial proof was this of the reality of his conversion!

What a hurry and confusion may we suppose the chief priests were now in! I warrant they were ready to cry out, What! Is he also deceived? As for the common people, who knew not the law, and are accursed, for them to be carried away, is no such wonder; but for a man bred up at the feet of Gamaliel, for such a scholar, such an enemy to the cause as Saul; for him to be led away with a company of silly, deceived men and women, surely it is impossible: we cannot believe it. But Saul soon convinces them of the reality of his becoming a fool for Christ's sake: for straightway, instead of going to deliver the letters from the high priests, as they expected, in order to bring the disciples that were at Damascus bound to Jerusalem, "he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God." This is another proof of his being converted. He not only conversed with Christians in private, but he preached Christ publicly in the synagogues; especially, he insisted on the divinity of our Lord, proving, notwithstanding his state of humiliation, that he was really the Son of God.

But why did Saul preach Christ thus? Because he had felt the power of Christ upon his own soul. And here is the reason why Christ is so seldom preached, and his divinity so slightly insisted on in our synagogues: because the generality of those that pretend to preach him, never felt a saving work of conversion upon their own souls. How can they preach, unless they are first taught of, and then sent by God? Saul did not preach Christ before he knew him; no more should any one else. An unconverted minister, though he could speak with the tongues of men and angels, will be but as a sounding brass and tinkling cymbal to those whose senses are exercised to discern spiritual things. Ministers that are unconverted, may talk and declaim of Christ, and prove from books that he is the Son of God; but they cannot preach with the demonstration of the Spirit and with power, unless they preach from experience, and have had a proof of his divinity, by a work of grace wrought upon their own souls. God forgive those, who lay hands on an unconverted man, knowing that he is such: I would not do it for a thousand worlds, Lord Jesus, keep thy own faithful servants pure, and let them not be partakers of other men's sins!

Such an instance as was Saul's conversion, we may be assured, must make a great deal of noise; and, therefore, no wonder we are told, ver. 21, "But all that heard him were amazed, and said, Is not this he that destroyed them who called on this name in Jerusalem, and came hither for that intent, that he might bring them bound to the chief priests."

Thus it will be with all that appear publicly for Jesus Christ; and it is as impossible for a true Christian to be hid, as a city built upon a hill. Brethren, if you are faithful to, you must be reproached and have remarks made on you for Christ; especially if you have been remarkably wicked before your conversion. Your friends will say, is not this he, or she, who a little while ago would run to as great an excess of riot and vanity as the worst of us all? What has turned your brain? -- Or if you have been close, false, formal hypocrites, as Saul was, they will wonder that you should be so deceived, as to think you were not in a safe state before. No doubt, numbers were surprised to hear Saul, who was touching the law blameless, affirm that he was in a damnable condition (as in all probability he did) a few days before.

Brethren, you must expect to meet with many such difficulties as these. The scourge of the tongue, is generally the first cross we are called to bear for the sake of Christ. Let not, therefore, this move you: It did not intimidate, no, it rather encouraged Saul: says the text, "But Saul increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ." Opposition never yet did, or ever will hurt a sincere convert: Nothing like opposition to make the man of God perfect. None but a hireling, who careth not for the sheep, will be affrighted at the approach or barking of wolves. Christ's ministers are as bold as lions: it is not for such men as they to flee.

And therefore (that I may draw towards a conclusion()) let the ministers and disciples of Christ learn from Saul, not to fear men or their revilings; but, like him, increase in strength, the more wicked men endeavor to weaken their hands. We cannot be Christians without being opposed: no; disciples in general must suffer; ministers in particular must suffer great things. But let not this move any of us from our steadfastness in the gospel: He that stood by and strengthened Saul, will also stand by and strengthen us: He is a God mighty to save all that put their trust in him. If we look up with an eye of faith, we, as well as the first martyr Stephen, may see Jesus standing at the right hand of God, ready to assist and protect us. Though the Lord' seat is in heaven, yet he has respect to his saints in an especial manner, when suffering here on earth: then the Spirit of Christ and of glory rests upon their souls. And, if I may speak my own experience, I never enjoy more rich communications from God than when despised and rejected of men for the sake of Jesus Christ." However little they may design it, my enemies are my greatest friends. What I most fear, is a calm; but the enmity which is in the hearts of natural men against Christ, will not suffer them to be quiet long; No; as I hope the work of God will increase, so the rags of men and devils will increase also. Let us put on, therefore, the whole armor of God: let us not fear the face of men: "Let us fear him only, who can destroy both body and soul in hell." I say unto you let us fear him alone. You see how soon God can stop the fury of his enemies.

You have just now heard of a proud, powerful zealot stopped in his full career, struck down to the earth with a light from heaven, converted by the almighty power of efficacious grace, and thereupon zealously promoting, nay, resolutely suffering for, the faith, which once with threatenings and slaughters he endeavored to destroy. Let his teach us to pity and pray for our Lord's most inveterate enemies. Who knows, but in answer thereunto, our Lord may give them repentance unto life? Most think, that Christ had respect to Stephen's prayer, when he converted Saul. Perhaps for this reason God suffers his adversaries to go on, that his goodness and power may shine more bright in their conversion.,

But let not the persecutors of Christ take encouragement from this to continue in their opposition. Remember, though Saul was converted, yet the high-priest, and Saul's companions, were left dead in trespasses and sins. And, if this should be your case, you will of all men be most miserable: for persecutors have the lowest place in hell. And, if Saul was struck to the earth by a light from heaven, how will you be able to stand before Jesus Christ, when he comes in terrible majesty to take vengeance on all

those who have persecuted his gospel? Then the question, "Why persecutest thou me?" will cut you through and through. The secret enmity of your hearts shall be then detected before men and angels, and you shall be doomed to dwell in the blackness of darkness for evermore. Kiss the Son, therefore, lest he be angry: for even you may yet find mercy, if you believe on the Son of God: though you persecute him, yet he will be your Jesus. I cannot despair of any of you, when I find a Saul among the disciples at Damascus. What though your sins are as scarlet, the blood of Christ shall wash them as white as snow. Having much to be forgiven, despair not; only believe, and like Saul, of whom I have now been speaking, love much. He counted himself the chiefest sinner of all, and therefore labored more abundantly than all.

Who is there among you fearing the Lord? Whose hearts hath the Lord now opened to hearken to the voice of his poor unworthy servant? Surely, the Lord will not let me preach in vain. Who is the happy soul that is this day to be washed in the blood of the Lamb? Will no poor sinner take encouragement from Saul to come to Jesus Christ? You are all thronging round, but which of you will touch the Lord Jesus? What a comfort will it be to Saul, and to your own souls, when you meet him in heaven, to tell him, that hearing of his, was a means, under God, of your conversion! Doubtless it was written for the encouragement of all poor, returning sinners; he himself tells us so: for "in me God showed all long-suffering, that I might be an example to them that should hereafter believe." Was Saul here himself, he would tell you so, indeed he would; but being dead, by this account of his conversion he yet speaketh. O that God may speak by it to your hearts! O that the arrows of God might this day stick fast in your souls, and you made to cry out, "Who art thou, Lord?" Are there any such amongst you? Methinks I feel something of what this Saul felt, when he said, "I travail in birth again for you, till Christ be formed again in your hearts." O come, come away to Jesus, in whom Saul believed; and then I care not if the high-priests issue out never so many writs, or injuriously drag me to a prison. The thoughts of being instrumental in saving you, will make me sing praises even at midnight. And I know you will be my joy and crown of rejoicing, when I am delivered from this earthly prison, and meet you in the kingdom of God hereafter.

Now to God, &c.

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