

Call to Obedience #497
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The Conversion of the Apostle Paul

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If there is any one conversion in the history of the church that has caused more people to be saved than most any other, it is that of the Apostle Paul. And what makes this such a great miracle is that he had two great flaws that should have prevented him from ever gaining fame in the church of the living God.

1. Paul was a murderer. Paul first came on the scene of New Testament history as a murderer as we see by these words: *and they cast him [Stephen] out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul (Acts 7:58)*. Shortly after this, we have these words: *Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest (Acts 9:1)*. Paul later confessed: *I persecuted this Way to the death...* (Acts 22:4). That all was not because Paul had a murderous spirit but rather, his wicked actions were the result of a grossly misdirected zeal for God. We can mean well but yet do evil in the process. Any time you mix ignorance with zeal, you have a dangerous situation.

2. Paul was an unsuccessful pastor by today's most common definition of pastoral success where success means that a church grows in membership. Paul was good at saving the lost, but he was not good at keeping them. For example, he said: *...all those in Asia have forsaken me...* (2 Tim. 1:15); *For I have no one like-minded...* (Phil. 2:20); and *...no one stood with me...* (2 Tim. 4:16). He did too many things "meddling" with people such as: he strongly condemned homosexuality; he declared that adulterers and fornicators will not enter the kingdom of heaven; he told women how to dress and not to take authority over men; he gave strict regulations in the exercise of spiritual gifts; and he stressed church attendance. He disqualified pastors from preaching if their children were in disobedience and he required of them that they be married to only one wife. He seemed to have preached too long and even Peter confessed that he was hard to understand. By his own admission, Paul was not a good speaker. While Peter was popular, Paul was tolerated. People laid money at Peter's feet, but they let Paul be cold and starving, forcing him to make tents for a living as he preached part-time (1 Cor. 5:11; Rom. 1:18-32; Acts 20:9; 2

Peter 3:16; 2 Cor. 11:6; 1 Tim. 2:9-12; Heb. 10:25; 1 Cor. 14:26-39; Acts 20:34).

Now, all this brings us to the point of self-examination. We love Paul as a theologian, but would we love him as a pastor if he were to stand in our pulpits today? Would we also leave him over any one of the issues I mentioned? Or perhaps, would we stick with him while gritting our teeth, sitting in the back row of the church and expressing our disapproval of him by our facial expressions? I speak to you as a pastor with fifty years experience. Yet, there is a better solution to this problem than gritting our teeth or leaving the pastor. It is that we decide to become more like Paul. Did he not say: *Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ* (1 Cor. 11:1)? Yes, be more like Paul by trying to have his passion for lost souls and for backsliders while praying for them night and day with tears. Comfort the discouraged and lift up the weak. Look after the widows and orphans and always say: *Lord, what do You want me to do?* (Acts 9:6). If Jesus does not leave your pastor, think twice before you leave him. God stood with Paul in Jerusalem, in Damascus, in Caesarea and in Rome. In fact, God sent Paul on a vacation to the third heaven. You may not be able to match that, but perhaps you can give your pastor a new pair of shoes. Jesus said: *Most assuredly, I say to you, he who receives whomever I send receives Me; and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me* (John 13:20). Oh, how the devil loves it when people leave God's appointed and anointed. Are you joining the devil in his plans or are you dying out to your personal choices to lift up the King of glory so that He can come in and stay in? And remember this, everything Paul taught was either by divine wisdom or revelation!

Yes, Paul was so much abandoned that he spoke of being cold, naked and homeless. So, what then made him so influential in history? Here is my answer to encourage each one of you.

1. Paul's past life did not relinquish his future prospects. It could have, but it did not because God is well able to turn even the most wicked of sinners into the greatest of saints. Whether you have been a murderer, a thief, a rebel, an adulterer or a sexual pervert—God can take care of all of that and make you holy, overnight. We all, and I mean all of us, come to God as sinners. But once we receive Him through Jesus Christ our Lord, we all start from a position of holy equality.

2. Paul surrendered all. Using the New King James Version of the Bible which best reflects Paul's mindset as a new convert, we read his first words as being: *Lord, what do You want me to do?* (Acts 9:6). These words clearly shadow

the first words of the Christians on the day of Pentecost: *Men and brethren, what shall we do?* (Acts 2:37). These words are truly at the heart of Christianity and they truly make up the core of the man/God relationship since Adam. Without that attitude of total surrender, you are going nowhere. Jesus said of Himself, *...Behold, I have come to do Your will, O God...* (Heb. 10:9). It is either this or nothing. Millions of “Christians” have been deceived all of their lives, thinking their religiosity has substance while in reality, it is nothing. Peter says of such: *These are wells without water, ...for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever* (2 Peter 2:17). When are you going to stop singing “I surrender all” without doing it, without making it your lifestyle? Remember, Paul’s first words were words of surrender—they never needed to be repeated to Him the rest of his life.

3. Paul was refined by suffering. Suffering is inextricably linked to Christianity and it became an integral part of Paul’s life from the day of his conversion when God struck him with blindness: *For whom the LORD loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives* (Heb. 12:6). Over and over we hear people ask: “Why do I have to suffer?” The universal answer from the very throne of God is: “Because you have now become one of My beloved.” Suffering is part of the adoption process. It is only by this means that oneness with Christ becomes possible. Of course, when it comes to suffering, God treats everyone different because each one has a unique calling in his or her life. But be that as it is, God’s anointed are also always God’s afflicted. So then, when God inflicted suffering on Paul on the first day of his Christian life, he was instantly initiated into the Honor Society of God’s Anointed Ones. This was to the end that he might bear a crown for eternity.

Also know that Paul’s reaction to suffering influenced the rest of his life in one way or another. So it is with all of us. How Abraham reacted when God told him to sacrifice his son determined whether the prophecy of him fathering many nations would come true. Be careful about adopting a negative attitude toward suffering; it may ruin the rest of your life. Consider the positives of suffering. Suffering will refine you, it will sharpen your focus, enlarge your vision on the things of eternity, remove any traces of the self-will from your life, beautify you, temper you, bless you, build your character and make you stronger and wiser. It will bring you into conformity with the Lord Jesus Christ. And furthermore, any suffering for Christ’s sake will always be outweighed by the goodness of God toward those who are suffering.

Paul’s response after he was struck with blindness remained the same: *Lord, what do You want me to do?* and never mind the blindness. Consider

putting a “never mind” into your suffering; it will serve you well. Then Paul was led to Damascus and fasted until the third day when he received his vision back, was baptized with the Holy Spirit, was commissioned to stand before Gentiles, Jews and kings as God’s ambassador and was also told that he must suffer even more for Christ’s sake. Next, God sent him into the Arabian desert for three years. There, Jesus taught him, trained him and rebuilt him from the inside out to prepare him for an anointed ministry (Gal. 1:12). All of his sufferings led him to say later, *for I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us* (Rom. 8:18).

4. Paul gave himself to prayer. After Paul was saved, the Lord spoke to Ananias saying: *...Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying* (Acts 9:11). We put an identification number on most everything and everybody. We all have an ID number from our government. We are all tagged. Throughout our lives, our government knows who we are by this ID number. And here is the government of God giving Paul his ID: *behold, he is praying*. God never had to change that identifying code for this apostle. Let me ask you: “What all came out of that?” My answer to that is a resounding: “Everything!”

Let us go back again to the first words of this new convert which essentially became his motto: *Lord, what do You want me to do?* Seldom is it ever right for you to leave God’s anointed. It takes the cross to follow Jesus and it takes a cross to follow His messengers.

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