

Acts - Commentaries by T.W.P. Wolston, Editor

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LET us see the remarkable way in which the Lord meets Paul. It is a most charming history. He goes on his way to Damascus, and all of a sudden, as he nears the town, he is challenged. "Suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven" (Acts 9:3), "above the brightness of the sun" (26:13). What was that light? It was the light that shone from the face of the Son of Man in glory. Wonderful light, indeed, was it; brighter than the sun at noonday. Think of that! You know what the sun is at noonday, and in an Eastern climate too. It was at noonday, when the sun was shining in all its meridian splendor, that the light of the sun was put out by a brighter light. Well might Paul say, "God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). It was the glory of God in the face of Jesus shining on him; and what was the effect? That wonderful light blinded him for the time being, and "he fell to the earth." The Lord had met him. The history of his self-will, of his sin, and of his wickedness, under the garb of religion, was over.

What grace, that Christ should pick up this man, who had been His most bitter opponent on earth, and make him a vessel of grace to others. What a marvelous thing also is it that the grace of Christ should take up men like you or me, who have been bitterly opposed to Him, and turn us, from being the servants of sin and the devil, to be His servants. That grace met Paul. It has met me; may it meet you tonight. If you are unsaved, unconverted, may the grace that saved Saul, and saved me, save you now!

Overwhelmed by the light, "he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" (vs. 4.) What a moment in his history! when he hears that all-commanding voice—a voice absolutely human, but intensely divine—the voice of a man, but which he felt was the voice of God—the voice of a human being speaking to him in his mother-tongue (Hebrew) from glory. Nevertheless, it was the voice of the eternal God to that man's soul and conscience. He who spoke was Jesus. The exalted man was God's eternal Son, who had veiled His essential glory, —His Godhead glory, —in human form. He now speaks from heaven to Paul and to us, and it is of vital importance not to despise His sayings. "See that ye refuse not him that speaketh. For if they escaped not who refused him that spake on earth, much more shall not we escape if we turn away from him that speaketh from heaven" (Heb. 12:25).

Whence did Jesus speak to Paul? From heaven! and, young man, on the road to hell, a voice from heaven speaks to you, and I ask you, Have you heard and obeyed that voice? "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" No doubt Saul was amazed. How could he be persecuting Jesus? It was a wonderful question. Could you persecute Jesus? I believe you could. Perhaps you have done so. If your history were published, it might come out that you had been persecuting Jesus. Did you not laugh at that man who works in the same building with you for his being converted? Have you not jeered at your own brother who was converted, and was seeking to serve the Lord? Have you not ridiculed the sister who sought to speak for Jesus, and to live for Him? Why persecutest thou Me? says Christ. In that moment Saul learned that the saint upon earth and the Saviour in glory were really one. He, the head of the body, in heavenly glory; and they, the members of it, here on earth. He learned the identity of the people of Christ on earth with the blessed Saviour in heaven. What a revulsion took place! The time of his self-will is forever over, the man is humbled in the dust; and not only does he fall down in the dust materially, but he gets down morally, by the side of Job, in dust and ashes. "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear; but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5, 6). Yes, that man is down in dust and ashes before God. He has seen Christ. He has seen the heavenly Saviour. Have you seen Him? Has your eye ever seen Him? Oh! if never before, let the eye of faith turn to the Saviour in glory this night.

Saul turns at once to the Lord. He is humbled, broken right down in the dust. Now observe his changed attitude. "And he said, Who art thou, Lord?" He does not say, Who art thou? He says, "Who art thou, Lord?" He knows Him. That voice had done its work. "Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God; and they that hear shall live" (John 5:25). He heard that voice, and lived. He was a quickened soul from that moment. He had the sense that he was in the presence of One who knew all about him. Were you ever brought into the presence of the Lord really, and got an answer as he got it? "And the Lord said, I am Jesus, whom thou persecutest." Has He to say to you tonight, "I am Jesus, whom thou persecutest"? If you have never loved Him, followed Him, or got to know Him, or serve Him, His voice speaks to you from glory tonight, and He says, Do you want to know Me, and to do My will? Then, as He reveals Himself as Jesus to your soul, you will understand the wonderful revulsion of feeling that passed over that stricken man's soul, as he learned that the One who had arrested him, the One whose light blinded him, was the Jesus whom he had been persecuting. He had looked upon Jesus as an impostor, and thought that he was doing God service in getting His name wiped off the earth. And while he was busily bent on his murderous tour, he was arrested by God's glory shining from the face of that same Jesus. I say again, What a revulsion of feeling took place in his soul. He saw in a moment what he had been doing during the whole of his life. He saw the criminality of his conduct, the fullness of his sin, the terribleness of his guilt; and I have no doubt he felt what would be the consequences of his folly and sin. Have you not sinned precisely in the same way? I believe we all have. We all have been opposed to Christ more or less, though our opposition may not have taken the fiery demonstration of a Saul.

There will be a mighty revulsion of feeling when you are truly converted. I don't believe in the conversion that does not change a man, and if you really turn to the Lord there will be a downright change in your life. If there is not, you may seriously doubt whether you have been converted or not. Was not Paul changed? Look at him! "And he trembling and astonished, said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do" (vs. 6). He is at once obedient. You have immediately dependence and obedience, the characteristic features of the new life that was started in his soul. Quickened by the life-giving voice of the Son of God, risen from the dead, the existence of that new life in his soul was demonstrated by the question, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" I have done my own will till now, but from this time forth I am Thine.

The Lord Christ says, "Rise, and stand upon thy feet; for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee; delivering thee from the people and from the Gentiles," who did not care for the gospel, "unto whom I now send thee." And what was he to do? "To open their eyes," he got his mission, "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 them which are sanctified by faith that is in me" (Acts 26:16-18). Prostrate on the ground, and blinded, he asks, "What wilt thou have me to do?" Go to the Gentiles, says Jesus, and "open their eyes."

That is what a man wants first of all. Have your eyes been opened to the fact that you are a man on the road to an eternal hell? It is a great thing when a man gets his eyes opened. He sees his danger. Are your eyes opened to see your need of Christ, and to see your danger? May God open them tonight, and turn you from the power of Satan to God! What is the state of the man who is not converted? His eyes are shut, and he is under the power of Satan.

Paul knew full well the terrible power that had blinded him, till this heavenly light illuminated him, and he got his mission, to go to the Gentiles, "to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light" —thank God for that!— "and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me." Hearing these words, he rises and goes forth with a mission to carry the most lovely news that ever mortal man could bear. What news? That there was a Saviour in glory, who had power and grace to save the worst man in the world; that there is a Saviour in glory for the most godless young man in this hall. If you turn to Him, and have faith in Him, I will tell you what you get, — "the forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith?" And who are they? They are called saints frequently in the New Testament. There are two classes in this hall—in this world—tonight—the saints and the sinners. And who are the saints? Those who are in heaven, you reply. Thank God, there are some there, but there are many still on earth, and I would like to see you among them.

Up to this point Saul had been persecuting them. "How much evil he hath done to thy saints," says Ananias to the Lord about him. But who are the saints? Those who belong to Jesus! You would not perhaps like to be called, or take the ground of being, a saint. I will tell you why. If you call yourself a saint, those around about you will look to see whether your walk and conversation is like that of a saint, i.e. saintly, suited to God. Quite right. I think it is perfectly fair. Observe! I am either a sinner on my road to eternal judgment, or a saint on the way to glory. Every man in this hall tonight is either a hell-bound sinner, or a glory-bound saint. Which are you? That is a terrible sharp line to draw, you say. Yes, I admit it, but so long as it defines the road you are on, it suffices. I say again, every young man in this audience is either a hell-bound sinner in his sins, or a glory-bound saint through faith in the blood of Christ. Which are you? I am not hell-bound; through grace I am heaven-bound. Go with me to glory! I won't go with you to hell. Come with me to Christ: I won't go with you to judgment. It is far better to heed the message this man got, as he rose up out of the dust, than to disregard it. W. T. P. W.

The Gospel Messenger: Volume 12, Jesus and the Resurrection. (17:18)

(Acts 17:18.)

IMPELLED by the terror of the Lord and constrained by the love of Christ, behold Paul at Athens. Think of the matchless splendor which burst upon his view as he rolled his eye round the enchanting outlook that encircled Mars Hill. Standing on its summit, there was spread out before him, on one hand, a lovely prospect of mountains, islands, seas, and skies; on the other, lay, within range of his vision, the plain of Marathon bristling with historic associations. Behind him towered the lofty Acropolis, crowned with the pride of Grecian architecture. There, in the zenith of their glory and the perfection of their beauty, stood those peerless temples, the very fragments of which are regarded by modern travelers with an idolatry almost equal to that which reared them. Stretched along the plain below him, and reclining her head on the slope of the neighboring hills, was Athens, mother of the arts and sciences. The Porch, the Lyceum, and the Grove, with the statues of departed sages, and the forms of their living disciples, were all within the sweep of the apostle's eye. How admirers of classic lore would have envied his position and gloried in the entrancing scenery! But there stood Paul, as insensible to all this grandeur as if nothing was before him but the treeless, turfless desert. A light above the brightness of the sun at noon had eclipsed all that for him. A zeal of a different kind filled his breast. The situation had no charms for him. He felt none of its fascinations. Nay, a pang went through his very soul, and his spirit was stirred to its depths when he saw "the city wholly given to idolatry." The Athenians might be at the height of civilization and literature, but he saw them as they really were, in the very depth of misery, having no hope, and without God in the world.

The great apostle of the Gentiles here actually bewailed a city of philosophers with more intense grief than any of us ever did a horde of savages. Inspite of all the pomp of earthly magnificence with which he was surrounded, to him it seemed nothing but a ghastly scene of death, where men lay dead in trespasses and in sins, and all that the dim light of philosophy could afford only served as the lamp of the sepulcher. And what was Paul's antidote for that state of things?

JESUS AND THE RESURRECTION.

Such is God's provision for the rich and the poor, the wise and the ignorant. How many in this advanced age appear to think that, with civilization, education, and culture, nothing more is needed. They seem to forget that an educated sinner requires salvation quite as much as an illiterate one, that what a man dead in sins needs is life not letters, and what a man alive in sins must have is justification from all things and peace with God, not scholastic information, however extensive. No class is more difficult to reach than this. They are well nigh unapproachable. Divine things are kept at arm's-length, and as for Jesus, that name, sweet as it sounds in a believer's ear, never passes their lips. Yet they have a claim upon us. Their souls are precious, and they are part of the very world that God so loved as to give His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.

Has it ever occurred to you, my dear cultured friend, how thoroughly what Paul preached to the Athenian philosophers of old meets your case? "He preached unto them Jesus and the resurrection." In other words, he offered them a Saviour, and this same Jesus is a Saviour for you. His very name implies it. "He was called Jesus," "for he shall save his people from their sins," and on the cross He died for our sins

according to the Scriptures, He was buried and rose again the third day according to the Scriptures. Paul accordingly proclaimed "Jesus," but did not stop there. It was Jesus and the resurrection. He is a Saviour surely, but not that only. He is a Saviour mighty to save, He was triumphant over death. Alone He went into the fight for us, but the issue of the conflict was neither doubtful nor uncertain. The foe was crushed, and the victory decisive and complete all along the line. He abolished death, rose a Conqueror, and brought life and incorruptibility to light.

This is something outside the sphere of all science. It is the demonstration of a power entirely above and beyond natural law. It is Divine power, Resurrection does not follow the ordinary sequence of nature. It is the supernatural intervention of a power that is paramount to death. Moreover it is a fact which is past debate and admits of no contradiction. That God should become a man, that the Son should be revealed as man on earth, that He should die as man on the cross, that He should rise from the dead, that He should ascend as man in a spiritual and glorified body to heaven, assuring those who believed on Him that they would be with Him, and like Him—these are facts which no science can ever give, and no philosophy can ever teach you. Indeed, the fatal defect in both these is that each starts with the assumption that man is a being in his normal state going on from one excelsior stage of progress to another, instead of a fallen creature, who has departed from God, and must either return to Him or be judged if he refuses. But, thank God, in the midst of man's ruin He has provided a remedy that more than covers it. Paul boldly announced it in the ears of instructed men at Athens—"Jesus and the resurrection;" and it is indispensable for learned and unlearned in our day if they are ever to be eternally blessed.

You may ask, however, What does Jesus and the resurrection mean? How does it apply to the salvation of a man's soul? Let me tell you how it was brought home to a young man of singular intellectual attainments, and with an exceptionally promising future. His university career was crowned with success, but in the too eager pursuit of his studies, and incessant application to books, the strain had been too much for his health. Examined by his medical adviser, he was immediately ordered a bracing climate and complete rest from mental work. It came like a shock on the family circle. The anxiety of a fond parent lost no time in getting him away as advised, hopeful that the thoroughness of the change might restore him to his wonted vigor. But alas! matters did not improve. His strength, on the contrary, was fast failing, and his life was ebbing away. Unable to leave his room, it was, to one of his accomplishments, a bitter disappointment, as he lay on his bed, to think of this early blighting of his brilliant prospects, and the, utter collapse of all his well-laid plans for this life. Still nothing now remained but to face the worst. A devoted laborer for God happened to be there, though the young gentleman was rather averse to be spoken to about spiritual things, but something he had heard concerning this particular servant of the Lord induced him to desire that his father should invite him to come and see him. He was soon by his bedside, only to find that he had covered his head with the bed-clothes. He quietly took out his Bible, and opening it at the tenth chapter of Romans, began to read, "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they might be saved." A brief pause ensued, and then raising his voice, he said, "Young man, that is my desire for you, take down the bed-clothes."

He instantly relaxed and tremblingly uncovered, when a pale, anxious face was revealed, looking imploringly at the visitor who had thus in so kind a manner broken down his reserve, and continuing, inquired—

"What is your trouble?"

The reply was—"My sins, my sins. I have been leaving God out. I have been forgetting Christ."

"Well, then," said the Lord's servant, "hearken to what I am about to read. These people were not saved. What was it that prevented them from being saved?" He read slowly and distinctly. "For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish a righteousness of their own, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone that believeth." Proceeding, he said, "Now you see there is a way not to be saved as well as a way to be saved."

"Yes," answered the young man, "that seems clear."

"What, then, is the way not to be saved? Hear while I read: 'For Moses describeth the righteousness which is of the law, That the man that doeth those things shall live by them.' But no one ever lived by them, because he could not do them, and he that offendeth in one point is guilty of all. Hence if you have offended in one point, the law can only curse instead of bless. There is no hope, then, on the principle of doing. But what is the way to be saved?" and then with a pathos which went to the young man's heart, he said, "Listen, as for your very life, while I tell you the way to be saved." This was the decisive moment. He read feelingly: "But the righteousness which is of faith speaketh on this wise, say not in thine heart, Who shall ascend into heaven? (that is, to bring Christ down from above:) or, Who shall descend into the deep? (that is, to bring up Christ again from the dead.) But what saith it? The word is nigh, thee, even in thy mouth, and in thy heart: that is, the word of faith, which we preach; that if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved."

He followed every word with intense interest, a new light broke into the dying young man's soul, and grasping the hand of the visitor he breathed out, "Saved, saved." It was a solemn but an eventful time. His distress was gone, a calm peace filled his breast, and a glory seemed to light up his countenance. His regrets were over. He had found satisfaction in Christ.

The true significance, my friend, ought to be evident now of what Paul meant by "Jesus and the resurrection," and the connection between that and salvation. "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved."

On calling next day, the young man said, "I am now going to meet God, I shall soon be in His presence, but having already met Him in Christ, and now resting in His word that cannot lie, 'thou shalt be saved,' it is going home, not death."

Soon after he went to be with Christ, which is far better. Can you, dear reader, say, "Christ for me"? Can you say, "Jesus is mine"?

W. S. F.

