

Lecture 9 — A young man named Saul.

Acts 7: 55-60, Acts 9: 1-30.

Young Men of Scripture.

Nine addresses to young men.

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We have here the historical account of the conversion of this remarkable man. A more remarkable conversion, I suppose, there never was, because, at the moment when the grace of God met him, he was doing all he possibly could to blot out the name of the Lord Jesus Christ from the earth; and that is the reason why he says, and says with truth: "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, OF WHOM I AM THE CHIEF" (1 Tim. 1: 15). Now, was he a scandalous sinner? No! Was he openly immoral? No! Was he a gross liver? No! Was he a man who set at defiance the laws of man and of God? No! And yet he says he was the chief of sinners. Now, it is very important to notice this, because Paul was in reality a most religious man; but it was religion without Christ. Nay, more, it was religion opposed to Christ. Of course he was a Jew. He had been born, bred, and brought up in the faith of the Jew as to the unity of Jehovah. Consequently he denied the divinity of Jesus, when He, as Son of God, appeared on earth.

The Jews regarded Jesus as a blasphemous impostor, claiming to be equal with God. Hence they rejected Him, crowned Him with thorns, and slew Him; but God raised Him from the dead. After He had been seen of witnesses for forty days, He ascended, going as Man into the glory of God. The Saviour being seated at the right hand of God, the Holy Ghost came down, and the testimony to a glorified Christ was commenced on earth, and continued from the second chapter of Acts to the seventh, a little of which I read to you. There Stephen, a remarkable man, quiet, devoted, earnest, but a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, gives a magnificent witness to the nation of Israel as to Christ, winding up his address by the statement, "Ye do always resist the Holy Ghost; as your fathers did, so do ye." The guilt of the nation was complete. They had broken the law, persecuted the prophets, slain the forerunners of Jesus, betrayed and murdered Him, and now resisted the Holy Ghost. At this they gnashed on him with their teeth; but Stephen, "being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, and said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God." What a wonderful thing for a man on earth to say!

At this point his listeners stopped their ears, ran upon him with one accord, and cast him out of the city to slay him. They stoned him, and the witnesses, who said he was blaspheming, took off their garments, the more to free their arms to cast these stones at Stephen. They did not

want their garments kicked about, however, so they laid them down "at a young man's feet whose name was Saul." He did not rush into the crowd to fling stones, but he consented to the deed. He said tacitly, "Let that man die, for he has said he has seen Jesus the Son of man standing on the right hand of God, which is an utter impossibility: I consent to his death." Stephen, stoned thus brutally, dies like his Master, praying for his murderers. His Master had said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do"; and the servant, in the moment of his death, prays, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." He could not add, "for they know not what they do," for too much had come out about Christ at this time.

There follows on this a terrible persecution against the Church, and Saul not only consents to it, but from that moment becomes the active embodiment of Jewish hatred, and determination to blot out the name of Jesus. When telling the story of his conversion at a later date to Agrippa, he says, "I verily thought with myself that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth" (Acts 26: 9). This doubtless he did with all good conscience. But mark! conscience is no guide to a man. Conscience is like the helm of a ship, and if you have a correct chart, and a good steersman, the helm is useful in guiding the course of a ship; but if you leave the helm to be tossed about by wind and wave, the ship will go on the rocks. We hear now-a-days that if a man walks according to his conscience, all will be well for time and eternity. That doctrine is not divine, and will not do. Conscience, I repeat, is no guide. Here Saul was "in all good conscience" doing everything he could against the name of Jesus. He becomes the missionary of the hatred of the Jews against the name of Jesus; and not content with ravaging the assembly in Jerusalem, he must needs go to foreign cities.

In the ninth of Acts we find him setting out for Damascus, where he learns there are a few Christians — a few believers in the Lord Jesus Christ — a few who love the heavenly Saviour. This young man, full of Jewish fire and zeal, is seen "breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord" Ere starting on his strange missionary enterprise he goes to the high priest and asks credentials. He "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 bound unto Jerusalem" (ver. 2). What a task! What a business! To bring men and women, who loved Jesus, bound to Jerusalem, and compel them to blaspheme His holy name or die (Acts 26: 9-11).

I wonder if some hater of Jesus, legally authorised to bind and deliver to prison all that love Jesus in Edinburgh, were to appear here this night, what would you and I say? Would you confess or deny Him? Would you say, I do love that blessed Saviour, I really love His name. If not yet on the Lord's side, I pray you, as this year dies away tonight, let your heart be Christ's henceforth. I do not say you are pursuing the same mad course that the zealot Paul was pursuing here. You see what he did. He took a missionary tour to bring people to prison and death who loved the name of the Lord Jesus, and that is why he speaks of himself as "the chief of sinners" (1 Tim. 1: 15). He knew that he was persecuting Christ in the persons of His people. This made him "the chief of sinners," but it was this same act that made him the chief of legalists, for, in another part of his writings, he says, "If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more: I . . . as touching the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless" (Phil. 2: 4-6). Paul touches, if I may so say, the two poles of human experience. He reaches the top of the tree of human righteousness, and goes to the lowest depth of human guilt by the same act — persecuting the

saints. What was the summit of the tree of human righteousness? As a Jew, thinking he was doing God service by slaying those who loved Jesus. As to legal human righteousness, the finishing touch was the persecuting of the Church. How was he the chief of sinners? Because persecuting the Church! Look, he has got to the top and to the bottom of the ladder of human righteousness. Hence he can say to the legalist, I have gone further than you, but I have given up all and taken my place as lost, and Jesus has saved me. To the man who is writhing under a sense of his sin and guilt Paul says, I am a greater sinner than you are, and yet Christ saved me.

Now let us see the remarkable way in which the Lord meets him. 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" (ver. 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 splendour 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 marvellous thing also is it that the grace of Christ should take up a man like you or me, who has 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?" (ver. 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 Saul? 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 for ever 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 fulness 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" (ver. 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.

I do not wonder at a gentleman's gardener being a little upset when he came back from doing what his master had bidden him. His master's favourite dog had a litter of whelps. Pups, as you know, are born blind, but usually open their eyes about the ninth day. The ninth day passed, and the fifteenth, and twentieth, but never a pup opened an eye. The master at length said to his man, "They are no use, they are all blind; drown the whole lot of them." The gardener obeyed his master, and casting them into a pond, drowned the whelps. After a few minutes his master met him, looking awfully upset. "Did you do what I told you?" he asked. "I did, sir," replied the man, "but I did not like the job." "But they were all blind, and no use." "Yes," said the man, "but every one of them opened their eyes just as they went down." Little good it will do you, my friend, to open your eyes just as you pass into eternity; and it is just when you go into hell unconverted that your eyes will be opened, depend upon it. The eyes are opened too late when there. May God show you now your ruin, and your need, and the danger in which you are! In one of his epistles, Paul says: "If our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: in whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them" (2 Cor. 4: 3, 4).

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 sin, 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 is a Saviour in glory, who has 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 to take the ground of being, a saint. I will tell you why. If you call yourself a saint, those round 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 my 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 terribly 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.

I don't think Saul was in the full liberty of the Gospel at that moment. That came three days after. Observe now — "The men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no man." "They heard not the voice of him that spake to me," Paul says (Acts 22: 9). When Christ meets a man, in saving grace, he speaks directly to him. I was preaching the Gospel in a hall in this city not long ago, and at the close of the meeting a poor troubled woman came to me and said, "Somebody has been telling you all my history during the past week." "No," I replied, "I had no information about you from anybody." "But it must be," she said; "you have been telling me my life, and the history of my sins during the past week." "I knew nothing, but God knew all, and He has sent a message of mercy and pardon to you," was all I could reply. It is a great thing when a man hears the voice of the Son of God. Have you heard it? Saul heard it, and, thank God! I have heard it.

The Lord then said to him, "Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do. . . . And Saul arose from the earth, and when his eyes were opened he saw no man." Man is out of sight. But "they led him by the hand, and brought him unto Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink" (vers. 8, 9). Fancy, he was in such deep exercise that he could neither eat, drink, nor, I should suppose, sleep for three days and three nights. I would be deeply thankful if I heard you were so anxious about your soul. There is no sleep in hell. There is no food in hell, and there is no drink in hell, and there is no getting out of it. The men who go into it will never get out, "and they have no rest day nor night" (Rev. 14: 11). That is a solemn word, and an awful outlook for eternity surely. Three days and three nights without sleep is a terrible thing, but what will an eternity of that nature be? Unsaved young man, you are journeying into it.

Think not lightly of this abstinence in Paul's case. He was in the deepest exercise, as he reviewed the past, his awful opposition to Christ, his torture of His people, his utter blindness under Satan's power. He passed through deep exercise of mind, heart, and conscience, and profound tumult of soul. That is what it was. I don't think that a man, when he is first converted, gets into the joy of the Gospel immediately. The deeper the exercise of conscience the more lasting and real will the work be in the soul, and the more steady and firm will the walk, be. But see the way the Lord meets him. There was in Damascus a man named Ananias. The Lord has always got servants to do His work, blessed be His name! Ananias was free to serve the Lord.

What a happy thing it is to be a servant of the Lord. "And to him said the Lord in a vision, Ananias. And he said, Behold, I am here, Lord" (ver. 10). He was ready to do anything the Lord wanted. What a blessed thing to be permitted to serve the Lord. "And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go unto the street which is called Straight." Ah, He knew the street where Saul lived, and He knows the street where you live. "Go unto the street which is called Straight, and enquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul, of Tarsus; for, behold, he prayeth" (ver. 11). These days and nights he had spent in prayer, looking to God for mercy, for grace, for deliverance, for salvation. Light, I believe, he had; but he had not got salvation, in the full sense of the word. He was not fully delivered, and he spent his time praying.

And don't you think God delights to answer such prayer? It is His joy to do so. If this is like your case, go on praying, the answer will come some day, as it came to the telegraph-clerk. He was very anxious about his soul, but got no peace, comfort, or rest, although one Sunday he heard three preachers. He went home to his lodgings very anxious. How could he be saved? He knew his sins were unforgiven, and he got little sleep. Monday morning he went to his work in a telegraph box on a railway line. Shortly after he arrived there came the signal that told him his station was called. As the message was received, he wrote down the name of the sender and the addressee. Then came the message — "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace." He dropped his pencil, and looked at the telegram. Though designed for an anxious servant girl, who also got peace through its words, it was God's message to him. He said afterwards "That 'LAMB OF GOD,' that 'REDEMPTION,' that 'BLOOD,' those 'RICHES OF His GRACE' went right into my poor heart, and no one in the whole world could have had greater joy than I had that Monday morning."

Ananias hesitates to go, for he could scarcely credit that a man like Saul, who had been a persecutor, could be anxious. But ere he arrives, he is seen by Saul, in a heavenly vision, to be on the road. He "hath seen in a vision a man named Ananias coming in, and putting his hand on him, that he may receive his sight" (ver. 12). Beautiful grace of Christ! He prepares Saul for what would take place, thus confirming his faith. "And Ananias answered, Lord, I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he hath done to thy saints at Jerusalem: and here he hath authority from the chief priests to bind all that call on thy name" (vers. 13, 14). Is it not lovely to note the freedom of intimacy, and the way the servant can speak to his Lord and Master? There is perfect freedom of intercourse between the Master and the servant, and the Lord, in no way offended, says: "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. And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house" (vers. 15, 16). Of course, Saul is ready for him, for, in a vision, he has seen Ananias coming; and I have no doubt as Ananias asked for Saul, and was shown into the room where he was, Saul would say, I was waiting for him. Ananias lays his hand upon him, saying, "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" (ver. 17). What a thrill of joy would pass through that man's soul as Ananias called him "Brother Saul"! Could you be truthfully called "Brother"? Further, would you glory in being a brother? I glory in that beautiful name. It is the name of the family of God.

I will tell you what took place in my own history. I was converted in London on Lord's Day the 16th December 1860, and I went the next Saturday into Somersetshire, and on Sunday came across a little company of believers. They had heard of my conversion, and they also knew what a thoroughly worldly man I had been before that. Well, they were going to take the Lord's Supper together, and they asked me if I would like to break bread with them. "What," said I, "I break bread? I have only been converted a week. It is far too serious a matter for me to think of sitting down at the Lord's Table." So I refused my privilege at the time, but I could not tell you the joy that filled my soul — like Saul's when he heard himself called "Brother Saul" — when I learned that these dear children of God would take me into their company.

There is nothing more blessed than to be numbered among the people of God. Oh, what joy if only I were assured that I could address you as "Brother." Deep must have been Saul's joy to hear Ananias say, "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." What happened to Saul was very remarkable. "And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales; and he received sight forthwith, and arose and was baptized" (ver 18). He confessed Christ. He publicly, openly, and honestly confessed the Lord Jesus Christ as his Saviour. He says elsewhere, "O king Agrippa, I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision" (Acts 26: 19). And we read here, "And straightway he preached Jesus in the synagogues that he is the Son of God" (ver. 20). He went and told others of Jesus. If you have been converted to God, your joy and privilege is to tell others of the blessed Saviour who has saved you.

And now, if you have never yielded your heart to the Lord, as I this evening close this series of addresses to you dear young fellows, I pray you turn to the Lord now. I charge you by the love of God, by the reality of the sufferings of Christ, those sufferings which He endured to redeem you, — I charge you by the joys of heaven, and the sorrows of hell, — by the blessedness of heaven's rest, and by the solemnity of coming judgment, — by the light that shines from the face of a glorified Saviour, and by the blackness and darkness that await the impenitent soul, — I charge you by all these to yield your heart to the Lord tonight, if you have never done it before. Could you possibly have a better time, a better moment, for doing so than this, when the old year — spent in the service of sin and of Satan — is just passing away? Let not 1893 rise in the judgment-day as a witness against you. I implore you, make up your minds, decide for glory this night, receive the Saviour now, believe on Him now, and go hence upon the Lord's side, a witness to His grace and looking for His coming. You may never, no, never, get another opportunity to decide for Christ. Let it be tonight; and tomorrow rise, and begin a new year, a new life, a new history! Serve the Lord, and the Lord only. Oh, how blessed it is to be on the Lord's side!