

Imprisoned for Christ

The Simplicity Of Conversion

Acts 22:12-16

As Paul made his defense to a mob of angry Jews seeking his death, he told them about his conversion. Events leading to his salvation began on his way to Damascus. The Lord Jesus spoke to him in a bright light, instructing him to go on to Damascus where he would be told what to do to be saved. Blinded by the light, Paul was led by the hand into the city. There he met Ananias. But let's allow Paul to tell his story.

“And a certain Ananias, a man who was devout by the standard of the Law, and well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, came to me, and standing near said to me, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight!’ And at that very time I looked up at him. And he said, ‘The God of our fathers has appointed you to know His will, and to see the Righteous One, and to hear an utterance from His mouth. For you will be a witness for Him to all men of what you have seen and heard. And now why do you delay? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.’”

There is nothing more profound than God's plan of salvation. In it there is such love, mercy, and justice as cannot be comprehended by mortal man. God's plan is so comprehensive it answers the need of all sinful men. It demanded a price beyond our ability to pay, beyond our ability to understand. But have you noticed the simple means by which God offers it to us?

First, God's redemptive plan is expressed to us in words, the simple symbols of our own, everyday communication. God could have saved Paul in an instant on that road, but He chose to have Paul hear words whereby he would be saved.

Next, God uses men to convey those words. Paul even had to wait until he could meet his teacher. Paul's conversion was brought about in the normal course of human lives.

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Third, God allows the success or failure of His plan to be decided by the will of each individual. Paul had to submit his will to the Savior in order to be saved. God's efforts, even the price paid in the sacrifice of His Son, have no value in your life unless you are willing to submit to Him.

And, finally, the steps of initial conversion are culminated in man's submission to water baptism. That is where God washes away past sins. Without it, Paul and every Christian would still be lost in sin.

Wasn't it Paul himself who later said to the Corinthians that God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise? Through that foolishness He saves those who believe.

Interrupted Defense

Acts 22:17-22

Bound by Roman chains, Paul related the events of his conversion to a crowd of angry Jews. Then he continued his defense with these words:

“And it came about when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I fell into a trance, and I saw Him saying to me, ‘Make haste, and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about Me.’ And I said, ‘Lord, they themselves understand that in one synagogue after another I used to imprison and beat those who believed in Thee. And when the blood of Thy witness Stephen was being shed, I also was standing by approving, and watching out for the cloaks of those who were slaying him.’ And he said to me, ‘Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’”

At this point Paul's audience interrupted his speech. They would not listen any further. “Away with such a fellow from the earth,” they cried out with loud voices. “He should not be allowed to

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live!” This is reminiscent of Stephen’s speech back in Acts 7. He, like Paul, was also making defense for his life, but was not allowed to finish. I wonder what else they would have said given the chance.

Before judgment is reached for or against anyone, he should be given a full hearing. Of course, we hardly expect a mob to hear a man out. A mob, such as accused Paul that day, operates out of passion, not out of justice or fairness. But we find in that mob’s willingness to accept unsubstantiated accusations and their refusal to hear Paul’s defense, reasons to recognize our own individual responsibility before God to hear all the testimony before passing judgment.

There is no virtue in answering before a matter is fully heard. Proverbs 18:13 advises, “He who gives an answer before he hears, It is a folly and a shame to him.” But how quickly we will answer before hearing the end, or how easily we will jump to a conclusion before hearing both sides. Someone says, “Did you hear the awful thing Joe did yesterday?” “Really!” we respond, “It sounds just like him. I suspected he was capable of that all along!”

Proverbs 18:17 cautions with this instruction, “The first to plead his case seems just, Until another comes and examines him.” This serves as a reminder of our own experience. One person’s story sounds good until another is told. In other words, until you have heard all the facts, both the complaint and the defense, you are not in a position to render a fair and impartial judgment. Love, the foundation of the Christian’s faith, demands full audience for everyone.

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Prejudice's Evil

Acts 22:22-23

A large crowd of Jews listened to Paul's defense for a few moments and then cut him off. They all began shouting, "Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he should not be allowed to live!" As they cried out in their rage, they threw off their cloaks and tossed dust into the air.

Prejudice drove the crowd on that day long ago. No, Paul was not of a different race. He was a Jew as were they. His skin was the same color. It was his creed that was different, though it had not always been. A Jew among Jews, he understood their beliefs. He had been trained in the finest points of their doctrine. In fact, the substance of Paul's new creed was born out of their rich history as a God fearing people. Their own prophets had prophesied that of which Paul desperately tried to convince them. Paul's new creed was not written on men's scrolls, nor even on Moses' tablets of stone. It was written in the hearts of men. His creed was Christ, and they would not accept Christ.

Frequently someone will say, "Times sure have changed." In many ways, of course, that is true. But some things never change. At the top of the list is human behavior. Prejudice has always been an ugly stain on the record of human deeds. Whether of differences in race, color or creed, or of some lesser crime - a disability or unusual appearance - prejudice can rear its head in most any circle. And where prejudice is, more evil is close at hand.

Did you notice the extremes to which Paul's tormentors were driven? "Away with such a fellow from the earth," they demanded. "He should not be allowed to live!" What had Paul done worthy of death? He was not a murderer. He was not preying upon society, spreading destruction and terror. Prejudice says, "If you are not just like me, then away with you. We don't want you around. We don't want you to exist."

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It is prejudice that should not exist. Prejudice is evil. Prejudice is sin. Even “little” prejudices. If not stamped out completely, they grow and mature. And full grown, prejudice is capable of every heinous crime of men against men. It must be stopped early.

Extermination cannot be legislated by a government. That helps. Real extermination, however, must take place in the human heart, individual by individual. It is not easy. It takes careful self examination. And discipline. We must change our thinking. What are you doing to rid the world of prejudice? It starts with each of us. In our homes and in our churches. With God’s help we can do it!

The Power Of A Question

Acts 22:24-26

The Jewish mob was in an uproar. They threw dust in the air and shouted, “Away with him. He should not be allowed to live!” Of course, they spoke of Paul. The Roman commander, who had allowed Paul to make his defense to the mob, stepped in. He ordered Paul brought into the barracks where he could examine him by scourging. He wanted to find out why the crowd shouted against him so. We naturally protest such cruel methods, but the commander was only doing what was normal then. Interrogation by tortuous beating was not uncommon in those days.

At the officer’s command, Paul was stretched out and tied down with thongs. Before the scourging began, however, Paul spoke to a centurion standing nearby. “Is it lawful,” Paul asked, “For you to scourge a man who is a Roman and uncondemned?” When the centurion heard this, he went to the commander and asked, “What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman.” With his question, Paul turned the tide of events and averted his further mistreatment.

Paul was aware of the power of a well placed question. He could have demanded his rights! He could have threatened the commander. “I’ll go to your superiors. I’ll have you removed from

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your command for mistreating a Roman citizen.” Of course, Paul didn’t say those things. He simply asked the right question. Respectfully, but pointedly. Is there a lesson here for you and me?

Jesus often taught this lesson of the power of a question. Some of His most profound teaching was driven home by a question. As Jesus taught Nicodemus of the kingdom of God, he asked, “If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how shall you believe if I tell you heavenly things?” (John 3:13)

Jesus helped one of His apostles see His divinity by asking, “Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip?..... Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me?” (John 14:9,10) Jesus stumped those who challenged His authority by answering a question with a question. “I will ask you one thing too,” He said, “Which if you tell Me, I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John was from what source, from heaven or from men?” (Matthew 21:24,25) He called Peter to publicly make that good confession by asking, “Whom do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:15) And later, He challenged Peter to greater service by asking, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?” (John 21)

There is power in the right question. Knowing what to ask and when to ask it is a skill that every wise person cultivates.

Citizenship Has Privileges

Acts 22:27-29

Bound with thongs and stretched out to be beaten, Paul questioned the Roman commander’s right to scourge a man who was an uncondemned Roman citizen. The commander said to him, “Tell me, are you a Roman? Paul answered, “Yes.” Doubtless skeptical of Paul’s claim, the commander said, “I acquired this citizenship with a large sum of money.” In other words, the commander was saying, “It cost me a lot of money to become a Ro-