The Conversion of Saul

"As he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?"
—Acts 9:3,4

IN PART TWO OF THIS SE-ries entitled the "The Heavenly Call," we reflected upon our Heavenly Father's invitation to Gentile believers who were living during the period of the Early Church. In Part 3, we will address the special call to the great Apostle Paul who was a Jew, "Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee."—Phil. 3:5

REPLACEMENT FOR JUDAS

By his miraculous conversion to become a faithful follower of our Lord Jesus, Paul proved to be one of the most powerful and important voices in connection with the heavenly calling that has ever been proclaimed throughout this present Gospel Age. He had been personally and directly chosen by our

resurrected and ascended Lord Jesus to assume a major role in connection with that calling. (Acts 9:15) He also became the twelfth apostle, taking the place of Judas Iscariot who had betrayed Jesus during the closing scenes of his earthly ministry.

The apostle recounts for us some of the circumstances that surrounded this most remarkable event. He said, "It came to pass, that, as I made my journey, and was come nigh unto Damascus about noon, suddenly there shone from heaven a great light round about me. And I fell unto the ground, and heard a voice saying unto me, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And I answered, Who art thou, Lord? And he said unto me, I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom thou persecutest."—Acts 22:6-8

APOSTLE TO THE GENTILES

The Apostle Paul had been called by the Lord to address a specific group of his followers. He explained this in his letter to the Church at Rome, where he wrote, "I speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify mine office." (Rom. 11:13) This proclamation was remarkable evidence of the Heavenly Father's ultimate will concerning Paul's calling. It also shows that it was God's will that the call was to be extended to those who were not Jews, and Paul was thus enabled by his ministry to carry that invitation forward to the Gentile believers.

Further to this, we learn, too, that during his ministry he was given supernatural visions, as we read, "How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter." (II Cor. 12:4) To help him carry

forward the heavenly calling to the Gentiles, he received the Holy Spirit of God that gave him the ability to speak in foreign tongues.—I Cor. 14:18

Paul's extensive and prolific writings make up a major portion of the Greek New Testament. His frequent references to the Hebrew Old Testament scriptures and types also provide us with the most spiritual and meaningful commentary on those scriptures that has ever been written. In Acts 13: 9, Luke recorded that the apostle had two names, "Saul, (who also is called Paul,)" and it has been suggested that as the apostle to the Gentiles he chose to be known by his Greek name Paul, rather than by his Hebrew name Saul.

EVENTS RECORDED BY LUKE

Divine providence has provided us with an important and accurate account of Jesus' earthly ministry through the detailed writings of Luke, who was also a physician. (Col. 4:14) He was a travelling companion to Paul (Acts 20:4-6; Philem. vs. 24), and by his authorship we learn most of what is now available about the life and ministry of the great apostle.

The Gospel of Luke (Luke 1:3,4) and The Acts of the Apostles (Acts 1:1) were both written by Luke. Both were addressed to Theophilus, who was evidently a Christian believer of high standing. Further to this, Luke takes up his account of Jesus' ascension (Acts 1:2), where he had left off in his Gospel (Luke 24:50-53), where he provides additional and important details.

THE MAN PAUL

We first learn of Saul at the time when Brother Stephen was stoned to death. The account was

recorded by Luke, who wrote, "The witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul." (Acts 7:58) This overly zealous Pharisee had willingly participated in young Stephen's death by guarding the garments of those who were hurling the stones that took his life.

Luke further writes, "Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him. As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison."—Acts 8:1-3

Saul had a special reason for wanting to travel to Damascus. He was not satisfied to limit his activity against members of the Early Church at Jerusalem, and he sought to pursue some of those who may have escaped. "Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the 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 unto Jerusalem."—chap. 9:1,2

A BLINDING LIGHT

While en route to Damascus with his travelling companions, he was stopped and suddenly struck blind by a brilliant light from heaven. When he realized that the one confronting him was the Lord Jesus whom he was opposing, he was greatly

frightened and confused. "The men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man. And Saul arose from the earth; and when his eyes were opened, he saw no man: but they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink."—vss. 7-9

SAUL MEETS ANANIAS

As a result of this very powerful and moving experience, Saul had a complete change of heart. He had lost his misdirected zeal, self-confidence, and self-assurance. At the time this incident took place, there was a disciple to whom the Lord had already appeared in a vision, and instructed him to go to Saul. "There was a certain disciple at Damascus, named Ananias; and to him said the Lord in a vision, Ananias. And he said, Behold, I am here, Lord. And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight, and enquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul, of Tarsus: for, behold, he prayeth, And hath seen in a vision a man named Ananias coming in, and putting his hand on him, that he might receive his sight."—vss. 10-12

The prayers of Saul did not go unheeded. We learn, "Then 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. But the Lord said unto him, 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 shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake."—vss. 13-16

ISRAEL'S FAVOR ENDING

This episode in the life of Paul occurred about one year before the last week of Israel's exclusive favor was to end. In these words to Ananias, our Lord gave one of the first direct indications that Gentiles would be invited to share in the spiritual body of Christ. Ananias did as he had been instructed—"Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on him said, 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 Spirit."—vs. 17

It is of particular note that Ananias greeted the blind man Saul with the words, 'Brother Saul.' His eyesight was immediately restored, and he was immersed into Christ. (vs. 18) Having been without food for three days and nights, he ate and was strengthened, and stayed with the disciples at Damascus for several more days. (vs. 19) Luke then informs us, "Straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God."—vs. 20

TAUGHT BY GOD

At the time the historian wrote this account, he did not give details as to how Saul obtained his very deep understanding of the Scriptures. However, we do learn some of this information from the apostle's own writings. In his letter to the Galatians, he confirms his appointment as an apostle by Jesus and the Heavenly Father. He wrote, "Paul, an apostle, (not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised him from the dead)."—Gal. 1:1 *(Continued on page 35)*

(Continued from page 31) The apostle then proceeded to write about his complete conversion from that of obeying and pleasing men and his fervent zeal for Judaism, to that of obeying and pleasing God. He proclaimed, "As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed. For do I now persuade men, or God? or do I seek to please men? for if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ. But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man. For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ. For ye have heard of my conversation in time past in the Jews' religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it: And profited in the Jews' religion above many my equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers."—Gal. 1:9-14

He then recalled, "When it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace, To reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood: Neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me; but I went into Arabia, and returned again unto Damascus."—vss. 15-17

The apostle speaks of God having sent him into Arabia to receive very special knowledge through direct revelations. This was a great honor and privilege, but it did not make him either proud or high-minded, as he later revealed in his letter to the brethren at Corinth. "I am the least of the apostles,

that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." (I Cor. 15:9) It is likely that one of the reasons why God did not instruct him to go to Jerusalem after leaving Arabia, was because of the very strong feelings that had been generated against him, and that continued to prevail there. Some still did not trust him, and might believe that he was secretly trying to entrap them in some way.

A HUMBLE SERVANT

The special calling of Paul and the direct revelations that were given to him by our Lord Jesus and the Heavenly Father are confirmed again in his letter to the Corinthians. He acknowledged that anyone who had undergone experiences such as he had might have a tendency to boast about them. He answered that possible question by saying, "Is it necessary to boast? It is not profitable indeed, but I will come even to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a man, in Christ, who above fourteen years since—(whether with a body, I know not; or without a body, I know not; God knows;)—such a one suddenly conveyed away to the Third Heaven. And I know this very man, (whether with a body, or without the body, I know not: God knows;) That he was suddenly conveyed away into paradise, and heard indescribable things spoken, which it is not possible for a man to relate. Respecting such a person I will boast; but respecting myself I will not boast, unless in my weaknesses. For if I should desire to boast, I shall not be unwise; for I will speak the truth; but I forbear, lest anyone should impute to me more than what he sees me to be, or

what he hears from me. And in order that I might not be unduly elated by the transcendancy of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me—an Angel adversary—that it might afflict me; so that I should not be much exalted."—II Cor. 12:1-7, *Wilson's Emphatic Diaglott*

SPECIAL REVELATIONS

The scriptural account does not tell us how long Paul was in Arabia receiving these special revelations, but it was perhaps several months. After this remarkable experience, we learn that he returned to Damascus, and 'straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God.' The reaction of the unbelieving Jews in Damascus was one of amazement, knowing that Saul had come there before to take the believers in Christ as his prisoners. No one, however, could refute his powerful logic when preaching of the resurrected Lord Jesus.

Not all who heard him preach appreciated his message, and a plot was underway to silence him. "After that many days were fulfilled, the Jews took counsel to kill him." (Acts 9:23) When the brethren learned of their plot, they helped the apostle to escape and make his way back to Jerusalem. However, the apostles and disciples at Jerusalem were still afraid of Paul, thinking that he had entered in among them to spy.

PAUL GOES TO JERUSALEM

Most of the brethren at Jerusalem found it difficult to accept Paul as a true brother in our Lord Jesus. However, there was one particular disciple whose name was Barnabas who realized that Paul had been truly converted to Christ, and saw the

great apostle for what he truly was. He had been convinced that his remarkable experiences had come from no other source but the Lord himself. Barnabas knew that the matter with the other brethren at Jerusalem had to be resolved, and he took the opportunity to speak with him.

He then took Paul to the apostles and insisted that they learn the truth of the matter firsthand and of the complete change that had occurred in his life.

In the scriptural account, we read of this most interesting experience in the life of the Apostle Paul. "Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared unto them how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus." (Acts 9:27) Afterward, the apostles and disciples did accept Paul, and welcomed him to become one of them by entering into their activities and speaking in the name of the Lord Jesus.

HELLENISTS SOUGHT HIS LIFE

As Paul began his ministry, his preaching brought him in contact with the Hellenists who also began plotting against him. "He spake boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus, and disputed against the Grecians: but they went about to slay him. Which when the brethren knew, they brought him down to Caesarea, and sent him forth to Tarsus. Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, were multiplied."—vss. 29-31

The word 'Grecians' in this scripture means Hellenists, and refers to those Jews who spoke Greek. Paul's logical and persuasive preaching of the Scriptures caused a disturbance among some of them. This was not unusual, because problems among them had occurred before. Luke records, "In those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration." (Acts 6:1) As was the case at Damascus, they too plotted against Paul and sought ways to take his life.

PAUL RETURNS HOME

The disciples in Jerusalem learned of the Hellenist's plot to kill Paul, and for his own safety they persuaded him to return to his home in Tarsus, which was a city in Asia Minor in the province of Cilicia. They provided for his safe escort by way of Caesarea, a port city from which he was able to sail to Tarsus. He remained there for a period of time, perhaps two years. Luke wrote, "Then had the churches rest throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, were multiplied."—Acts 9:31

GLADLY WAS THE WORD RECEIVED

After that time, the Lord caused a respite from the severe persecution that had been directed against his special people which had existed especially since the time of Jesus' crucifixion. This was no doubt very beneficial to the members of the Early Church, and it helped them in many ways. They then became more acceptable in Israel's society,

and employment was more readily obtainable to them. As a result, the communal arrangement that had been tried for a time became less important and soon ended. It is noteworthy that there is no further mention in the Scriptures concerning this type of shared close-living social structure, either continuing or being revived among those of the brethren living at that time.

The main interest of Luke, the historian, in writing an account of the Acts of the Apostles was in connection with the spiritual growth and development of the followers of our Lord. He recorded for us information that large numbers of believers were added to the church at that time. "Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls." (Acts 2:41) The increase in the numbers of brethren in the church came from all the ranks of Israel, and showed how God's blessed High Calling was yet exclusively upon that nation, even as the last prophetic week of their favor was rapidly coming to an end.

ISRAEL'S FAVOR ENDS

The nation of Israel's special time of favor ended even as it had been foretold centuries earlier by their prophets. Among God's prophets was Amos who wrote, "Hear this word that the LORD hath spoken against you, O children of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up from the land of Egypt, saying, You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities."—Amos 3:1,2

When Jesus' ministry was drawing to a close, he taught an important lesson concerning the fig tree that soon withered away. Matthew records, "When he saw a fig tree in the way, he came to it, and found nothing thereon, but leaves only, and said unto it, Let no fruit grow on thee henceforward for ever. And presently the fig tree withered away. And when the disciples saw it, they marvelled, saying, How soon is the fig tree withered away!"—Matt. 21:19,20

ISRAEL'S HOUSE LEFT DESOLATE

Our Lord Jesus proclaimed that Israel's house would be left desolate soon after his crucifixion and earthly ministry had been completed. He said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord."—chap. 23:37-39

PAUL'S LABOR NOT IN VAIN

The great apostle became very prominent among Jesus' followers, and especially those who had heard the heavenly call and had responded by being baptized into Christ. As a replacement for Judas, it is evident that he rose above some even of the original twelve apostles, some of which are rarely named outside of the apostolic lists. He wrote, "By the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me."—I Cor. 15:10 ■