

Saved or Lost?

by

William Bell Riley, A. M., D. D.,
Pastor of the First Baptist Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota

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SERMON ONE

THE DIVINE AND THE HUMAN SIDE IN SALVATION

Acts 9:1-20

“And 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. And 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?

“And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks. 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.

“And 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.

“And 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.

“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.

“And 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 Ghost.

“And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized.

“And when he had received meat, he was strengthened. Then was Saul certain days with the disciples which were at Damascus. And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God” (Acts 9:1-20).

PERHAPS in all literature there is not a more interesting story than that of Saul’s conversion; and, beyond all question, the remarkable change in life, experienced on the way to Damascus, produced not only one of the most striking, but also one of the most influential personalities of the Christian centuries. It is doubtful if history holds another human name around which clustered more honors and from which proceeded such sacred influences as that of the apostle Paul; if there be another, Moses alone might contest his superiority.

These things being true, how important it is to discover what took place on the Damascus road, and to inquire whether a kindred experience may be expected by, or for others!

The history of this event is fully recorded in the ninth chapter of the book of Acts; and I invite you to consider with me verses 1-20, hoping that, as we move together in this study, the recorded experience of Saul of Tarsus may show the unsaved the way, and make more clear the path before the faces of the redeemed. These twenty verses rather naturally relate themselves to three great Biblical ideas—Conviction, Conversion, and Consecration. —

CONVICTION

By nature, men oppose God!

And 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” (vss. 1, 2).

Let no man say “this was not opposition to God, but to Jesus of Nazareth, instead,” for he who so speaks reveals either his ignorance or his unbelief. The Bible clearly teaches that Jesus was God.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1).

Christ said: **“I and my Father are one” (John 10:30).**

In his First Epistle, John affirmed of Jesus Christ: **“This is the true God” (I John 5:20).**

Saul vainly imagined that he was serving God when he opposed His Son, and some men still imagine that they can worship God and reject Christ. Not so; the Lord Himself said: **“No man cometh unto the Father, but by me”** (John 14:6), and **“He that hath not the Son hath not the Father.”** (vs. 9).

One of the frightful fruits of sin is shown in the antagonism that human nature feels toward God. Paul, writing his First Epistle to the Corinthians, reminds them of this truth by saying: **“. . . the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned”** (I Corinthians 2:14).

In his volume *“Our Retreat from Modernism,”* Dan Gilbert calls attention to the claim of twentieth century skeptics that they have found “perhaps the only God there is in their own higher natures.” There may be some dispute as to the “higher nature” of man: there can be none as to his “lower nature.”

Experience and observation combine to justify Peter, James and Jude in their descriptions of what men are by nature. Peter speaks of **“them that walk after the flesh in the lust of uncleanness . . . presumptuous . . . self willed . . . as natural brute beasts . . . and shall utterly perish in their own corruption; And shall receive the reward of unrighteousness, as they that count it pleasure to riot in the day time. Spots they are and blemishes, sporting themselves with their own deceivings”** (II Peter 2:10-13).

James speaks of natural wisdom as **“earthly, sensual, devilish”** (James 3:15).

Jude criticizes the sacrilegious, and says:

“But what they know naturally, as brute beasts, in those things they corrupt themselves” (vs. 10).

Paul — self-satisfied as he had been — when finally the Spirit illumined his mind so that he saw himself as he was, found his lower nature in conflict with God and was compelled to say: **“For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh), dwelleth no good thing. . . . I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of, sin which is in my members”** (Romans 7:18-23).

It was when he faced this fact that he cried: *“O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?”* (Romans 7:24).

“The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God” (Romans 8:7-8).

By grace, God arrests that opposition!

Our text strikingly illustrates this fact:

“And 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?”

The Lord has many ways of arresting men in their evil courses. They are not all as graphic and as apparently miraculous as Saul’s, but they all have one feature in common— His “Voice.”

Sometimes that Voice is stern—**“Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?”** Judgment has arrested many a man in his sinful course.

My own dear father was going his way without God until my oldest brother was snatched from his arms by the icy hands of death. That arrested him. In that judgment they heard the “Voice” of God.

More often, even with the most wicked, it is a Voice of tenderness and love.

The story is told that an infidel soldier of the Middle Ages, in order to prove there was no God, threw his glove to the ground as a challenge and defiantly cried toward heaven: “God, if there be a God, I defy Thee to mortal combat; strike me if you dare!” And as he stood with uplifted face he saw a piece of paper fluttering through the air. It fell at his feet. Picking it up, he read: **“God is love.”** It shamed him, and subdued his spirit; it sent him to his knees; it resulted in the salvation of his soul.

It is the grace of God that arrests men in their evil courses, and the goodness of God leads them to repentance.

By word, God reveals the right way.

When Saul said **“Who art thou, Lord?”** the Lord replied: **“I am Jesus whom thou persecutest; it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.”**

What a marvelous- medium of salvation is God’s Word! **“It is the “power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth.”**

“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. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the scripture saith, Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed” (Romans 10:8-11).

Evangelist Thomas S. Cole tells the story of the young infidel who was lecturing to a Free Thought Association in a Canadian city. On Saturday night some Y. M. C. A. men were praying for this lecturer, and one of them decided he would write him a letter. He penned it, and put it in the mail, having begun the letter with a quotation from Scripture.

It so happened that the letter reached the young infidel just before he started for the hall in which he was to lecture, and as he read this Scripture text, he said:

“That’s somebody that knew my father.”

His father had been a believing man. Once at the hall, that Scripture text began to work. It convicted the lecturer and confused him to such an extent that when he had spoken but a few minutes, he feigned sickness and retired, promising to return the next night. After a sleepless night he went to the Y. M. C. A. and asked to see the man who had written him.

“Did you know my father?” he asked. “No.”

“Well, the text you put on top of your letter is the very one he quoted to me when he was on his deathbed, and it has so upset me that I have been unable to sleep; and I have come to ask you to show me the way.” And as did Philip with the Ethiopian eunuch, the young Y.M.C.A. man speedily led him to the Lord.

Oh, the power of the Word of God! It is indeed **“the Word of salvation!”**

Few unsaved men read it: that is why they remain in sin. Few unsaved people dare to expose themselves to its preaching; that is why they continue in the ways of wickedness. There is power in the Word! The “Voice” of God will one day awaken the dead. I speak of the bodies of those that sleep in the graves. That same Voice will now awaken the spiritually dead, if, like Saul of Tarsus, they will attend.

II. CONVERSION

“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.”

According to the dictionary, the word “*conversion*,” from its root derivation, means (in its theological sense) “the act of turning from the supreme love of self to the love and service of God.”

This story of Saul’s conversion involves the common features of practically every conversion.

It is influenced by information.

“Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?”

That question is answered fully, minutely, **“Arise, go into the city and it shall be told thee what thou must do.”** And the rest of the story reveals how Ananias came, and how at his touch the scales fell from the eyes of Saul and he received his sight, and how, under the instruction of Ananias, he was baptized.

Paul, writing to the Corinthians, tells that **“It pleased God, by the foolishness of preaching, to save them that believe.”**

That is what is involved in preaching; it could have no other object than information. All preaching looks to instruct men in the way of righteousness. The Holy Ghost **“convicts of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment to come.”**

It is true that there are men and women, a great multitude, who have either never heard the Gospel faithfully preached, or, if so, were unattracted, and never converted. They are, therefore, without the knowledge of **“THE WAY.”** They know not what they should do, nor how to go about it.

For such people the preacher has an obligation to make the way plain, to preach what God has revealed concerning sin and to show what is set forth in sacred Scripture as to the way of salvation; to preach repentance from sin and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, for it is still true that those **“who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ shall be saved.”**

I know a preacher’s wife who never comments on the preacher’s coming sermon without prefacing it with, “Now, my dear, make the way plain; there may be people in the audience who do not know it, and today may be the only opportunity they will ever have to get it. Make the way plain.” Certainly that is what the Lord did for Saul.

But there is another side to salvation. One may speak of it as the “human side.” And there is a sense in which man has a part (a minor part, I grant you) but an absolutely essential part. “Salvation is from the Lord”; yet man determines whether he is to enjoy the same.

Salvation is accompanied by courageous action.

Saul **“arose from the earth”**; Saul accepted **“baptism.”** In other words, Saul did everything that the Lord Himself, by His own voice, and by the voice of His servant Ananias suggested. I am here to tell you why some of you are not saved! You are not saved because you have not the courage of your convictions. You are not saved either because you are cowards, or you have confederates in sin and do not propose to break away from them, or both.

The prodigal son had to say, **“I will arise and go to my father,”** before he could be saved. His father’s house existed; his father’s heart was filled with love; his father’s arms ached to embrace him; but if he came not, the father was helpless. If he preferred the company of harlots and the sustenance of swine, the father could do nothing. Or, if he was tired of both, but would not set his face homeward and by the act of his will compel his feet to carry him that way, his father could do nothing.

I say it reverently, that the reason why God cannot save you is that you either do not want Him to save you—preferring your sinful associates and the world’s husks—or, you are such a cringing coward that you will not stand up and say that you want Christ to save you.

“The fear of man bringeth a snare.” And that snare is not only set for the sinner, but for the professed saint as well. There are hundreds of people, who, by the help of others, finally manage to get to the front seat, and to answer a few simple questions put by the deacons, and to be voted into the church, and, like the old woman, say of the baptism, “It’s a dip and be done with it.”

What we need is such conviction by the Spirit of God as will make sinners ready to face men and devils in open confession of the Lord, and mum church members to become eloquent advocates of His grace.

At an open-air meeting, held in Liverpool, a skeptic was haranguing the crowd. He knew they were in sympathy with him, as such crowds are, so he said, “Is there anyone here who can say a word for Jesus Christ, in view of what I have said against Him? If so, let him come forward and say it now.”

Not a man moved; most of them were anti-Christian!

But, to the speaker’s surprise, two young women came from the edge of the crowd up to the stand, and one of them said, “We are women, and not accustomed to public speaking, but we will sing our word for Jesus Christ; and with surprising sweetness they sang, “Stand up, stand up for Jesus.”

By the time the song ceased, the heads of the entire company were uncovered; some were weeping, and the crowd speedily dissolved, leaving the infidel orator mantled with shame.

I tell you it is high time that the silent church of God got its mouth open, and that a trembling sinner who wants to be saved, finds the courage to say so.

Paul’s conversion was sealed by willing submission.

He yielded at every point. His threats were at an end; his arrests of Christians were no more; his persecutions of Jesus had passed forever. According to the record, **“He rose from the earth.”** At the hands of men he was **“led into Damascus”** to Ananias, the servant of the Lord, and was **“straightway baptized.”**

It sounds like a strange contrast, but in order to be free one must become a slave; in order to do his own pleasure, one must cease from independent action and submit himself to the commands of the Lord.

You say, “How can that be?”

Well, perhaps I can illustrate it — in a homely way. I have a hunting dog — in fact, I am afraid I am getting a reputation as having a kennel— but the truth is that that dog, by nature, wants more liberties than are for his good or my convenience. He ranges too far a-field. In hunting, we do not want birds flushed so remotely from us as to be beyond the range of gun. Yet he would prefer a thousand times to have more hunting than none at all.

So of late, I have put him on a leash to keep him within range and to teach him that he can have all the action and freedom he wants if only he will stay within the bounds of my will in the matter; and when once he has learned that lesson he will have far more freedom than he could have otherwise secured. In the meantime, what he wants to do—is crazy to accomplish—in his ignorance, he defeats, until such time as he has learned his lesson.

It is exactly so with us. When we follow our natural impulses we get far a-field and fail to accomplish all the purposes that we had in mind and hand; in fact we work havoc instead of good. But when once we have made ourselves subject to the Master's will, we find that within the bounds of God's prescription we have all the liberty that a saint needs, and the very best and most effective room in which to walk and work.

OBEDIENCE sounds like a hard word to unsundered spirits; but the elder brother, who was obedient to the father's will and remained at home, had infinitely the best of it. He foolishly complained, "**Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment.**"

But he forgot for the moment that he had had his father's fellowship: he had had his father's beautiful home: he was heir to all his father's wealth; and on the whole, he had an infinitely happier time than his wild, foraging brother had ever found with harlots and hogs.

Paul's grief over his own people was at this point. Of them he said: "**They being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God.**"

And James commissions us, "**Submit yourselves, therefore, to God; resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw nigh to God and he will draw nigh to you.**"

III. CONSECRATION.

The story of Saul does not stop with conversion. Thank God for that! With too many of us there is an arrested development. We profess to find Christ, but do not exhibit such fruits of that profession as should characterize our Christianity. In Paul's life we have proofs of his profession. They exist in several forms. Let us study a few of them:

Consecration is suggested in the circumstance of prayer.

When the Lord commissioned Ananias to "**go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul,**" he added, "**for, behold, he prayeth.**"

One of the old Church Fathers said, "Prayer, on the part of the new convert, is like the cry from the natal, chamber—the first sigh of life."

Concerning the physical manifestation of God, it is written of Christ, "**In all things he was made like unto his brethren.**"

The converse of that should be true. The newly-born should grow, in likeness, to the Lord; and one point at which Jesus of Nazareth never failed was the point of prayer. As someone has suggested, “With Him, prayer was like the never-failing fountains—perennial.”

Horatius Bonar said, “In one sense, in the quiet hour of prayer the soul will often mark more progress than in the days of company with others.”

I do not know why it happened, but I remember full well how it fell out—

My village pastor, on the morning when I went forward to make my profession of Christ, did not ask me to first testify, but said: “William, would you like to lead us in prayer?”

It seems to me now that he was infinitely wise. If profession is not preceded by prayer, it is scarcely dependable.

Consecration is further shown by prompt and strict obedience.

“And immediately . . . he arose, and was baptized.”

It is not my purpose to stop at this time for a discourse upon baptism; but it is necessary that I say to you that **“obedience is better than sacrifice,”** and that I remind you of the word of the Lord Jesus: **“Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you”** (John 15:14).

And then, I call to your further remembrance what Peter said to the convicted inquirers at Pentecost who asked him and the rest of the apostles: **“Men and brethren what shall we do?”**

Peter’s answer is illuminating: **“Repent, and be baptized every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost”** (Acts 2:38).

People say to me: “Baptism is not essential to salvation! Can’t I be saved without being baptized?”

But the assertion does not justify the question. It is so that baptism does not save by **“a mere putting away of the filth of the flesh,”** but it is also true that **“it is the answer of a good conscience toward God”**; and no one will imagine that the non-willing, the un-submissive, the disobedient spirit is accepted by, or acceptable with, the Lord.

The truly saved man will not ask, “What command of the Lord can I leave in neglect and get to heaven?” but he will inquire: **“Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?”** and with ready spirit undertake.

It is hardly up to man to prescribe to God what he is to do; it is certainly within the Divine providence to prescribe to man what he shall do.

Since the Lord wrought our salvation by the sacrifice of Himself, it is His right to prescribe the conditions under which He will apply it to your soul and mine; and if, by His personal example of baptism, at the hands of John in the Jordan, He entered upon His life of public service, who am I to affirm that I propose to choose my own way of commencing my Christian career, and to ignore both His example and His apostle's word—**"Be baptized"**?

How well I remember the night when a young woman, coming into the hallway leading from the robing rooms to the baptismal pool, said with a shudder: "My, how I fear this experience! There is only one thing in the world that makes me submit to it, and that is His Word!"

"A week hence you will want me to baptize you over again," I replied.

With a shudder and a shake of the head she said: "Never!"

But just exactly seven days later, as I was entering the pool with another company, she came to me and said: "Oh, please take me! I will be calm now, and unafraid; so happy to follow my Lord through the baptismal grave to the resurrection of a new life!" It is commonly so with those who are obedient to the Lord.

A gentleman who has traveled in the Alps tells the story of how he came, one day, with his guide, to a point where the path was cut off by an inaccessible cliff rising hundreds of feet perpendicularly. But there was a mountain stream flowing under it through a dark channel. The guide, standing for a moment at the edge of the same, said to his trusting traveler:

"Follow me!" And he leaped into the foaming torrent and disappeared. The traveler was terrified! It looked to him like destruction, but he reasoned within himself, "This guide must know, and for me his commandment must be safe"; and he dared it.

In a few seconds he found the current carried him out to the other side of the mountain and to the beautiful grass-covered, green banks that stretched away into a valley of magnificent proportions and picturesque scenery such as his eyes had seldom feasted upon!

Truly God leads us by a way that we know not. He makes **"darkness light before us"** and **"crooked things straight."** His Word is: **"These things will I do unto them, and not forsake them"** (Isaiah 42:16).

Do you trust Him? Will you obey Him?

Paul's further consecration was proven by testimony of lip and life.

He not only arose and was baptized, but he gave himself immediately to fellowship with the **"disciples which were at Damascus"** and took the still further and essential step: **"And straight-way he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God"** (Vs. 20).

You notice that I said "testimony of lip and life." Profession is one thing, and an essential thing, but it is not a sufficient thing. It must be followed by practice.

One of the speakers in the Ministers' Retreat, recently held in this First Baptist Church, told us of how he baptized a man who was so enthusiastic that he requested the privilege of testifying before he quit the waters of the baptistry. His testimony was clear and ringing; it had the clarity and power of a brief sermon. But, one year later, this man had, by his bad practices, discounted that day's profession.

God knows we need the testimony of the lip badly enough. The dumbness of the average church member is both an indication of his own spiritual deadness, and a contributing factor to the undisturbed sleep of the sinful world; nevertheless, we need the testimony of life still more!

The young college student who was asked the question, "Which version of the Bible do you prefer?" and who was able to answer, "My mother's version," had comprehended the truth that Paul penned to the Corinthians: ". . . **ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshly tables of the heart**" (II Corinthians 3:3).

In view of all this, I am wondering how many there are (who read these lines) who will now accept Christ (if you have not already done so), or who, if you have indulged in Him a secret faith, will now cast your cowardice aside, prove your love by an open and courageous confession, to be followed by obedience in baptism, and by glad and continuous testimony to His grace and love?

A friend of mine, speaking at Janesville, Wisconsin, a few years since, told the following story. (I repeat it to enhearten any timid, hesitant soul).

It was March and midnight; the air was full of driving sleet and the streets were vacant, when a boyish form emerged from a dark corner and crept slowly up the steps of a mansion. Once at the door, he fumbled in his pocket and drew forth a tiny key. It fitted perfectly; the door opened, the dark form entered the warm hall. Upstairs and into a side room he crept as stealthily as though he had been a burglar. There, a gas light, turned low, revealed a dainty bed, a pillow in place and the covers turned back, and a dressing gown hung at the foot of the same.

With a sob he knelt at its side in thanksgiving. The first prayer for more than two years, since he had left home, was offered. In this time the prodigal's mother had died. Thinking of his stern father, he feared to return; but once, at a "general delivery," a letter had reached him. It contained no message, but a key to the home-door.

The next morning, when Mr. Kane (the father) came—as was his custom—and looked in, hoping against hope, he staggered at the sight! Surely it was Ralph's head upon the pillow!

Stealing to the bedside, he knelt and laid his hand on the boy's head at the same time. Opening his eyes and looking about him, he saw his father.

"Dad," he said, "forgive me! I'm sick; the doctor at a General Hospital says I will live but a little while. That's why I came home."

“The doctor doesn’t know, Ralph,” the father answered. “You will have a warm room here, good meals, a nurse, a doctor; and, if you need it, FLORIDA later. We will make a well man of you yet.”

Then the boy answered: “Dad, it may be so; but at any rate I am at home, and I’m happy. If you hadn’t sent me the latchkey I would never have come.”

God’s latch-string is out; it is yours; it is in Christ; and He is THE WAY! Will you accept Him and walk in the Way? May the Holy Spirit so incline your hearts!

~ end of sermon 1 ~

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