**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**ACTS-033. GRACE TRIUMPHANT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1.* *And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, 2. 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 hound unto Jerusalem. 3. And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: 4. And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me? 5. 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. 6. 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. 7. And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man. 8. 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. 9. And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink. 10. 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. 11. 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, 12. And hath seen in a vision a man named Ananias coming in, and putting his hand on him, that he might receive his sight... . 17. 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 earnest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost. 18. And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized. 19. And when he had received meat, he was strengthened. Then was Saul certain days with the disciples which were at Damascus. 20. And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God.--."*

*Acts 9:1-12, 17-20*

This chapter begins with but, which contrasts Saul's persistent hatred, which led him to Gentile lands to persecute, with Philip's expansive evangelistic work. Both men were in profound earnest, both went abroad to carry on their work, but the one sought to plant what the other was eager to destroy. If the but in verse 1 contrasts, the yet connects the verse with chapter 8:3. Saul's fury was no passing outburst, but enduring. Like other indulged passions, it grew with exercise, and had come to be as his very life-breath, and now planned, not only imprisonment, but death, for the heretics.

Not content with carrying his hateful inquisition into the homes of the Christians in Jerusalem, he will follow the fugitives to Damascus. The extension of the persecution was his own thought. He was not the tool of the Sanhedrin, but their mover. They would probably have been content to cleanse Jerusalem, but the young zealot would not rest till he had followed the dispersed poison into every corner where it might have trickled. The high priest would not discourage such useful zeal, however he might smile at its excess.

So Saul got the letters he asked, and some attendants, apparently, to help him in his hunt, and set off for Damascus. Painters have imagined him as riding thither, but more probably he and his people went on foot. It was a journey of some five or six days. The noon of the last day had come, and the groves of Damascus were, perhaps, in sight. No doubt, the young Pharisee's head was busy settling what he was to begin with when he entered the city, and was exulting in the thought of how he would harry the meek Christians, when the sudden light shone.

At all events, the narrative does not warrant the view, often taken now, that there had been any preparatory process in Saul's mind, which had begun to sap his confidence that Jesus was a blasphemer, and himself a warrior for God. That view is largely adopted in order to get rid of the supernatural, and to bolster up the assumption that there are no sudden conversions; but the narrative of Luke, and Paul's own references, are dead against it. At one moment he is yet breathing threatening and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, and in almost the next he is prone on his face, asking, Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do? It was not a case of a landslide suddenly sweeping down, but long prepared for by the gradual percolation of water to the slippery understrata, but the solid earth was shaken, and the mountain crashed down in sudden ruin.

The causes of Saul's conversion are plain in the narrative, even though the shortened form is adopted, which is found in the Revised Version. The received text has probably been filled out by additions from Paul's own account in chapter 26. First came the blaze of light outshining the midday sun, even in that land where its beams are like swords. That blinding light shone round about him, enveloping him in its glory. Chapter 26. (verse 13) tells that his companions also were wrapped in the lustre, and that all fell to the earth, no doubt in terror.

Saul is not said, either in this or in his own accounts, to have seen Jesus, but 1 Corinthians 15:8 establishes that he did so, and Ananias (5:17) refers to Jesus as having appeared. That appearance, whatever may have been the psychological account of it, was by Paul regarded as being equal in evidential value to the flesh-and-blood vision of the risen Lord which the other Apostles witnessed to, and as placing him in the same line as a witness.

It is to be noted also, that, while the attendants saw the light, they were not blinded, as Saul was; from which it may be inferred that he saw with his bodily eyes the glorified manhood of Jesus, as we are told that one day, when He returns as Judge, every eye shall see Him. Be that as it may,--and we have not material for constructing a theory of the manner of Christ's appearance to Saul,-- the overwhelming conviction was flooded into his soul, that the Jesus whom he had thought of as a blasphemer, falsely alleged to have risen from the dead, lived in heavenly glory, amid celestial brightness too dazzling for human eyes.

The words of gentle remonstrance issuing from the flashing glory went still further to shake the foundations of the young Pharisee's life; for they, as with one lightning gleam, laid hare the whole madness and sin of the crusade which he had thought acceptable to God. Why persecutest thou Me? Then the odious heretics were knit by some mysterious bond to this glorious One, so that He bled in their wounds and felt their pains! Then Saul had been, as his old teacher dreaded they of the Sanhedrin might be, fighting against God! How the reasons for Saul's persecution had crumbled away, till there were none left with which to answer Jesus' question! Jesus lived, and was exalted to glory. He was identified with His servants. He had appeared to Saul, and deigned to plead with him.

No wonder that the man who had been planning fresh assaults on the disciples ten minutes before, was crushed and abject as he lay there on the road, and these tremendous new convictions rushed like a cataract over and into his soul! No wonder that the lessons burned in on him in that hour of destiny became the centre-point of all his future teaching! That vision revolutionised his thinking and his life. None can affirm that it was incompetent to do so.

Luke's account here, like Paul's in chapter 22, represents further instructions from Jesus as postponed till Saul's meeting with Ananias, while Paul's other account in chapter xxvi. omits mention of the latter, and gives the substance of what he said in Damascus as said on the road by Jesus. The one account is more detailed than the other, that is all. The gradual unfolding of the heavenly purpose which our narrative gives is in accord with the divine manner. For the moment enough had been done to convert the persecutor into the servant, to level with the ground his self-righteousness, to reveal to him the glorified Jesus, to bend his will and make it submissive. The rest would be told him in due time.

The attendants had fallen to the ground like him, but seem to have struggled to their feet again, while he lay prostrate. They saw the brightness, but not the Person: they heard the voice, but not the words. Saul staggered by their help to his feet, and then found that with open eyes he was blind. Imagination or hallucination does not play tricks of that sort with the organs of sense.

The supernatural is too closely intertwined with the story to be taken out of it without reducing it to tatters. The greatest of Christian teachers, who has probably exercised more influence than any man who ever lived, was made a Christian by a miracle. That fact is not to be got rid of. But we must remember that once when He speaks of it He points to God's revelation of His Son in Him' as its essential character. The external appearance was the vehicle of the inward revelation. It is to be remembered, too, that the miracle did not take away Saul's power of accepting or rejecting the Christ; for he tells Agrippa that he was not disobedient to the heavenly vision.

What a different entry he made into Damascus from what he expected, and what a different man it was that crawled up to the door of Judas, in the street that is called Straight, from the self-confident young fanatic who had left Jerusalem with the high priest's letters in his bosom and fierce hate in his heart!

Ananias was probably not one of the fugitives, as his language about Saul implies that he knew of his doings only by hearsay. The report of Saul's coming and authority to arrest disciples had reached Damascus before him, with the wonderful quickness with which news travels in the East, nobody knows how. Ananias's fears being quieted, he went to the house where for three days Saul had been lying lonely in the dark, fasting, and revolving many things in his heart. No doubt his Lord had spoken many a word to him, though not by vision, but by whispering to his spirit. Silence and solitude root truth in a soul. After such a shock, absolute seclusion was best.

Ananias discharged his commission with lovely tenderness and power. How sweet and strange to speaker and hearer would that Brother Saul' sound! How strong and grateful a confirmation of his vision would Ananias's reference to the appearance of the Lord bring! How humbly would the proud Pharisee bow to receive, laid on his head, the hands that he had thought to bind with chains! What new eyes would look out on a world in which all things had become new, when there fell from them as it had been scales, and as quickly as had come the blinding, so quickly came the restored vision!

Ananias was neither Apostle nor official, yet the laying on of his hands communicated the Holy Ghost. Saul received that gift before baptism, not after or through the ordinance. It was important for his future relations to the Apostles that he should not have been introduced to the Church by them, or owed to them his first human Christian teaching. Therefore he could say that he was an Apostle, not from men, neither through man. It was important for us that in that great instance that divine gift should have been bestowed without the conditions accompanying, which have too often been regarded as necessary for, its possession.