

The Glorious Gospel of Grace

... nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. ACTS 20:24

Study 11a: THE CONVERSION OF SAUL (9:1-18)

... the conversion and apostleship of St. Paul alone, duly considered, was of itself a demonstration sufficient to prove Christianity to be a divine revelation. -- George Lyttelton in F.F. Bruce, Acts p.196

9:1-5 How would you characterize the first words of Christ to Saul? (1 Timothy 1:2,11-17)

This is a common proverb, found in Greek and Latin literature as well as Hebrew; and it might seem a bathos, but that it is thoroughly in the proverbial style, familiar but incisive, of Jesus of Nazareth. And in fact it was the best description of what Saul had been doing -- trying to stifle the pricks of his inmost heart or conscience, which all the time was asking, Is this righteousness of mine own really joy and peace? what if Stephen and the Nazarenes are right after all, and in possession of the true secret? -- R.B. Rackham, Acts p.130

9:6-14 Shall we assume that personal visitations of the Lord were normal among the disciples? (2 Cor. 12:1-5)

Here the Lord Jesus in his proper person appears very conspicuous, as in the gospel narratives, but as in *no other place* in this book of the Acts of the Holy Ghost. For the time we lose sight of the Spirit, as though the Lord himself had returned, and the Paraclete were no longer so needful to the disciple. It is the Lord Jesus himself who appears in a vision both to Saul and to Ananias. There is a special reason. Christ is now *calling a new apostle*, and the call must be direct and personal; ... the fundamental qualification of an apostle was that he had "seen the Lord" after he was risen ... -- AT. Pierson, Acts p.76

Saul remained three days in darkness, both physical and spiritual, without food or drink, overwhelmed at the collapse of his past life and dark as to the future. All he could do was to *pray* ... His mind, dazed and bewildered, could only realize this -- that he had made a disastrous mistake, and that he had seen the Messiah the hope of Israel. Beyond this all was darkness. The sudden and complete transformation of Saul the Pharisee into Paul the apostle, with which our imagination is familiar, is not the impression which the

Acts would convey. This incident is but the first step in Saul's 'conversion'; to define more exactly, it is his arrest or 'apprehension,' -- from another point of view, the conviction of his sin. This is followed by death, death to the old life. He is crucified with Christ, and the three days of darkness are like the three days in the tomb. But on the third day with Christ he rises from the dead in baptism; after this he is filled with the Holy Ghost -- his Pentecost; then he is joined to the disciples and admitted to the fellowship of the common meal; and henceforth Saul the Pharisee is a new creature, Saul the Christian. In Romans vi 3-11 S. Paul describes holy baptism as a death and burial followed by a resurrection to a new life, and no doubt he is writing out of his own experience. -- R.B. Rackham, Acts pp.132-133

9:15-18 Paul's temporary blindness seems but a token of what aspect of his ministry? (2 Cor. 11:22-33; 12:6-10)

The Gentiles, kings and people of Israel represent the three main groups before whom Paul will in fact bear witness later in the story, and the unusual order of the words is meant to stress the calling of Paul to go to the Gentiles. Such 'bearing of the name' would be no easy matter; it would involve *suffering* on behalf of Jesus -- a sharp contrast to *causing* suffering for Christians (9:13). The book of Acts does not gloss over the fact that faithful witness to Jesus is a costly task in terms of the suffering that it may cause for the bearer of the good news. -- I. Howard Marshall, Acts p.72

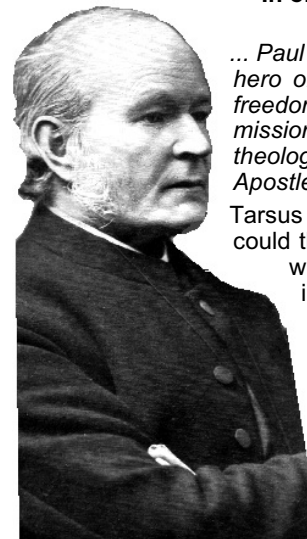
The Preparation of Paul

In one of the greatest biographies of Paul, F.W. Farrar sums up the apostle's stature:

... Paul energetic as Peter, and contemplative as John; Paul the hero of unselfishness; Paul the mighty champion of spiritual freedom; Paul a greater preacher than Chrysostom, a greater missionary than Xavier, a greater reformer than Luther, a greater theologian than St. Thomas of Aquinum; Paul the inspired Apostle of the Gentiles, the slave of the Lord Jesus Christ

Tarsus was a confluence of East and West. That is why Paul could think like a Greek. He alluded to Greek philosophy. He wrote Greek with skill. Educated also in Jerusalem ... an intellectual of the first order, probably the finest mind of his century, and ranked with Plato by the eminent classicist T.R. Glover, of Cambridge. E.M. Blaiklock *The Birth of the Church* p.72

He was indeed a chosen instrument in Christ's hand, fitted for his life-work long before his conversion -- set apart for it, indeed, from his very birth, as he confesses (Gal.1:15; Rom.1:1). Born a "Hebrew" son of "Hebrew" parents, and given the best education in his ancestral traditions that contemporary Judaism could provide, he also inherited a large measure of Hellenistic culture and the coveted privilege of Roman citizenship. When in due course God "revealed His Son" in Saul of Tarsus, he devoted all his wealthy inheritance, together



F.W. Farrar
(1831-1903)
Chaplain to
Queen Victoria

with his rare natural qualities, to the work of Gentile evangelization; and late-comer though he was among the apostles, he "labored more abundantly than they all: yet not I [he adds], but the grace of God which was with me" (1 Cor.15:10). **F.F. Bruce Acts** (NICNT) p.209

Study 11b: THE NAME SAUL BEARS TO GENTILE AND JEW

I bear on my body the brandmarks of Jesus Galatians 6:17 (NAS)

9:19-25 What does Saul consider the principal purpose of his calling? (vv.14,15,16,20,21,22, 27,29)

As applied to our Lord, then, the title "Son of God" marks Him out as the true representative of the Israel of God and as God's anointed king, the promised Messiah; but it is no merely official title. As He Himself used it, it reflected His unique relationship and fellowship with the Father, and His function as the revealer of the Father; and it is this essential character of His Divine Sonship that is so prominent in the Pauline epistles. The proclamation of Jesus as the Son of God may therefore represent some advance on the way in which His Messiahship has been proclaimed thus far in Acts. -- **F.F. Bruce, Acts** p.203

We may note incidentally the two descriptions of the Christians used here. The *saints* (9:32,41; 26:10; cf. 20:32; 26:18) is a common term in Paul's writings and describes Christians as people who have been set apart for God's service and must show an appropriate character. Those *who call upon your name* echoes 2:21 (Joel 2:32) and recurs in 22:16 in a command to Paul himself to be baptized (see further 1 Cor. 1:2). -- **I. Howard Marshall, Acts**, p.171

9:26-31 What was the secret of the church's growth & peace in those days --- and the proof of it? (2 Tim.3:12)

Like Stephen he *argued with the Hellenist Jews*, probably in the very same synagogue, and already we see the retribution begin to work. The Hellenist Jews dealt with him the same measure as to Stephen: they sought an opportunity *to kill him*. -- **R.B. Rackham, Acts** p.139

Perfect vessel for the Gospel of Grace

Christianity obtained in Paul, ... a great thinker. ... Christ had departed from the world, and those whom he had left to represent him were unlettered fishermen, and for the most part men of no intellectual mark. In one sense this fact reflects a peculiar glory on Christianity, for it shows that it did not owe its place as one of the great influences of the world to the abilities of its human representatives: not by might nor by power, but by the Spirit of God, was Christianity established in the earth. Yet, as we look back now, we can clearly see how essential it was that an apostle of a different stamp and training should arise. Christ had manifested forth the glory of the Father once for all and completed his atoning work. But this was not enough. It was necessary that the

meaning of his appearance should be explained to the world. Who was he who had been here? What precisely had he done? To these questions the original apostles could give brief popular answers; but none of them had the intellectual reach or the educational training necessary to put the answers into a form to satisfy the intellect of the world. Happily it is not essential to salvation to be able to answer such questions with scientific accuracy. There are many who know and believe that Jesus was the Son of God and died to take away sin, and, trusting to him as their Saviour, are purified by faith, but who could not explain these statements at any length without falling into mistakes in almost every sentence. Yet if Christianity was to make an intellectual as well as a moral conquest of the world, it was necessary for the church to have accurately explained to her the full glory of her Lord and the meaning of his saving work ... he could not tell all his mind to his followers. They were not able to bear it; they were too rude and limited to take it in ... Even what he did utter was very imperfectly understood ... There was needed a thinker of broader and more massive make to sketch the first outlines of Christian doctrine; and he was found in Paul ... none of [the twelve] had the combination of gifts necessary to attempt the conversion of the Gentile world on a large scale. ... beyond Palestine lay the great world of Greece and Rome -- the world of vast populations, of power and culture, of pleasure and business. It needed a man of unlimited versatility, of education, of immense human sympathy and breadth, to go out there with the gospel message; a man who could not only be a Jew to the Jews, but a Greek to the Greeks, a Roman to the Romans, a barbarian to the barbarians; a man who could encounter not only rabbis in their synagogues, but proud magistrates in their courts and philosophers in the haunts of learning; a man who could face travel by land and by sea, who could exhibit presence of mind in every variety of circumstances, and would be cowed by no difficulties ... Persons whose conversion takes place after they are grown up are wont to look back upon the period of their life which has preceded this event with sorrow and shame, and to wish that an obliterating hand might blot the record of it out of existence. St. Paul felt this sentiment strongly; to the end of his days he was haunted by the spectres of his lost years, and was wont to say that he was the least of all the apostles, who was not worthy to be called an apostle, because he had persecuted the church of God. But these sombre sentiments are only partially justifiable. God's purposes are very deep, and even in those who know him not he may be sowing seeds which will only ripen and bear their fruit long after their godless career is over. Paul would never have been the man he became or have done the work he did, if he had not in the years preceding his conversion gone through a course of preparation designed to fit him for his subsequent career. He knew not what he was being prepared for; his own intentions about his future were different from God's; but there is a divinity which shapes our ends, and it was making him a polished shaft for God's quiver, though he knew it not. -- **James Stalker, Life of St. Paul** pp.10-19



James Stalker
(1848-1929)