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SERMON DCCI.

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THE CONVERSION OF SAUL.

"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."—Acts ix. 1-6.

EXCEPT only the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, no fact recorded in the New Testament is more important than the conversion of Saul. This is sufficiently indicated by the very manner in which it is recorded. It is set forth in the inspired history minutely and repeatedly. Besides various allusions to it in the Epistles, three detailed accounts of it are found in the Acts of the Apostles. Once it is related by the Evangelist Luke, in the passage before us; and twice by Paul himself; in his address to his countrymen at Jerusalem, and in his defence before the throne of Agrippa. In these several accounts, the facts are related with such circumstantial variety, and at the same time such substantial agreement, as to leave no room for doubt or disputing. The history is plain and unvarnished. After the martyrdom of Stephen, in which he had acted a conspicuous part, Saul continued to breathe out threatenings and

slaughter against the Church. Jerusalem did not furnish a wide enough scope for his persecuting spirit. The success which followed the preaching of the dispersed disciples inflamed his fiery zeal, and, being exceedingly mad against them, he pursued them unto strange cities. Armed with a commission from the High Priest, and surrounded with a pompous retinue, he sets out for Damascus. The cruel service was voluntarily undertaken, and he proceeds to execute it with enthusiasm. The hot and weary journey through the desert is rapidly performed; and now, as the white domes of the beautiful city glitter before him in the eastern noontide, and the luxuriant verdure of the gardens by the streams of Lebanon invite him to their repose, all the pride of the Pharisee and all the zeal of the persecutor are swelling within him. He anticipates, already, the full success of the enterprise, and urges his jaded horse impatiently towards the gates of the city.

But suddenly his career is checked. He is surrounded by a light from heaven more brilliant than the sun in an eastern sky. The senses of all are stunned, and they fall prostrate on the earth. Then there is a voice, saying, in the Hebrew tongue, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me." "Who art thou, Lord?" he replies, with trembling astonishment. "I," says the voice from heaven, "am Jesus whom thou persecutest." With these words the fearful truth flashes, like lightning, into the darkened soul of the inquisitor. He perceives that this Jesus of Nazareth, whom they crucified, is, indeed, the Lord of Glory; and that the wrath he was indulging against the disciples was so much ignominy heaped upon their Lord. He sees too, that his persecuting course was but the vain fury of an ox kicking against the sharp points of the goad. Christ, to whom all power is committed, would impose a yoke upon him, and to resist would only insure his own destruction. Wherefore, he cries humbly, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? I not only cease my opposition to thy cause, but I am ready to enter thy service. Command me, for I am willing to obey." Blinded by excess of light, he is led, according to Christ's direction, into the city. There he is instructed and baptized; and finally appears in the synagogue to preach the very faith he once destroyed.

It is not our intention to dwell upon these facts; they speak for themselves, and need no explanation. Neither are they capable of being adorned by any description we could give. They stand up in their own sublime simplicity and significance before us, and are, no doubt, recorded for our instruction and confirmation in the faith. The importance of Saul's conversion, in its first and most obvious relation to the establishment of Christianity in the world, cannot well be over-estimated. Among the noble company of Apostles, he labored more abundantly and more successfully than they all; and so far as it is in human power to

make reparation for wrong doing, his persecution against the Church was gloriously atoned for.

But the importance of his conversion does not relate merely to the first establishment of Christianity through his labors. It has a higher and broader significance. The facts recorded in the passage before us involve and illustrate for the instruction of all ages,

The truth of Christianity.

The sovereignty of God in the conversion of men.

The riches of divine mercy towards the chief of sinners.

The discussion of these three points will occupy the remainder of this discourse.

I. *The Conversion of Saul illustrates the truth of Christianity.* The main facts in his life, as they are recorded by inspired penmen, are fully confirmed by profane writers. That he was prominent and powerful among the early enemies of the Gospel—that he suddenly became a Christian convert—sacrificed for the Gospel's sake all those worldly prospects which are most fascinating to ambitious youth, and spent his life in unceasing labors for its advancement; these are *facts* as well attested as any recorded in the history of the world. The enemies of religion cannot deny them. The early writers against Christianity confirm them fully. Now, we assert, that if we had *no other external evidence* that our religion is true, the *conversion of Saul* would leave every infidel *without excuse*. If a man of his unquestioned ability had done no more than impartially examine the claims of Christianity and give his judgment in its favor, his witness could not be successfully gainsayed; for the great facts of the Gospel were matters of cotemporary history, and he had abundant opportunity to investigate them. But you will readily perceive that his testimony is even much stronger than that of an impartial and competent judge. He was converted suddenly from a zealous opposition to as zealous an advocacy of the Gospel; and that too, at the very time when his prejudices and passions against it were at the highest pitch of excitement; and when pride and self-interest were urging him forward in his persecuting course.

He starts from Jerusalem with a commission to scourge and bind all who believe in Christ. His well-known character and previous history leave no doubt in the mind of friend or foe as to how he will execute his trust. And yet, strange to say, his first public appearance in Damascus is in the synagogue, where he "preaches Christ that he is the Son of God." No wonder that "all who heard him were amazed, and said, Is not this he that destroyed them which called on this name in Jerusalem, and came hither for that intent, that he might bring them bound unto the Chief Priests?" Looking at the facts just as they ap-

peared to the people of Damascus, and as they are proved out of the very mouths of Christ's enemies, we may well ask how could this sudden revolution in Saul's mind have been accomplished? He himself has given us a full explanation of the way in which it was wrought. If we admit the truth of his statements, then we admit all that is essential to the truth of Christianity. But, if we deny this explanation, then we have before us the unexplained fact that Saul the persecutor, became Paul the Apostle. And how will the infidel solve this great historical problem? There are only two ways in which he can attempt it. He must set Paul down either for an impostor or an enthusiast, a rogue or a madman. He may assert that Paul was an *impostor*, and that the whole story *about his conversion was a fabrication of his own*. Now, if this had been the case, would it not have been easy for his fellow-travellers to come forward and say so? Were such witnesses ever arrayed against him? Did the Scribes and Pharisees, whose cause he deserted, in all their efforts to malign his character, ever attempt to convict him of falsehood in this matter? When he was arraigned before the council, when he stood in chains before Festus and Agrippa, did his enemies, who so vehemently pleaded against him, bring forward his companions in the journey to Damascus, to prove that his miraculous conversion was a fiction?

And, besides this, what motive could Saul have for entering upon such a course of deception? A man who would have the cunning and the hardihood to fabricate such a story, and act it out in all his subsequent life, would not be fool enough to do so without the expectation of profiting by it; and what could he expect to *make* by abandoning the dominant party, whom he believed to be right, and uniting with a persecuted sect, which, according to the infidel's theory, he knew to be wrong?

He well understood what kind of enmity the Christians were called upon to face. The garments of Stephen's murderers, which were laid at his feet, was a sufficient indication of what he might expect if he became a Christian. The scorn and hatred of his kinsmen—the sacrifice of every worldly honor and possession—the endurance of poverty, bonds, scourging and death, these were the penalty he must pay for embracing the religion of Christ. And are we to believe that a man like Saul would brave all these perils, and persist in his course to the forfeiture of his life, just for the sake of making others believe what he knew to be a *lie*, and that, too, a most *unprofitable* and *injurious lie*? Let the infidel think so; such childish credulity is consistent with his character: for “the cautious and captious unbeliever is of all men weakest to believe.” But we know, that whatever else he might be, *Paul was no impostor*.

But, perhaps, in order to avoid the force of this reasoning, the infidel will adopt the other theory and assert that he was an

enthusiast. When they can no longer resist the spirit and force with which he speaks, they exclaim with Festus, "Paul, thou art beside thyself, much learning hath made thee mad."

But, I ask, *how much* enthusiasm does it take to make a man see a light and hear a voice from heaven, in the public highway, at midday; and that, too, when his heart and mind are absorbed in the pursuit of an object, which such a vision would certainly defeat? Men may imagine miracles for the confirmation of their own desires; but who ever imagined that the sun grew dark at noon because of a still brighter light—that a voice spake from heaven—that he was stricken blind for many days, and all to teach him that his desires and purposes are totally wrong? And is not that a strange kind of madness, which enables a man to move such cities as Jerusalem, and Corinth, and Athens, and Rome with his eloquence? to utter such words of truth, and soberness as Paul spake before Agrippa? to write such specimens of logic, and pathos, and beauty, as are found in these Epistles, to lay broad and deep the foundations of a system which is still in the vigor of its youth after the dust of centuries has gathered on the ruins of the cities in which it was persecuted.

See what children in credulity these boasted free-thinkers are, when they can believe, that a man who has left such monuments of sincerity and wisdom, was either an impostor or an enthusiast; and see here, in the undeniable facts of Saul's conversion, a *sample* of the evidences of *Christianity*.

II. *These facts illustrate the sovereignty of God in the conversion of men.* Who, after reading this history, can dispute the doctrine which represents God as choosing the objects of his mercy according to his own will, to the praise of the glory of his grace? There was not in all Jerusalem, a man whose conversion was more improbable; nor was there one in whom God's holy eye could detect less that rendered him fit to be a Christian. He was a proud self-righteous, bloody-minded man. The bigoted spirit he cherished as a virtue rendered his heart more wicked and insensible than if he had led an utterly careless and dissolute life. His very conscience was hoodwinked and pressed into Satan's service. Though he was but a young man, he seems to have entered into schemes of persecution with an eagerness that eclipsed the zeal of the old Scribes and Pharisees. He looked not only upon the sufferings of men, but on the tortures of tender women, with the coolness of a hardened inquisitor. Who would ever expect such a man to be converted? And then, too, how unfavorable to the eye of sense, were the circumstances under which he was converted! When the Lord spoke to him, with a voice of mercy, and effectually called him from darkness to light, had he laid God under any kind of

obligation to convert or bless him, by the convictions he had endured or the efforts he had put forth? Had the eloquence of some preacher touched his heart? Was he mourning over his sins and seeking the Divine favor? No! he was confident and boastful of his good estate. He had closed his ears against the sound of the Gospel; or if he listened at all it was only to cavil and blaspheme. He was "still breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord." And yet, while on his way to execute his threatenings, surrounded by companions of his own choice, and his heart burning with the fierce spirit of persecution, it was then, that the light of Divine glory shone round his path, and the tender yet mighty voice of Christ spoke to him from heaven; and that strong fierce man lying prostrate, cried humbly, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" The power of Divine grace has suddenly transformed the lion into a lamb. The persecutor, whose approach has sent terror into many a household, is led blind through the gates of the city; and while the disciples wait and tremble for him to enter on his bloody work—"Behold, he prayeth." Now, we ask, *who has made him to differ?* What has he, in regard to his salvation, which he did not receive? Can we wonder that, when he is adorned with all those resplendent virtues, which distinguish him as the chief Apostle, he exclaims, "By the grace of God, I am what I am!" Can we wonder that he should be more ardent and eloquent than all others in setting forth the *sovereignty of Divine grace?* that he, of all others, should be inspired to write such passages as we find in the ninth chapter to the Romans, and the first chapter to the Ephesians? Nay, is it not rather a surprising thing that any one can be "unlearned and unstable" enough to stumble at the hard things in his Epistles, illustrated and proved as they are by the facts of his own personal history? After reading that history, how can any one doubt that the conversion of the soul is not of him that willeth nor of him that runneth, but of *God that showeth mercy*—that from the foundation to the top stone it is *all of grace*. So that the Master may truly say to all his disciples, "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that you should go and bring forth much fruit."

But, while we behold and admire this illustration of the Divine Sovereignty, let us beware lest we wrest it to our own destruction. Let us not use the word of God, which is the sword of the Spirit, to commit suicide on our own souls. It is needful, in this connection, that we should be cautioned in regard to two points.

1. The conversion of Paul, while it illustrates God's *sovereignty*, does not exhibit any *uniform plan as to the exercise of that sovereignty*. He saves men by *different ways*. Though, in every case of conversion, he exercises the *same right to bestow*

grace on whom he will—we are not to expect that his gracious designs will always be executed by *the same means*. Especially, we are not to suppose that he will, now-a-days, arrest sinners as he did Saul, by a voice from heaven, or a light shining at noon-day. The days of miracles are past!

Neither are we to suppose that the same instrumentalities will be employed in every case, nor that the soul will always pass through the same routine of experience. There is too much disposition among men to limit the Holy One of Israel. Sinners, like Naaman the Syrian, are not willing to be healed unless the work be done according to a plan of their devising; and even Christians are too much disposed to make their peculiar experiences a model, to which all others must conform. It becomes us to remember that we are but as clay. We take too much upon ourselves when we say to the potter, "Thou shalt mould me thus." The conversion of the soul is as the blowing of the wind; and we might as well demand that the wind shall blow according to the conjectures of the almanac, as to expect that Divine grace will always be dispensed in connection with the same forms and means. God teaches us in this history of Saul, that he is Sovereign, not only in choosing whom he will convert, but as to where and how he will convert them. He can arrest a man in the highway as well as in the Church. He can make a falling leaf more eloquent than a sermon: and by the power of his Spirit he can cast men down to the earth trembling and astonished, or lead them to sit like Mary in calm, sweet penitence at the feet of Jesus. Let us, therefore, in judging of men's spiritual state, be satisfied with the evidence that now they see; without being over curious or strenuous as to how their eyes were opened.

2. We need to be reminded by way of caution, *that the sovereignty of God in the conversion of men gives no encouragement to continued impenitence*. Nay, rather: it is just because the conversion of the soul is from first to last under the Divine control, that we warn you not to presume on the Lord's forbearance. If a man might convert himself at any time, such presumption would be far less perilous. But how imminent and awful is the danger, when you consider that you are in the Almighty's hand, that he only can impart the grace of repentance, and that unless he chooses to do so you are eternally lost. True, he converted Saul in the midst of a wicked career, far from the sanctuary and the means of grace. He may thus bring you to repentance, though you now reject his Gospel and even persecute his saints. It is possible for you to be brought into his kingdom in the very last moments of life. I say he *may* do this; for he hath mercy on whom he will have mercy. But, then, for the very same reason, he may *not* do it. If he is sovereign to *bestow*, he is sovereign also to *withhold* his grace.

If he "has made known the riches of his grace on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory, he has also shown his wrath and made his power known by enduring with much long-suffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction." Therefore, harden not your heart. Reply not against God. Presume not on his forbearance. Neglect not the means of grace; neither trifle with the convictions of conscience and the strivings of his Spirit. Because he has plucked some as brands from the burning, when the everlasting fire was just ready to kindle upon them, do not, "according to thy hardness and impenitent heart, treasure up to thyself wrath against the day of wrath." Do not try the fearful experiment, how near you can drive to the verge of the slippery precipice of perdition, and yet not fall over; but, now, while the danger seems to be a great way off, yield to the gracious restraints that would hold you back, and let the riches of his goodness, and forbearance, and long-suffering, lead you to repentance.

And now, to enforce this exhortation, consider,

III. *The conversion of Saul illustrates the riches of Divine mercy towards the chief of sinners.* When we say God is sovereign in the conversion of men, we do not mean that he is *arbitrary*, or that he ever acts without a sufficient reason. When, in the exercise of his converting grace, one is taken and another left, he always has a wise motive for his choice, though that motive is not often revealed.

In the case of Paul, however, the reason is distinctly avowed. In his first Epistle to Timothy, the heart of the Apostle seems to be absorbed with admiration at the mercy which had been shown to him, "the chief of sinners." He is filled with the sentiment of that hymn,

"Why was I made to hear thy voice,
And enter while there's room?"

The Spirit of inspiration puts this remarkable answer into his lips. "For *this cause* I obtained mercy, that in me first, Jesus Christ might show all long-suffering for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe in him to life everlasting." His conversion was first, not in the order of time, but by *way of pre-eminence*. In him Christ gave the highest exhibition of long-suffering, and then held him up before all succeeding ages as a *pattern* for the instruction and encouragement of all who would believe in him to eternal life. Impenitent man, look at this Gospel pattern. Do you desire to believe and be saved? Behold here the long-suffering love of Christ. He came into the world to save sinners. He came that his feet might be bathed with the penitent tears of Mary Magdalene; that he might open the gates of heaven for the vilest of mankind; that the thief

from the cross might be the first to follow him into Paradise. Seated on his glorious throne the same purpose of grace fills his heart; and the most signal triumphs of that grace are in the conversion of such as Saul of Tarsus.

If, now, in face of these undoubted facts, you, even in thought, question his willingness to save to the uttermost those who come unto God by him, do you not undervalue the saving efficacy of his blood, and impeach his faithfulness to fulfil his word? O look away from such impious and soul-destroying notions to the long suffering so clearly set down in this Gospel pattern. If Saul obtained mercy, so may you. The doubtful question is not whether he will save you if you believe, but whether you will ever embrace his offered mercy. This is a doubtful question. There comes a voice from heaven saying, "Son of man, can these dry bones live? Can these Gospel-hardened sinners ever be converted?" The only response we dare make is, "Oh, Lord, thou knowest; no eye but thine can look through the dark future and see who of us shall lie down in everlasting sorrow." And then, turning away from those secret things which belong to Him, I exhort you, by the mercy of God, and by the value of your own soul, "give diligence to make your calling and election sure."

Impenitent man, it is hard for you to kick against the pricks. Now and again God puts goads into your soul; and it is not without a struggle that you silence your conscience, and quench the Holy Spirit. He was scattered all along your way to perdition, influences which you cannot resist without many a pang. He has spilt the blood of the cross upon that path. Is it not hard for you to trample on that precious blood? He has sprinkled that path with the tears of Christian affection. It is not hard for you to resist the appeals of those whose heart's desire and prayer to God for you is that you may be saved! He has set up all along that path the patterns of those with whom you are linked in the most intimate relations of life. Is it not hard for you to refuse the example of a believing wife, or parent, or child? He has poured around that path, the light of the Gospel, shining above the brightness of the sun; and every day he calls to you from heaven, saying, "Why persecutest thou me—why do you reject my love and neglect my great salvation?" Oh! can you, without hard struggles, refuse to fall prostrate and cry, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? Alas! if you tell us you have become insensible to these appeals, so that it is *not* hard for you to trample on and blunt their sharp point, then has the question of your salvation become indeed a doubtful problem. God's whirlwind may rend the old and gnarled oak that has breasted the storms of a hundred winters. His earthquake may turn the course of the river that has worn its deep channel in the rock for centuries. But this is not the usual course either

of his providence or his grace. He bends the young and tender sapling. He turns the course of the infant stream as it springs from the fountain. His converting grace achieves its chief triumphs in the soul that is not yet hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. How suitable, therefore, is the lamentation which the prophet puts into the mouth of impenitent old age: "Woe unto us! for the day goeth away, and the shadows of evening are stretched out!" And with what emphasis do the words of wisdom come home to the hearts of the young, "Remember now thy Creator, in the days of thy youth, before the *evil* days come"—before the heart is absorbed by the world, and hardened by the deceitfulness of sin—before the affections become insensible to the melting love of Christ—before the long-suffering Spirit of God is grieved and provoked to abandon the soul to its own devices; even *now* obey every heavenly voice, follow every thread of gracious influence that would lead you to the Saviour, put forth every Divine impulse within you to lay *hold on eternal life*.

SERMON DCCII.

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POLITICS FOR CHRISTIANS.*

"Render, therefore, unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's."—MATT. xxii. 21.

It is a question of great importance how far the discussion of civil and secular matters should enter into the ministrations of the pulpit. In the practical decision of this question, we have been accustomed to look for guidance mainly to the example of Christ and his Apostles. We believe that example was intended to be a perfect pattern for us. It was written for our learning, and has, therefore, all the binding authority of a Divine law.

Nor let it be supposed that this law has become inapplicable to us by the lapse of centuries or the peculiarities of the present age.

* Preached Thanksgiving Day, November 20, 1854.