

Message 6

UNDERSTANDING PAUL'S CONVERSION AND CALLING AS AN APOSTLE

This is the second message in the series *Appearance and Reality*¹.

Paul is an outstanding example of a man of faith. However, at the time he was converted, he appeared an unlikely candidate for conversion. He had set his heart to destroy the church and was actively doing so when the Lord appeared to him, bringing about his conversion and calling him to be an apostle. To many, it is inconceivable that something like this should have happened.

In this message, we seek to understand why this persecutor of the church and the "chief of sinners" was "suddenly" converted and called by God to be an apostle. We will seek to understand the heart of Paul before his conversion, the meaning of his conversion and the depth of his response to the Lord. This will shed light on what constitutes a man of faith and how to become a man of faith. Paul's unceasing zeal and earnestness in working out his faith is a powerful testimony to how much a man of faith can accomplish in God's kingdom by God's grace.

This message has been included in this book because it can contribute to our understanding of the man of faith and what God looks for in a man.

Appearance can be very different from reality. There is a tendency for many to conclude on the basis of outward appearance.

In John 7:24, the Lord Jesus teaches us not to judge according to appearance but to judge with righteous judgement. In 1 Samuel 16:6-7, God cautioned Samuel against looking at outward appearance, for He looks at the heart.

When Moses was forty years of age, he thought he was ready to deliver the Israelites out of Egypt. But in reality he was not. After forty years in the wilderness, God called him to deliver the Israelites out of Egypt. This time, Moses appeared unready for the task. But in reality, he was ready.

To be effective disciples of the Lord, we need to perceive the truth and reality accurately. This will help us to see things the way God sees them, to enter into fellowship with Him and to move with Him. We can then respond well to people and situations, and we will not be deceived or make gross mistakes, which can have serious consequences for us, for others and also for the Lord's work.

¹ Messages in the series *Appearance and Reality* are available on the website www.godandtruth.com.

Let us consider the example of the apostle Paul. We shall seek to understand the state of Paul before his conversion, his sudden and unexpected conversion, and his calling as an apostle to the Gentiles.

Paul before his conversion – a violent persecutor of the church

Before his conversion, Paul was a prominent and violent persecutor of the church. He appeared to be ruthless, heartless and hardened towards the truth. This is the picture we get when we read Acts 8.

Acts 8:1-3

1 Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death.

And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

2 Some devout men buried Stephen, and made a loud lamentation over him.

3 But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.

Paul, who was then known as Saul, was among the crowd when Stephen was being stoned. Saul was not merely a spectator; he was in hearty agreement with the stoning of Stephen, even though Stephen was a good and faithful disciple of the Lord Jesus. Stephen's meekness and forgiving spirit shone through in the way he faced the stoning and in his prayer to the Lord to forgive those who stoned him (Acts 7:54-60).

Even after witnessing the wonderful testimony of Stephen and the gracious way Stephen went through his ordeal, Saul went on to ravage the church and, "entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison" (Acts 8:3). He was actively seeking to destroy the church. Not being satisfied with persecuting and imprisoning the Christians at Jerusalem, he headed for Damascus with fiery zeal to arrest Christians in that city.

Acts 9:1-2

1 Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest,

2 and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

A person observing Saul's actions would likely have the impression that he was a terrible man in a terrible state and doing terrible things. In persecuting the Christians, he was persecuting the Lord Jesus Himself (Acts 9:4-5), the Son of God, the Way, the Truth and the Life, and the true Light who has come into the world. Saul could justifiably be described as an enemy of God, the church and the truth.

Paul's sudden conversion and calling

As Saul headed for Damascus on his self-appointed mission, suddenly and dramatically, the Lord Jesus confronted him and stopped him in his tracks. Saul was blinded by a bright light that appeared from heaven. What followed was his wondrous conversion.

Acts 9:3-5

3 As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him;

4 and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

5 And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting,

In Damascus, Saul was greeted by Ananias, a disciple of the Lord. The Lord had earlier revealed to Ananias that Saul was His chosen instrument to bring the gospel to both the Gentiles and the Jews.

Acts 9:15-16

15 But the Lord said to him (Ananias), "Go, for he (Saul) is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel;

16 for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake."

Paul's conversion and calling appeared unthinkable

Who would have thought that a person like Saul could be converted so suddenly? There was no indication that he was near the kingdom of God. Even more incredible was the fact that Saul's conversion took place at the height of his violent persecution of Christians, for he was at that time "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord" (Acts 9:1).

It may also seem inconceivable and incomprehensible that God would call such a terrible persecutor of the church to so prominent a position as the great apostle to the Gentiles.

This account of Saul's conversion and calling by God in Acts 9 raises two questions:

- How could a person who appeared so ruthless, heartless, hardened and anti-Christian be converted so suddenly, even while he was relentlessly persecuting the church of God?
- How could it be that at the time of Saul's conversion, God had already decided and chosen him to be His special minister and witness, and the great apostle to the Gentiles?

Inadequate explanations for Paul's sudden conversion and calling

If we look at the situation superficially, we may answer these two questions as follows:

- Conversion can take place at any time, in any person, even when it seems most unlikely.
- This event demonstrates the wonder of God's grace, that even a person in a state like Saul's can be converted and chosen to fulfil such a significant role in God's kingdom.
- It is God's prerogative to choose whoever He wishes to fulfil whatever role He assigns in the outworking of His purposes. This is an expression of God's sovereignty. His choice is not dependent on the qualities or the merits of the man chosen.
- The infinite God often works in strange, incomprehensible ways – ways that finite men do not and cannot understand.

It is true that the conversion of Saul and his appointment as an apostle demonstrate the bountiful grace of God towards Saul. It is also true that they are an expression of God's sovereignty. However, are the above answers adequate and satisfying? Is there more to the whole episode that we can try to understand from the scriptural records?

Understanding what God wants us to understand

As finite men, we have our limitations. At times, we cannot comprehend the ways of the infinite God. However, we should not use this as an excuse for our neglect and failure. God desires us to grow in our understanding of Him and His ways so that we can have quality fellowship with Him and participate more meaningfully and effectively in His purposes.

There is much that God desires to teach us and reveal to us through His Spirit. We must therefore seek Him earnestly, diligently and humbly. This is an important aspect of our friendship with God.

One major reason for our failure to understand people and situations accurately is our failure to perceive the realities beyond the outward appearance.

Paul's true state before his conversion

Let us seek to understand the true state of Paul just before his conversion. We will examine two aspects:

- Was he really heartless, cruel, against the truth and against God?
- Is his conversion and calling really so incomprehensible?

To understand why the Lord appeared to him on the road to Damascus and why He appointed him to be His apostle to the Gentiles, we need to learn to perceive what was going on in Saul's heart. This is God's approach: He "looks at the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7).

Paul not against God or the truth

Saul thought that in persecuting the church, he was being zealous for God. He testified to this in Acts 22:3-4, when he was making his defence to the people.

Acts 22:3-4

3 "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God, just as you all are today.

4 "And I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons,

"I persecuted this Way to the death" was an expression of his zeal for God. Growing up, he was educated under Gamaliel, a famous teacher of the Law. He sought sincerely and earnestly to keep the Law as he understood it, and could testify in Philippians 3:6 that he was blameless as to the righteousness which is in the Law. Though what Saul did was contrary to God's will, in his heart, he was not against God and the truth. In fact, he was trying earnestly to keep the laws of God and to serve God zealously.

Paul's frame of mind as a Pharisee

Saul persecuted the Christians so severely because he was convinced they could not be of God. To him, the Lord Jesus could not be the Messiah, or the Son of God, or even have the approval of God upon Him. The Lord Jesus was crucified on the cross, and "he who is hanged is accursed of God" (Deut. 21:23). As a Jew well-versed in the Law, Saul was sure that the One who died such a death could not be the Messiah, the Saviour of mankind, or be equal with God, as He had claimed to be.

It must have appeared outrageous to him for the Christians to claim that He who died such an ignoble death has risen from the dead by the power of God, and has ascended and even been exalted. In his mind, these blasphemous people and their false teachings must be nullified and the whole movement snuffed out! They must not be allowed to lead the people astray!

Like many Jews in his days, Saul could also have thought that the true Messiah would be a victorious, reigning king who would come as a deliverer of Israel. What Saul knew about the Lord Jesus was that He was a weak and helpless person crucified on the cross. He could not imagine that God would permit His Messiah to die such a pathetic death.

It was only after his conversion that he came to appreciate very deeply that the Lord Jesus willingly offered Himself to be cursed on our behalf. He stated this in Galatians 3:13.

Galatians 3:13

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree"—

It is also helpful for us to remember that Saul, as a Pharisee, would have undergone rigorous training in Judaism. Such training concentrated very much on the observance of the laws of the Old Testament, temple sacrifices, and Jewish traditions and interpretations developed and passed down over many years. The whole religion of Israel then was very much centred on the belief that man could become right with God and be saved through the observance of these rituals and traditions. The Lord Jesus had pointed out on several occasions that mere outward observance of these rituals and traditions without the inward reality was inadequate. He often rebuked the Pharisees for emphasising the strict observance of these rituals and traditions while violating the true principles in the Scriptures.

As Saul was steeped in the Judaistic understanding of salvation, he would have great difficulty understanding and accepting the new concept of salvation through faith in Christ as well as other teachings of the Lord Jesus that the Christians were proclaiming. Saul and the other Jews must have felt very threatened by this new teaching of the Lord Jesus and His disciples.

Whatever may be the other reasons in the heart of Saul, it is clear that he persecuted the believers not because he was against God and the ways of God, but because he was convinced that the disciples were leading people astray by making false claims and imparting false teachings. Saul's persecution of the Christians is a warning to us that a person can be deceived or led astray and can do terrible deeds, yet think he is serving God.

Our attempt to understand the state of Saul's heart is not intended to excuse him or to minimise the seriousness of what he had done. There was moral failure, which he acknowledged in his letter to Timothy.

1 Timothy 1:12-15

12 I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service,

13 even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief;

14 and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus.

15 It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all.

In this passage, Paul was referring to what he did before he became a Christian – that he was once a persecutor and a violent aggressor, and that he had acted ignorantly in unbelief. At that time, he did not believe in the claims of the Lord Jesus. But when he became a Christian, he was deeply appreciative of God's grace towards him, the "foremost" of sinners (v. 15).

It is clear that Saul was very different from someone with evil intent; he was not a terrible, ruthless, heartless and hardened man who was against God and the truth.

Paul's deep response to God's call

Looking beyond Paul's outward conduct before his conversion, God saw the great potential and qualities within his heart. He knew that if Saul were to come to recognise the truth and experience the enabling of God, he would wholeheartedly commit his life to God and serve Him faithfully. As the Scriptures clearly shows, he did not disappoint the Lord.

The moment Saul came to recognise the truth of the gospel, that the Lord Jesus is indeed the Saviour of mankind, he committed himself without reservation to the Lord and to His service. The qualities within him emerged very quickly, indicating that basically these realities and their potential were already present within him.

Believers often make professions of wholehearted commitment to God and to His service, but the quality of their commitment is often much lower than what we see in Paul. Among Christians, the expression "total commitment" or "wholehearted commitment to God and to His service" is often used too glibly and treated too lightly. Paul's commitment to the Lord and to His service was of a very high quality.

Let us look again at the account given in Acts 9, when the Lord Jesus suddenly appeared to Saul as he was journeying to Damascus.

Acts 9:3-6

3 As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him;

4 and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

5 And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting,

6 but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do."

Let us note the quality of Saul's response to the Lord the moment the Lord Jesus appeared to him. He instantly recognised it was a supernatural revelation from God and he therefore asked, "Who are You, Lord?" This question implied that there was a spirit of submission to God.

This is verified by Paul's own account of the same incident.

Acts 22:6-10

6 "But it happened that as I was on my way, approaching Damascus about noontime, a very bright light suddenly flashed from heaven all around me,

7 and I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?'

8 "And I answered, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said to me, 'I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting.'

9 "And those who were with me saw the light, to be sure, but did not understand the voice of the One who was speaking to me.

10 "And I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord said to me, 'Get up and go on into Damascus, and there you will be told of all that has been appointed for you to do.'

In verse 8, we see Saul asking the first question: "Who are You, Lord?" Then in verse 10, we see him asking a second question: "What shall I do, Lord?" Here Saul again addressed Jesus as "Lord" and sought to know what the Lord desired of him. His spontaneous response to the Lord was an expression of his desire to know God's will and then to submit to it. This was a consistent posture in Paul's life and is a key quality of true discipleship.

This attitude is reflected in the pattern prayer that the Lord Jesus teaches us: "Your will be done". The prayer of our hearts should be for the will of God to be done. And for this to take place, we should first seek to know what the Lord's will is and then cooperate with the Lord so that His will can be fulfilled in our lives.

After many years of service, when recounting the same incident on the road to Damascus in his testimony before King Agrippa, Paul declared: "So, King Agrippa, I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision" (Acts 26:19). This declaration confirms that Paul's two questions: "Who are You, Lord?" and "What shall I do, Lord?" reflect deep positive qualities of true discipleship in the heart of Paul. Paul not only desired to know God's will, but also to submit to it and fulfil it in his life from then on. Indeed, Paul proved to be faithful, obedient and persevering in doing all that the Lord desired of him, and he also accomplished the mission and tasks God entrusted to him.

Regardless of the obstacles he encountered, Paul did not deviate from God's call. He went through much suffering, afflictions, pain and hardship, but still he continued in this path. At the end of his life, he could say: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith". He had the assurance in his heart that God was pleased with his life and would reward him with "the crown of righteousness" (2 Tim. 4:7-8).

The kind of attitude that Paul adopted, the life he lived, and the way he responded to God from the moment of conversion, reflected the earnest longings within his heart to serve God and to be true to Him even before his conversion. He did not know the

Lord and the way of truth then, but once he came to know Him, his heart was set in that direction.

"Who are You, Lord?", "What shall I do, Lord?", "I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision". These questions and words epitomise the key elements of true discipleship and the life of faith: to know the Lord, live out His will, and be faithful to Him till the end.

The working of the Holy Spirit and Paul's striving

Some may attribute the success of Paul's life to the working of the Holy Spirit. Certainly, the Holy Spirit was working mightily in Paul to strengthen and enable him to accomplish all that he did. However, it was not solely because the Spirit of God strengthened and worked in him in a special way. How the Spirit of God worked in and through Paul was related to his deep response and faithfulness to God. Paul could have been disobedient to God's call. But he was not. Instead, he laboured hard and fought the good fight of faith, and he sought to encourage all true believers to move in the same direction.

It is important that we learn to strive according to the power of the Holy Spirit working within us. Let us learn from the example of Paul, as he testified in Colossians 1:29: "I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me".

Let us look more closely at the relationship between Paul's striving and the gracious working of God in and through his life.

1 Corinthians 15:10

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me.

In saying "by the grace of God I am what I am", Paul was referring not only to what he managed to accomplish (i.e., his doing), but also to his attainments in spiritual development (i.e., his being). God's grace towards him could have been in vain, but it was not. Together with God's working, Paul laboured all the more – but in the same breath he added: "yet not I, but the grace of God with me". He wanted to make sure we understand that even his earnest labouring was possible only by God's gracious enabling. Many temptations, distractions and hardships could have caused him to falter, but it was the grace of God that enabled him to be faithful to the path of truth, even as he himself was determined to remain faithful to God and continue in His grace.

1 Corinthians 15:10 is one of the clearest verses in the Scriptures on the relationship between God's part and man's part in the life of the man of faith. Whatever we can attain to in moral and spiritual stature and whatever we are able to do that is of true value is by God's gracious working in and through our lives. At the same time we

must fulfil our part and cooperate with God – otherwise His gracious working in our lives would be in vain.

The moral and spiritual principles involved are the same with regard to our growing in faith and all expressions of true faith. There is God's part as well as man's part – man must respond positively to God's gracious working in his heart.

God desires to do a deep work in the lives of all His children. Though the gifts and the kind of work entrusted to each one of us may differ, He wants all of us to be faithful and fruitful disciples living the abundant life in Christ. God is calling us to attain unto maturity in Christ, to the measure of the stature that belongs to the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:13). Many of us, however, fall far short of the kind of life God intends for us. Let us therefore respond to Him more deeply so that His grace towards us would not be in vain.

Further explanations for Paul's sudden conversion

Having seen Paul's true state before his conversion and his deep response to God, we can say that Paul's conversion did not happen out of the blue; neither was it incomprehensible, though there were no obvious indications he was about to be converted. It did not happen contrary to his whole manner of life, as it might appear to be.

Powerful impact of the testimony of Stephen and other Christians

There is another aspect regarding Paul's conversion helpful for us to consider: the likely impact of the testimony of those whom Paul persecuted, including Stephen's. Paul heard the words and saw the lives of these faithful disciples, and the way they faced the persecution. A genuine manifestation of the power of the Holy Spirit could be seen in the love, joy and peace in their hearts, and in their faithfulness to God in the midst of trials and persecution.

The strength and courage manifested in the life and conduct of Stephen must have been a very powerful testimony. Stephen was filled with the Spirit (Acts 7:55). He was empowered by God to be a testimony to the truth. His face was "like the face of an angel" to those who were beholding him (Acts 6:15); and as he was being stoned to death, he was praying to the Lord not to hold this grievous sin against those stoning him (Acts 7:59-60).

Although under great pressure, the believers remained steadfast and were even willing to die for their faith. Their testimony would likely have had an impact on Paul and helped to prepare his heart for the "Damascus road" experience.

Disciples' testimony on Jesus' life and teachings

It is also likely that Paul would have heard the disciples' testimony of the Lord Jesus as the Christ, and about His life and teaching and the miracles He performed. He

would have heard them directly or indirectly in many different ways. For example, the disciples whom Paul had persecuted, imprisoned and perhaps interrogated would have borne witness to seeing the risen Christ, a significant event at that time.

The empty tomb and the risen Christ

Furthermore, there seemed to be no good explanation for the empty tomb apart from the fact that Christ had indeed risen. Paul might have thought over some possible explanations: Could it be that the disciples had taken away the body of the Lord Jesus? But if indeed they had taken away His body, could they still have testified so definitely and boldly about something they knew to be untrue? Would they have been willing to die for a lie? Or could it be that the authorities had taken away the body of Jesus? But if they had, they would likely have produced it to discount the claims of the apostles. Or could it be that He was not fully dead, and that He got up and escaped? What about the huge stone that was placed over the head of the tomb, and the guards who were stationed there? How could He have disappeared without a trace?

God preparing Paul's heart for the "Damascus road" experience

Though Paul was still persecuting the believers vehemently, there would likely be many things causing unease within him. Could these people indeed be testifying to the truth? Otherwise, why would they be prepared to die for their faith?

It is likely that the Spirit of God would also have been working in Paul's heart and mind during that period, in the midst of all that was taking place. So finally, when the risen Lord Himself appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus, he was smitten in his heart and he submitted to the Lord and to the truth. He had heard many testimonies but was unable to believe. But when the Lord Jesus appeared to him, he knew instantly that the disciples were telling the truth – Jesus has indeed risen and He is the Christ!

To sum up, it would be reasonable to say that under God's gracious oversight, the experiences Paul went through prepared him for his conversion. So, though at first glance, his conversion may seem very sudden, unexpected and incomprehensible, in reality, it was not.

Lessons from our reflection on Paul's conversion and his calling

As we reflect on Paul's conversion and his calling as an apostle to the Gentiles, there are various lessons that we can learn.

1. *The state of a person's heart before his conversion has a bearing on the quality of his faith and whether he becomes a man of faith.*
2. *The depth of a person's response and commitment to the Lord at conversion can give him a good start on the road to becoming a man of faith.*
3. *"Hardened people" may be near the kingdom of God.*

Those who appear hardened and antagonistic towards Christians and the Christian faith may not necessarily be far from God's kingdom. Like Paul, some of them, while at the height of their anti-Christian stance, could in fact be near to God's kingdom. But it is also true that many who are antagonistic may actually be very far from God's kingdom. When we encounter such situations, we should try to understand what the reality is, and not be deterred because of wrong conclusions based on the outward appearance.

4. *The true state of a person may not be easy to perceive.*

This is especially so when the outward appearance portrays a very different picture from the realities within the heart. Many things that are not obvious may be going on in the heart and mind of the person. We need to be alert and open to this possibility instead of being over-confident in our assessment of things and thus concluding hastily. Sometimes, even the person himself may not understand what is going on.

The difficulty in understanding these things can be illustrated by the initial response of the disciple Ananias to the Lord's instructions to him concerning Paul.

Acts 9:10-15

10 Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord."

11 And the Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying,

12 and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight."

13 But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem;

14 and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name."

15 But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel;

From the above account, we see that the devout Ananias was hesitant when he was instructed by the Lord to go to Paul and minister to him. It is understandable that Ananias was uneasy and reluctant, knowing the fearsome reputation of Paul that preceded him. Besides, it would seem a dangerous mission for Ananias. He could not

perceive the reality of the situation and the state of Paul's heart at that time. But when God specifically commanded him, he obeyed.

5. The key to understanding the true state of a person is to try to perceive what lies in the heart.

Our approach should be to understand the underlying attitudes and longings of a person and not to conclude based only on the outward conduct. Otherwise our conclusions may be wrong and damaging. We need to discern the quality and strength of the positive attitudes and longings in a person's heart. At the same time, we need to understand the seriousness of the negative features and traits that are present and the degree of moral failure and culpability of the person. These are the key areas to focus on rather than the external behaviour of the person.

Recognising the correct approach is helpful, but it may still be difficult for us to know the true state because we may not be able to fathom what is going on in the hearts of people. We should therefore not be careless, presumptuous or over-confident. If we are prayerful, the Lord will help us, and we are less likely to make a gross error. We should form tentative impressions and continue to evaluate as things unfold. With passing time, and in the light of further developments, things may become clearer. As we grow in maturity and in our fellowship with the Lord, we can develop our ability to perceive more accurately.

6. The positive impact of Christians may not be obvious.

The conduct and testimony of Christians, including Stephen and others whom Paul had persecuted or observed, might not appear to have had a positive impact on him. In fact, they appeared to have infuriated him and caused him to be even more antagonistic. In reality, they could have caused him to become less certain about his stand against the Christian faith, thus preparing him for conversion.

In our desire to be faithful witnesses for God, we may at times not appear to have positive impact on others, or we may even appear to infuriate them. Let us not conclude that just because there appears to be no positive impact, there is indeed none. However, we need to exercise care that our lives and conduct do not actually hinder others from entering the kingdom of God.

Generally, the conversion of a person is not solely due to a particular experience or event. Many things would have been taking place in his life. It is an on-going process, and along the way, the testimonies of faithful brethren would have contributed to the final positive outcome.

By their faithful lives and words, believers can also contribute significantly to the quality of response in conversion. If the testimony is strong, the likelihood of a conversion of quality is greater. After becoming a Christian, the person can often look back and point to the positive impact of Christians he had come in contact with or whose lives he had observed, even those observed from a distance.

We should therefore not think that our lives have no positive impact on others just because it appears that way. Though a person's response to God is a matter of personal choice, it is nevertheless important that we, as lights of the world, strive to be faithful to God because potentially, the impact on others can be very significant.

In the same manner, we should also not conclude that there is great impact of our lives on others just because it appears to be that way. They may be merely expressing superficial words, sometimes out of politeness, without a deep response in the heart.

7. Faithful testimony of Christians can have positive impact on others not only at conversion, but also after conversion.

After conversion, a person can still reflect over the quality of the testimony he had observed in the lives of believers. This can be a source of encouragement to him and can contribute greatly to his own spiritual development even long after the event. However, if there is little quality, the impact is likely to be minimal.

For example, it is unlikely Paul would forget the life and testimony of Stephen and the other faithful disciples and their willingness to suffer for the Lord. They would have been an encouragement to him to be earnest and faithful, and would have helped to prepare him for a life of suffering for the faith.

God knew from the beginning that the ministry He intended for Paul would include much suffering. God told Ananias in Acts 9:15-16 that Paul was not only a "chosen instrument" of God but also one who would suffer much for His name's sake.

In later years, Paul wrote much about the place and meaningfulness of suffering in Christian living. In Philippians 1:29, Paul expresses that suffering is a privilege: "For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake". He teaches that suffering for the Lord's sake can be a very meaningful experience for faithful Christians:

Philippians 3:10

that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death;

Colossians 1:24

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions.

In his epistle to the Corinthians, he elaborates on the principle of suffering and death and how it produces life in others:

2 Corinthians 4:8-12

8 we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing;

9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;

10 always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.

11 For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

12 So death works in us, but life in you.

It could well be that Paul learned to appreciate the meaning and purpose of suffering in a Christian's life not only through his personal experience, but also from observing and being encouraged by the positive example of Stephen and the other believers.

8. The true man of faith will persevere and run the race well until he finishes his course on earth.

Paul's life and faithful ministry from his conversion to the end of his time on earth is a good illustration of this point and a powerful testimony to how much God can do in and through a man of faith.

Concluding remarks

In this message, we have sought to understand Paul's conversion and calling as an apostle. These events in his life may seem sudden and incomprehensible because he was a violent and relentless persecutor of the church just before his conversion. Yet, as we have examined, Paul was in reality seeking zealously to serve God and keep His laws. The Lord saw beyond Paul's apparent anti-God and anti-Christian stance. He knew Paul's true state of heart and the positive qualities within him. This helps us understand the Lord's intervention in Paul's life that led to his conversion and his calling as an apostle. Paul vindicated God's confidence in him. The moment he was converted, he became a committed disciple of the Lord. He laboured hard to serve the Lord and did not receive the grace of God in vain. Paul became an outstanding example of a man of faith.

We learn from this that what motivates our outward conduct is more important than the outward conduct itself. Ultimately, God is most concerned about what lies within our hearts. However, let us not give excuses for our improper conduct by saying, "My heart's attitudes are right; outward conduct does not matter." Although appearance does not always reflect reality, our outward conduct often flows forth from what is within the heart and reveals its true state. It can help us understand ourselves and others.

We have seen that the faithful testimony of the disciples of Christ in the face of fiery persecution would likely have had a positive impact on the life of Paul, even though outwardly he continued to persecute Christians. It would have stirred Paul's heart

and helped to prepare him to receive the Lord Jesus. It would also have contributed much to Paul's own faithful ministry as an apostle in the years that followed.

Let us not be deterred by outward appearance, but learn to persevere in faithful service and witness to the truth. There are those who may appear to be hardened towards the truth but in reality are near God's kingdom. If we live our lives well, we can have a significant positive impact on others, even though it may not appear to be so. Let us take courage and not lose heart. The more wholeheartedly we live for the Lord, the greater will be the impact of our lives in the spiritual realm.

God desires to do a deep work in our lives so that we can bear much fruit. Like Paul, let us be fully submitted to God and let us learn to strive according to His power and His guidance.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How does this message help you understand the heart of Paul before his conversion, the meaning of his conversion and the depth of his response to the Lord?
2. How does this message help you understand what constitutes a man of faith and how to become a man of faith?
3. What can we learn from Paul's conversion and his calling as an apostle to the Gentiles?

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