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UNDERSTANDING PAUL'S CONVERSION AND CALLING AS AN APOSTLE

A review

In the previous message, we noted that appearance can be very different from reality and that there is a tendency for man to hastily conclude on the basis of outward appearance.

We looked at two key passages on this subject. In the first, John 7:24, the Lord Jesus teaches us not to judge according to appearance but to judge with righteous judgement. In the second, 1 Samuel 16:6-7, God cautioned Samuel against looking at outward appearance, for He looks at the heart.

We also reflected on two biblical illustrations. The first was the scribes and Pharisees and the contrast between them and the tax collector (Luke 18). People of that time tended to be impressed by the religiosity of the scribes and Pharisees, but despised people like the tax collectors. Though not all tax collectors were righteous and just, there could also have been those who had good attitudes and were repentant like the one in this parable in the Gospel of Luke.

The second illustration was Moses. We noted that when Moses was in Egypt at the age of forty, he appeared ready to fulfil God's intention to deliver Israel, but in reality he was not. After forty years in the wilderness, God called him and entrusted to him the important mission of delivering Israel out of Egypt. At that time, he appeared not ready for the task, but in reality he was.

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

Let us now consider another biblical example, 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 passive spectator; he was in hearty agreement with the stoning of Stephen, even though Stephen was a good and faithful disciple of the Lord who testified boldly to the Lord and to the truth. Stephen's meekness and forgiving spirit shone through in the way he endured the stoning and prayed to the Lord not to hold the sin of those stoning him against them (Acts 7:54-60).

Even after witnessing the wonderful testimony of Stephen and the gracious way he went through his ordeal, Paul 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 towards Damascus with fiery zeal to arrest the 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 these actions by Saul would tend to have the impression that he was a terrible man in a terrible state and doing terrible things. In persecuting the Christians, he was actually 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. It would appear then that Saul could justifiably be described as an enemy of God, the church and the truth.

Paul's sudden conversion and calling

With zeal and fury, Saul headed towards 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 the wondrous conversion of Saul.

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, to whom was revealed that Saul would be God's 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

No one would have thought that a person in Saul's state could be converted so suddenly. There was no indication that he was near the kingdom of God. Even more incredulous was the fact that Saul's conversion took place at the height of his ruthless and fierce persecution of Christians as the Scriptures tells us that he was "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord" just before his conversion (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 Paul's conversion and calling by God in Acts 9 is likely to raise two questions:

- How could such a person who appeared so ruthless, heartless, hardened and anti-Christian be converted suddenly in the midst of persecuting the church of God in a relentless manner?
- How could it be that at the time of Paul'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 do not reflect over the matter prayerfully, but look at the situation superficially, we may answer these two questions as follows:

- a. Conversion can take place at any time, in any person, even when it seems most unlikely.
- b. This event demonstrates and illustrates the wonder of God's grace, that even a person in a state like Paul's can be converted and chosen to fulfil such a task.

c. In the accomplishment of His purposes, God chooses whomever He pleases to fulfil whatever role He desires for that person. This is an expression of God's sovereignty and is not dependent on the qualities or the merits of the man.

d. The infinite God often works in strange, incomprehensible ways—ways that finite men do not and cannot understand. The conversion and calling of Saul as the apostle to the Gentiles is a good example.

It is true that the conversion of Saul and his appointment as an apostle does demonstrate the bountiful grace of God towards Saul. It is also an expression of God's sovereignty in choosing Saul. However, are the above answers to the two questions adequate and satisfying? Is there more to it that we can try to understand?

Importance of seeking to understand what God wants us to understand

As finite men, we must humbly acknowledge our limitations and that at times we cannot comprehend the ways of the infinite God. However, we should not use this fact too freely to cover up our inability to understand God's will and ways due to neglect and failure on our part. God desires us to grow in understanding of Him and His ways and in moral and spiritual stature so that there can be quality fellowship with Him and meaningful participation and cooperation with Him in the fulfilment of His purposes.

Although we may not be able to understand some of the deeper things of God because of our level of maturity, we must not simply excuse ourselves. God wants us to grow in understanding over time. There is much that He desires to teach us and reveal to us through His Spirit, whatever is appropriate for our understanding. We must therefore respond to 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 try to perceive or our inability to perceive the realities beyond the outward appearance.

Paul's true state before his conversion

Let us now 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?
- Was his conversion and calling really so sudden and incomprehensible?

If we can perceive Paul's true state accurately by examining what was going on within his heart, it will help us understand why the Lord Jesus appeared to him in that way on the road to Damascus, and why He appointed him to be His chosen minister and apostle to the Gentiles. This is God's approach: He "looks at the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7).

Paul not against God or the truth

Though Paul was relentlessly persecuting the church, God could see that he was in reality not against God or against the truth in his heart. In fact, Paul 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 part of Paul's expression of his zeal for God. Growing up, he was educated under Gamaliel, a famous teacher of the Law, and was taught strictly according to the Law of the Jews. He was brought up in that way and sought sincerely and earnestly to keep the Law. Before his conversion, he had faithfully kept the Law according to his understanding, and could testify in Philippians 3:6 that he was blameless as to the righteousness which is in the Law. Though he was doing something contrary to what God desired, 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

One major reason for Paul persecuting the church and the Christians so severely was that he was convinced that they could not be of God. He was sure that the Lord Jesus could not be the Messiah, or the Son of God, or even have the approval of God upon Him. One major reason could be Paul's knowledge of the fact that the Lord Jesus was crucified on the cross. According to Paul's understanding of the Old Testament teaching that "he who is hanged is accursed of God" (Deut. 21:23), he could not believe that the One who died such a death could be the Messiah, the Saviour of mankind, or be equal with God, as the Lord Jesus had claimed to be.

It would have appeared to him blasphemous for these disciples of the Lord Jesus to make such assertions. It must have appeared outrageous to him that the Christians were claiming that He who died such an ignoble death could possibly rise again from the dead by the power of God, and actually ascended and was exalted. These outrageous and blasphemous people and their false teachings must be nullified and the whole movement snuffed out!

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

It was after his conversion that Paul 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 Paul, 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 various Jewish traditions and interpretations that were 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 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 the manner in which they sought to observe strictly these rituals and traditions while violating the true principles in the Scriptures.

As Paul was steeped in the Judaistic understanding of salvation, he would have great difficulty understanding and accepting the new concept of faith in Christ and other teachings of the Lord Jesus that the Christians were proclaiming. Paul and the other Jews must have felt very threatened by this new teaching of the Lord Jesus and His disciples, which posed a serious challenge to the Jewish religion.

Whatever may be the other reasons in the heart of Paul, it is clear then that he persecuted the believers not because he was against God and the ways of God, but because he was firmly convinced that the disciples were leading people astray by making false claims and imparting false teachings that were very dangerous and harmful. This should serve as a warning to us that a person can be deceived or led astray and can do terrible deeds, yet may at the same time think that he is serving God.

Paul's moral failure

Our attempt to understand what was going on in the heart of Paul is not intended to excuse Paul or to minimise the seriousness of what he had done and his violent persecution of the Church. There was moral failure on his part, which he acknowledged when he wrote to Timothy in 1 Timothy 1:12-15,

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, he 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 and that was why he acted so vehemently against the Christians. But now Paul was thankful to God and deeply appreciative of His grace towards him, the “foremost” of sinners (v. 15).

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

Paul's deep response to God's call

Quality of Paul's response

Looking beyond Paul's outward conduct before his conversion, God saw the great potential and qualities within Paul's heart. He knew that if Paul 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, Paul did not disappoint the Lord.

The moment Paul came to recognise the truth of the gospel, and 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 Paul emerged very quickly, indicating that basically the potential and the realities 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 the life of 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. When Paul committed himself wholeheartedly to the Lord and to His service, it was of a very high quality.

Let us look again at the account given in Acts 9, when the Lord Jesus suddenly appeared to Paul 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 Paul's response to the Lord the moment the Lord Jesus appeared to him. He instantly recognised that he was experiencing 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, which is recorded in Acts 22:6-10

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 the first question that Paul asked, "Who are You, Lord?" Then in verse 10, we see Paul asking a second question, "What shall I do, Lord?" Here Paul 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 what God required of him and then submit to it. This was a consistent posture in Paul's life and is a key quality of true discipleship.

As we see Paul's response of wanting to know God's will, we can also reflect on 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. Such was the attitude of Paul's heart when he asked, "What shall I do, Lord?"

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 to us that Paul's two questions, "Who are You Lord?" and "What shall I do, Lord?" at the time of his conversion reflect deep positive qualities of true discipleship in the heart of Paul. Paul not only desired to know God's will, he submitted to it and

fulfilled it in his life from then on. Paul proved to be faithful, obedient and persevering in doing all that the Lord required and desired of him, and he also accomplished whatever mission and task God entrusted to him.

Regardless of the obstacles and difficulties that Paul encountered, he did not vacillate in his decision nor deviate from this path. 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" (2 Tim. 4:7). He had the assurance in his heart that God was pleased with his life and would reward him.

The kind of attitude that Paul adopted, the life he lived, and the way he responded 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 then know the Lord and the way of truth, but once he came to know Him, his heart was set in that direction.

The realities in the life of Paul are illustrated by his questions at the time of conversion: "Who are You, Lord?", "What shall I do, Lord?" and his testimony to King Agrippa, after many years of faithful service: "I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision". These questions and words epitomise the key elements of true discipleship because true disciples of the Lord should be seeking to know the Lord, and having known Him, to live out God's 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. It is true that the Holy Spirit was working mightily in Paul to strengthen and enable him to accomplish what he did. But this working of the Spirit of God was related to his deep response and faithfulness to God and cooperation with Him. Paul could have been disobedient to God's call. We cannot say that he was faithful solely because the Spirit of God strengthened and worked in him in a special way. Paul 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".

At the same time, Paul also recognised that it was the grace of God at work in 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.

Paul's declaration, "By the grace of God I am what I am", indicates not only what he managed to accomplish, but also his own state and his attainments in spiritual development. God's grace towards him could have been in vain but it did not prove so. Together with God's working, Paul laboured all the more.

In saying "yet not I, but the grace of God with me", Paul recognised and acknowledged that he could not claim any credit for himself as it was the grace of God that enabled him as he sought to be faithful and not to deviate from the path of truth. There were many temptations, distractions, hardships that could easily have caused him to falter, but he was determined to remain faithful to God and continue in His grace.

God desires greatly to do a deep work in the lives of all His children. Though the gifts and the kind of work entrusted to us may differ, He wants all of us to respond deeply, 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). It is possible for each of us to respond deeply and attain a high quality of life and deep fellowship with God as intended by Him. Sadly, few are responding well. The majority of Christians fall far short of the kind of life the apostle Paul led. When we do not respond in the way we ought to, we are receiving the grace of God 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 pointing to his conversion. It did not happen contrary to his whole manner of life, as it might at first appear to be.

Powerful impact of the testimony of Stephen and other Christians

Further to the above observations, there is also another helpful aspect for us to consider regarding his conversion: the likely impact of the testimony of those whom Paul persecuted, including Stephen. Paul heard the words and saw the lives of these faithful disciples, and the whole way in which they responded to the persecution. There was a genuine manifestation of the power of the Holy Spirit working in the lives of the believers as seen in the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and goodness in their hearts, their faithfulness to God and their self-control in the midst of trials and persecution.

The strength and courage of Stephen's words and life must have been a very powerful testimony. The Scriptures mentions in Acts 7:55 that Stephen was filled with the Spirit. He was specially empowered by God to be a testimony to the truth. It is also recorded in Acts 6:15 that his face was "like the face of an angel" to those who were beholding him.

The believers, including Stephen, were steadfast and willing to die for their faith as martyrs under great pressure and pain. These genuine features of the Spirit of God at work in their lives 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

Besides this, it is also likely that Paul would have heard the disciples' testimony on 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, those disciples whom Paul had persecuted, imprisoned and perhaps interrogated would have borne witness of seeing the risen Christ, which was 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 for the empty tomb: 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 the way they did and would they have been willing to die for a lie that they were proclaiming? 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?

Though Paul was still persecuting the believers very vehemently, there would likely have been many things that were causing a sense of uneasiness within him. Could it be that these people were indeed testifying to the truth? Otherwise, why would they be willing and 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 time, in the midst of all that was happening. 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 not able to believe. However, when the Lord Jesus appeared to him, he knew almost instantly that the disciples were telling the truth—Jesus has indeed risen and is the Christ!

All these experiences that Paul had were likely to have been preparatory 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 reflections 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 some lessons that we can learn.

1. "Hardened people" may be near the Kingdom of God

Those who appear hardened, anti-Christian and very antagonistic towards Christians and the Christian faith may not necessarily be far from God's kingdom. Some of them like Paul, while at the height of their anti-Christian stance, could in fact be rather 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 experiences, we should try to understand what the reality is, and not become discouraged because of wrong conclusions based on the outward appearance.

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

This is especially so when the outward appearance and conduct portray a very different picture from the realities within the heart, and various 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 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 regarding the conversion of 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 terrible reputation of Paul that preceded him. It was not easy for Ananias to appreciate God's instructions. Besides, it would seem a dangerous mission for him. 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 was obedient and went accordingly.

3. A 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 just the outward manifestations of conduct. Otherwise, we may make wrong and even harmful conclusions. On the one hand, we need to discern the quality and strength of the positive attitudes and longings within a person, which may differ from person to person. On the other hand, we need to understand how serious are the negative features and traits in the heart, as well as the degree of moral failure and culpability. These are things that we should try to look out for, so that we will not give undue emphasis on less important areas.

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 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 due to hasty conclusions based merely on the outward. We should also learn to form tentative impressions and continue to evaluate as things unfold. With passing time, and in the light of further developments, things may become clearer. With growing maturity and in fellowship with the Lord, we can develop our ability to perceive more accurately.

4. 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 could have infuriated him and caused him to be even more antagonistic outwardly. But at the same time, they could also be causing him to think and preparing him for conversion.

In our desire to be faithful witnesses for God, we may sometimes 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 apparent positive impact, there is none indeed. Similarly, let us not think that because there doesn't seem to be any negative impact that there is also none.

Generally, the conversion of a person is not solely due to what takes place at a particular moment in time. Many things would have been taking place in his life. It is an on-going process, and along the way, the positive impact of faithful testimonies would have contributed to the final outcome.

The faithful testimony of believers by their lives and words can also contribute significantly to the quality of response in the conversion. The quality of response may vary from person to person at the point of conversion. If our 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 various Christians he had come in contact with or whose lives he had observed, even those he had observed from a distance.

We should therefore not conclude 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 live lives that are consistently faithful to God because potentially, the impact on others can be very positive and 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. It may just be politeness on the part of the person or persons concerned and they may be merely expressing superficial words without an accompanying deep response in the heart.

5. Positive impact of faithful testimony can be relevant to a person 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 in the lives of believers he had observed, it is not likely that there will be any significant positive impact on him after the conversion.

For example, Paul would not likely forget the life and testimony of Stephen and the other faithful disciples and their willingness to suffer for the Lord. They would most probably 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 also teaches that suffering for the Lord's sake can be a very meaningful thing 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 elaborated 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 examples of other believers, including Stephen.

Concluding Remarks

In this message, we sought to understand Paul's conversion and calling as an apostle. These events in his life may seem sudden and incomprehensible because he was, just prior to those events, a ruthless persecutor of the church. Yet, as we have examined, Paul was in reality seeking zealously to serve God and to 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 trust 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.

God also desires to do a deep work in our lives and to enable us to bear much fruit—but are we prepared, like Paul, to be fully submitted to God and to learn to strive according to the power of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit?

We have also 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 caused a stir in 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 learn from this. 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 quite near God's kingdom. Our lives may have a significant positive impact on others in the spiritual realm, even though it may not appear to be so outwardly. Let us take courage and not lose heart.

The more whole-heartedly we live for the Lord, the greater will be the impact of our lives in the spiritual realm, even though it may not be obvious all the time.

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, "If my heart's attitudes are right, then the outward conduct does not matter." Outward conduct flows forth from what is within the heart and reveals its true state. It is relevant in helping us understand ourselves or other people if we know how to interpret it correctly.

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