

**Conversion to Jesus Christ:
(7) God's Preparation of the Sinner unto His Salvation**

Let us turn in our Bibles to Acts 26.

In our study of true and false conversion to Jesus Christ I would like us to consider one of the great accounts of personal conversion recorded in the Word of God. In Acts 26 we read the third account of the remarkable conversion of Saul of Tarsus to Jesus Christ. Luke, the writer of the Book of Acts, had first narrated Saul's conversion in Acts 9:1-9. Then in Acts 22:1-11 Luke recorded Paul reciting his conversion experience before a murderous mob in Jerusalem. And then in the passage before us, Acts 26:1-23, we read of Paul standing before the Jewish King Agrippa giving a defense of himself and of the gospel. In this defense Paul related how the Lord Jesus had brought him to faith.

¹So Agrippa said to Paul, "You have permission to speak for yourself."

Then Paul stretched out his hand and made his defense: ²"I consider myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, I am going to make my defense today against all the accusations of the Jews, ³especially because you are familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews. Therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently.

⁴"My manner of life from my youth, spent from the beginning among my own nation and in Jerusalem, is known by all the Jews. ⁵They have known for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee. ⁶And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, ⁷to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O king! ⁸Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?

⁹"I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. ¹¹And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.

¹²"In this connection I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. ¹³At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me. ¹⁴And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' ¹⁵And I said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. ¹⁶But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, ¹⁷delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you ¹⁸to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'

¹⁹"Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, ²⁰but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance. ²¹For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. ²²To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: ²³that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles."

The Apostle Paul was one of the most remarkable persons depicted in the biblical record. Here was a man who was the foremost enemy of the gospel, who lived to extinguish the faith and the people of Jesus.

But in a matter of just a few days, he became one of the chief promoters and proclaimers of Jesus as the promised Christ, the Son of the Living God. God had performed a great work of grace in bringing him salvation. Paul had become born again. God had caused new life to spring up where there had been spiritual deadness. Paul became one who loved Jesus Christ and His people, who had formerly hated Jesus Christ and His people.

Now as we consider the conversion experience of Paul, it is not easy to detect precisely the *ordo salutis* (the order of salvation) in which God brought Saul to salvation.¹ We might assume that Paul was born again (regenerated) when he initially saw the glorified Jesus while on the road to Damascus. Perhaps he was, but we really cannot know for certain. We cannot always know the moment of the new birth, but its affects will always be seen sooner or later, and probably sooner than later. “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). We know that Paul had been born again, for his conversion to Jesus Christ was a manifestation of that new birth by the Holy Spirit, but when it happened precisely cannot be determined by us. It had to have taken place during the time that Paul initially saw the glorified Lord and the time several days later when he was baptized, confessing openly his faith in Jesus Christ.

It is also difficult to say when Paul first exercised saving faith—justifying faith—when he fully trusted Jesus as his Savior from sin. Perhaps it was upon his initial seeing the Lord Jesus, but perhaps it was afterward, when Paul had reflected upon the event, even when he was temporarily blind, through the explanation of Ananias to him of the gospel. It was several days later that Ananias told Paul, “Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord” (Acts 22:16). This should not be understood as the water of baptism actually washing sins from a sinner, rather, Ananias was calling upon Paul to repent of his sins and to show forth the cleansing of his sin by undergoing baptism, which was an emblem of his cleansing. It would seem that the entire experience of Paul over the course of several days could be described as an account of Paul coming to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

But Paul’s conversion was remarkable in its suddenness. Here he was, one who punished Christians “often in all the synagogues” and had tried “to make them blaspheme”, even as he was “in raging fury against them.” Paul had persecuted Christians “even to foreign cities.” But soon, very soon, he was proclaiming the gospel to the Gentiles. For Jesus Christ had sent him “to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me” (Acts 26:18).

But had everything begun with Paul on that occasion when He saw the glorified Lord Jesus on the Damascus Road? Well yes, in that event initiated his actual conversion to Christ. But no, in that God had been at work in Paul’s life before that day, preparing Paul for his conversion. We spoke last week of this work of preparation that God works on behalf of preparing the sinner to receive the grace of God. The manner in which God normally brings salvation to sinners involves God at work in the soul of the unconverted bringing him or her to the place and time that God imparts new life in the grace of regeneration. Now again, it is important to understand that the soul’s preparation in no way meritorious nor does it qualify the soul for regeneration. But the Lord must prepare the soul otherwise the hating, rebellious sinner, would not hear and respond to the grace of God in the gospel. God inclines the ear to hear and works upon the mind and will of a person, prior to that day the truth of the gospel floods his understanding and he bows his will to the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the passage of Acts 26 before us we read in our Lord’s words to Paul that Paul had been the object of God’s preparation for grace. Paul had heard a voice to him in the Hebrew language, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? ***It is hard for you to kick against the goads.***”² As a stock animal resists being prodded

¹ Last Lord’s Day we rehearsed the reformed understanding of the *ordo salutis*, that is, the order of salvation in which God brings a sinner to receive salvation from sin. The order is as follows: (1) election/predestination (in Christ), (2) atonement, (3) gospel (general) call, (4) inward (effectual) call, (5) regeneration, (6) conversion (faith & repentance), (7) justification, (8) sanctification, and (9) glorification.

² This is the only place in which Paul related these words of the Lord Jesus. This verse, Acts 26:14, is found in the initial account of Paul being converted in Acts 9:5 in the King James and the New King James Versions, but this was probably an insertion by a scribe much later in the Christian era, as he sought to harmonize the account with what is recorded in Acts 26:14.

to do something against his will, so Paul had been kicking against our Lord's prodding him. God had been prodding him, goading him, preparing him for the day when he would experience conversion.

Here we have, therefore, further evidence of what we had addressed toward the end of our last study. Yes, the Bible teaches God's salvation of sinners is due to His sovereign grace alone. Fallen man cannot and will not come to Jesus Christ for salvation. In order for a sinner to believe the gospel to be saved, God must impart a new heart to him to enable him to believe. Without this new heart, a sinful man never could, never would, believe the gospel. And although the new birth is the first act of God by which He begins to do a work of grace *in* the sinner in order to transform him into a repentant, believing, obedient disciple of Jesus Christ, the new birth is not the first work of God in bringing that sinner to salvation. Prior to regeneration God prepares the sinner to encounter salvation. God prepares people by His grace for the grace of regeneration. And God had been at work in Saul's life, even before his Damascus road journey, even while he had been "breathing threatening and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord" (Acts 9:1).

We might ask, "In what way or ways did the Lord prod Paul, in preparation to his conversion?" We might propose several.

I. First, God had prodded Paul to see in a measure his errant thinking regarding himself and of the nature and ways of God, thereby stripping Paul of self-confidence and assurance that he had formerly understood things rightly and had behaved righteously. God had to unsettle Paul in his own estimation of himself. It would appear that God had been at work in Paul toward this end. The Lord Jesus said to Paul, "It is hard for you to kick against the goads."

There are some characteristics that are common to unconverted people that must be recognized, acknowledged, and changed when they are converted to God through Jesus Christ. One of these characteristics of an unconverted man is *ignorance of his own sinful pride*. Proverbs 14:16 reads, "A wise man fears and departs from evil, but a fool rages and is self-confident." He assumes he knows best how to govern his life even while presuming that God is pleased with the course that he has chosen for himself. Fallen man is a god unto himself, though he does not think so or realize it is so. God must bring him down to the dust, before he will look to Jesus Christ alone.

This is how the people of Judah were before God brought His judgment upon them by sending upon them the armies of Babylon. We may read of the manner in which they thought and lived in contrast to those who are truly blessed of the Lord. We read of this in **Jeremiah 17:5-10**.

⁵Thus says the LORD:

"Cursed is the man who trusts in man (or himself)
And makes flesh his strength,
Whose heart departs from the LORD.
⁶For he shall be like a shrub in the desert,
And shall not see when good comes,
But shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness,
In a salt land which is not inhabited.

⁷"Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD,
And whose hope is the LORD.
⁸For he shall be like a tree planted by the waters,
Which spreads out its roots by the river,
And will not fear when heat comes;
But its leaf will be green,
And will not be anxious in the year of drought,
Nor will cease from yielding fruit.

⁹“The heart is deceitful above all things,
And desperately wicked;
Who can know it?
¹⁰I, the LORD, search the heart,
I test the mind,
Even to give every man according to his ways,
According to the fruit of his doings.

These people were under the wrath of God, but they had thought that they were blessed of God. They had ordered their thinking and their lives according to their own opinions and values. They were in error regarding their own thinking. They were ignorant of God’s ways. They presumed that their ways of thinking were in accordance with what God would have them think. Their fallen hearts had deceived them. God had said to them, “Obey My voice.” But then God said, “Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but *everyone followed the dictates of his evil heart*; therefore I will bring upon them all the words of this covenant” (Jer. 11:7f). In preparation of a soul to call upon the Lord Jesus, to submit wholly unto Him in all matters of faith and practice, God must show the sinner the error and folly of his own way of thinking, of his own independent spirit that had disregarded the Word of God.

Discovery of one’s true sinful condition is not an easy matter. People are ignorant of their sinful condition and they are ignorant of God’s true assessment of them. **David Brainerd**, the well-known young missionary to the Indians (whose grave is in Northampton), wrote of the effort and difficulty he put forth in order to inform and humble people with respect to their sin.

Especially I discoursed repeatedly on the nature and necessity of that humiliation, self-emptiness, or full conviction of a person’s being utterly undone in himself, which is necessary in order to a saving faith, and the extreme difficulty of being brought to this, and the great danger there is of persons taking up with some self-righteous appearances of it: The danger of this I especially dwelt upon, being persuaded that multitudes perish in this hidden way: and because so little is said from most pulpits to discover any danger here: so that persons being never effectually brought to die in themselves, are never truly united to Christ, and so perish.³

The apostle Paul described this work of grace in the soul. He quoted Isaiah 29:14: “For it is written: ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent’” (1 Cor. 1:19). If you are wise in your own eyes. You believe that you are capable of governing your own life by your own intelligence, experience, or reason, you are playing the fool. God needs to undeceive you. God will have to humble you before you will begin to look to Him and His Word alone to guide you in the manner in which you think and the way in which you should go.

And so, it is of critical importance that people be humbled before God in order for people to come into a saving relationship with God through Jesus Christ. God declared this through His prophet Isaiah:

For thus says the High and Lofty One
Who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy:
“I dwell in the high and holy place,
With him who has a contrite and humble spirit,
To revive the spirit of the humble,
And to revive the heart of the contrite ones. (Isa. 57:15)

³ In the Introduction to Thomas Hooker, *The Application of Redemption* (International Outreach, 2008, orig. 1657), p. x.

Note here that God identifies Himself as transcendent, infinite, and holy. He dwells in heaven--“a high and holy place”; He is high and removed from the inhabitants of the earth. But we read that He not only dwells in heaven, He also dwells with the one who has “a contrite and humble spirit.” Here, for God to “dwell” in heaven speaks of God not only abiding in heaven, and owning heaven, but that He also rules in heaven. Here also for God to “dwell” with “a contrite and humble spirit”, speaks of God both owning and ruling in and over the one with a humble and submitted heart. In order for the sinner to be made one fit with whom God can dwell, God must humble him, and move him to submit to His rule over him.

There must be contrition and humiliation before the Lord comes to take possession; the house must be aired and fitted before it comes to be inhabited, swept by brokenness and emptiness of spirit before the Lord will come and set up his abode in it... So it shall be spiritually, the valley of consternation, perplexity of spirit, and brokenness of heart, is the very gale and entrance of any sound hope, and assured expectation of good.⁴

In order for God to humble the sinner, preparing him as a dwelling place for Himself, **God must give the sinner a clear sight of his sin.** Before there will be humility in the sinner, there must be apprehension of the sinner to his sin. God the Holy Spirit must do this work, and the primary means He uses to give sinners a clear sight of their sin, is **His holy law.**

The apostle Paul described the role of the law of God in convicting him of his sin. Paul had described the law of God’s ability to condemn sinners resulting in their death. We read Romans 7:5, “For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death.” In speaking of God’s law as having condemned people by causing them to bring forth fruit unto death, and the law having prevented people from joining themselves to Jesus Christ, one might draw the wrong conclusion that there was something inherently defective, even sinful about the law itself. Paul next demonstrates that this would be a wrong conclusion, for God had a use for His law in bringing people to faith in Jesus Christ. This is what we find in this next paragraph that we desire to examine, **Romans 7:7-12**, which reads as follows:

What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.”⁸ But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead.⁹ I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died.¹⁰ The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me.¹¹ For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.¹² So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

Here we see Paul using a rhetorical question once again to begin his argument.⁵ **“What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin.”** Paul corrects the possible wrong conclusion that there was something defective about God’s law. He asked the question, “What then shall we say? That the law is sin?” One might think that Paul would use the adjective “sinful” rather than the noun, “sin.” Paul used the word, “sin”, to intensify the thought.⁶

Paul not only saw the law to be blameless to the charge, but he stated that the law had served an indispensable role in revealing to Paul his sinfulness and his need of salvation. **Here Paul stated specifically that apart from the law he would not have known sin.**

One of the effects of sin is that it renders a person unable to detect and identify the *presence* of sin that is in him. Sin also renders a sinner unable to see the *gravity* of the sin before God. When we sin, we tend to minimize its evil and perhaps even deny its presence. God has to teach us what it is we have done. He then needs to just about drag a confession from us, for we will avoid facing the fact of it or the guilt of it. But

⁴ Thomas Hooker, *The Application of Redemption* (International Outreach, 2008, orig. 1657), p. 4.

⁵ Cf. 3:9, 27; 6:1, 15; 7:7.

⁶ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1 (Eerdmans, 1959), p. 249.

God's law reveals to us that sin is sin and it also reveals to us the gravity of sin. God's law teaches us what sin deserves before God who gave His law. Paul had declared that this was so earlier in his epistle. Paul had written, "For by works of the law no human being will be justified in His sight, since *through the law comes knowledge of sin*" (Rom. 3:20). Paul himself would not have known of his sinfulness had it not been for the law of God. God had given His law so that we might know "our own sinfulness and shortcomings."

But God has given His law not only so sinners can see their sin, but that they might see their sin as *exceedingly sinful*. We read through Romans 7:12 above. But verse 13 reads this way:

Has then what is good become death to me? Certainly not! But sin, that it might appear sin, was producing death in me through what is good, so that sin through the commandment might become *exceedingly sinful*. (Rom 7:13 NKJ)

John Calvin said of this:

The import of the whole is — that it was necessary for the atrocity of sin to be discovered by the law; for except sin had burst forth into outrageous, or, as they say, into enormous excess, it would not have been acknowledged as sin; and the more outrageous does its enormity appear, when it converts life into death; and thus every excuse is taken away from it.

And **Matthew Henry** wrote of Romans 7:13:

There is nothing about which the natural man is more blind than about original corruption, concerning which the understanding is altogether in the dark till the Spirit by the law reveal it, and make it known. Thus *the law is a schoolmaster, to bring us to Christ*, opens and searches the wound, and so prepares it for healing. Thus sin by the commandment does appear sin (v. 13); it appears in its own colors, appears to be what it is, and you cannot call it by a worse name than its own. Thus by the commandment it becomes *exceedingly sinful*; that is, it appears to be so. We never see the desperate venom or malignity there is in sin, till we come to compare it with the law, and the spiritual nature of the law, and then we see it to be an evil and a bitter thing.

Now again, one of the great obstacles to humble sinners to see their need for Jesus Christ is because sinners do not see the presence or the gravity of their sin. *Why is it that people in their sin can be unaware of their condition?* It is not due to an absence of God's revelation of His law to the people of this world. God has told us clearly in His Word and in our conscience what is right and true over against what is sinful and false. One aspect of God creating man and woman in His image was the imparting to them an inherent sense of what is true, good, and just. God has given every person a conscience that sets up a tribunal in the soul. By it a man or woman passes judgment upon himself. Sin, however, has distorted that understanding, rendering sinful man no longer to identify clearly between God's will and his own will. The conscience ceases to be a reliable guide, until it is "reprogrammed" by the law of God.

And so, *why is it then that people in their sin can be unaware of their sinful condition?* The early New England pastor, **Jonathan Edwards**, set forth a number of reasons:

1. From the blinding *deceitful nature of sin*. The heart of man is full of sin and corruption, and that corruption is of an exceedingly darkening, blinding nature. Sin always carries a degree of darkness with it; and the more it prevails, the more it darkens and deludes the mind.—It is from hence that the knowing whether there be any wicked way in us is a difficult thing... The light shines clear enough around us, but the fault is in our eyes; they are darkened and blinded by a pernicious distemper.

Sin is of a deceitful nature, because, so far as it prevails, so far it gains the *inclination* and will, and that sways and biases the judgment. So far as any lust prevails, so far it biases the mind to approve of it...

Hence many men who live in ways which are not agreeable to the rules of God's word, yet are not *sensible* of it; and it is a difficult thing to make them so; because the same lust that leads them into that evil way, blinds them in it...

So the more a man lives in a way of covetousness, or the more inordinately he desires the profits of the world, the more will he think himself excusable in so doing, and the more will he think that he has a necessity of those things, and cannot do without them. And if they be necessary, then he is excusable for eagerly desiring them... All lusts are deceitful lusts... And even godly men may for a time be blinded and deluded by a lust, so far as to live in a way which is displeasing to God.

The lusts of men's hearts—prejudicing them in favour of sinful practices, to which those lusts tend, and in which they delight—stir up *carnal reason*, and put men, with all the subtlety of which they are capable, to invent pleas and arguments to justify such practices. When men are very strongly inclined and tempted to any wicked practice, and conscience troubles them about it, they will rack their brains to find out arguments to stop the mouth of conscience, and to make themselves believe that they may lawfully proceed in that practice.

When men have entered upon an ill practice, and proceeded in it, then their *self-love* prejudices them to approve of it. Men do not love to condemn themselves; they are prejudiced in their own favour, and in favour of whatever is found in themselves.

2. *Satan* also sets in with our deceitful lusts, and labours to blind us in this matter. He is continually endeavoring to lead us into sinful ways, and sets in with carnal reason to flatter us in such ways, and to blind the conscience. He is the prince of darkness; he labours to blind and deceive; it hath been his work ever since he began it with our first parents.

3. Sometimes men are not sensible, because they are *stupefied through custom*. Custom in an evil practice *stupefies* the mind, so that it makes any way of sin, which at first was offensive to conscience, after a while, to seem harmless.

4. Sometimes persons live in ways of sin, and are not sensible of it, because they are *blinded* by common custom, and the *examples of others*. There are so many who go into the practice, and it is so common a custom, that it is esteemed little or no discredit to a man; it is little testified against. This causes some things to appear innocent, which are very displeasing to God, and abominable in his sight. Perhaps we see them practiced by those of whom we have a high esteem, by our superiors, and those who are accounted wise men. This greatly prepossesses the mind in favour of them, and takes off the sense of their evil. Or if they be observed to be commonly practiced by those who are accounted godly men, men of experience in religion, this tends greatly to harden the heart, and blind the mind with respect to any evil practice.

5. Persons are in great danger of living in ways of sin and not being sensible of it, for want of duly regarding and considering their duty in the *full extent* of it. There are some who hear of the necessity of reforming from all sins, and attending all duties, and will set themselves to perform some particular duties, at the same time neglecting others. Perhaps their thoughts will be wholly taken up about religious duties, such as prayer in secret, reading the Scriptures and other good books, going to public worship and giving diligent attention, keeping the sabbath, and serious meditation. They seem to regard these things, as though they comprised their duty in its full extent, and as if this were their whole work; and moral duties towards their neighbours, their duties in the relations in which they stand, their duties as husbands or wives, as brethren or sisters, or their duties as neighbours, seem not to be considered by them.

They consider not the *necessity* of those things: and when they hear of earnestly seeking salvation in a way of diligent attendance on all duties, they seem to leave those out of their thoughts, as if they were not meant; nor any other duties, except reading, and praying, and keeping the sabbath, and the like... Many men seem to be very conscientious in some things, in some branches of their duty on which

they keep their eye, when other important branches are entirely neglected, and seem not to be noticed by them. They regard not their duty in the full extent of it.⁷

Because of the insensitivity to sin that we all manifest, it is necessary that God Himself reveal to sinners their true condition so that they will seek forgiveness and deliverance from their sin. We should be as the psalmist and ask the Lord to reveal our condition to us. David prayed,

Search me, O God, and know my heart:
Try me, and know my thoughts:
And see if there be any wicked way in me,
And lead me in the way everlasting. (Psa. 139:23f)

David knew that he did not know himself. He asked God to reveal to him his sin, otherwise he would have remained in sin, but ignorant to its presence and severity.

II. Again we ask, “In what way or ways did the Lord prod Paul, in preparation to his conversion?” We could say, *secondly*, that **God had prodded Paul to see in a measure a specific sin that condemned him before God.**

The apostle recounted his own experience of becoming very convicted of his guilt before God due to a specific sin with which struggled against with no success. We have already considered Romans 7. But we see also in that passage that Paul wrote of his personal experience of having God’s law reveal his sin to him. He wrote, “**For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’**” God used the tenth commandment to convict Paul of his sin. “You shall not covet.” Apparently Paul had come to the place that he was not content with the manner in which God had governed his life. He was not content with what God had given to him. He was not happy with what God had not given to him. This commandment revealed to Paul that he was a transgressor of the law, a sinner deserving of God’s wrath.

In Paul’s case we see a common manner in which God saves His people. **God will prepare people for saving grace by causing them to face squarely a single, specific, sin.** This revelation to a sinner of his sin is a work that the Holy Spirit must do in the soul. This is preparatory work to bringing a sinner to salvation in Jesus Christ. **Horatius Bonar** wrote of this role of the Holy Spirit:

The Holy Spirit is as indispensable to your believing, as is Christ in order to your being pardoned...Salvation *for* the sinner is Christ’s work; salvation *in* the sinner is the Spirit’s work. Of this internal salvation He is the beginner and ender...If you understand the genuine Gospel in all its freeness, you will feel that the man who tries to persuade you that you have strength enough left to do with the Spirit, is as great an enemy of the cross, and of your soul, as the man who wants to make you believe that you are not altogether guilty, but have some remaining goodness, and therefore do not need the to be wholly indebted to the blood and righteousness of Immanuel...Till you feel yourself in this extremity of weakness, you are not in a condition (if I may say so) to receive the heavenly help. Your idea of remaining *ability* is the very thing that repels the help of the Spirit, just as any idea of remaining goodness thrusts away the propitiation of the Saviour. It is your *not seeing that you have no strength* that is keeping you from believing.⁸

God will commonly drive home to the sinner in His preparation of him for grace, a particular grievous sin, setting forth a clear charge of guilt. **Thomas Hooker** drew this principle of god’s dealings with the soul from the sermon of Peter in Acts 2, which in part reads,

⁷ Jonathan Edwards, *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2, pp. 489-492.

⁸ In the Introduction to Thomas Hooker, *The Application of Redemption* (International Outreach, 2008, orig. 1657), p. x.

“Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know-- ²³Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, ***you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death***... (Acts 2:22ff)

Hooker then went on to draw a doctrine, an authoritative abiding teaching and principle in God’s dealings with men.

The description of contrition stood of two parts whereby the nature of the work was especially discovered.

Partly in the causes of it: Sight of sin; sorrow for sin.

Partly in the effects of it: Detestation of sin; sequestration from sin.

Concerning the sight of sin so far as it serves our turn in a true conviction of it, in that they stood here as accused by Peter and condemned in their own consciences as guilty of no less than the blood of Jesus, we have already spoken.

The second thing in the text to be considered is the means how this is wrought. And these in two.

The first is a particular application of their special corruption. The Apostle doth not hover in the general and shoot at rovers, but comes close to them, chargeth them expressly in a special manner, and lets fly in the very faces of them, *this Jesus and you are the men that have committed this villainy*, a person could not be more innocent, a practice more bloody, you are men that stand guilty of this horrible abomination of *crucifying the Lord of Glory*. The doctrine hence is this.

Doctrine: A plain and particular application of special sins by the ministry of the Word is a special means to bring the soul to a sight of, and sorrow for them.⁹

Sometimes God will bless a witness to an unconverted person that addresses a specific sin. It is in specifics that people become confronted with sin. I recall a pastor relating his conversation with a woman in his church. She said to him, “Yes, pastor, we are all terrible sinners who deserve God’s wrath.” His response to her was, “Yes, you are right. We are all sinners, and I have noticed that your particular grievous sin is the sin of gossip.” Of course this offended her. She did not mind acknowledging sin in general, but a specific sin charge to her unsettled her. And so God will often take a particular sin and drive it home to the conscience in order to reveal the sinner that he is a desperately hopeless and condemned sinner in all his ways and that he is a utterly helpless sinner in need of a Savior to do for him and in him that which he cannot do for himself.

III. We again ask, “In what way or ways did the Lord prod Paul, in preparation to his conversion?” We could say, thirdly, that ***God had prodded Paul to see that the people of God that he was persecuting lives exemplary lives in the manner that they dealt with his afflictions of them.***

Christians do not respond to their tormentors in a manner that sinners are accustomed. The manner in which Christians suffer testifies that there must be reality to what they believe if they would respond to their enemies as the commonly do. Paul had declared to King Agrippa that when he was unconverted that he had terribly treated Christians. He had said:

⁹“I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. ¹¹And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.

⁹ Hooker, *Application of Redemption*, p. 142.

How many of these Christians bore faithful witness of the Lord Jesus Christ in the manner that they responded to their persecuter? We know that Paul had been instrumental in the stoning of Stephen, which is recorded in Acts 8. There we read of the response of those unbelieving Jews upon hearing the message that Stephen proclaimed openly to them:

⁵⁴When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth. ⁵⁵But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, ⁵⁶and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"

⁵⁷Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; ⁵⁸and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep. (Acts 7:54-60)

And then we read in Acts 8:1ff of Paul's involvement in this event and of his subsequent behavior:

Now Saul was consenting to his death.¹⁰

At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. ²And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him. ³As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison. (Acts 8:1ff)

Consider all of the faithful witnesses of Jesus Christ who bore testimony of their faith in Jesus Christ through the manner in which they suffered at the hands of Paul. Do you not think that their testimony, some perhaps like Stephen's confession of Christ upon his death, a matter that "goaded" Paul when he saw these things and upon his reflection of them prior to his conversion. "Yes, Paul, it is hard for you to kick against the goads!"

There are people being converted out of Islam unto Jesus Christ all over the Middle East due to the witness of Christians in the manner that they are suffering at the hands of their tormentors. We read of what is occurring through the ministry of **MERF**, The Middle East Reformed Fellowship. On their website we read:

The so-called 'Arab Spring' has emboldened Islamic extremists, bringing them publicity, prominence and political influence, especially in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia. In Egypt, the significant Christian minority has faced intimidation and threats by Islamic groups. The response of some Coptic Christians is to seek to run away from the country. Many others, including evangelical believers, have turned the Islamic threats into an opportunity to proclaim the gospel of God's self-giving love in Christ. For example, one boldly creative group of young believers held large banners in Cairo's Tahrir Square announcing to their Muslim countrymen their love, as Christians, for them and distributing cards with Bible quotes on Christian love. Many Muslims joined them in holding the large, bright posters and banners with New Testament quotes on Christian love.

In central and northern Syria, a growing number of Christians have had to leave their homes and villages in the wake of approaching armed and violent Islamic militants. Many Syrian Christian refugees in Turkey and Lebanon are even now seeking immigration to the West.

The rise of Islamic fanaticism and militancy has also had its positive side effects – more disenchantment with Islam. Yes, many more Muslims are boldly raising serious questions about Islamic teachings. There are many disquieted about the application of 7th century eastern Arabian living norms

¹⁰ It is commonly believed and taught that Saul had changed his name to Paul upon his conversion to show forth his new life in Christ. But this is probably not the case. Saul was Paul's Jewish name; Paul was his Roman name. He probably used Paul because of his continual interaction with Gentiles in bringing them the gospel.

from Mohammad to 21st century societies. In Syria, the more violent the Islamists, the more the Muslim-majority Syrian population opposes their drive to take over the country. Support for Islamic forms of government is rapidly declining throughout the Arab world.

Much thanksgiving can be offered to the Lord for using even the Arab Spring to attract more Muslims to new life in Christ.

Heavy armed conflict between the Islamist rebels and secular government troops filled the center of Aleppo, the Syrian city with the largest Christian population. Families have retreated to the interiors of their homes shocked by noisy night battles raging in their streets and earthshaking bombardments damaging buildings, including some churches. In the vicinity of the central city of Homs, more Christians have also had to flee villages and several neighborhoods following threats from Islamic extremists. Many have sought refuge with relatives and friends in other parts of the country and neighboring Lebanon. Also, it has been reported that many predominantly Sunni Muslim communities have provided protection and lodging to fleeing Christian families. The vast majority of Syrians oppose the setting up of an Islamic state. Please pray for guidance, protection and strengthening of God's people through these very difficult times and for the restoration of security and stability to the country. Despite these trials, some Christians are able to gather for worship and prayer in safer parts of Aleppo and even near some troubled areas. Such times of suffering provide additional opportunities for the light of Christ and His love to impact the lives of many Muslims already disenchanted with their religion.¹¹

It may be that our best witness to ones to whom you have witnessed may be in the manner that you face and address the great trials that come into your life. Sometimes Christ is made known by us more through our reactions than by our actions.

May our Lord enable us to testify faithful to our Lord Jesus and may our Lord cause many to be goaded in preparation of them coming to trust and embrace Jesus as Lord.

But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you. To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1 Pet. 5:10f)

¹¹ See <http://merf.org/index.php>