

SEVEN SAVED SINNERS

Or How God Saves Men

A study of God's Varieties of Religious Experiences in the Book of Acts

by

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CHAPTER FOUR

THE CONVERSION OF SERGIUS PAULUS

THE STUDY

Acts 13

The Occasion

In the event before us, the Church is sending out her first missionaries. It is therefore an auspicious occasion. Also, Paul is beginning his first missionary journey, and there are far-reaching effects.

The devout little church at Antioch in Syria gets a world vision under the leadership of the Spirit of God, and becomes the mother church of Gentile Christendom. The members had ministered unto the Lord and fasted and prayed, and the Holy Ghost had said, "**Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them,**" and in due time the Holy Ghost sent them forth on their great missionary enterprise.

They had gone to Salamis and had passed through the isle unto Paphos, and there they came into conflict with the devil and his emissaries. The situation resolved itself into a contest over the soul of a man. Here we see the drama that has been reenacted a million times.

The Subject

Sergius Paulus was undoubtedly a Roman and a representative of the Roman government. He would therefore normally be a materialist, and usually men of his type were hard-hearted individuals. Whether he had any knowledge of the Gospel previous to the coming of Paul and Barnabas we do not know. But it is evident that he was a man inquiring after the truth.

Whatever may have been the human factors entering into this, undoubtedly the Holy Spirit had done a preparatory work in the man's heart.

He must have been a man of unusual intelligence for he is reported to have been the ruler of the Isle of Cyprus. He is called a deputy in the Authorized Version which is a proconsul. Whatever previous knowledge of the truth he may have received, it is certain that he had received a great deal of false teaching from Elymas, the sorcerer.

The Agents

The agents of this conversion, generally, are Paul and Silas, but Paul primarily, and the Holy Ghost finally, for it is apparent that the contest is between the Holy Spirit and the devil himself.

The Accompaniments

Here is a conflict, tense and bitter. The first recorded battle of false faith against the true in the apostolic era.

We see, also, these important factors:

- First, the interposition of spiritual force;
- Second, an adverse miracle. There are few of these in the New Testament; Jesus performed but two which are recorded in all of the Gospels. Elymas is stricken blind for a season.
- Third, there is astonishment because of the miracle, and faith results.

The belief in this case comes more, it would seem, from the miracle than from the preaching. As is oftentimes the case in outstanding conversions, there are startling contrasts here.

- Light for Paulus;
- darkness for Elymas.

The central scene of the drama is satanic opposition. This opposition comes through a typical child of the devil who is an apostate, a teacher of false faith.

The Results

We have already partially noted these. Apart from the salvation of Sergius Paulus, it is important to note that the devil is openly and dramatically defeated. The mission upon which Paul and Barnabas are launched triumphs over Satan's opposition, even as Jesus triumphed at the beginning of His ministry. Defeat here for the apostles would mean a wrecked voyage for the Gospel.

Significant Lessons

Learn some valuable lessons from the devil.

- He keeps his eye on the working of God's children, especially when they are directed by the Holy Ghost.
- He always resists beginnings, not waiting for God's movements to gain momentum.

- Satan is a religionist who has missionaries able to attract and to hold some of the mighty of earth.
- Satan is not afraid of religion, but is afraid of salvation, and he fights bitterly the preaching of the Gospel. He is wily but not wise.

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Wisdom, as well as the Spirit of Truth.

THE SERMON

BEATING THE DEVIL AT HIS OWN GAME

Acts 13:6-13

A study of the devil, his ways and his wiles would be a very profitable occupation for many, these days. Next to knowing the Lord Jesus Christ in saving and keeping power, the child of God should know about the devil and how to meet his onslaughts. The Apostle Paul declared that Christians were not ignorant of his wiles.

“Oh,” I hear someone saying, “I don’t believe in a personal devil.”

I remember reading some years ago a statement by the late Elbert Hubbard: “He who believes in a personal devil is one”; but, in the interest of truth, I should say that, he that doesn’t believe in a personal devil is in his service.

An unfailing test for finding out the reality of the devil is to serve God wholeheartedly and oppose the wickedness of the Evil One. Then you will know. Of course, there are some folks who don’t believe in that. They don’t believe in opposing the devil because they dislike family quarrels. Some churches don’t even mention his name, and, when that is true, they’re not doing much opposition to his work. Talk about battling the devil! I suppose that a third of the churches never throw even so much as a custard pie into his territory.

We have a very profitable study before us in the record of the conversion of Sergius Paulus, and the defeat of Elymas, the sorcerer, and, as we proceed with the story, we shall note the following lessons it contains.

I. THE DEVIL SEES TO IT THAT HIS EMISSARIES ARE BUSY WHERE GOD’S MESSENGERS ARE AT WORK

Let us note the drama of the situation.

The church at Antioch was sending out its first missionaries. Paul was starting out on his great missionary career. The Holy Ghost was directing the affair. No wonder the devil got busy; it was high time.

You know the devil is lots wiser than some of the children of light. He knows the necessity of resisting beginnings.

The Church of God and the individual Christian is usually asleep at the beginnings of evil, and only when the wicked come in like a flood, and an overwhelming flood at that, do they become alive to the situation. Were it not for the protectiveness of God and His almighty power, the Christian Church and the individual Christian would have been wiped out of existence long ago. The devil knows how hard it is to stop a movement once it has gained momentum. The Christian can expect the devil to make a supreme effort to down him the moment he starts out in the service of God.

As we have a drama here, we had better note the cast of characters.

- There is Barnabas, a great, noble soul and a devout Christian.
- There is Saul, now Paul, the greatest preacher and missionary of all time.
- There is John Mark, used of God in writing the second Gospel.
- There is Sergius Paulus, a Roman deputy, whom both God and Satan wanted.
- There is Elymas, the devil's instrument, a sorcerer, whose real name was Bar-jesus (meaning "son of Joshua"), a bad man with a good name (A literal rendering of his name would be, "*the son of the Lord's salvation*"; yet he was a child of the devil)!

I always hate to see a man with a good name in a bad business—don't you?

Now, let us look at the stage, itself. The battle is in the devil's territory. Paphos was a wicked pagan city. It was called the City of Aphrodite. There was there an ancient temple erected to the worship of Venus. Now Venus was the goddess of sensuality, and we are told that the practices connected with this temple were abominable.

It is well to remember that the devil always prospers where sensuality abounds. Not that he is necessarily the author of sensuality, because that is one of the sins of the flesh; but sensuality is one of the most deadening of sins. Gross participation in the lusts of the flesh soon deadens every finer sensibility; not only is the body steeped in degeneracy, but the soul itself is drugged and stupefied to the finer things of life, and therefore comparatively senseless to the Gospel.

The Bible reveals that where sensuality has prevailed for a long while, the only thing that can cure it is a severe judgment from God. Witness Babylon—witness Nineveh—witness Sodom and Gomorrah. How long God will withhold His judging hand on our own civilization, especially our own country with its nudity, its lewdness, its licentiousness and sin, no one can prophesy; but we can declare that God will not withhold His judging hand forever. Our theatres, our motion pictures, our magazines, our books, and pictures, are all catering to this sensuousness. It disgusts me when I hear New Yorkers boast about the glory of Times Square and the lights of Broadway. Don't boast; hang your head in shame, for the world has probably not produced, anywhere, another such cesspool of sensuousness and sin as that which can be found on Broadway at Forty-second Street and its environment. A sensitive, spiritual soul can almost smell the devil as he walks through that territory.

Yes, a sensuous age is an age in which the devil thrives, because he finds men and women mentally and morally depleted and spiritually deadened, and they become an easy prey of his wiles.

II. GOD HAS HIS NEEDY ONES WHERE HIS MESSENGERS WORK

We now take a closer look at Sergius Paulus. He was a prominent man, he was the proconsul and governor of Cyprus, and it is suggested that he was an extraordinarily intelligent man—something of a philosopher.

One may well imagine that he supposed he was doing Paul a great favor when this apostle and Barnabas came to his community and were received by him. In reality, however, the favor was being done him. It was a great favor that God should visit him with salvation.

We are told, also, that he was prudent—that is, a thinking, intelligent man, and when we ponder this we are brought to realize that Elymas was not just a cheap fortune teller. This sorcerer was a clever religionist; he undoubtedly had an intellectual approach to the faith he propagated. He could never have appealed to Sergius with any cheap legerdemain.

Please remember the devil is never afraid of religion; that's his specialty! But he is wholesomely afraid of salvation.

Many wonder why it is that modernism makes its appeal so often to the intellectuals. The answer to that is that the pride of human intellect despises the Gospel.

The Word of God has said that not many wise, not many mighty, not many noble, are called, and it declares also that the natural man perceiveth not the things of God for they are foolishness unto him. Neither can he understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

Modernism is essentially the religion of the natural man; it is the religion of the proud human heart. The Gospel breaks down the barriers of pride, and brings a man penitently to the foot of the Cross. Human learning does not relish this sort of thing; but it is well to remember that human knowledge cannot keep any man from being fooled by the devil. The wiser he is the harder he falls!

On the other hand, the thinking man may not be very far from the kingdom.

God does not discourage thought upon the matter of faith. As a matter of fact, He encourages it. His unmistakable declaration is “**Come, now, let us reason together.**” The emphasis is not only upon the word “**reason,**” but upon the word “**together.**”

The trouble with the intellectual rejecting the Gospel is that he reasons apart from God. If he'd bring his reasoning into cooperation with God's revelation, there would be no difficulty about the matter. A little sane reasoning would show any man that he is a lost sinner, and needs a Saviour; and a little reason applied to the study of revelation would show him that the Gospel and its working is an inevitable thing, and, although supernatural in its nature, is in its application a natural thing. Any reasonable person should know that until he is right with God through faith in Jesus Christ, he is not right with himself or with anybody else.

God evidently knew that Sergius was worth getting for the kingdom. The devil knew it, also, and wanted him badly. We must not be respecters of persons in our saving ministry, but it is not unchristian to covet the leadership of our day for Jesus Christ. I seldom hear a great singer on the radio with a voice that captivates the hearts of people without wishing that perhaps he might yield his heart to Jesus Christ and sing the Gospel in the power of the Spirit. What a blessing he could be and what a power for God. I never read the stories of such opposers of the truth as Ingersoll, Darrow and others, with their brilliant minds and ability to move the public, without thinking of what they might have done for God had they known Jesus Christ in a saving way and been dedicated to Him.

I've been thinking, recently, of Leon Trotsky. Oh, the earnestness and enthusiasm of the man!

Irrepressible and effervescent, hounded from one country to another, yet never giving up his philosophy, nor failing to preach his gospel, as damnable as it is; and I recall that, years ago, Leon Trotsky, as a Jew named Bronstein, lived in New York's lower East Side, in this nominally Christian country of ours, under the sound of the church bells of this great city, and, humanly speaking, he might have been reached for Christ.

What a power he would have been—a veritable second Paul! But the devil got him and a million Christians were bathed in their own blood, in Russia. The greatest onslaught against the faith in modern times emanates from the philosophy which he has espoused and which he propagated with every ounce of his wondrous energy.

III. SATAN IS WILY, BUT NOT WISE

The battle continues, the plot thickens, and Elymas launches to the attack.

The text seems rather passive. It states merely that Elymas withstood the preaching of Paul and Barnabas, endeavoring to turn the Deputy from the faith; but, if we read between the lines, we learn that the conflict was intense. This false prophet doubtless interfered with a view to preventing his master from yielding to the Apostle's preaching and of deadening its influence upon Sergius Paulus.

Farrar declares that probably he spared neither argument nor insult in his endeavor to persuade Sergius of the absurdity of the new faith. He may have reviled Christ as a crucified malefactor, and denounced Him as an enemy of Moses. Ridicule and satire is often used as an effective weapon by the devil.

If any attack were made on the person of Christ, it would not have been surprising to see the Holy Ghost entering the lists, and we read the startling statement in the ninth verse: **“Then Saul (who is also called Paul), filled with the Holy Ghost, set his eyes on him, and said, O full of all subtlety and all mischief, thou child of the devil, thou enemy of all righteousness, wilt thou not cease to pervert the right ways of the Lord?”** What a denunciation! Elymas is accused of three things:

- Having craft and cunning,
- Being a child of the devil,
- An enemy of all righteousness.

The question that comes to our minds immediately is, was not Paul unduly harsh? Surely he was unchristlike here. Some tender souls would declare that he should have been a little more charitable. But the difficulty of such reasoning is that we don't know Christ.

The world and the Church, in some instances, have been propagating a false Christ, or, perhaps to be more exact, a "half-Christ"; they have been presenting a Christ of tenderness and sympathy, and have failed to remember His rugged anger and uncompromising denunciation of sin and evil. It would pay us periodically to read the woes pronounced upon the Pharisees and learn that love can be awful in judgment, as well as tender in compassion.

But the truth is that there is no room for human speculation concerning this matter. In reality, it is not Paul who speaks, but the Holy Ghost.

- This is not a flare of human passion; it is a demonstration of divine indignation.
- This is not the contentious accusation of an embittered man, but the righteous denunciation of a Holy God through His messenger.

And, what is more, there is no element of slander here. Remember that Paul told Elymas to his face, and did not rail at him behind his back.

Oh, that we might have such holy men and such uncompromising denunciation today!

We have no little sarcasm and no small amount of innuendo, but this is Holy Ghost-directed condemnation. The solemn truth is that no man has a right to take the weapon of condemnation in the flesh.

Too much of the preachers' condemnation is done in the energy of the flesh. The result is wounds that are infected and will not heal; but when the Holy Ghost is present, directing operations, the servant of God may swing the sword and every wound made will be cauterized and evil will be sloughed off with every fell swoop; but so little is done in this direction we are forced to agree with Joseph Parker when he says: "We have lost our fire today; we talk to Elymas, not in syllables of fire as did the Apostles, but in syllables of ice."

As I walk about the streets of this city and see the sin, godlessness, and indifference, a cry comes up in my soul and a great longing in my heart that someone might really be raised up of God to speak in the power of the Holy Ghost; one able to condemn the awful sin and licentiousness of this city, and bring multitudes to repentance at the foot of the Cross.

Because of Paul's faithfulness and boldness in the Spirit, the devil was defeated, and the way is paved for God to manifest His glory in the whole affair.

- Elymas is stricken blind in condemnation;

- Sergius Paulus is convicted and saved;
- There is darkness for Elymas and light for Paulus.

By the way, this is Paul's first recorded miracle, and we feel sure that the judgment was not of his own doing but divinely directed, because Paul had suffered too much of blindness himself, at his conversion, to ever use that as an instrument of judgment upon others of his own free will.

Rather harsh, you say; yes, God does destroy, as well as make alive; God has a hell as well as a heaven. He sets His love upon men, He plans for their redemption, and woe unto that person who attempts to thwart the plan of God.

I am told that a railroad line between Cripple Creek and Colorado Springs drops more than four thousand feet in a distance of forty miles. All along this line are signs marked "derailing switch." The reason for the multiplicity of derailing switches, we are told, is so that, if an engine loses control and runs wild, it can be plunged against the side of the mountain, and destroyed, before it destroys other trains and lives.

Now, God also has some derailing switches.

Individuals that stand in His way persistently and unrepentantly, are put out of the way, in order that souls might be saved. All along the track of history God has had these derailing switches, into which individuals, cities and nations that have lost control of themselves and become instruments of the devil and menaces to the world have been thrown, and we praise God for this action on His part.

But was Elymas ever saved? There is no record that he was, and, if he was a true apostate, he never found salvation; but, of course, there is a question as to that.

But whether Elymas was saved or not, this much is true, that you may be saved.

You are the object of God's mercy, you are the subject of His redeeming love. If it were possible for Elymas to be saved (and we may well suppose that it was) what a calamity that he should be so near to the power of God and His grace and yet fail to appropriate it!

The term Elymas means "*the wise*," but think of his lack of wisdom! The Word of God says that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and that fear means reverential, and not cringing fear.

Yes, my brother, there's hope for you, and may God help you to find Him who is your salvation and your eternal hope.

Not far, not far from the Kingdom,
Yet in the shadow of sin;
How many are coming and going!—
How few there are entering in!

Not far, not far from the Kingdom,
Where voices whisper and wait;
Too timid to enter in boldly,
So linger still outside the gate.

Away in the dark and the danger,
Far out in the night and the cold;
There Jesus is waiting to lead you
So tenderly into His fold.

Not far, not far from the Kingdom,
'Tis only a little space;
But oh, you may still be for ever
Shut out from yon heavenly place!

~ end of chapter 4 ~

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