

Lesson 1

"Paul: Apostle to the Gentiles"

Have you learned to *love* the Book of Galatians? Or is it dull, boring, confusing? It has been the spark that has ignited glorious reformations in people's lives since the time of Martin Luther. So you should learn to make friends with it, to love it, to let your heart revel in its powerful good news.

How does a lukewarm, sensual, half-worldly, half-cold, half-hot person get to be "on fire" like Paul? The answer is Galatians. People wonder why Galatians could have such gospel dynamite in it that it one time turned Europe upside down.

The statement of the "acceptance theory" of the 1888 message of righteousness by faith is made in the quarterly with these words: "Through the study of Galatians, E. J. Waggoner and A. T. Jones helped the Adventist Church in the 1880s and 90s rediscover the truth of righteousness by faith" (*The Gospel in Galatians*, p. 2 [2011]). The word "rediscover" is the operative word. This cannot be maintained in view of what Ellen White wrote: "An unwillingness to yield up preconceived opinions, ... [occurred] at Minneapolis against the Lord's message through Brethren [E. J.] Waggoner and [A. T.] Jones. By exciting that opposition Satan succeeded in shutting away from our people, in a great measure, the special power of the Holy Spirit that God longed to impart to them. ... The light that is to lighten the whole earth with its glory was resisted, and by the action of our own brethren has been in a great degree kept away from the world" (*Selected Messages*, book 1 pp. 234, 235 [1896]).

The church has yet to identify justification by faith with the sanctuary truth of at-one-ment with God. To date justification is viewed, as do other denominations, with a mere legal transaction which doesn't affect the heart alienation with God. The church would be turned upside down if it captured the "big ideas" in Galatians that explode in people's hearts like sticks of spiritual dynamite. We *must* study and learn the message of Galatians--what Christ accomplished for us by His sacrifice on the cross, the good news of the atonement, what is the new covenant.

The one who wrote Galatians was the former Saul, a murderous "thug," the end-product of Israel's old covenant unbelief. How ironic that Saul should participate in the stoning of Stephen, the prophet, which event signaled the end of the 490 years of grace extended by God to His people (Dan. 9:24). God's patient forgiving mercy terminated for the "Jewish

church." Its national apostasy in the worship of "self," manifested in its ceremonialism (Acts 7:48-50), drove away the Spirit of God (vs. 51). This resulted in national ruin with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. by the Romans. But Christ plucked a brand from the fire,--the Pharisee Saul,-- before its collapse.

Saul was a microcosm of the centuries-long old covenant unbelief of the ancient Israelite church in which they promised God to do everything just right (Ex. 19:8; cf. Heb. 8:7, 8). Christ Himself had instituted all the rites and ceremonies after they made their old covenant with God at Mt. Sinai, in order to lead them back to "the faith" in His promise of the everlasting covenant. But the leadership and scholarship of that day did not know the meaning of these types and shadows, and failed to identify their Messiah--the suffering crucified One--when He came into their midst.

The significance of Stephen's defense speech before the "council" and "high priest" was God's last warning and appeal to the leadership of His church to repent for their idolatrous history culminating in the murder of "the Just One" (Acts 7:52). The "council" had accused Stephen of teaching lawlessness (6:13), but they were the idolaters cherishing murder in their hearts (7:53). Stephen proclaimed the law and the gospel of the cross of Christ which pricked their hearts; and they chose to reject the Spirit's gift of repentance and instead took up stones. The leadership's decision sealed their fate as a nation. They would no more listen to the still small voice of the Spirit. They committed the unpardonable sin by attributing the work of the Spirit to the devil (Matt. 12:22-32).

The young Saul was part of the council which participated in the stoning of Stephen by acting as the "coat check" for the judge, jury and executioners. The shining face of Stephen and his forgiving spirit toward his executions made a profound impression upon Saul (Acts 7:60; *Acts of the Apostles* [AA], p. 116). Jesus had prayed for them all, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34; Acts 6:15-7:60). But that was Stephen's last sermon--the benediction he pronounced was in his dying. We have the sermon recorded; no self entered in. No "prophet of Baal" could preach such a sermon.

Saul, too, resisted the Holy Spirit, and gave in to the "group think" of his superiors within the Sanhedrin. He concluded with them that Stephen was a blasphemer and that Christians were followers of an imposter Messiah. Saul believed Stephen was a libertine, destructive of the law of God.

Saul now sought to gain the favor of his colleagues by following their example in the murder of Stephen. By obtaining letters of recommendation from the high court in

Jerusalem he could go out to synagogues and with their support persecute the followers of Jesus. This was Saul's purpose when journeying to Damascus.

But the Lord Jesus arrested him on the road with the blinding vision of His exalted position in heaven as a result of His crucifixion (Acts 26:13). The Lord Jesus asked him, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" (9:4). "*Christ here identifies Himself with His people*" (AA 117). Saul was sincerely deceived by Satan. In doing the work of Satan he thought he was doing the work of God. He was actually re-crucifying the Son of God afresh in the person of His saints.

Christ said to Saul: "It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks" (Acts 26:14). The Lord put obstacles in his path to make the wrong way seem like kicking against the goads. Yes, the Lord made it "hard" for Saul to be lost! This is one of the "good news" ideas of the 1888 message. It's easy to be saved and hard to be lost if you know this truth: You live because One died in your place; love (*agape*) now motivates you. "All along the road that leads to [eternal] death there are pains and penalties, there are sorrows and disappointments, there are warnings not to go on. God's love has made it hard for the heedless and headstrong to destroy themselves" (*Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, p. 139).

Saul asked: "Who art thou, Lord? And He said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest" (Acts 26:15). This was Jesus' self-revelation of the ever-present cross to Saul. "In the glorious Being who stood before him *he saw the Crucified One*" (AA 115).

The point is that conviction came to Saul's heart by means of the cross of Christ. It was a heart-melting appreciation that his Messiah was "the crucified One." Now all the prophecies, types, and shadows of the ceremonial system came alive for him as pointing to "the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29; AA 115).

Saul received the laying on of hands by Ananias thus commissioning him as Christ's "chosen instrument to carry [his] name before the Gentiles and their kings before the people of Israel" (Acts 9:15). Above all, Paul was called to be the Apostle to the Gentiles. In his speech before Agrippa, the call to a Gentile mission constitutes the center of the conversion account. Paul is sent forth as the servant and witness of Christ (26:16).

The old covenant never leads to the cross. It cannot produce genuine conversion. It never produces genuine revival and reformation. It always leads to dependence on "self" and the people's promises to "trust and obey." It, indeed, genders to bondage and slavery in a continuous spiral into sin.

It was the revelation of the cross to Saul that opened up to him the whole reason for Israel's history of ups and downs in revival and reformation. The only true religion is the religion that derives from the self-denying love of God revealed at the cross. It alone produces new covenant faith. It produces genuine revival and reformation. If the "Golden Boy" of the Jewish Church could repent of missing the Messiah, then the Laodicean Church can "be zealous ... and repent" of missing her "latter rain" (Rev. 3:19).

--Paul E. Penno