

ST. PAUL AT PHILIPPI

THREE STARTLING CONVERSIONS

Acts xvi. 6-40

“SIRS, what must I do to be saved?” “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved and thy house” (vv. 30, 31).

No more urgent question could come from the lips of mortal man than this, and no more assuring answer could be given to it than we have in these words. To the anxious enquirer the circumstances which lead to the making of the question are intensely illuminative and instructive. He has in the sixteenth chapter of Acts the record of three startling conversions which, resulting from obedience to the great Imperative, vividly delineate the typical characteristics of salvation.

The cry “What must I do to be saved?” is universal. The numerous inventions of the human mind to answer the problem bear abundant evidence of the fact. Does not the recognised need of salvation lie at the heart of every ethnic religion? The question was common in Macedonia before the arrival of St. Paul, but now we hear it repeated by one under a terrorising conviction of sin. The conviction has come by the preaching of the Gospel and the moving power of the Holy Spirit. The sinner is awakened both to his fearful guilt and to a lively apprehension of his desperate need. It is realised that fallen man cannot be saved in his sins; if he is to be saved he must be saved from his sins. The sound of the Evangel in this respect is emphatic; and none after hearing it can remain as he was before. For it calls for a decision on the all-important controversy which determines human destiny, viz., which is to be the more esteemed, the passing riches of the pleasures of Egypt, or the greater riches of the reproach of Christ? The decision may be deferred or deadened by fleshly lust and worldly care. Yet the innate craving for pardon and safety of soul cannot be altogether suppressed. Let any calamitous occasion overtake

the ungodly and the cry for mercy is heard strong and passionate even among the most hardened.

The genesis of the Philippian story lies in the midnight vision that appears to St. Paul at Troas in Asia: "There stood a man of Macedonia and prayed him saying, come over into Macedonia and help us." The apostle and his fellowworkers Silas, Luke, and Timothy at once set forth in response, and, like all missionary enthusiasts, choose a strategic centre from which the Gospel can run abroad in every direction. They come to the gateway of Europe, to Philippi, a chief city of that part of Macedonia where there is a Roman colony with its government based on law and order, and also a settlement of Jews who, by their monotheistic faith, their conception of sin, and Messianic hope of a worldwide Saviour have prepared the hearts of adherents for the reception of the truth as it is in Jesus Christ.

The Good News soon resounds throughout the city. Surpassingly attractive in itself with its free offer of the grace of God, including pardon of sin, the gift of a Divine justifying righteousness, and the securing of eternal life, it is something not merely new and surprising, but powerfully appealing because arising out of the spontaneous, unmerited love of God to sinful men. Its only condition is that of repentance and faith. Whosoever will may be saved. And so manifestly does the power of the Holy Spirit work with the apostles that hearts are mightily searched. The way of salvation is widely discussed in mart, temple, and forum.

Likewise are its heralds closely scrutinised. Centres of concourse in every Eastern city are numerous. People daily come hither to tell, or hear some new thing. The apostles make the latest sensation. The superiority of the way of salvation which they proclaim provokes wide interest, as also keen discussion. The city Praetors, or Magistrates, always kept informed of all news of moment in the city learn of the great topic on everybody's lips. The Jailer being a Roman official becomes also conversant with its nature and moral appeal. The current talk is that these men are servants of The Most High God which show unto us the way of salvation. The description is exact; the statement is true. The four preachers are indeed, not followers of the temple gods, but the messengers of the Supreme Being who set forth the way of life or death. How

are they and their message to be regarded? The question is, by its very character, irresistibly forced home on the consciences of men high and low.

Three persons, different in nationality, position, temperament and religion, three, moreover, of the most unlikely individuals to be won to Christianity appear as the fruit of the labour of the Apostles. All three equally command the attention because together they demonstrate the essential threefold work of Christ in man's heart, and further because they assume an order, or sequence, always noted in evangelism.

The first is a woman named Lydia of Thyatira in Asia, a merchant, one of a class proverbially hard to win to Christ because of their worship of mammon. The deceitfulness of riches allures multitudes to their doom. But Lydia is a Jewish proselyte. This is in her favour. A seeker after truth, a worshipper of God, she has a receptive disposition. Such, like the children of Christian parents in a revival, are ever among the first to be saved. And she is the first at Philippi. God opens her heart to attend unto the things spoken of Paul. Her faith is evidenced by the manifestation of a ready obedience to the truth. The rite of baptism sets its seal to her profession.

A great change of disposition is immediately noticed in Lydia. Her affections are now set on things above, for she has awakened to the truth that man lives not by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God; this life is a preparation for a higher. She would serve Christ who loved her and gave Himself for her. This love takes practical shape. To disburse, consequently, balances the will to accumulate. It is more blessed to give than to receive, to serve than to be served. With this new impulse of soul she turns to the apostles. Her desire is to set them free from pecuniary care that they may devote their time entirely to the work of evangelisation. She constrains them to let her shew her faithfulness to the Lord by accepting of her hospitality. Her house she opens as a meeting place for the saints. The woman is no longer her own: she is the Lord's. So is the house she owns. Generosity after this sort from her kind elicits the general exclamation: "What God hath wrought". The revolution in the plan of her life creates astonishment among her fellow merchants. To seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness makes the whole bent of her thought. Scrupulous honesty, justice, fair

dealing mark the woman's business transactions. There is no overreaching of anyone by false weights, short measure, adulteration of goods, or excessive charges. A prodigy of righteousness has appeared among them: such as she has temporally and spiritually she cheerfully shares; what kindness she would that others should do unto her she loyally does unto them.

The second is a Grecian damsel who is doubly a slave, a pitiable creature under the domination of a demon, and under the control of unscrupulous masters who sell her soothsaying for the sake of gain. How she has come to be possessed is not stated. Among the heathen demon possession is closely linked with idolatry, and, in all probability, her spiritual seduction resulted from a resort to one or other of the common divinities for benefits alleged they could confer. In contrast to Lydia she is a frequenter of the local temples, and, being bound to the gods after this fashion, the conversion of such a devotee seems exceedingly remote.

One notes somewhat of a parallel between the case of this pagan girl and that of Rachab the innkeeper of Jericho who hid the spies of Joshua. Both give utterance to an unexpected knowledge of the truth, which by the goodness and mercy of God leads to their deliverance. The damsel though a pagan is not afraid to confess that the apostles are servants of The Most High God who shew unto men the way of salvation. The tragedy of idolatry lies in the worship of imaginary divinities despite man's innate sense of the supremacy of a Creator high over all. Obviously she is not averse to retain Him in her knowledge, and in her own way lets this be known. St. Paul naturally recoils from the acceptance of testimony tainted by her evil associations. No concord can exist between Christ and Belial. The Lord Himself at Capernaum silenced a similar witness, and the apostle in His name commands the demon to come out of her. To intimate the complete authority of Christ over the forces of the infernal world, it is recorded that it departed from her "the same hour".

The exit of the invader of her personality brings to the damsel that great boon of the free grace of God the restoration of the freedom of her will in Christ Jesus. To this freedom is added by the same grace the enrichment of Divine holiness and strength of new life through the indwelling of the Spirit of

God. Paradise and more is regained; where sin abounded grace does much more abound.

Contact with spirits is invariably depraving, soul-darkening, and unchristian. The possessed know their moral subjugation. A common phenomenon is the liability to fits or outbursts of real Satanic fury, to descents into vile debauchery. The presence of a recognised Christian to one who has purposely sold himself to the devil can arouse such bitter dislike that he will foam at the mouth as he pours upon him a shuddering torrent of curses and abuse. It is futile to deny or explain away the New Testament instances of demoniac possession on the hypothesis of insanity, or hallucination. The veracity of the Lord and the apostles cannot be questioned. Foreign missionaries to-day recognise the signs. Demon possession is still a fact. But inability to reach the afflicted the Lord's servant does not admit. Heathen devotees are won sooner than callous worldlings. The fact that they are devotees betrays a soul-hunger that may be directed to Him whose Spirit alone can satisfy it. Though under the category of the demon-possessed the Name of Jesus Christ is omnipotent. And when converted they make unique witnesses to the redeeming power of the Saviour of the world. But no dalliance with idolatry is permissible. The idols require to be removed from a house before the evil spirit will cease troubling its inmates, and depart from the person particularly afflicted.

The conversion of this well-known soothsayer makes a fresh and profound sensation. As a result a class unaffected by the conversion of Lydia is awakened, while the noble stand she takes as a Christian leads, by the overruling power of God, to the working out of His sovereign purposes in Philippi through the raising up of yet another astonishing witness-bearer in the city.

The marvel of her liberation from the demon arrests close attention. What is this? What new doctrine have we here? Who is this Saviour with such transcendent power that the very spirits whom men dread and cajole must obey Him? To seekers after truth her case raises hope of the dawn of a new day. Incontrovertibly no name given under heaven can save after this fashion; the evidence cannot be gainsaid. The Holy Spirit of God replaces the evil spirit that held her in bondage. To temple priests and rulers this brings alarm. Their position and influence are threatened, their living is in danger. As always, with

the presentation of saving truth, a sharp division is created among men.

The division is accentuated by her positive refusal to continue her soothsaying manner of life. Did she so desire nothing could be easier since deceit, trickery and blandishment make up the secret of its success. But these she can no longer and will not practise, let her owners threaten as they may. Their rage at the loss of their gains is overwhelming proof of the holiness of her new life, and corresponding courage to withstand the evil of a degrading occupation. Another than the prince of darkness now reigns in the citadel of her heart.

What compels the comment of many concerning her, and arouses their desire for the blessing is exactly that which still calls forth the surprise of the heathen at the sight of Christian converts, viz., the expression in her face of a radiant peace which they themselves do not have, and hitherto have not seen. This rare serenity of spirit speaks of the security and soul-satisfying fellowship she has with her Saviour; something which the world cannot give and cannot take away. "There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked."

The third, the Philippian jailer, is a man of the military class in whom the proud Roman and cultured pagan unite, the last and hardest to be won for Christ. His conversion takes on another complexion to that of Lydia and the damsel; a long and tense struggle against the light takes place before God finally opens his heart.

That he is aware of the issue involved in the new doctrine leaks out at the last. But not at once will he yield. As in the city so likewise in his heart an interest is born. The Spirit of God strives with him. Though his mind approves his inclination disapproves. To take heed to what he hears would be to break caste. The opprobrium of forsaking the old ways he dare not risk. He fears loss of prestige, of pleasure, and perhaps of position. Are not the members of his household dependent on him? He must also think of them. Because so much which he values seems threatened, a resentment with a dangerous trend comes over him. Should opportunity offer he would be hard tempted to show revenge.

The apostles from past experience need not to be told that their labours engender danger. The atmosphere of the city is becoming charged with highly explosive forces. The Prince of

the power of the air never yields quietly to an attack on his kingdom. Nevertheless theirs is to remain faithful. The Lord is their light and their salvation. Whom shall they fear? What time they are afraid they will trust in Him. He makes all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to His purpose. Of a certainty He called them to Philippi.

They care naturally not to provoke trouble. Discretion, tact, meekness, forbearance become the deportment of the Christian. Speaking the truth they speak it in love. Their good must not be evil spoken of. It is often better to suffer wrong or loss quietly than the Gospel be not hindered. Nevertheless the dreaded storm bursts over their heads. The persistent calling of the damsel grieves St. Paul. It is unseemly that an agent of the Evil One should mingle testimony with their own. The exorcism of the demon leads to a grave tumult in the religious world. It is an open act of aggression against the temple cults and brings direct retaliation.

The masters of the damsel, seeing that the hope of their gains is gone, turn in fury upon the apostles. However disreputable their business, however commendable the exorcism, they will not pass over in silence this interference with their money-making. Paul and Silas are seized and hurried to the market-place to enlist the help of the merchants against them, and inflame the rabble. The combined multitude then conduct the apostles to the magistrates. Artfully concealing the real nature of their grievance, and saying nothing about the relief of the oppressed girl which would expose their wickedness, they bring an indictment against the two preachers calculated to appeal to the national sympathies. They charge the seized men as Jews who exceedingly trouble the city by teaching customs unlawful for them as Romans to receive, or observe. The magistrates, thus imposed upon, noting too the wild and dangerous trend of the clamour, and afraid of the peace of the city for which they are responsible, are rushed into precipitate action. This may seem strange with Roman officials accustomed to law and order in their courts, but they who have ever heard the blood-curdling yell of a Satan-filled murderous mob can fully understand. The wits of the magistrates are temporarily paralysed. They offer the accused no opportunity for defence; the only thing they deem urgently essential is to appease the wrath of the infuriated citizens led as they are by these religious temple leaders. Tearing the clothes

from the backs of Paul and Silas a command is given to beat them. It is a shameful proceeding, an outrage on courtly procedure, but the magistrates can excuse their sin with the reflection that the flagellation serves to save the men from a worse fate.

It is at this juncture that the jailer comes into the drama. His character and the part he plays are easily read. Why does he make the feet of the two sufferers fast in the stocks? This is unnecessary added torture. They have done nothing but good. Cannot their anguish awaken pity in his breast? The inner prison is secure enough. What means this ferocity? There must be a cause, a reason, for his action. It is a deliberate venting of spleen against the servants of the Most High whose preaching has pricked his conscience. His resentment had arisen owing to an unwillingness to repent, and seek the proffered way of salvation. It is a common symptom with the convicted, and so strong is his anger that it leads him to violate the plain instincts of humanity. He is reckless. We see in this jailer the mad and desperate revolt of the natural man against the grace of God. He is too proud to yield. No one is more to be feared than an apostate, or he who having heard the truth, refuses wantonly to obey it. Felix, for instance, trembles at the reasoning of righteousness, temperance and judgment to come, but this does not deter him from relentlessly sending back the Reasoner to his long weary confinement.

The jailer's standard is that of the worldling. He seeks the friendship of the world, craves its pleasures, covets its power, and, to secure these, falls down and worships its god. Has he not promised all to him in return? Before the apostles arrive he is contented with his way of life; it irritates him now to have his equanimity disturbed. The barb of the irritation is a haunting sense that they are right. Man needs God his Creator, Provider, and Redeemer. The heartfelt desire for pardon and safety of soul cannot be suppressed. But the cost and inconvenience of repentance alarms him. The fear of man holds him in its snare. Can he, this haughty, perverse and worldly-minded man, be saved?

“Depth of mercy, can there be
 Mercy still reserved for me?
 Can my God His wrath forbear,
 Me the chief of sinners spare?”

Let us see.

Little does he surmise as he locks securely the door of the inner prison how soon his petty authority is to be held in derision. He imagines he has locked up not only the apostles but with them the preaching of the Gospel in Philippi. He would be troubled with it no longer. But the word and the work of God cannot be bound, neither can His ambassadors when He decrees their release. The praises and prayers of Paul and Silas exceed all the might of Rome—praises for Divine mercies, prayers that God will glorify His holy Name in Philippi. In answer comes at midnight a great earthquake, rocking the prison to its foundations, bursting open every door, and loosing the bonds of every prisoner. Terror falls upon all. Though earthquakes are common in the region the cause of this cannot be mistaken. It is uncommon. God is in it. The apostles' appeal made not to Caesar, but to Caesar's Lord, has been heard. The Most High is vindicating His own cause, and justifying His servants before men. He is intervening on their behalf. Rome, boastful of her law and order, is being convicted of the express violation of law and of wanton disorder. The intervention is a sign and a wonder to the people of Philippi to believe the Gospel; the earthquake itself with its accents of judgment and mercy is itself a parable of the Gospel.

The jailer startled from his sleep sees the prison doors open. Thinking that the prisoners have fled, and his life thereby forfeited, an impulse comes powerfully upon him to kill himself to evade a more ignominious death. It is Satan's desperate try to ruin his soul, and would have succeeded but for St. Paul's crying with a loud voice, "Do thyself no harm, for we are all here". The apostles who bide God's own time refuse to escape. They refuse since God is working for them, and lest by leaving they should bring calamity on the jailer; they return him good for evil. The prisoners, overawed by the sense of the supernatural, follow their example. The extreme contrast between his cruel treatment of Paul and Silas and the mercy they show him humbles him to the dust. To them he owes his life. They who preach salvation stay to save him. Their conduct exemplifies their doctrine.

Dreadfully conscious, moreover, of the presence of God in the earthquake, the joints of his loins are loosed through fear and his knees smite together. The magnitude of his sin appals him.

How shall he escape the Divine wrath? Calling for lights he springs in and comes quivering and quaking into the prison to fall down abjectly at the apostles' feet—a sign verily of his humiliation and repentance. Bringing them out he cries piteously, "Sirs—rather, Lords—what must I do to be saved?" The question plainly reveals his knowledge of their work and doctrine. That he did not ask it before now lets the character of his perversity and unbelief be distinctly known. How often it requires affliction, calamity and a cataclysm of some sort to bring men to their right minds! It needs now the severity of an earthquake and the goodness of God to turn this headstrong Roman from accomplishing his own undoing.

The answer to his cry is for him nothing less than a destructive earthquake to all his former manner of thought. But he does not stumble like so many at the simplicity of the injunction. The "doing" is to believe, not on any deified Caesar, or god in the national calendar, but upon The Lord, the Lord Jesus Christ and he shall be saved and his house. "This is the work of God that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent" (John vi. 29). In other words it is believing and not doing. "Salvation belongeth unto the Lord" (Psalm iii. 8). "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law." (Rom. iii. 28). "Doing is a deadly thing; doing ends in death." "Doing is the idea of man; believing is the command of God." To believe on Jesus Christ is the grand Imperative.

After this historic answer to his moving question the apostles proceed to speak unto him "the word of the Lord"; that is, to expound to him the meaning of faith in Jesus Christ. The word of the Lord is variously put as "the word of truth", "the word of truth the Gospel of your salvation", "the word of life", "the word of His grace". However rendered, the phrase denotes the salvation offered to man by the redemption secured for him through the atoning sacrifice and justifying resurrection of Christ Jesus. The redemption is accomplished in truth and righteousness, revealing the infinite love, holiness, wisdom and power of God. There is nothing spurious, unreal, unmoral, or fleeting in its character. The salvation, therefore, is unlimited in its moral beauty, its scope and efficacy. Judgment and mercy, faithfulness and certainty combine to form its wondrous glory. God is a just God and a Saviour, the Judge of men and their heavenly Father. Its proclamation is the word of

His grace; it is not of works lest any man should boast. Salvation is an absolutely free gift; to believe on Jesus Christ is to receive the gift with praise and thanksgiving.

A theological diamond of exceptional brilliance glowing with the sum of things which become sound doctrine we have in Titus ii. 11-14: "The grace of God which bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously and godly in this present world; looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ: who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto Himself a people zealous of good works."

The jailer receives the word gladly and is baptised with his whole household. But, previous to the ceremony, an initial act seems to him necessary. Compunction over his cruel treatment of the apostles demands that first their stripes should be tenderly washed. The humanitarian act declares the change that has taken place in the man's heart. His desire for cleansing from sin would appear incongruous did he not first cleanse the wounds caused by sin.

After the ceremony he makes haste to bring them into his house. The suffering men need refreshment. He must receive them as benefactors and guests worthy of double honour. A family meal, the bond of an enduring friendship, shall let it be openly known that he publicly enters into fellowship with them in the Gospel. He has crowned Christ as King, and received Him as his Saviour. His life henceforth is not self-centred but God-centred. Accordingly he sets meat before them and rejoices, believing in God with all his house.

Sin, it has been said, is fundamental joylessness. Hence the world's many inventions to supply that which is lacking. But true abiding joy depends entirely on man getting right with God. That brings the soul into tune with the Infinite, and to the fountain-head of all good, enabling him to live his life in harmony with the constituent law of his being which is that of righteousness, a procedure always attendant with what Scripture terms blessedness. The prominent feature, consequently, in the jailer's conversion is the sudden accession of a new superabounding joy into his life. This feature is as conspicuous as the Divine peace that came to the damsel, and the Christ-given love that

flowed into the heart of Lydia. The three features, of necessity are simultaneously present in every conversion, peace preceding joy since joy is based on peace, and love preceding both since love is the source of all. The distinction here consists in each having its own specially marked characteristic. The jailer's revolt is over, his nightmare past, he has met the Desire of all nations, the Altogether Lovely One, the Fulfiller of man's highest good, and he can sing the new song which only the sons of God can sing.

The Christian recognises that he lives and moves and has his being in God. Without Him he is nothing, has nothing, and can do nothing. God communicates His salvation and His life through His Word, the Incarnate Son to man. He who gave Himself for us now gives Himself to us; and the life which we live is by the faith of the Son of God. Our life is hid with Christ in God. In grateful dependence, therefore, the believer joyfully receives through the Word the destined fullness of his being.

Analysed, the sequence of the three conversions follow the order of the Lord's temptations as given by St. Matthew. The first need of man is bread, the second, communion with the Unseen, the third dominion. How are these to be obtained? By lawful or unlawful means? The Gospel supplies the answer. The answer is graciously illustrated for all to read in the experiences of this trio of Philippians whose conversions represent leading types constantly recurring in Christian work.

Among the various helpful lessons arising therefrom we gather that Christ knows how to find His disciples among all classes. He is ever in quest of the lost and downtrodden. He can transmute the chiefest of sinners into saints if they will receive His Word. No one lies beyond His saving arm. He adapts His methods of dealing with the fallen according to their distinctive need. He delivers them from the flesh, the devil and the world. So mighty is the efficacy of His mercy that no one need despair, or preachers faint owing to the hardness of men's hearts, or the mountainous difficulties in front of them. He can make the wrath of man to praise Him, and the sufferings of His servants to work out their increased fruitfulness. His salvation of men rests upon the casting out of Satan from their hearts by the reception of the Holy Spirit: the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus makes them free from the law of sin and

death. Converts are raised up as living miracles of salvation to let the world see in them the exceeding riches of His glorious grace. The apostles require to move on to other spheres; these remain to continue their testimony.

But ere the apostles leave a farewell message is broadcast to the city. It is a Church manifesto. The praetors having heard of the supernatural events at the prison, doubtless from the jailer himself, and conscious of their own wrongdoing, send an order that the apostles may be allowed to go. But St. Paul for the sake of the Gospel and the Christians they leave behind cannot consent to sneak away as culprits would do. He and his companions are not disorderly persons, they are law abiding citizens. But the magistrates themselves have been disorderly, and broken the law, having beaten Romans openly and uncondemned. They must come personally and fetch them out. They cannot be justified at the expense of the Church. Otherwise the Gospel will suffer. This gives the apostles the public opportunity to do justly and to love mercy, and thereby demonstrate the principles of the Gospel they preach. The demand met, they kindly refrain from accusing them to Caesar, which together with their meekness and readiness to depart peacefully puts the magistrates on their honour not to deal harshly with the Christians after they have gone. The Church is made up of a body of men who are sincere, peaceful, merciful, without offence, and whose moderation is known to all.

T. TORRANCE.

Edinburgh.