

Lesson 1. Paul: Apostle to the Gentiles

Sabbath.

What was at the root of Saul's persecution of the early Christian church??

If we, today, believe in a similar God concept, might we be in danger of similar or worse persecution of those who do not share our beliefs??

From the teacher's quarterly.

You want to become really bad? Not bad as in "misunderstood"; not bad as in a diamond-in-the-rough kind of character with the proverbial heart of gold; but bad as in some of the world's most evil men? You must start by convincing yourself you're good. So good, in fact, that you believe you're better than anybody else. Or that you can do no wrong. Not only that, but you have God on your side and anyone who opposes you opposes God. French philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal wrote, "Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from a religious conviction." That could be you. It could be any of us if, in misguided devotion, we put ourselves in God's place and stop listening to the real God.

Sunday.

Acts 6:9-15.

9. Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen. 10. And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. 11. Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." 12. And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council. 13. They also set up false witnesses who said, "This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; 14. for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us." 15. And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel.

The lesson asks of whom are we reminded with this passage [Matt 26:59-61].

57 And those who had laid hold of Jesus led Him away to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were assembled. 58 But Peter followed Him at a distance to the high priest's courtyard. And he went in and sat with the servants to see the end. 59 Now the chief priests, the elders, and all the council sought false testimony against Jesus to put Him to death, 60 but found none. Even though many false witnesses came forward, they found none. But at last two false witnesses came forward 61 and said, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in

three days.” 62 And the high priest arose and said to Him, “Do You answer nothing? What is it these men testify against You?” 63 But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest answered and said to Him, “I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!” 64 Jesus said to him, “It is as you said. Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.” 65 Then the high priest tore his clothes, saying, “He has spoken blasphemy! What further need do we have of witnesses? Look, now you have heard His blasphemy! 66 What do you think?” They answered and said, “He is deserving of death.” 67 Then they spat in His face and beat Him; and others struck Him with the palms of their hands, 68 saying, “Prophecy to us, Christ! Who is the one who struck You?”

NOTE: Both Steven and Christ are referring to the Spirit Temple / Sanctuary. Have we, today, received any grief from the current church leaders on this subject??

Read the red section at the bottom of Sunday’s lesson.

Convinced he was right, Saul was willing to put to death those whom he thought wrong. While we need to have zeal and fervor for what we believe, how do we learn to temper our zeal with the realization that, at times, we just might be wrong?

Monday.

The lesson asks, “What role did the grace of God have in this experience [Saul’s conversion]?”

Might this be why Paul later said we are “saved by grace.” [Acts 15:11, Eph 2:5, 8.]

What role did Saul play in his conversion??

The martyrdom of Stephen made a deep impression upon all who witnessed it. The memory of the signet of God upon his face; his words, which touched the very souls of those who heard them, remained in the minds of the beholders, and testified to the truth of that which he had proclaimed. His death was a sore trial to the church, but it resulted in the conviction of Saul, who could not efface from his memory the faith and constancy of the martyr, and the glory that had rested on his countenance. {AA 101.3} At the scene of Stephen’s trial and death, Saul had seemed to be imbued with a frenzied zeal. Afterward he was angered by his own secret conviction that Stephen had been honored by God at the very time when he was dishonored by men. Saul continued to persecute the church of God, hunting them down, seizing them in their houses, and delivering them up to the priests and rulers for imprisonment and death. His zeal in carrying forward this persecution brought terror to the Christians at Jerusalem. The Roman authorities made no special effort to stay the cruel work and secretly aided the Jews in order to conciliate them and to secure their favor. {AA 101.4} After the death of Stephen, Saul was elected a member of the Sanhedrin council in consideration of the part he had acted on that occasion. For a time he was a mighty instrument in the hands of Satan to carry out his rebellion against the Son of God. But soon this relentless persecutor was to be employed in building up the church that he was now tearing down. A Mightier than Satan had chosen Saul to take the place of the martyred Stephen, to preach and suffer for His name, and to spread far and wide the tidings of salvation through His blood. {AA 102.1}

According to the lesson: “The only thing Saul deserved was punishment.” Really?? Why do we keep coming back to this idea that all sinners deserve punishment?? Did any of us choose to be born?? Born a sinner??

I want to make clear that, while we do NOT *deserve* God’s grace [it’s a gift], we do not *deserve* punishment either. That is a doctrine of devils [see DA 761].

Tuesday.

The following is a quote from the teachers quarterly:

“Saul, on the other hand, did not so much turn as he was turned. Until the moment when the living Christ appears and incapacitates him, we see no sign of a change of heart in Saul. The passages in chapters 8 and 9 tell us nothing at all about his internal state. We see a lot of his external state, vividly described in terms evoking a fierce predatory animal (Acts 8:3). Was the Holy Spirit working with him? Undoubtedly, but to see it would have taken greater faith than most had then or have now.”

Did God “turn” Saul?? or merely choose the best method to get his attention?? As we have seen above from the AA 102,103 quote, Saul was struggling with the Holy Spirit before his “conversion”.

What would you have done if you were Ananias??
Do you think our ministry has been judged fairly or accurately??
Have you misjudged anyone else’s ministry??

Wednesday.

In the later centuries of Israel’s history prior to the first advent it was generally understood that the coming of the Messiah was referred to in the prophecy, “It is a light thing that Thou shouldest be My servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give Thee for a light to the Gentiles, that Thou mayest be My salvation unto the end of the earth.” [Isa. 49:6]. PK 68

The OT is quite clear that God intended to save the “Gentiles” also. The children of Israel were his initial instrument for this, but he knew they would not live up to the task, so he included in the prophecies of the coming Messiah language to enlighten them.

Are there any “Gentiles” that we, as Adventists, think are beneath our efforts??

I attended a small Adventist church in middle TN, as a guest about 2 years ago. The SS teacher and pastor, both, referred to non-Adventists as “Philistines”. What kind of message is being sent from our pulpits??

The lesson brings out the point that persecution after Steven’s death is the catalyst for the spreading of the message of Christ to Antioch. Has the tyranny of Satan ever succeeded in destroying the Church?? Has he come close??

Thursday. Conflict within the Church.

Can we identify any rites, beliefs, and ordinances that cause conflict in the church today??

What’s the big deal about circumcision, anyway??

If man had kept the law of God, as given to Adam after his fall, preserved by Noah, and observed by Abraham, there would have been no necessity for the ordinance of circumcision. And if the descendants of Abraham had kept the covenant, of which circumcision was a sign, they would never have been seduced into idolatry, nor would it have been necessary for them to suffer a life of bondage in Egypt; they would have kept God’s law in mind, and there would have been no necessity for it to be proclaimed from Sinai or engraved upon the tables of stone. And had the people practiced the principles of the Ten Commandments, there would have been no need of the additional directions given to Moses. PP 364.

Friday.

*“A general slain in battle is lost to his army, but his death gives no additional strength to the enemy. But when a man of prominence joins the opposing force, not only are his services lost, but those to whom he joins himself gain a decided advantage. Saul of Tarsus, on his way to Damascus, might easily have been struck dead by the Lord, and much strength would have been withdrawn from the persecuting power. But God in His providence not only spared Saul’s life, but converted him, thus transferring a champion from the side of the enemy to the side of Christ. An eloquent speaker and a severe critic, Paul, with his stern purpose and undaunted courage, possessed the very qualifications needed in the early church.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 124.*

Paul’s conversion is a perfect example of God’s “vengeance”. He used the best method needed to get Paul’s attention, knowing that Paul’s heart was still receptive to the Holy Spirit, and then He healed Paul. This was far more effective for the growth of the early church than just striking him dead. How do you think Satan felt, losing one of his best soldiers??