

A Necessary Fall from our High Horse

Many Christians are familiar with the story of Saul of Tarsus (later Saint Paul of the New Testament) and what happened to him when he was on his way to Damascus, Syria.

For those not familiar with the story, a brief synopsis will be presented here.

Saul of Tarsus was a young man (a Jew) who lived at the time when Jesus of Nazareth was preaching the New Gospel to the Jews in Judea. Like all devout Jews, Saul was also expecting the coming of the promised Messiah, who would lift Israel again to a leading and lofty position among nations. They expected this because they saw themselves as The Chosen People.

But, over the years *the Chosen People* had been suffering from all manner of indignities and humiliations meted out to them by the various nations that had conquered and subjugated them. Some of their conquerors even ridiculed them and their GOD, who *though being so powerful was unable to protect his Chosen People from these conquerors*.

Being very strong in their belief and faith, perhaps bordering on dogmatism, most Jews, like Saul, held fast to their belief and hopes, and even became more intolerant of anyone among their own folk who did anything to disparage their view of the greatness and omnipotence of their GOD. Thus the crime of blasphemy took on a very severe tone.

It is against this background that one can begin to appreciate why Saul was very incensed when the disciples of a lay preacher from Nazareth, by the name of Joshua (better known today as Jesus) insinuated that their Rabbi (Master/teacher) was the Son of GOD incarnate! That for Saul was the height of disparaging GOD and blasphemy.

With the support of the Jewish authorities who had reasons of their own for wanting to get rid of this Joshua and his followers, Saul was granted free reign in routing this group of blasphemers and rebels against the orthodox teachings of their faith. The use of violence and death was deemed acceptable for this purpose, even though the Fifth Commandment expressly stated "*Thou Shall Not Kill*".

Saul pursued his passion with such efficiency and ruthlessness in Jerusalem and Judea that many of the few disciples of the Nazarene either fled the city or went into hiding, upon hearing the name Saul of Tarsus.

Having done an effective job in subduing or slowing down the activities of the followers and disciples of the now late Jesus of Nazareth, Saul proceeded to Damascus, the nearest city with a sizeable Jewish community, in which report had got back to Jerusalem about the growing conversion of the Jews there to the new teachings being spread by the followers of Jesus.

It was as he approached Damascus that Saul experienced the event that is known to every person who has read the New Testament of the Christian bible, or attended a Christian religious class. According to the account, (Acts 9) on the road to Damascus, Saul was struck by a brilliant light, and fell to the ground from his horse. Then he heard a voice from heaven identified as the voice of Jesus asking, "Why are you using violence against me?" Having become blinded by the bright light Saul was led by his companions to Damascus, where they left him.

For three days Saul was blind and didn't eat or drink. Meanwhile, Jesus appeared in a vision to a disciple in Damascus named Ananias and told him to go to Saul. Ananias was afraid because he knew Saul's reputation as a merciless persecutor of the followers of Jesus. But Jesus repeated his command, explaining that Saul was his chosen instrument to deliver the gospel to the Gentiles, their kings, and the people of Israel. So Ananias found Saul where he was in Damascus. Praying for help, Ananias laid his hands on Saul, telling him Jesus had sent him to restore his sight and that Saul might be filled with the Holy Spirit.

It is further narrated that something like scales fell from Saul's eyes when Ananias laid hands on him, and he could see again. He then rose up and was baptized into the Christian faith. After his conversion, Saul changed his name to Paul and went on to become one of the foremost evangelists of the New Gospel of Jesus.

Themes and Life Lessons from this story.

This story about Saul, later Paul, contains many lessons for man of today. The first and most obvious being that one's greatest adversary today could become one's greatest champion tomorrow, therefore it is short sighted to dismiss and judge a person by their current behavior or outlook.

Another lesson from Saul's example, is how a person can, in all good faith, work against that which they hold dear. But, it must be pointed out that this can only happen where one allows worldly considerations or views to distort their inner sensing. In the case of Saul, the devout Jew, he allowed his worldly view of how GOD should manifest to becloud and obscure his inner devotion to GOD. His pride would not allow him to imagine his great GOD coming to Israel in the guise of a simple lay preacher out of Nazareth, of all places, a back water region of Judea. This was so contrary to the notion of the Messiah coming as the descendant of King David, the most celebrated of the Kings of Jews.

Many devout Christians, Jews and Muslims today, who all believe in the coming Messiah, have formed their own ideas of how this Messiah must appear. Almost all envisage a Messiah who will appear in *Glory and Majesty, clothed in the power of Heaven*. Simply put, many are again today expecting a Messiah that will come endowed with Ecclesiastical and Material power.

Perhaps such believers, to which the majority of the faithful of today belong, need to revisit this aspect of the story of Saul.

Furthermore, we are told in the story that when Saul was struck by the bright Light, he was thrown off his horse and could no longer see to continue the ride to Damascus. Beside the fact that the light startled his horse, which made Saul lose his grip and fall off his horse, there is a symbolic lesson in this occurrence. Saul the high and mighty prosecutor fell off his high horse and was brought low and blind. In his helpless state, he was forced to take stock of his miserable condition. One can imagine how humbling it must have been for Saul the source of terror, to suddenly find himself dependent on others and at their mercy to get around.

During this period of introspection, and being a truly devote Jew at heart, Saul was able to reflect on his actions and motivations, and The Lord heard his prayers and saw his heart, and sent help to him.

Even to this day, The Lord still hears and sees the heart of the honest person. But, the attraction of help must come from the individual. And help will only come to him or her who is willing and ready to *come off their high horse* and see the Lord's way in the way the Lord wants, not what we, or the worldly opinions expect or demand. For example, Saul knew that the commandment of GOD forbade killing, yet he allowed worldly considerations to override this clear commandment, because he wanted to continue riding high in the opinion of the authorities. In what ways are we allowing our worldly considerations to prevent us from overthrowing that which we know is wrong within us, or to remain silent when we know that we should stand up or speak up to correct or prevent a wrong.

The scales falling from Saul's eyes was another Spiritual symbolic event. Through deep reflection, Saul allowed the scales (ego, pride, dogmatism) that had been obstructing his Spiritual vision to fall off. Thus it was not only the physical, but also his Spiritual sight which was then restored to Saul.

Today, when beset by what we call misfortune, many are quick to pray for relief from the condition or situation. But, how many give thought that the misfortune is an opportunity to reflect on our actions to date, and an opportunity for us to allow the scales that are obstructing our spiritual vision to fall. Truth be told, many today no longer believe or imagine that misfortunes could hold an opportunity for Spiritual awakening. Not even those who believe in the well-known saying that "*There is always a silver lining to every dark cloud*" appreciate the depth of truth contained in it. At best we interpret the saying as referring to the evident changes in the fortunes of men, or the cycles in the nature that is physically visible to us.

When seen from this perspective, one may wonder how many opportunities for Spiritual regeneration are being offered to man, in the numerous misfortunes with which we are confronted today, to remove spiritual scales from our eyes. This is indeed a very difficult concept to grasp. But, the sacred books, as well Saul's story demonstrate, the truth behind this very difficult concept. What it takes to come to a gradual appreciation of this truth is the unshakable belief and trust in the Justice of GOD, and, or knowledge of the operations of the Laws of Creation. Evidently Saul, who was already a truly devout believer in GOD, was able to attain to that recognition during his time of reflection.

After his conversion and baptism, the bible tells us that Saul changed his name to Paul and went on to preach the good news to Jews and Gentiles as far as he could go in the Roman Empire.

This change of name also has a symbolic meaning which is relevant to anyone who today truly decides to embrace the true teachings of GOD, regardless of whether it is to be found in the sacred books of old, or in today's message. By changing his name, Saul was in effect dissociating from his old self, the dogmatic, egotistical Pharisee, to which class he belonged. It was indeed a symbolic rebirth and a voluntary decision to undergo a reeducation and realignment with the new teachings of Jesus. No doubt this must have meant a struggle to overcome and drop many cherished principles, beliefs and attitudes that he must have held very dear heretofore. The most difficult and subtle being attitudes and ways of life to which we have been accustomed. The latter is one of the toughest to overcome, as history shows again and again. We witness this even in the present day. A person or group comes across a new teaching which they find to be the truth or at least better than what they once held on to. An organization soon develops around this new teaching. But in time, the ills and traits of the old organization, which they supposedly found irksome or stifling

soon begin to appear in the new group. In time, except for the externals, there is very little difference between the practices of the new and old groups.

This should tell us that any true change or rebirth invariably requires a complete discarding of many a long held and cherished attitudes. Indeed it often requires a complete regrowth from a fresh start. This point applies to any endeavor at regeneration whether spiritual or material. It is also very noteworthy today when many are gradually coming to the recognition that our present way of life is not sustainable for our planet and our psyche. Like Saul, mankind today needs a radical change, perhaps a change of name (identity) and personality (attitudes).

But what should form the basis of this new and radical change? Surely not religion, seeing as how almost all religions have had the opportunity to prove their mettle in various societies and have failed to bring about lasting change for the benefit of their citizens. Until recently, one might have pointed to Science with confidence and certainty. But increasingly we are seeing the problems attributable to man's scientific achievements and endeavors. Yet, man is no doubt in desperate need of a new guiding light.

As before, help is always sent to mankind at our most vulnerable periods of crisis. And again, as in the past only a few appear able to free themselves from their everyday pressing concerns, entrenched positions or attitudes to listen and benefit from the help that has been sent. As a result, many will inevitably go down with the collapse that almost always results when things become totally unwieldy, as is arguably the case today.

Help is available, it only takes a personal resolve to seek, find and use it.