

"I Did It Ignorantly In Unbelief"

"I thank him that enabled me, even Christ Jesus our Lord, for that he counted me faithful, appointing me to his service; though I was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious, howbeit I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief ..." (1 Tim. 1:12f).

These words mark a turn in the apostle's train of thought. To this point he has admonished Timothy to maintain the charge to certain men not to teach a different doctrine, men who desired to be teachers of the law, although they understood not what they said nor what they confidently affirmed.

Was it a painful stab of memory that stirred Paul to write of his prior life before he became a Christian? One thing is certain: he had tenaciously adhered to the law, pressing his convictions zealously.

Despite his injury to the cause of Christ, the Lord counted him faithful, appointing him to his service. Let none suppose God counted Paul faithful when he persecuted the church, nay, not the church but Christ Himself. Remember our Lord's words to Paul on the Damascus road? *"Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me"* (Acts 9:4)?

We have, in Paul's words *"counted me faithful"* an example of God *"calling the things that are not, as though they were"* (Rom. 4:17). This latter quotation was Paul's commentary of God's words to Abraham, whose son Isaac was yet not born: *"a father of many nations have I made thee"* (Rom. 4:17; Gen. 17:5). The same sort of language appears again when a fearful Paul in Corinth was comforted by a heavenly vision: *"Be not afraid, but speak and hold not thy peace: for I am with thee and no man shall set on thee to harm thee: for I have much people in this city"* (Acts 18:9f). God had many people prospectively in Corinth; Abraham was prospectively a father of many nations, and prospectively Paul would prove to be faithful, despite all odds.

"Appointing me to his service." This is a reference to his apostleship to which, in Paul's words, God had *"separated me, even from my mother's womb"* (Gal. 1:15). God had His eye on Paul. He knew his character and doubtlessly providentially directed his early training which qualified him for the task he must fill: God's apostle to the Gentiles to preach the blessed gospel of His Son.

The humility of Paul is seen in his frank description of himself: *"although I was before a blasphemer and persecutor and injurious."* One of the marks of the inspiration of the scriptures is that no effort is ever made to gloss over

the sins and shortcomings of God's people. No man was more devoted to Paul than Luke. He remained with him when everyone else forsook him, and Paul called him "*the beloved physician*" (2 Tim. 4:11; Col. 4:14). What a bond existed between these two noble men! Yet, that bond did not cause Luke to "water down" the early harmful nature of his dear friend. In his Acts, Luke wrote of Paul, "*Saul laid waste the church, entering into every house, and dragging men and women, committed them to prison*" and "*Saul breathing threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord*" (Acts 8:3; 9:1).

"I did it ignorantly in unbelief." One wonders how Paul could have claimed ignorance when he had been present at Stephen's stoning and had doubtlessly heard Stephen's defense (Acts 7)? Perhaps the answer is found in that the Law, its sacrifices and temple services were God ordained: temporary in God's mind, permanent in Jewish thinking. It was inconceivable to Paul that God was radically changing what He, Himself had ordained 1,500 years before. His ignorance lay in his unbelief. Yet Paul obtained mercy because, however prejudiced he was, he still did not sear his conscience. In his words, "*I have lived before God in all good conscience to this day*" (Acts 23:1).

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