

Glad Tidings

“And we bring you good tidings of the promise made unto the fathers...” (Acts 13:32)

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Identifying With Paul

(Jerry Fite)

How do you identify today with a man who lived almost 2,000 years ago? He traveled by walking, and sailed in ships. We travel daily by car and fly in planes. How do you identify with a preacher whose back was slashed open with 39 stripes five different times; who, on three occasions felt the bone shattering blows of rods; and whose body was pummeled with stones and left to die? How does one enjoying daily freedom relate to the indomitable spirit of a man who refused to allow the darkness of prison to cloud his joy?

It may be easier to identify with a once cowardly Peter or a timid Timothy and John Mark. Paul almost rises to the status of “super Christian”, too superlative for emulation by many today.

On the surface, it may be difficult to identify with Paul’s conversion. He was blinded by a bright light and heard the audible voice of the Lord. For three days Paul did not eat or drink until miraculously receiving his physical sight immediately before his baptism (Acts 9:3-9, 17-19). Did you have the same “conversion experience”?

We can identify with Paul’s conversion by having confidence in the reality of the Lord we serve. Paul was traveling to Damascus to imprison people who were serving the Lord, not traveling to learn more about the Lord. He was approaching the city firmly convinced that God was well served by his breathing of slaughter upon the disciples called Christians. Yet, all of a sudden, his life took a one hundred eighty degree turn. It would take an extraordinary event to convince one so determined to imprison and kill Christians to become one. But such was the experience of Paul. We can relate to Paul by knowing the one we confess to be the Son of God really exists, and sits in heaven and rules in His kingdom.

While I cannot relate to the miraculous event surrounding Paul’s conversion, I can identify with him by realizing that if Jesus died for the chiefest of sinners, then he must have died for me as well. Paul makes this point when he writes, “*Faithful is the saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief. . . that in me as chief might Jesus Christ show forth all His longsuffering, for an ensample of them that should thereafter be-*

lieve on Him unto eternal life” (I Timothy 1:15-16). With Paul, I can look back on my sins, and deeply appreciate God’s grace while viewing my past without the present haunting guilt of sin (cf. I Timothy 1:13-14).

We can identify with Paul in his baptism. Paul was commanded by Ananias, the devout servant of the Lord, to “*be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling His name” (Acts 22:16)*. Baptism points toward the forgiveness of sins, not back to already forgiven sins. If so, why would Paul spend three days, not eating and drinking, which was a sign of sorrow, if his sins had already been forgiven (Acts 9:5-9)? In appealing to the authority of the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ, Paul was baptized, having his sins washed away or remitted (cf. Acts 2:38). He could now rejoice, being forgiven, and take in food (Acts 9:18-19).

Paul did not tarry after he was told to be baptized. “*He arose and was baptized” (Acts 9”18)*. Those of us who have risen from the pew, chair, couch or bed to submit to baptism can identify with Paul in finally doing what we know we should do: arise and be baptized. Have you?