

And thus it chanced, as I divine,
 With Roland and Sir Leoline.
 Each spake words of high disdain
 And insult to his heart's best brother :
 They parted—ne'er to meet again !
 But never either found another
 To free the hollow heart from paining—
 They stood aloof, the scars remaining,
 Like cliffs which had been rent asunder ;
 A dreary sea now flows between ;—
 But neither heat, nor frost, nor thunder
 Shall wholly do away, I ween,
 The marks of that which once hath been.

COLERIDGE : From *Christabel*.

I MUST remove a misapprehension which may be liable to arise, that conversation must always be didactic. There is a great deal of conversation that simply rests men. It does

not directly edify, but it tends to keep and refresh what we have built. A dust-cloth is a very useful thing in a house. It does not feed you, nor warm you, nor shelter you from the storm, but it removes dust. There are many words that are like dust-cloths. They brighten, they polish, they comfort, they cheer.—H. W. BEECHER.

IF we were never to open our mouths except when we had something to say which was obviously worth listening to, we should be a silent and melancholy generation indeed. The depths of the Atlantic have their foam as well as their great waves. The fluttering leaf of the topmost bough belongs to the oak as much as the solid timber of the trunk. The gnats which dance in the evening sunshine are a part of the great Creator's world ; and the shallowest rill which trickles over the pebbles is as truly fulfilling the great law of gravitation as the huge green mass of water which slowly turns its mighty bulk over the precipices of Niagara.—HARRY JONES.

The International Lessons.

I.

Acts ix. 1-20.

SAUL OF TARSUS CONVERTED.

1. "Breathing out threatenings and slaughter" (ver. 1). The Greek is simply "breathing threatenings and slaughter," as if that were the atmosphere in which he now was living.

2. "Letters to Damascus" (ver. 2). The high priest in Jerusalem, like the Pope in Rome, had jurisdiction over the Jewish synagogues all over the world. Whether the governors of the various cities would allow their Jewish subjects to be abused, was another question. But the governor of Damascus seems to have been a ready ally, as was proved in Saul's own case immediately afterwards. That may have been the very reason why Saul selected Damascus.

OUR lesson to-day is the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. Let us think, first, what his conversion meant to Saul himself, and then what it means to us.

I. To Saul himself it meant, first of all, the ending of a fierce struggle in his own soul. There are those who will have it that Saul was converted suddenly. In a sense, he was. Suddenly the light shone out of heaven upon him, and suddenly he fell to the earth. But if it is meant that up to that moment the possibility of being in error never once entered his heart, then not merely the words, "It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks," but many sentences in his own letters plainly contradict that. Unbelievers like to speak of Saul's conversion as sudden. They represent him as a man of whim and caprice, of visions and hallucinations. In a book just published, Professor

Huxley says: "This strange man, because he has a vision one day, at once and with equal headlong zeal, flies to the opposite pole of opinion." God does not work by sudden impulses ; and if it had been an impulse of his own heated brain, he would have speedily repented of it.

But the other thing to notice about Saul himself is, that this was the event which explained the whole of his after-life. When Agrippa II. came to visit Festus, and heard that Paul was a prisoner with him, he was very anxious to see him. So Paul was brought forth. And what was the speech he made? It was simply the story of his conversion told over again. Just as if he had said to Agrippa: "You want to understand me—understand *that*."

II. What, then, does it mean to us? It means well-nigh everything to us. If it is true that Saul met Jesus that day on the road to Damascus, then (1) Jesus did really rise from the dead. For Saul knew that this Jesus, who spoke to him then, in his mother-tongue, and said, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me?" had been crucified till he was *dead*, and had been laid, as any dead body is laid, in a tomb. But if Jesus rose from the dead, then (2) all that He claimed was true. And for us this is the important thing. He claimed that the day was coming when He would sit upon His throne as the Judge, and we, with others, should stand before Him to be judged of the deeds done in the body. And He claimed the right to say, either "Come unto Me, ye blessed"; or else, "Depart from Me, ye cursed."

But it means also to us, that He is ever the Good Shepherd, ever out on the mountains seek-

ing the lost sheep, if He may find it. The meeting of Jesus that day on the long, lonely road to Damascus with Saul of Tarsus is a blessed sample of the daily doings of this Jesus of Nazareth still.

ILLUSTRATIONS.—“They led him by the hand” (ver. 8). The companions of Saul doubtless pitied him, as they took his hand to lead him to Damascus, and congratulated themselves on an escape from such an experience.—W. R. CAMPBELL.

“He did neither eat nor drink” (ver. 9). The biographer of Dr. Wayland, remarking on this critical period of his life, says, “He resolved to drop everything else and bend all his efforts to end the long struggle. He gave himself up to the solitude of his room, reading the Scriptures, and calling upon God. It went on so for days.”

“For, behold, he prayeth” (ver. 11). Some young men were on an excursion car to California, and when night came, one of them beside his berth committed his soul to God, as he was wont to do at home. A friend remarked concerning the boy afterwards: “He is a thoroughbred.”

II.

Acts ix. 32-43.

DORCAS RAISED TO LIFE.

1. “Tabitha—Dorcas” (ver. 36). The first word is Hebrew (*i.e.* Aramaic), the second is Greek, for a gazelle.

2. “The widows” (ver. 39) who had worked along with Dorcas in her good works and alms-deeds.

SAYS an American commentator on this lesson: “Nothing could be more graphic than this brief narrative, or more touching than the incident itself. Amid the march of imposing events, which are moving before us, it drops in like a wild flower in a stately forest.” Certainly the raising of Dorcas is a small matter in comparison with the immense importance of the conversion of Saul, which formed the subject of last lesson. Yet we may be sure that St. Luke saw some special significance in this incident, else he would not have selected it as one of the “Acts” of one of the “Apostles.” There are, indeed, several points of significance.

1. The least of these, perhaps, is, that it was a resurrection from the dead. No doubt a resurrection is always wonderful, marvellous exceedingly. And it may be the unique wonder of it that gives us only three in the gospel history. But the wonder is mostly outward, and mostly ours. To God we know there are many things that must be done before that. The harvest which is ready for the reaping is not the raising of dead bodies to life, but the regenerating of the spiritually lifeless. How else can you understand the fact that Stephen’s mangled body is simply buried out of sight? If Dorcas was raised to life, it was for another purpose than the mere wonder of it; another purpose

than the mere bringing back the soul to its earthly house of this tabernacle.

2. Another reason why St. Luke includes this story in his work is, that his wish is to describe the beginnings of Christianity in its various phases. One of these, and a most important one, was the place that it gave to woman—rather, let us say, the place woman at once and so naturally took in the new society, and the work she fell at once to the doing of.

3. But there is a third reason. The last verse of this chapter tells us that St. Peter abode many days in Joppa with one Simon a *tanner*. Now tanners were an abomination to the Jews, for their work was one which it was not possible to engage in and avoid ceremonial defilement. Already, therefore, St. Peter is rising above his narrow Jewish prejudices; already the kingdom is being opened to the wider circle of the Gentiles. That is the great subject of St. Luke’s history; and it is natural that he should immediately proceed to tell the story of the conversion of Cornelius, the Roman centurion.

ILLUSTRATIONS.—Acute observers of moral changes in history have remarked how Christianity suddenly shifted the supreme type of character from the masculine to the feminine virtues. In the pagan world “virtue” itself meant simply manfulness. It was the combination in the perfect Man Himself of all those graces which formerly had been deemed womanish or weak, such graces as humility, meekness, tenderness, and serving charity, that rectified the judgment of humanity.—J. O. DYKES.

Here the narrative closes, as well it might; for not even St. Luke’s graphic pen could describe the scene which followed. And if the restoration of one saint to the little band which she has left is indescribable, what shall we say or think of that hour when all the sainted dead shall rise in glory and greet one another on the shores of life? Is not this event in Joppa intended to give us a slight foretaste of the joys of the resurrection morning?—J. W. M’GARVEY.

III.

Acts x. 1-20.

PETER’S VISION.

1. “The Italian band” (ver. 1). An Italian cohort, so-called probably because it was raised in Italy, and may have been still recruited from there.

2. “He saw in a vision evidently” (ver. 3), *i.e.* openly. It was no trance with Cornelius, but a waking, open vision.

3. “Anything that is common” (ver. 14). The word “common” had come to be applied to everything that was forbidden in the ceremonial law. So in Mark vii. 2: “Defiled hands” is in the original “common hands,” as the margin points out.

If there was one intention more than another in the mind of St. Luke in writing the Acts of the

Apostles, it was that he might tell how the gospel came to be preached to the Gentiles. And here he relates the first unmistakable step in that great work. It *was* a great work. We, because we are sinners of the Gentiles, can never know the greatness of the conception nor the grandeur of its working out. But when we read the Epistles of St. Paul, we see clearly that he placed the preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles second only to the revelation of the gospel itself, and not very far behind it.

And the first Gentile was a Roman centurion. It is a fine-sounding name, and, besides, it is a curious fact that all we read of centurions in the New Testament is to their credit, so that it has come to signify in our ears no little rank and honour. But it was by no means a dignified office. The centurion was the commander of but a sixth part of a cohort or "band." He had many superior officers. And so the surprise is the greater that a centurion had this surpassing grace conferred on him, and the joy is not the less.

St. Peter was the chosen instrument. Not St. Paul the Apostle of the Gentiles, but St. Peter the Apostle of the Circumcision, received the first open Gentile convert. That was all of purpose. It was purposely arranged so for St. Peter's own sake; for, as St. Paul tells us, he needed special revelation and special honour to keep him right on this most testing matter. And it was of purpose for the sake of the Church also. When the cry arose against St. Paul, and the subject came up at the Jerusalem Council, it was St. Peter's reference to the conversion of Cornelius that brought opinion round to the right side.

Nor was it without intention that a supernatural vision was granted, that St. Peter was in a trance when the revelation was made to him. In common with his countrymen generally, he gave more credit to a revelation which came that way than if it had come by ordinary experience, or in a waking vision. He never could doubt the reality of this trance; he never could doubt that it was direct from God.

ILLUSTRATIONS.—The point to be observed in this particular study is, how *unconsciously* men are being prepared for higher communications, wider services, deeper suffering, nobler sympathy. God leads us on step by step. He will send a stubborn Jew who had never eaten anything common or unclean to lodge with one Simon a tanner. Having got him so *far* on the road, He will send him to a *Gentile* called Cornelius. The *tanner* is on the road towards the *centurion*. We do not *jump* to conclusions in Divine Providence, we go forward *a step at a time*; and we never know how far we have advanced until we come to the *last* step, and find that it is but a step.—JOSEPH PARKER.

God Himself had made unclean that which He was teaching Peter to regard as cleansed—*cleansed*, mark you! not

clean from the first; but, having once been regarded as unclean, now cleansed by a fresh touch of the finger of God.—J. BALDWIN BROWN.

IV.

Acts x. 30-48.

PETER AT CÆSAREA.

1. "God is no respecter of persons" (ver. 34). St. Peter's immediate reference is to the Gentiles. Gentiles, he sees and says, as well as Jews are accepted by God. But his words have a wider range than that. See the exposition below.

2. "This word, I say, ye know" (ver. 37). The whole narrative seems to show clearly enough that this is a *résumé* only of the Apostle's speech. And he is referring back at this point to what he has already spoken.

3 "They heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God" (ver. 46). So that, as on Pentecost, the gift of tongues was used, not to preach the gospel and save the necessity of learning the various languages, but in praise to God. Its purpose was evidential and devotional.

THREE weeks ago the subject of lesson was the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. To-day, we have the story of another conversion. The persons differ, and the circumstances differ also. Saul the persecutor is brought to Christ in one way, Cornelius the devout centurion and his God-fearing friends are brought to Christ in another way. But they are both brought to Christ; both receive the remission of sins through faith in Him.

In this light we must understand the 34th and 35th verses, so easily and so often misunderstood and fatally misapplied: "Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons; but in every nation he that feareth Him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with Him." The popular interpretation of these words—and it is *very* popular—is, Do the best you fairly can, and leave the rest to God. And so for all such practical expositors of this word Christ has indeed died in vain. But St. Peter speaks of those who, not having known or even heard of the Christ of God after the flesh, have nevertheless had faith in God, and have trusted their soul's salvation *wholly* to God. He speaks of those, wherever they are found, whose deficiency is in *knowledge*; and in the present case he proceeds to supply that deficiency by the story of the life and death and resurrection of the Man Christ Jesus. He speaks of those who, like Abraham, can look only afar off at the day of Christ, but whose *faith* it is nevertheless that is counted to them for righteousness.

The conversion of Cornelius is thus closely parallel to that of the Ethiopian eunuch. They are men who seek God and the pardon of their

sins, and find both in fuller knowledge—the knowledge of Emmanuel, or God amongst us, in the person of Jesus Christ.

But there is one remarkable circumstance here. The gift of the Holy Spirit, which follows every conversion, here manifested itself in an outward way. Cornelius and his friends were empowered to speak with tongues, and magnify God. This at once shows us the historical importance of the event. As St. Peter afterwards pointed out, the outward circumstances were exactly the same as on the day of Pentecost. And no doubt the gift of tongues was for the purpose of attestation—that the Jews might be convinced that the Gentiles also were to be received, and on equal terms, into the kingdom of God. Only on these two occasions was this gift bestowed—on the one occasion when the Jews, on the other when the Gentiles, first received the baptism of the Spirit. Never again was any such outward sign required; never again ought it to be looked for.

ILLUSTRATIONS.—“Thy prayer and thine alms” (ver. 31). Thus this Roman soldier exhibited the two great essentials of real religion. His faith flowed out on the one side to God in prayer, on the other side to men in acts of mercy and love. His prayer showed that he loved God whom he had not seen; his alms, that he loved his brother whom he had seen.—W. G. HORDER.

“Now, therefore, we are *all* here present” (ver. 33). Are *we* all here to-day? “Oh,” said a farmer in Scotland, when a minister rebuked him for not attending church, and said, “you know, John, you are never absent from the market.” “Oh,” was the reply, “we *maun* gang to the market.”—J. McNEILL.

V.

Acts xi. 19–30.

THE GOSPEL PREACHED AT ANTIOCH.

1. “Now they that were scattered abroad” (ver. 19). This begins a new section of the Acts; and the historian goes back again to his great starting-point, the death of Stephen, and the persecution which followed it.

2. “The Grecians” (ver. 20) must mean the Greeks (though the MSS. are divided as to the reading)—that is to say, the Gentiles.

3. “Prophets” (ver. 27). The chief function of the prophets in the early Christian Church, as in the Old Testament Church, was not foretelling future events. They preached the gospel mainly. Still they did foretell the future, as this instance proves. And see also chap. xx. 10.

4. “Claudius Cæsar” (ver. 28) reigned from A.D. 41 to 54. Josephus mentions a famine in A.D. 45, which was particularly severe in Jerusalem.

THIS is the beginning of foreign missions. Before this there have been one or two isolated foreigners who have heard the gospel preached, as the Ethiopian eunuch and Cornelius the Roman

centurion. In a sense, also, the Samaritans, among whom Philip had such success, were foreigners. But in the full sense this is the first missionary enterprise to foreign lands.

The places thus blessed and privileged were three—Phœnicia, Cyprus, and Antioch. They are all famous in history. But in the history of the Church of Christ the last is much the most famous. It is enough at present to notice (1) that while St. Paul was hunted out of Damascus and Jerusalem, he really found a home in Antioch, and returned to that city to rest at the end of each of his missionary journeys. And (2) that it was in Antioch the name “Christian” was first applied to the believers in Christ. We do not know who first applied it, whether friends or foes. Most probably it was neither, but was invented as a convenient neutral designation—perhaps by some one of the official class, who, like Gallio, cared for none of these things. The followers of Christ did not use it of themselves, but called themselves “brethren” (Acts xv. 1); or “saints” (ix. 13); or “those of the Way” (ix. 2). Again the hostile Jews called them “Nazarenes” (xxiv. 5); while Agrippa used this word Christian as a convenient and sufficiently courteous title when addressing Paul (xxvi. 23). The Greeks and Romans often in those days misunderstood the word “Christ,” which means anointed, and said “Chrest,” which means “good,” and so spoke of Chrestians instead of Christians; and the Christians accepted the mistake as a good omen.

If this was the first foreign mission, who were the first missionaries? We do not know. Their names are not recorded. Some of them passed through Tyre and Sidon, the cruelly pagan cities of Phœnicia; some crossed to the island of Cyprus; and some settled in the profligate city of Antioch. And wherever they went, we are well sure that they endured great hardness for the cross of Christ. But they sought no glory for themselves, and the historian, whose almost solitary word of commendation is spoken of Barnabas in this very lesson, has not found it necessary even to record their names. “So, doubtless, when the great summing up is made, when the sheaves of the final harvest are all gathered in, the unknown reapers will have done the greater part of the work.”

ILLUSTRATIONS.—Why did Barnabas take so much interest in these new converts? The answer is given in the 24th verse. It is the answer to all such inquiry: “For he was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith.” Good men see goodness in other men.—JOSEPH PARKER.

It is not easy for us to imagine a condition of affairs in which the word “Christian” was a term of reproach. Yet, sacred as is the name of Jesus to our ears, it has not prevented a bad meaning from being attached to the name Jesuit.—A. WATSON.