

Grace Church
Roanoke, Virginia

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Lesson #22

ACTS
The Conversion of Saul of Tarsus
Acts 9:1-9

Every conversion of a person to Jesus Christ is a miracle and no one becomes a Christian without conversion. In the book of Acts, we have probably the greatest conversion of all time, the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, who later became known as the Apostle Paul, the most eminent missionary and proponent of the Christian Faith. Young, zealous, Saul of Tarsus, the enemy, the persecutor, the relentless pursuer of Christians was pursued by God. God's plan was not to kill His enemy but to win him to Christ. The Lord Jesus hounded and pursued Saul of Tarsus until he truly became a Christian. It is consistent with a sovereign Christ that He pursues a man or woman until he finds him or her and converts him to His own purpose.

Saul's conversion, more than any other, shows us the supernaturalism involved in a person coming to Christ. Therefore atheists, agnostics, infidels and liberals, who are all anti-supernaturalists, seek to disprove the conversion of Saul. Next to the resurrection of our Lord, the conversion of Saul comes under the greatest attack from the critics of the Christian Faith. It can rightly be said that to disprove the conversion of Saul of Tarsus is to put the Christian religion into serious disrepute. It can conversely be said that to accept the conversion of Saul of Tarsus as recorded in the book of Acts is to see Christianity as the only supernatural religion given by God to men.

PERSON OF SAUL (Acts 9:1a)

“Now Saul, . . .” -- Saul was born in Tarsus, a Roman city in Cilicia. He was a staunch Pharisee in Judaism and a very religious person.

“I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God, just as you all are today. And I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons,” (Acts 22:3-4).

Although very sincere and devoted, Saul was blinded by his religion.

“. . . although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless” (Phil. 3:4-6).

Saul was one of the great intellects of his day. He spoke Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic and Latin. He was a Roman citizen and; living in a Gentile world, he was acquainted with all the Greek and Roman philosophies. Saul was one of the best trained persons, had one of the finest minds, and was one of the outstanding men of his day. He was headed to the top in Judaism, and had he not become a Christian he would have ultimately become the leader in the Jewish religion. He was probably a member of the Sanhedrin and a very wealthy man at a very young age of around thirty-two. Outwardly Saul of Tarsus had everything going for him but inwardly he had nothing. A living, vital, spiritual relationship with God through Christ had eluded this brilliant young Pharisee.

PERSECUTION BY SAUL (Acts 9:1b-2)

“. . . still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord,”

-- Saul was a calloused, bigoted Hebrew who hated the name of Jesus. He was the most zealous, young evangelist in Judaism and he regarded Christianity as a cult that must be exterminated. He was like a war horse who had the scent of battle. He was breathing in an atmosphere of hate, violence and murder. Saul was obsessed with the elimination of Christianity from the face of the earth.

“So then, I thought to myself that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And this is just what I did in Jerusalem; not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them. And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme; and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities” (Acts 26:9-11).

Saul may have been motivated by guilty zeal. He had never forgotten the death of Stephen and in order to cover up his inward conviction of conscience, he suppressed the truth and hardened his heart. In order to quiet this conviction, he engaged in a terrible persecution of the church where nothing but total annihilation would satisfy him.

“. . . went to the high priest, and asked for Letters from him to the synagogue at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.” -- Due to persecution centered around the death of Stephen, many Christians fled to various parts of the Roman Empire. Apparently a good number of them had taken refuge in Damascus in Syria. When Saul heard that Christianity was making inroads into Judaism in Damascus, he was even more enraged. He went to the high priest and asked for authority to root out and chain any Christians who were bothering the Jewish community in Damascus. They were to be brought back to Jerusalem for a proper trial and probably put to death. Saul hated Christ The Lord Jesus Christ may never have had a greater enemy than Saul of Tarsus, but Saul, as we shall see, was no match for the sovereign Christ.

Are your attitudes and actions similar towards Christians as was Saul's? Have you persecuted Christians? Perhaps you have not persecuted them to the degree that Saul did but have you ridiculed, mocked, made fun of and said mean things about Christians? Are you under conviction about your need of Christ but you are covering up that guilt by persecuting Christians?

Probably the first name given to Christians in the first century was “Disciples of Christ” and their second title was “The Way“. Christianity is “The Way” because Christ is the only way or road to God. “Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one canes to the Father, but through Me’” (John 14:6). Christ is the only way to salvation and without Christ as personal Lord and Savior, a person will perish for all eternity. Christianity is also a way of life. It is the only path of conduct pleasing to God. People who are Christians are going another way than the non-Christian world. They have a life style that is different. After a person trusts in Christ as Lord and Savior, his pathway is to be in accordance with Christ and the Holy Scriptures. Christianity is the way of salvation and a specific way of life, and this is what will impress the unsaved world about the: reality of Christianity.

CONVERSION OF SAUL (Acts 9:3-5)

“And it came about that as he journeyed, he was approaching Damascus,” -- Damascus was about one hundred fifty miles from Jerusalem and it took about five or six days to make the trip. Saul was probably traveling by camel or on a donkey. Some think he rode on a horse but Pharisees had some kind of aversion to riding horses. He probably was accompanied by a group of Jewish-soldiers of the temple guard. Saul came by the snow-capped Mount Hebron and looked down in the valley below and saw the beautiful city of Damascus. His heart was pumping and his blood was running hot to capture the heretical Christians. It was noonday and the sun rays were blistering hot but Saul relentlessly pushed on with his small band of soldiers to pursue the Christians.

“. . . and suddenly alight from heaven flashed around him; . . .” -- Quite suddenly a supernatural light

shown around Saul of Tarsus. This was not a lightning bolt from heaven for it was a sunny day. It was the resurrected and glorified Christ who appeared to Saul of Tarsus. Saul saw the face of the glorified Savior. We know on the Mount of Transfiguration Christ's face "shown like the sun." The brilliant light of the Savior's face eclipsed the noonday sun. So bright was the light that Saul was blind for three days, and probably had eye trouble because of this event the rest of his life. Saul saw the Lord Jesus Christ and he testified over and over again that is who he saw.

"Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?" (I Cor. 9:1a)

". . .and last of all, as it were to one untimely born, he appeared to me also!" (I Cor. 15:8).

Unbelievers have tried to explain away the supernatural appearance of Christ to Saul. One explanation is that Saul was hit by a lightning bolt and fell to the ground dazed, thinking he heard voices and saw lights when he really did not. This explanation is inadequate because Paul was consistent and claimed he saw the Lord and this event revolutionized his life. Would he count everything loss for Christ if he had only a psychological experience. Another explanation is that Saul had a hallucination. Perhaps this hallucination was caused by a sunstroke, and if he had one so did his companion soldiers for they heard inaudible sounds. Nor is there any proof that Saul had any nervous disorders. Still another explanation is that Saul made up the whole story. It was a fraud and this is the common Jewish interpretation of the event. They argue that no Jew is ever converted to Christianity unless there is some ulterior motive such as financial gain, power or prestige. They say that Saul had some ulterior motive for becoming a Christian and so he fabricated this story of his conversion. Yet Saul had no need for wealth and besides Christians were poor as a whole. Saul did not need power or influence for he had all that in Judaism. Saul gave up wealth, power and influence to follow Christ.

"But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ" (Phil. 3:7-8).

Yet another explanation is that Saul was an epileptic and had a seizure during this time. Yet there is no evidence that Saul was an epileptic. Charles Spurgeon commenting on the ridiculous argument that Saul was an epileptic said, "O blessed epilepsy! Would that every man in London would have epilepsy like that!" The only rational explanation is that Saul had a supernatural encounter with Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus. It was an amazing act of grace on the part of Christ to appear to this hater of Christians. Had not Christ intervened into Saul's life he would have never been saved.

"And he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?'" -- The high and mighty Saul found himself groveling in the dust as he came face to face with the glorified Christ. He saw the light; he heard voices and he was astounded and perplexed at all this supernatural phenomena. Saul had no idea he was persecuting Jesus. He thought he was persecuting Christians. It was right here that the Apostle Paul received his first inkling of the spiritual union of a Christian with Christ. The Christian and Christ are one spiritually. Jesus identifies Himself so closely with Christians that it is impossible to persecute Christians without persecuting Christ. To touch a Christian with hatred and violence is to touch Christ. Saul was getting an indirect lesson in theology from the glorified Christ.

"And he said, 'Who art Thou, Lord'" -- Saul immediately recognized the light and voice as from the Lord-God but he did not know it was Christ who was appearing to him. Saul may have expected that the God of Judaism would appear to him for he believed in the supernatural. However, the last person in the world he expected to encounter from heaven was Jesus of Nazareth. Saul was probably the most brilliant and religious man of his day but he did not know Jesus Christ even when He appeared to him. How sad!

"And he said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, . . .'" -- Christ's answer to Saul was not very theological but it was profound. He said, "I am Jesus." He could have said, "I am Jehovah," or "I am the Lord," but He said, "I am Jesus." It was Jesus of Nazareth whom Saul hated so much and it was Jesus

whom he must recognize, acknowledge and serve. Saul had to change his whole attitude about Christ. Instead of being a Jewish heretic and imposter who was nailed to the stake for blasphemy, this Jesus was to be acknowledged as the eternal God, the eternal King, the eternal Priest, the eternal Prophet and the eternal Son of God! He hated Jesus of Nazareth and now he must fall down and worship Him.

“It is hard for you to kick against the goads.” -- If you have a NASB, you will notice these words are not in this verse, but they are part of one of Paul's own conversion accounts in Acts and this is put into the King James version of the Bible. A goad was a sharp piece of iron on the end of a stick which was used to urge an ox to move more rapidly. Saul was kicking against the goads of God which were pricking his conscience. This tells us that Saul, who on the outside was totally hardened to Christ, was on the inside struggling with his conscience. Deep inside he was hearing again and again the voice of the dying martyr, Stephen. The Holy Spirit was convicting Saul through all of his persecutions of Christians.

CAPITULATION OF SAUL (Acts 9:6a)

“And trembling and astonished he said, ‘What shall I do, Lord?’” -- These words do not appear in the NASB but they are part of Saul's conversion experience as given by Saul himself. At this very point in time, Saul was converted. God had worked grace in his heart and he responded to Christ as Lord. He believed and repented; that is, he changed his mind about Jesus of Nazareth. Saul acknowledged Jesus as Lord. Absolutely no one can call Jesus, Lord, except by the Holy Spirit and only saved people have the Holy Spirit. “Therefore I make known to you, that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, ‘Jesus is accursed’; and no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit” (I Cor. 12:3). At this point, Saul bowed to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. He surrendered his will to Christ and he became a man under orders from his commander in chief, Jesus Christ. Saul capitulated. He said, “I'm Your servant; You are my Master!”

God sovereignly brought Saul to the place where he would trust Christ, but Saul had to trust Christ and repent and acknowledge Christ as Lord by an act of his will if he was to be saved. Saul had very little understanding of Christ or of salvation at this point but he humbly bowed his will to Christ as Lord and Savior and in a moment of time he was saved.

Paul gave evidence of the fruit of true repentance when he said, “What shall I do?” He was ready to do the bidding of his Lord even though he did not have the slightest idea how to follow Christ. A truly saved man always gives evidence of true repentance by his works. “So then, you will know them by their fruits” (Matt. 7:20).

DIRECTION OF SAUL (Acts 9:6b)

“... but rise, and enter the city, and it shall be told you what you must do.” -- Saul was beginning to experience a new life style which belongs only to a Christian. His whole approach to life was changed. He had given the orders before but now he must receive orders from Christ. Conversion is a turnabout in one's life whereby he gives up trying to run his own life and acknowledges that Christ alone has a right to tell him what to do. Conversion is a revolutionary change of government in one's life resulting in a radical change of behavior. Saul, from this point on, would no longer be giving orders but taking orders from the glorified Christ.

HUMILIATION OF SAUL (Acts 9:7-8)

“And the men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice, but seeing no one.” -- In another place in Acts, it says that they did not hear. Is this a conflict? No, they heard the voice but did not understand what was said. It did not make any sense to them. They obviously did not see anyone speaking to Saul. They were speechless at this whole phenomena.

Saul was saved at this point but we have no record of the others who were with him being saved. Christ

revealed Himself to Saul and did not reveal Himself to the others. This is a clear case of God's discriminating love. What can we say but that Saul was an object of divine election? He was chosen by God to salvation and consequently he believed in Christ. In this very context, Saul is referred to as a "chosen vessel."

"But Ananias answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Thy saints at Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call upon Thy name.' But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel;'" (Acts 9:13-15).

Saul of Tarsus is a perfect example of one who had a supernatural conversion from beginning to ending. Christ invaded Saul's life. Christ crashed into Saul's own sovereign domain. Christ intervened. Christ took the initiative to save Saul or he would have never been saved.

Saul hated Christ and was not seeking Christ. Saul's testimony was not, "I sought after God for years and tried to find Him. He eluded me. I ran after Him. He hid from me and I finally caught Him." No, Saul hated Christ and was running from Him but Christ invaded his life. Saul was called by God and later realized he was an elect vessel. This is why Saul (later Paul) spoke so much about election in his epistles. He knew his salvation went back into the ages of eternity and he says, like Jeremiah, that before he was born, he had been called and chosen.

". . . just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will," (Eph. 1:4-5).

"But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. And it was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (II Thess. 2:13-14).

". . . who (God) has saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity," (II Tim 1:9).

We often hear mistaken evangelists and misinformed Christians say, "God stands at the door of your heart trying to get in but He will not override your will. He will not force Himself on you." Saul's conversion proves this kind of theology as false. Christ came crashing into Saul's life and in sovereign grace saved him. It is true that no one is ever saved against his will but it is the grace of God which makes a person willing to receive salvation in Christ. As the poet said it, "As if the Eternal Mandate ran, 'Almighty Grace, Arrest that Man!'" Saul's own testimony is that Christ laid hold of or apprehended him. ". . . but I press on in order that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:12b). Saul of Tarsus knew something of the grace of God in his salvation. Do you, beloved? Do you really understand that Christ laid hold of you before you laid hold of Him? Therefore, you are bought with a price; you are not your own; glorify God in your body!

Perhaps the poet sums up this whole matter of grace better than a preacher or theologian:

'Tis not that I did'st choose Thee,
O Lord, that could not be!
This heart had still refused Thee
Had Thou not chosen me.

'Twas the same Love that spread the feast
That sweetly forced me in;
Else I had still refused to taste

And perished in my sin.

“And Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open; he could see nothing; and leading him by the hand, they brought him to Damascus.” -- This proud arrogant, boastful young Pharisee had been broken and humbled by the sovereign Christ. Blinded by Christ, he must now be led by the hand into Damascus. It took a lot to break Saul of Tarsus but Christ was the victor.

CONFUSION IN SAUL (Acts 9:9)

“And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.” -- Christ allowed Saul to go three days without his sight and for three days he fasted. Saul probably did not completely understand what had happened to him. He was a man as puzzled and confused as any man had ever been. Had it been possible for us to interview Saul during those days of blindness and we asked him what had happened to him, his answer would have been, “I don't know!” He knew he saw Jesus. He knew he bowed to Him as Lord. He probably did not understand much more than that and his mind must have been filled with thousands of thoughts.

Christ blinded Saul's eyes so he could see more clearly with his mind. Who knows what went through Saul's mind those three days? Surely he thought about his vision. He must have mulled over Stephen's death. He surely searched deeply into his soul about the persecution and murder of Christians for which he was responsible. He must have pondered about Christ and His death. He was confused and could not put together the pieces of the puzzle, even though he had experienced the new birth which comes from God above.

It is possible to be converted and not know exactly what happened. A number of years ago, God in His grace, allowed me to be the instrument to lead a man to Christ. This man and I had talked on several occasions about Christ. He was interested, under conviction and being drawn to Christ by God, but he did not know this.

One night we were sitting in his living room and he said to me, “Jack, last week I did not believe in Christ. Today I do. Last week I thought Christianity was for weak people. Today I feel my need of Him. Last week I was a convinced evolutionist. Today I'm not sure since there is a real God. Last week I wanted to run my own life. Today I want Christ to take charge.” Then he looked at me with a puzzled look on his face and said, “Jack, what has happened to me?” I explained to him about the new birth and that Christ had sovereignly invaded his life. He was still somewhat puzzled but he was coming to understand that something supernatural had happened to him.

CONCLUSION

Paul's experience on the road to Damascus is not just a dead fact of ancient history, but it is an experience you can have today. You will probably not have the objective light from heaven or hear a voice, but you can have the subjective contact and encounter with Jesus Christ which is just as real. You may think you are too sinful to be saved. Are you more sinful than was Saul of Tarsus? After his conversion, Paul considered himself the “foremost” or “chief” of sinners and yet God showed mercy on him.

“... even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. And yet I was shown mercy, because I acted ignorantly in unbelief; and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus. It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all” (I Tim. 1:13-15).

Christ is alive and He is converting men and women today. Are you like Saul of Tarsus: A hater of Christianity; an indifferent person to Christ; a persecutor of Christians; a person running from God? What will it take for Christ to break you so you will bow before Him as Lord and Savior? The very moment you say, “Thank you, Lord, for dying for me,” you shall be saved. You will come to understand that Christ has

invaded your life. He has intervened into your experience just like he did in the life of Saul of Tarsus. You will experience a fellowship with Christ as real as that of Saul of Tarsus because Jesus Christ is alive. Yield to the sovereign Christ and be converted!