

"...about all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:1).

## **The Conversion of Saul – Part 1**

Acts 9:1-19

*1 Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, 2 and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. 3 As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; 4 and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" 5 And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, 6 but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do." 7 The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. 8 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 into Damascus. 9 And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank. 10 Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." 11 And the Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying, 12 and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight." 13 But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem; 14 and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name." 15 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; 16 for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake." 17 So Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." 18 And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized; 19 and he took food and was strengthened.*

Did you know that phrases like "the signs of the times" or "the twinkling of an eye" or "a drop in the bucket" or "by the skin of my teeth" and many other modern phrases originate from the Bible? This ought not to surprise us when we realize that until recent times the Bible was likely to be the only book found in the average home. And so, whether knowingly or not, many generations of authors were taught by or inspired by the world's greatest book. The King James Version (KJV) of the Bible is an acknowledged literary masterpiece and again, up until the past few decades, a great deal of the Bible was read aloud, in churches, schools and elsewhere. Just a few more examples of this of phrases that come from the Bible:

- Nothing but skin and bones (Job 19:19)
- I have escaped only by the skin of my teeth (Job 19:20)
- There is an appointed time for everything (Ecclesiastes 3:1)
- Going the extra mile (Matthew 5:41)
- United we stand, "divided we fall" (Matthew 12:25)
- Scapegoat (Leviticus 16:9-10)
- The writing is on the wall (Daniel 5:5-6)

*"...about all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:1).*

The list could go on and on. We describe a good and faithful person as *"the salt of the earth"* based on Matthew 5:13. But, one more phrase that is sometimes used to describe the nature of coming to faith is Jesus is this, *"A Damascus Road Experience."* This phrase comes from the account of Paul's conversion, as recorded by Luke here in Acts 9.

What happens to Saul is one of the most well-known and shocking events in the history of the world. Someone has said that it would like the well-known atheist and evolutionist Richard Dawkins being converted to Christ. As glorious as that would be, Dawkins' coming to Christ would pale in comparison to Saul's because of what God did as a result of this conversion in spreading not only the breadth, but also the very depth of the gospel to the nations. While each of our salvation experiences begins with and must be recognized first and foremost as the work and act of God, each of us here must also thank God for Saul (or Paul), who was used to spread and explain the glories of the gospel.

Now in case you think I am making too much of the conversion of Saul, let me point out to you that it was important enough for Luke, the author of Acts, to record the event three times: in chapter 9—Luke's record of the event; chapter 22—Paul's summary of this event; and chapter 26—Paul's testimony of his conversion before the Roman officials Festus and Agrippa. Obviously Luke, along with the Holy Spirit of God, found this event significant to recount. Luke does not want his readers to forget the wonder of this event.

This begs the question as to this was so important? Well, Luke gives us the answer to this question down in verse 15 where we read:

***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..."***

God, in His wisdom and pleasure, chose one of the seemingly least likely of people to become one of the most strategic of people. Paul would become the vessel through whom the knowledge of the glory of the Lord through the gospel amongst the Gentiles would be spread. Luke has been slowly building us to this climax, having given us the evangelistic thrusts of Stephen in chapter 7, followed by Philip in chapter 8, we now come to the evangelist's evangelist here in chapter 9 and flowing through the rest of the book as we are presented with Paul. Not content with the spread of the gospel to simply Jerusalem, Samaria, and as we saw last week, to the southern half of Africa, God is going to unleash upon the world the full scope of Acts 1:8, taking the gospel to the furthest regions of the earth.

I would like you to notice how beautifully Luke has crafted this account in bringing us to this place. In telling us of the ministries of Stephen and of Philip, we see that both of these men also had some connection with Saul. It was Saul who witnessed, with hearty agreement, the stoning of Stephen. Then, as Saul intensified his persecution thus causing the church to be scattered like seeds, one such seed was Philip, who preached the gospel in Samaria and to the Ethiopian Eunuch. My point here is to show you how strategic and deliberate God is being in fulfilling the command of Jesus from Acts 1:8. And from Luke's perspective, as he records the events of this book, he recorded how Acts 1:8 was being fulfilled in his own lifetime.

This morning I wish to keep the importance of Saul's conversion in the forefront of your minds. Saul's Damascus Road experience, humanly speaking, is connected to our own Damascus Road Experience. To be sure, it is unlikely that any of us have experienced a blinding light, an audible voice from heaven, blindness, fasting, and miraculous restoration of sight to

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accompany our salvation, yet it is true that if we have been saved, then the essentials of Saul's conversion experience will be our experience as well, essentials such as faith and obedience to Christ. Let us consider our text as I walk you through six components that led to Saul's conversion to Christ.

## I. Saul's Condition (9:1)

*Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord...*

Acts 9 opens with the reference of **“Now Saul.”** Chapter 8 also opened with a reference to Saul. The point is to establish the fact that conversion of Paul from a murderous sinner to a mercy-filled saint did not happen in a vacuum, and it was not instantaneous. It came within a context, over time. And this is true of everyone who is saved. God prepares those whom He saves to receive the gospel. We saw that last week with the providence of God in bringing Philip to preach the gospel to the Ethiopian Eunuch.

Here we find Saul being uniquely prepared by God for the mission that he would serve. We know that Saul was from Tarsus of Cilicia, on the southwest side of Asia Minor. He was of Jewish birth, which established a link to the Old Testament covenant. He also he enjoyed Roman citizenship by birth, which gave him great freedom within the culture of his day. He was Greek educated, which served him well in his mission to preach the gospel.

It is possible that Saul had encountered Jesus at some point during his years as a Pharisee. We cannot be sure of this, but it is at least plausible. Here in Acts 9, we find Saul's condition. He was spiritually blind and dead. But shortly he will be spiritually resurrected by the grace of God, and his upbringing would be used by God to advance Saul's ministry.

All of this reminds us that it is God who takes the initiative in sovereign grace, to bring sinners to faith in His Son Jesus Christ. Humanly speaking, Saul saw Christianity as nothing more than a vile infestation to be exterminated. There was no draw in Saul's mind to the merits of Christ and he was more than content on basing his salvation on his own heritage and his own honors rather than upon God and must less Christ.

We see in Saul's life the truth taught by Jesus in John 6:44; **“No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws Him; and I will raise Him up on the last day.”** Let us never forget that the Father is in the business of drawing people to Jesus and He has called us to be busy about His business. Thus we must see that only by God's sovereign grace was Saul saved. Likewise, it is only by God's sovereign grace that *anyone* is saved. Believer, do not ever forget your condition before Christ saved you, and be sure to be grateful that God was sovereignly working in and through your conditions to save you. Also, remember that the Lord has saved you at a specific time and for a specific ministry.

## II. Saul's Cruelty (9:1-2)

*1 Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, 2 and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.*

Saul's condition led to his cruelty. Saul's condition was unbelief. Unbelief is being at war with God. Such a condition can express itself in various ways. In Saul's case, it revealed itself in carnivorous cruelty. The words Luke used here in verse 1 would be used by Paul in his later testimony and writings. They picture a person whose behavior toward Christians was likened to that of a cruel and indiscriminate beast. Remember back in Acts 8:3, we learned that Saul was

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***"ravaging the church"*** a phrase used to describe ravenous wolves. Now we read of Saul ***"breathing threats and murder."*** The picture here is of a panting, snarling and snorting beast. Look down in verse 21. This is after his conversion, but Saul was identified here as the one who "destroyed those who called on this name" – destroyed speaking of how an animal might maul its prey. Saul was not satisfied with hunting the church only in Jerusalem but took his safari further out with even more unabated ferocity.

Saul's condition was one of depraved cruelty. This is what makes his conversion so wondrous. John Calvin remarked that God's grace is seen, "not only in such a cruel wolf being turned into a sheep, but also in his assuming the character of a shepherd." But at this time, Saul believed he was doing God a favor by this carnivorous cruelty. How could this be? How can a person do such things thinking he is serving God? This happens as a person is ignorant of the person and work of Jesus. This is the very testimony of Paul from 1 Timothy 1:12-13 where he said:

***12 I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service, 13 even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief...***

If your life is not characterized by the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22 – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control), then be warned, you are ignorant of Christ. Learn of Christ. Know Christ. Call upon Him for knowledge and wisdom that leads to eternal life.

### **III. Saul's Consequences (9:3-5)**

*3 As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; 4 and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" 5 And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting..."*

We move from Saul's condition and cruelty to his consequences. Here is his Damascus Road experience. It would appear that Saul, even as he was persecuting the church, was being convicted of sin. It is likely that it was the conviction of sin that actually fed his cruelty. You have been there before, right? Something is eating away at you, you sense that it is wrong somehow but you simply indulge yourself further and further. A young man's anger turns to deeper rage. A woman's unbiblical view of herself leads to eating disorders or promiscuity. A person's feeling alone leads to a further isolation of him or herself. For Saul, his rage led to cruelty, the consequence of which was deeper sin. Insightfully, William Barclay wrote,

*"In this passage we have the most famous conversion story in all history. . . . We will see that this is not a sudden conversion; but it is surrender. Something about Stephen lingered in Paul's mind and would not be banished. How could a bad man die like that? In order to still this insistent doubt Paul plunged into the most violent action possible. . . . He redoubles his efforts and drives himself all the harder to convince himself that he is right and to silence the doubts."*

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The confession of Stephen no doubt haunted Saul, causing him to doubt his own thoughts and actions. Perhaps he thought along the lines, "What if this Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah, could it be? No, it is impossible that this one we all saw crucified could have risen from the dead and ascended to the place reserved for the Son of Man, or could He? No, I am in the right by apprehending these men, women and children who are following a false Messiah. I am in the right, am I not? I am bringing glory and honor to God by incarcerating these blasphemers who claim that Jesus Christ is Lord? Or am I?" Yes, Saul, by his own testimony, acted ignorantly. However this not to say that he acted without doubts. In the end, regardless of he sought to justify his behavior, Saul could not silence the doubts. When Paul used the term, "Lord" in verse 5, it was intended not only respectfully but also worshipfully. Saul's consequences included a burden that all he did was against the very Lord he thought he was serving. How could the Lord rebuke his behavior? Wasn't he doing the will of God? This brings us to the next component of Saul's experience.

#### **IV. Saul's Confusion(9:5-7)**

*5 And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, 6 but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do." 7 The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one.*

Remarkably, Saul hears the audible voice of Christ in verse 4. I am not sure how I would respond, but Saul responded in complete confusion saying, **"Who are You, Lord?"** Do not forget that up to this point, Saul was convinced that he was faithfully serving God. Saul was one of whom Jesus had said in John 16:2,

***They will make you outcasts from the synagogue, but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God.***

That is Saul. Here is own testimony before the Jewish Council as recorded in Acts 22:1-4:

*1 Brethren and fathers, hear my defense which I now offer to you. 2 And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew dialect, they became even more quiet; and he said, 3 "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. 4 I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons..."*

Paul was confused because he was convinced that he was serving God; that he was protecting the flock of God and the honor of God's name. How could he be persecuting God? He thought he was defending God. But he was blind, not recognizing God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, who was and is the Messiah, God's Son! At this moment of crisis, we come to our next point, Saul's conversion.

#### **V. Saul's Conversion (9:8-9, 11)**

*8 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 into Damascus. 9 And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank. 10 Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." 11 And the Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying..."*

# The Church Alive

“...about all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:1).

I love the picture here. It is nothing for Jesus to break through the wall of Saul’s unbelief. For His own purposes, Jesus had delayed this encounter until this divinely appointed time to reveal His sovereign grace in salvation. The one who had sought to enter Damascus as a brutal and hateful creature was about to be led by the hand into that city as a blind and helpless child. Upon this encounter with Jesus, Saul’s unbelief turned to childlike faith. Saul was ready to go and ready to do whatever the Lord asked him. I find it interesting that Saul’s conversion resulted in such unquestioned obedience. He had been humbled and even humiliated—by his sense of failure and sin. Yet, a greater sense of change came over him. Truly the Lord was teaching him that he was a new creature and would need to not lean on himself but upon the Lord. And boy did Saul have to lean as he was shut up in the darkness of physical blindness, but he could now see the Lord Jesus.

God, in His sovereign grace, hunted down the hunter until he was trapped in the loving net of the gospel truth revealed in His Son. That is how everyone comes to faith. C.S. Lewis testified in his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, of his experience of conversion. Sensing God’s relentless pursuit of him, Lewis likens God to “the great Angler” playing his fish; to a cat chasing a mouse; to a pack of hounds closing in on a fox; and finally to the divine chess player maneuvering him into the most disadvantageous positions until in the end he concedes “checkmate.”

Now let me make this point, as there is so much confusion in churches today on this matter. This account is clear that Saul did not “decide for Christ” but rather it was rather Christ who decided for him and intervened in his life. The ignorant and impetuous arrester had been himself arrested by the grace of God. This is Paul’s own testimony of his conversion to Timothy. He said in 1 Timothy 1:14:

***...and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus.***

In Saul’s conversion, we see what is true of the salvation of anyone; that God pursues His own relentlessly, but He does so without violating our responsibility. As one preacher [John Stott] has put it,

*“Divine grace does not trample on human personality. Rather the reverse, for it enables human beings to be truly human. It is sin which imprisons; it is grace which liberates. The grace of God so frees us from the bondage of our pride, prejudice and self-centeredness, as to enable us to repent and believe.”*

I love verse 11 as God tells Ananias how he could find Saul. He would be the new creature, the one no longer “preying” on the church, but now simply praying. The mouth that had been ***“breathing threats and murder against the disciples”*** was now praying in praises to God. The brutal lion had been changed into a bleating lamb.” Saul was a new creature evident for all to see. Beloved, our conversion out to be evident for all to see as well. This brings us to the final component of Saul’s conversion. We see...

"...about all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:1).

## VI. Saul's Companion (9:10-19)

*10 Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." 11 And the Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying, 12 and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight." 13 But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem; 14 and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name." 15 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; 16 for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake." 17 So Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." 18 And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized; 19 and he took food and was strengthened.*

In the midst of this account of Saul's conversion, Luke introduces us to an unlikely companion for Saul, one who would be a "brother." Ananias would be responsible for exercising a crucial ministry in Saul's early new-creature days. I find this to be one of the most heart-warming accounts in Scripture. It is full of instruction for us as well. How so? Consider that Ananias had every human reason to be afraid of receiving infamous Saul of Tarsus. I can only liken it to David being pursued by King Saul. I am sure that Ananias feared that he might be run through with a spear once he came face to face with the zealous Pharisee Saul! No doubt the church knew that Saul was coming to Damascus was to arrest, extradite and thus eliminate the followers of the Way. Notice that in verse 13, Ananias justifiably questioned the command of the Lord in verses 11-12. But this was a command from his sovereign and saving Lord! It cannot be overstated to take note of Ananias words in verse 17, after warmly laying hands on him he greeted him with tender words: "Brother Saul."

Can you begin to imagine what was going on in the heart and mind of Saul? Humbled and blind, in the home of a stranger, and one whom he had intended to arrest. Saul first feels warm friendly hands and then hears words that welcome him into the family of God as a fellow believer by the work of the Holy Spirit. Now counted as a brother in Christ after his many attempts to devour the church must have filled his soul with astonishment and joy. What a blessed introduction to Christian fellowship! Oh that we would extend warm hands of fellowship and give kind words of hope and healing every time we get together. Do you think like that? "What can I say at this fellowship to encourage a brother or sister?" In this context, hear the exhortation of Paul in Ephesians 4:29:

***Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear.***

When a person comes to Christ, the old things pass away and behold all things become new. Let us remember that the new birth, our salvation in Christ is to give us a completely different perspective towards one another. If this is not our outlook then perhaps we need to examine ourselves to see whether we indeed have had our own Damascus Road experience.

# The Church Alive

*"...about all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:1).*

One of the great lessons we learn from this passage is that God uses ordinary people to launch great people on their paths of service for Him. We have no idea how that one person we greet in Christ, instruct in things of the Lord, or simply pray for may become a mighty force in the service of spreading the gospel. We would not have known of Ananias except for his kind-hearted welcome and care for Saul. Let us be companions to one another and welcome warmly those whom God sends our way. By this we are further enabled by grace to speak of the glories of the gospel.

As a result of Saul's obedience in coming to Ananias, and of Ananias' obedience to receive Saul, God heals and restores Saul and Saul is baptized before this group of Christians! Have you had your own Damascus Road experience? I am not asking if your conversion experience was dramatic. I am asking you, "Do you know in your heart that there is a new dynamic in your life?" Do you know what it means to feel the burden of your sins lifted? Do you know what it means to be a part of the family of God? Do you know what it means to boldly proclaim the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior? This is a Damascus Road experience. May each of us either remember our own, or receive such for the first time this morning to the glory of God. Receive the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved to serve the living and true God.

*Soli Deo Gloria*

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