

## **THE CONVERSION OF SAUL**

Text: Acts 19:1-19

Readings: Phil 3:4b-4:9

Theme: Jesus brought Saul to a dramatic conversion to preach about him to the Gentiles.

Purpose: To highlight the dramatic change Jesus brought about in Saul's conversion and the task Jesus gave him.

The conversion of Saul on the Damascus Road has been described as the most famous in all of church history. He went from being a primary persecutor of the church to being its greatest missionary, from hating the Lord Jesus to serving him with great zeal. He undertook three important missionary journeys, through which he established churches in many cities in Asia and Europe; he preached to thousands of people and wrote many letters to churches and individuals, 13 of which are recorded in the New Testament.

In the 4<sup>th</sup> century Augustine was converted through hearing and reading a verse from Paul's letter to the Romans.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century Martin Luther was converted by reading and studying the same letter of Paul, especially what he wrote about being justified by faith. Martin Luther's conversion was the beginning of a major reformation of the church and the beginning of all the protestant denominations.

Saul's conversion changed his life suddenly and dramatically. Luke records this as an important part of the account of the early church and its witness and growth. We will consider this by linking Saul to three other people: to the high priest, to Jesus and to Ananias.

### **1. SAUL AND THE HIGH PRIEST**

Luke tells us that Saul was "breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples" (v 1). To understand this we need to review the past few chapters.

The early church had grown rapidly in Jerusalem. The apostles preached boldly and many were converted. The church also appointed seven men as deacons and one of them, Stephen, was a powerful witness for Jesus (6:8f). Some of the Jews falsely accused him and he was brought before the men of the Sanhedrin who were so angry about what he said about Jesus that they stoned him to death.

The witnesses who killed him laid their cloaks at the feet of a young man named Saul (7:58). Saul was present at that execution and he approved of Stephen's death. Immediately after this a great persecution broke out in Jerusalem and all the believers were scattered. In chapter 8:3 we read that "Saul began to destroy the church." (8:3) The Greek word means to ravage or devastate and is used in Psalm 80 to describe the destruction caused by wild boars (v 13). He was as mad as a wild animal and was intent of doing great harm to the church. "Going from house to house he dragged off men and women and put them in prison" (8:3). He was filled with zeal for his task and believed, wrongly, that he was doing God's work.

Luke then wrote about the preaching ministry of Phillip in Samaria and his one to one evangelism of the Ethiopian eunuch (8:4-40).

But while Phillip was preaching about Jesus Saul was persecuting the church. Ananias described Saul as raising havoc in Jerusalem (9:21). Saul was filled with hatred against Christ, blinded by his prejudice and hostile to the church.

In verse 2 we read; "He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem." He knew that many Christians had fled Jerusalem and gone

north into Syria and he was determined to track them down! He led the Jewish persecution of Christians.

## 2. SAUL AND JESUS

We have noted that Saul had a sudden and dramatic conversion. But we know from our own experience and observation that usually a person is not converted to Christ out of the blue; conversion is usually preceded by a long period of preparation. This was true of Saul, as we will see.

Luke records Saul's conversion here but he also records it two more times in Acts, once when Paul spoke to the Jewish crowds in Jerusalem (22:1-21) and once when he spoke to King Agrippa and the Roman Governor Festus in Caesarea (26:1-23).

In his account to Agrippa Paul quoted the words Jesus spoke to him on that Damascus Road when he said, "'It is hard for you to kick against the goads" (Acts 26:14). A goad is a sharp pointed stick used for training and directing cattle. To "kick against the goads" was a familiar proverb used to describe useless resistance. An ox would kick against the goad but that wouldn't help; the farmer would still be there prodding and directing it. In the same way Jesus had been prodding, directing and prompting Paul, even though he didn't realize it.

The journey from Jerusalem to Damascus was about 240 kilometres and would take a week on foot. On the way Saul had plenty of time to think. Perhaps he thought about the miracles and the teaching of Jesus, about his death on the cross and the account of his resurrection. Perhaps he thought more about Stephen's speech to the Sanhedrin and the way he had died.

Towards the end of his long journey he came near the city of Damascus, the capital of Syria, which was located in a plain that was watered by two rivers. It has been described as "a lovely white city in a green plain", (although it has been very different in recent times with the civil conflict going on there).

"Suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him"(v 3). In another telling of this Paul said it was "brighter than the midday sun"! (26:13). This was the light of the glory of Christ.

Then he heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me." (v 4) Saul's name is repeated twice for emphasis.

Paul instinctively realizes that God is speaking to him and responds; "Who are you Lord?" (v 5)

Jesus replied, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting" (v 5b). To persecute Christians was to persecute Christ; to hate the church was to hate Jesus.

Saul was taken aback. The stories about Jesus having been raised from the dead were true! Jesus was alive and was speaking to him! All this time he had been wrong! In another account Saul recalls asking, "What shall I do Lord?" (22:10) He was humble, searching, obedient.

Jesus responds, "Get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do" (v 6). Before this Paul had been doing what he wanted to do; from this time on he would do what Jesus wanted him to do, he would be a servant of the Lord Jesus.

When Saul got up off the ground he was blind and could not see anything at all. "So they led him by the hand into Damascus." He had expected to enter the city with the authority of the high priest, full of zeal and the righteousness of his cause; but instead he was led into the city blind and humbled and for the next three days he fasted and prayed.

As a Pharisee, he had *often fasted*, but he had done so to fulfill the legalistic righteousness of the Jews as a way of being saved by his own works, almost as an expression of pharisaical pride. Later he

acknowledged to the Christians in Philippi that he had sought “a righteousness of my own that comes through the law” (Phil 3:8). But now, in Damascus, in the house of Judas on Straight Street, he fasted in humility and penitence as an expression of his sorrow for his sins.

As a Pharisee he had *often prayed*, the self-righteous public prayers that Jesus described in one of his parables – prayers of self-congratulation that sought the praise of men. But now he prayed sincerely, from his heart, confessing his sin of unbelief, of misplaced zeal, of hatred towards the people of God. He prayed prayers of praise to the Lord who had reached out to him in mercy, who had shown him grace, who had loved him before the creation of the world!

Some aspects of Saul’s conversion are unique: the blinding light, the voice from heaven, the direct appearance of Jesus, his blindness.

But there are other aspects that are part of every genuine Christian conversion: a personal meeting with Jesus, humility before the Lord, repentance for sin, faith in Jesus Christ, and a willingness to serve Jesus as Lord.

In his letters Paul often referred to his conversion. He described how Christ Jesus took hold of him (Phil 3:12) and how the grace of the Lord had been poured out on him abundantly (1 Tim 1:14). He put himself forward as “the worst of sinners” and as an example of the “unlimited patience” of Jesus “as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life” (1 Tim 1:16).

Have *you* met Jesus? Not, of course, in the same way as Saul met him, but have you seen Jesus with the eyes of faith? In seeing him have you seen your own sin and failures? Do you recognise your disobedience to God and his commands? Have you repented of all these sins and confessed them to God? Have you trusted in the death and resurrection of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins? Are you willing to serve Jesus no matter what it costs you?

This is true conversion. This is what you need to do in order to be saved.

We have considered Saul the persecutor, going out with letters from the high priest; we have seen how Saul was converted through meeting Jesus; now we consider how Saul was received into the church through Ananias.

### **3. SAUL AND ANANIAS**

Saul’s conversion came about through his direct meeting with Jesus. After this Jesus sent a Christian to Saul, a member of the church, to restore his sight, to enable him to be filled with the Holy Spirit and to receive him into the church.

Jesus instructed Ananias to go to Saul and he also prepared Saul for this visit by giving him a vision of Ananias coming to him (v 11f).

We know very little about this disciple. He was not an apostle but Paul described him as “a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews” (22:12).

One writer has described him as “one of the forgotten heroes of the Christian church.”

He demonstrated courage in being willing to go to Saul, who was a feared persecutor of the church.

He also demonstrated much love and grace in the way he approached Saul. Knowing he was blind he placed his hands on him as a thoughtful and kind gesture so Saul could feel him there. Then he addressed him, “Brother Saul...” (v 17). What a heart-warming greeting! Even though this man had been persecuting fellow believers Ananias welcomed him as a brother in Christ, as a fellow Christian, as a believer in the Lord Jesus! He gave him a loving and sincere welcome into the church of the Lord Jesus! This must have been sweet music in Saul’s ears!

Two applications arise out of this.

i. One is the importance of welcoming new believers into the church and accepting them. We cannot hold their past against them but rather must receive them warmly as a brother or sister in Christ.

ii. The other application is to highlight the importance of belonging to the church. Ananias received Saul into the church of Christ. The following verses record how other Christians looked after him (23f) and then how Barnabas introduced him to the church in Jerusalem (26f).

Many people today claim to be Christians but have no real communion with God's people, do not attend worship regularly, and do not belong to a local congregation.

But the whole Bible, Old and New Testaments, emphasizes the importance of actively belonging to the people of God.

The final point we need to note about Saul's conversion is **God's purpose for him**, stated to Ananias in verse 15; "This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel."

Saul would become Paul, the first great missionary of the church, who would take the good news about Jesus to the Jews first and then to the non-Jews, to the Gentiles. Through Paul the gospel would spread through much of Asia and Europe, extending across the Roman Empire and penetrating into Rome itself.

God used Paul's great gifts, his brilliant intellect, his biblical training under Gamaliel and his natural zeal, for the cause of the church and kingdom of Christ.

Through him God would fulfil the promise made to Abraham that through him all the nations of the world would be blessed.

Paul's conversion is one of the most famous of all conversions in the Christian church. It demonstrates the power of God who can change the most unlikely unbeliever and bring them to faith in Jesus Christ.

If you are *not* a Christian you need to be converted in order to be saved. You need to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and follow him.

If you *are* a Christian you need to use the gifts, talents, time and training the Holy Spirit has given to you for the cause of Christ's church and kingdom.

You are called to be a witness and servant of the Lord Jesus to proclaim the good news about Jesus to those around you.

Amen