

The Great Stories of the Early Church
24 - The Last Apostle, 03
The Conversion of Saul of Tarsus
Acts 9:1-22

1 And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest,

2 And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem.

3 And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven:

4 And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?

5 And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.

6 And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do.

7 And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man.

8 And Saul arose from the earth; and when his eyes were opened, he saw no man: but they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus.

9 And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink.

10 And there was a certain disciple at Damascus, named Ananias; and to him said the Lord in a vision, Ananias. And he said, Behold, I am here, Lord.

11 And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight, and inquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul, of Tarsus: for, behold, he prayeth,

12 And hath seen in a vision a man named Ananias coming in, and putting his hand on him, that he might receive his sight.

13 Then Ananias answered, Lord, I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he hath done to thy saints at Jerusalem:

14 And here he hath authority from the chief priests to bind all that call on thy name.

15 But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel:

16 For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake.

17 And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost.

18 And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized.

19 And when he had received meat, he was strengthened. Then was Saul certain days with the disciples which were at Damascus.

20 And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God.

21 But all that heard him were amazed, and said; Is not this he that destroyed them which called on this name in Jerusalem, and came hither for that intent, that he might bring them bound unto the chief priests?

22 But Saul increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ. KJV

Introduction:

The Book of Acts contains three accounts of Saul's conversion. We have provided you with a copy of them from the KJV. Each of them was told originally by Paul and recorded by Luke but they vary somewhat. On a couple of the occasions Luke may have been present as Paul recounted the story but he could not have been present for the account in chapter 9.

People, of course, have sought to use the differences in the accounts to their own advantage and to promote various understandings even of the gospel. Some have suggested that the different accounts prove the scriptures cannot be trusted, that they are inconsistent and, thus, erroneous.

Think about this. One man wrote the book, probably at one time. His stated goal, as he said, was to expound to a man named Theophilus the history of the beginnings of the church. Would he, do you presume, have written down contradictory accounts of the same event? Would the early church have preserved an account as scripture which they deemed to contain contradictions? Therefore, we may safely conclude, even though the passages differ somewhat neither the original author nor the original audience believed those accounts to be contradictory.

You may have had this happen. You are telling a story that happened a while ago and someone is present who has heard you tell it before. Either during the telling of it or afterward the person says, you told that story differently than you did the first time. You think about it and, indeed, it is true. This time you included some of the details that you had left out before and left out some that you had included before. The story was the same but you had told it a different way. Which time did you lie? Neither, even though it was told differently it was all the truth. Such are the accounts before us today.

First, let us review the combined stories and timeline.

Paul was headed to Damascus and it was near midday, 26:12, about noon, 22:6, and he was near the city, 9:4.

A bright light from heaven shine round about him, 22:6, brighter than the noonday sun, 26:13, and not only around him but also his companions.

He heard a voice, 9:4, speaking to him in Hebrew, 26:14. Those that were with him heard something, 9:7, but did not understand what they heard, 22:9. (Like it or not, this is what it must mean and many translators agree.) 'Hear' is often a biblical euphemism for 'understand.'

A conversation ensued with the voice that was speaking Hebrew. "*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*" 9:4; 22:7; 26:4.

"Who are you, Lord?" 9:5; 22:8; 26:15

“I am Jesus, Whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the pricks (goats).” 9:5; 26:14.

“What will you have me do?” 9:6; 22:10.

“Arise and go into the city and it will be told you what to do.” 9:6; 22:10. The account in chapter 26 adds some detail.

Acts 26:16-18

- 16 But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee;
- 17 Delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee,
- 18 To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me. KJV

He arose to discover that he was blind, 9:8; 22:11. Notice that he attributed his blindness to the glory of the light in 22:11.

Entering the city he stayed with a man named Judas on the street named ‘Straight.’ 9:11

There he stayed in his room, neither eating nor drinking for three days. During this time he was praying. 9:9-11.

About what, do you suppose, was he praying?

His entire religious world had just been up-ended.

What he had thought was true has now been proven false and what he vehemently denied had been proven factual.

Jesus, Who the Christians had been testifying that He rose from the dead, was indeed alive, was in heaven, was Deity, just as the Christians had claimed, and now He had laid the charge at Saul’s feet that persecution of these people was persecution of Him.

So, what would his prayers have looked like?

“Lord Please forgive me:

For persecuting your people,

For persecuting You,

For my religious arrogance, blindness, and unbelief,

For my horrible cruelty.”

And, an educated guess:

Now, ***all*** of his sins are coming before his mind in crystal clarity. Will he not repent of them all?

Would we not also assume that he was crying out for and receiving clarity concerning the Person of Jesus Christ and how the (OT) scriptures had revealed Him?

Having been told what God would now have him do, would it be illogical to think

that he was seeking grace to do it, knowing how the Jews would treat him for daring to do such things?

So, there he was for three days.

Note: God does not get in a hurry.

Real Repentance takes some time and the more profound one's religious deception the longer it will take.

Regeneration is instantaneous for sure but Conversion takes a while. Some people are confused about this.

Then, after three days, the Lord appeared in a vision to Ananias, told him who Saul was, where he was staying, what God was going to do with his life and what Ananias was to do, 9:10-16.

Ananias was troubled by God's instructions because of Saul's reputations and he protested against the assignment.

But, of course, he went.

The encounter between Ananias and Saul contains some very interesting words that have led to many heated debates over Saul's conversion.

Acts 9:17-18

17 And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost.

18 And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized. KJV

Acts 22:12-16

12 And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, having a good report of all the Jews which dwelt there,

13 Came unto me, and stood, and said unto me, Brother Saul, receive thy sight. And the same hour I looked up upon him.

14 And he said, The God of our fathers hath chosen thee, that thou shouldest know his will, and see that Just One, and shouldest hear the voice of his mouth.

15 For thou shalt be his witness unto all men of what thou hast seen and heard.

16 And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord. KJV

First of all, let us acknowledge what obviously did occur.

Ananias came to Saul and spoke to him:

Of the restoration of his sight,

Of the fullness of the Holy Spirit he was about to receive,

Of the fact that God had chosen him to know His Will, to see Jesus, and to hear His voice,

That Saul was going to be His witness to all men of what he had seen and heard, (by the way, has he ever *actually* been a witness to *every person*?)

And, that Saul should be baptized and wash away his sins, calling on the

name of the Lord.

So, how was Saul converted? How were his sins taken away? By baptism?
Doesn't this plainly say that Paul washed away his sins by baptism?
Well, frankly, no.

There is a multitude of problems for anyone who would make such a claim.

First of all, let me give the proper take away for this text.

1. First of all, baptism *is* a ceremonial cleansing.

It was not a thing which had been created anew and afresh by John the Baptist when he burst onto the Jewish scene a few months before Jesus.

The Jews already had a whole body ceremonial washing associated with a number of ritual cleansings *including* the conversion of a pagan to Judaism, which, by the way, was once the was a heathen person came to faith.)

Sometimes, in fact often, the scriptures speak of the ceremonial doing of a thing as if it were the actual thing.

The sacrifices of the tabernacle and temple were called 'atonement' even though we know that it is not possible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin. (Ex 29:36,37)

Things were called 'purification' that did not literally purify. (Num 19:9,12)

Things were 'cleansed' that were made clean in ceremony only, not literally. (Lev 14:6-9)

And, things were 'washed' as ritual only.

It is, for sure, a sort of 'doublespeak' but it was well understood to be so. The form could be called the reality because everyone knew it to be form representing the real.

Here is a principle to always remember when dealing with scripture: Ceremony Is Never the Actual Thing Pictured in The Ceremony.

Baptism is a ritual, a ceremony, which pictures cleansing but it is not and cannot be an *actual* cleansing since no ritual ever was the real thing. Just as the bread and wine in communion do not literally *become* the blood and body of Jesus, the water of the baptistry does not actually carry away a person's sins.

2. Secondly, no person is ever rendered 'cleansed' from his sin who does not repent of them, from his heart, 'calling on the name of the Lord.'

This is the reason that the Thief on the Cross was converted and Judas Iscariot was not. The thief repented but was not baptized and Judas was baptized but did not repent. You tell me, which one 'washed away his sins calling on the name of the Lord'?

3. Finally, Ananias was making an absolutely honest declaration to Saul.

I could in all honesty say the same thing to any unconverted sinner here today, “Arise and be baptized and was away your sins calling on the name of the Lord.” You will be truly cleansed by God as you repent and ceremonially cleansed as you are baptized.

4. Before we finish let us notice some other obvious problems which exist if Saul was not converted, did not have his sins washed away, until he was baptized.

Jesus Himself personally appeared to him, something that was never done to any other lost man, ever.

Saul immediately committed himself to do whatever the Lord would have him do (9:6), something no lost man ever did in sincerity.

According to 26:16, he was immediately called into the gospel ministry, something that God never, ever, did to any lost man.

It appears from 9:17,18 that Saul was filled with the Holy Spirit (similar to Cornelius and his house) when he received his sight at the laying on of Ananias’ hands, before his baptism. Tough to explain if he was not regenerated until baptism.

Beside all that, 9:15 and 22:14 say that he was ‘chosen,’ something that those who teach baptismal regeneration deny that God does to lost men.

The sequence of events is fairly obvious.

The revelation that knocked Saul to the ground also regenerated him.

Every response he gave going forward, every thing that was said to him, and every action he took mark him as a converted soul.

His baptism, then, was a ceremonial cleansing to testify of God’s work in him.

So, how is it with your soul?

Have you repented of your sin and been washed from them by Jesus Christ but have never been properly baptized? You should do that.

Have you been baptized but never repented of your sins?

You are not clean. The ceremony did you no spiritual good.

You are lost, still in your sins, and under the judgment of God.

You will perish unless you repent!

Will you?

Or, maybe, you have been truly converted, but it has happened since your baptism.

If so, your first baptism was essentially a fraud since you were unconverted and unclean at the time.

You should publicly own your faith with proper baptism.

Or, maybe, you are unsaved, unrepentant, and unbaptized.

Repent of your sins!

Cry out to God for Mercy!

Trust in Jesus's Great Work to cleanse you!

Publicly confess Him and be baptized.

Wash away your sins calling on the name of the Lord.