

The Great Stories of the Early Church
25 - The Last Apostle, 04
The Conversion of Saul of Tarsus
Acts 9:17-31

- 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.
- 23 And after that many days were fulfilled, the Jews took counsel to kill him:
- 24 But their laying await was known of Saul. And they watched the gates day and night to kill him.
- 25 Then the disciples took him by night, and let him down by the wall in a basket.
- 26 And when Saul was come to Jerusalem, he assayed to join himself to the disciples: but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple.
- 27 But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared unto them how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus.
- 28 And he was with them coming in and going out at Jerusalem.
- 29 And he spake boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus, and disputed against the Grecians: but they went about to slay him.
- 30 Which when the brethren knew, they brought him down to Caesarea, and sent him forth to Tarsus.
- 31 Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied.

Introduction:

Paul was, by nature, a man of action. When he saw that the church was spreading beyond Jerusalem, before his conversion, he took the initiative to pursue the Christians to other cities. And when he was converted and understood that he had been called to proclaim Jesus Christ, he set immediately about that as well.

But all of that which happened after his conversion cannot be attributed totally to his natural inclination to act quickly and decisively. Remember that in the laying on of hand by Ananias he

had received the empowering of the Holy Spirit to the degree that would be needed by an apostle of Jesus Christ. We have previously spoken of the fact that in the typical laying on of hands in the NT a significant transference of Holy Spirit enabling almost always took place but that enabling was, in every other case, a lesser degree than was possessed by the one conferring the blessing. It does seem that in this one case an exception was made and the one receiving ended up with a greater gifting than the one transferring the gift.

And, why not? Saul was an exception in every other way as well. He was the only one chosen after the death and resurrection of Christ, the only one of the Jerusalem elite called to be an apostle, the only one specifically called to carry the gospel to the Gentiles, and the only one chosen by a post-resurrection appearance of Christ. So, it should not surprise us that he would be filled with the Holy Spirit in a manner not characteristic of the others, that the Lord bypassed His Own special servants to have this man ordained to the ministry by a virtual unknown in a city other than Jerusalem, even a city outside of Israel itself.

We notice the story here is fairly compact. After his baptism Saul remained with the brethren for 'certain days.' This could have been a week or it may have been three months, there is simply no way to know. Personally, as we will see a little later, I think that it was probably weeks or month rather than just a few days. After that he began to go into the synagogues and proclaim Christ.

Let's pause here to take note that the synagogues were a little different than our typical church service, though the early church services were probably more like the synagogue than like the way we do it. Typically, the scriptures would be read and then the floor was opened for questions or comments from the audience of the men. When these had finished the rabbi would then give a lesson or exposition from the text. If someone of note was visiting, he might be given precedence to speak to the group. 1 Cor 14 gives a picture of church services as being much more open and free flowing than ours typically are today.

It seems that Saul took advantage of the opportunities afforded by the open format and immediately began to give understanding from the Jewish texts that Jesus was indeed the Christ. He did it so emphatically and so profoundly that people were completely astonished, but it did not take long until the power structure began to plan his murder to stop him from having any more impact on the Jews in Damascus.

What we want to consider today is some of the obvious elements on display in Saul's early conversion days and some elements to consider that may not be so obvious. We will begin with the more obvious elements.

Maybe the most obvious thing we see here is that True Conversion changes a life completely and for the better.

Those who knew Saul and especially those in Damascus who witnessed the early days of his Christianity saw what the church always witnessed and expected in the birth of a soul into the

kingdom of God. It is something that Saul, who was later known as Paul, would write later.

2 Cor 5:17

17 Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new. KJV

The Evangelical world today tells us not to expect change and certainly not to insist upon it from the new believer. He has the option, they say, as to whether actually make Jesus Lord of his life or not. He may option to remain as he is, in his adultery, in his drunkenness, in his blasphemy, and not put any of those things away at all. But, so long as he has 'asked Jesus into his heart' no one can make the judgment that he has not come to Christ. Not only is this directly denied in the examples of those converted but it is flat out contradicted in the testimony of scripture.

The church has the right, No, the obligation, the insist upon visible, tangible repentance in the life of any person presenting himself for baptism and church membership. But, of course, modern Evangelicalism goes so far now as to claim that baptism and church membership are, themselves, optional.

Even for the child raised in a Christian home and taken to church weekly there must be some change, some visible impulse to serve God more profoundly, to take the initiative in Bible study and prayer, to have conversations with their friends about what God has done for them.

The standard has fallen so low in modern Christianity that I believe one could honestly put most churches in a category worse than Laodicea was in the closing days of the first century, maybe even where Sardis was, "thous has a name that thou livest, and art dead."

Christian Conversion produces profound change. The soul once dead is now alive. The love of sin is gone and love for God has replaced it. Arrogance and pride, the love of self, has been offered on the altar of sacrifice to God and now humility reigns in their place. The love of the people of God is palpable and obvious as John said.

1 John 3:14-16

14 We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death.

15 Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him.

16 Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. KJV

Acts 9:20-21

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? KJV

He who denies that Gospel Conversion produces profound change denies the very essence of the

Gospel itself.

Next we notice that the gospel, when proclaimed properly and under the empowering of the Holy Spirit does three things.

Acts 9:21

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?

First, it 'amazed' some, "all that heard him were amazed." The word Luke used is quite a bit stronger than the English word 'amaze.' It is more closely related to 'astonished' and 'beside one's self.' In fact, that is exactly how the translators rendered it in Mark 3:21; 5:42; Luke 2:47; 8:46; and other places.

No one was debating whether there was any change visible in Saul of Tarsus. The change was so profound and so obvious that those who knew him and actually knew why he was at Damascus were, as we might say, 'blown away.' It was not merely the change in the man but an entire change in his thinking, his teaching, his entire philosophy of life.

I have a friend who tells the story of his own conversion from a life of rough living, fighting, and drunkenness. He said that his own best friend whom he had grown up with and done everything with looked at him one day and said, "I don't like you any more." The problem? Conversion had wrought a change in him and he no longer desired nor practiced the things he once did.

People are 'amazed' when God truly does a work. Others were 'confounded.'

Acts 9:22

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

The definition of the word used is, "NT:4797 - to throw (an assembly) into disorder, to perplex (the mind)."

This is the same word that Luke used to describe the chaos and confusion at Jerusalem on that Day of Pentecost immediately after the ascension of Jesus back to heaven.

Acts 2:6

6 Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language. KJV

And the riot, as it were, that occurred at Ephesus when Paul cast the demon out of the fortune-telling girl.

Acts 19:32

32 Some therefore cried one thing, and some another: for the assembly was

confused; and the more part knew not wherefore they were come together. KJV

As well as the uproar at Jerusalem when the Jews tried to murder Paul.

Acts 21:31

31 And as they went about to kill him, tidings came unto the chief captain of the band, that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. KJV

The reality is that the Jewish community at Damascus had become in turmoil over the sudden and profound change that had taken place in Saul's life. Not only had his world been turned inside out but his conversion had shaken the world of the Jews and thrown the entire lot of them into profound and utter confusion.

The third thing that happened among the Jews was that there was a group among them that became angry.

23 And after that many days were fulfilled, the Jews took counsel to kill him:

Saul was no timid Christian. For him the world existed in bright colors and some things were very different than others.

The socialist mentality that is currently gripping our world turns everything the same shade of gray. All things are equal. There is no 'morality' as such, nothing is seen as profoundly wrong. Nothing that is but the insane voice of those who are awake and cry out against the removing of all barriers of right and wrong and the destruction of every principle upon which Christianity and our country stand, or have stood for centuries.

Paul spoke in the voice of the prophets of old who called men to account for their sins, promised God's judgment upon the world because of them, and who cried out for men to repent, if, perhaps, God might be merciful to them.

If you want to create chaos and confusion just start talking about morality and principle. You will often get the same reaction that Saul did. People will be thrown into confusion and will desire to see you dead.

Which modern preacher has a contract on his head for declaring truth? The answer to that will make you realize that Saul's preaching had a disturbing quality to it. He was both bold and accurate in his rendition of scripture, so, those who opposed him sought to kill him.

The next little tidbit of observation is right there for all to see but many seem to miss it. Escaping a death plot when one can is neither faithlessness nor cowardice. A sort of a fanaticism concerning martyrdom seized upon the early church in later years and it still has an impact on some, I think, maybe without them realizing it. Facing death with courage when there is no other option is, for sure, one of the most incredibly Christian things that a person can do. But, at the same time, Christianity is not a suicide covenant. If one can escape and save his life as well as the lives of others, he should. Never should we compromise Biblical truth to save our lives but

escape should be sought if possible.

Then, there are some other things here that are less obvious.

Notice that Saul did not run right out after his baptism and begin preaching. There are some who certainly read the text this way and fashion a doctrine that the newly converted should immediately begin to preach. But, in v.19 we see that Saul received some kind of training from the believing brethren in Damascus.

Why days and not years? Remember that the man was trained as a rabbi which meant that he knew the scriptures far better than most, probably better than most of the Christians in the world at the time. His problem was one of perspective, not one of information. All of the scriptures were already in his mind and available to him. What he needed was to organize this new perspective in his head. And, of course, you remember that he had the Holy Spirit upon him in an unusual and amazing way.

Another thing that is here in the text should serve as a caution to believers. People will choose their religion over you every time...that is if they have a religion. Saul had been the darling of the Pharisees before his conversion, the star pupil of Gamaliel and probably his successor. But within a few days his Jewish brothers hated him as badly as they had hated Stephen or James or Peter. He had committed what for most religious people is the unpardonable sin, he had *proven* that their religion was false.

Now, one would think that a person would be grateful for anyone to show him he was in error, right? After all, isn't religion a search for truth in understanding things concerning God?

Yes, True Religion is...but most people have bought in on something else. And their religion is more important to them than most relationships, so do not expect to be rewarded for showing people the error of their beliefs. Most will rather hate you than praise you, even if you do it very kindly.

As an aside we might also take note of those who will choose you over their religion. Those people have no religion at all other than themselves... maybe not the best company to keep.

Our takeaways from this text are these:

True Conversion creates profound change. That which does not produce change also does not save.

Those who teach should be people who have something to teach, by some kind of serious study and/or training. I am not saying that a man cannot be self-taught, every true preacher should be to a great extent. But, as Paul taught Timothy, he is not to be a novice. The church is greatly damaged with unlearned and unwise men occupy the pulpit.

(And...by the way...some are novices after 20 years because they do not and will not learn. They came to the ministry knowing everything, while actually knowing very little, so they have been unwilling to learn.)

Finally, sit down and count the cost. Is holding Truth worth your life to you? If not, then step aside, confess yourself to be an unbeliever, and begin to seek God for grace to hold Truth rightly, which means the willingness to sacrifice all for it.

Persecution and death squads are coming. Maybe not in our lifetimes but certainly in those of our children, whether an Awakening comes or not. Pray that grace may abound to those who are ultimately put to the test for their faith.