

The conversion of Saul of Tarsus, the leading persecutor of the Christians, was perhaps the greatest event in church history after the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. The next great episode would be the conversion of the Gentiles (Acts 10), and Saul (Paul) would become the apostle to the Gentiles. God was continuing to work out His plan to bring the Gospel to the whole world.

The account of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus is given three times in Acts, in chapters 9, 22, and 26. According to chapter 9, Saul experienced four meetings that together transformed his life.

### **He Met Jesus Christ (Acts 9:1-9)**

When you look at Saul *on the road* (Acts 9:1-2), you see a very zealous man who actually thought he was doing God a service by persecuting the church.

In spite of his great learning (Acts 26:24), Saul was spiritually blind (2 Cor. 3:12-18) and didn't understand what the Old Testament really taught about the Messiah. Like many others, he stumbled over the Cross (1 Cor. 1:23) .. he depended on his own decency and not on the righteousness of God (Rom. 9:30-10:13; Phil. 3:1-10). So many self-righteous religious people today don't see their need for a Saviour and resent it if you tell them they don't meet God's standard. They measure themselves against other people.

Saul's attitude was that of an angry animal! (see Acts 8:3) Like many other rabbis, he believed that the Law had to be obeyed before Messiah could come; and yet these "heretics" were preaching against the Law, the temple, and the traditions of the fathers (Acts 6:11-13). Saul wasted the churches in Judea (Gal. 1:23) and then got authority from the high priest to go as far as Damascus to hunt down the disciples of Jesus. This was no insignificant enterprise, because he had the authority of the highest Jewish council behind him (Acts 22:5).

Damascus had a large Jewish population, and it has been estimated that there could well have been thirty to forty synagogues in the city. The fact that there were already believers there indicates how effective the church had been in getting out the message. Some of the believers may have fled the persecution in Jerusalem, which explains why Saul wanted authority to bring them back. Believers were still identified with the Jewish synagogues, and the break with Judaism wouldn't come for several years.

Saul suddenly found himself *on the ground!* (Acts 9:4) This was a personal meeting with Jesus Christ. At midday (Acts 22:6), he saw a bright light from heaven and heard a voice speaking his name (Acts 22:6-11). The men with him also fell to the earth (Acts 26:14) and heard the sound, but they could not understand the words spoken from heaven. They stood to their feet in bewilderment (Acts 9:7), hearing Saul address someone, but not knowing what was happening.

Saul of Tarsus made some wonderful discoveries that day. To begin with, **he discovered to his surprise that Jesus of Nazareth was actually *alive!*** Of course, the believers had been constantly saying this (**Acts 2:32; 3:15; 5:30-32**), but Saul had refused to accept their testimony. If Jesus was alive, then Saul had to change his mind about Jesus and His message. He had to repent, a difficult thing for a self-righteous Pharisee to do.

Saul also discovered that he was a lost sinner who was in danger of the judgment of God. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (**Acts 9:5**). Saul thought he had been serving God, when in reality he had been persecuting the Messiah! All of his values changed. He was a new person because he trusted Jesus Christ.

The Lord had a special work for Saul to do (**Acts 26:16-18**). The Hebrew of the Hebrews would become the apostle to the Gentiles; the persecutor would become a preacher; and the legalistic Pharisee would become the great proclaimer of the grace of God. . .

Saul was out to arrest others when the Lord arrested him. He had to lose his religion before he could gain the righteousness of Christ. His conversion experience is unique, because sinners today certainly do not hear God's voice or see blinding heavenly lights. His salvation is certainly a great encouragement to anyone thinking they are too lost, for if "the chief of sinners" could be saved, surely anybody can be saved!

It is worth noting that the men who were with Saul saw the light, but did not see the Lord; and they heard the sound, but did not hear the voice speaking the words (cf **John 12:27-29**). We have to wonder if any of them later trusted in Christ because of Saul's testimony. He definitely saw the glorified Lord Jesus Christ (**1 Cor. 15:7-10**).

The men led Saul *into the city* (**Acts 9:8-9**)! The leader had to be led because the vision had left him blind. His spiritual eyes had been opened, but his physical eyes were closed. God was thoroughly humbling Saul and preparing him for the ministry of Ananias. He fasted and prayed (**Acts 9:11**) for three days, during which time he no doubt started to "sort out" what he believed. He had been saved by grace, not by Law, but through faith in the living Christ. God began to instruct Saul and show him the relationship between the Gospel of the grace of God and the traditional Mosaic religion that he had practiced all his life.

### **He Met Ananias (**Acts 9:10-19**)**

Ananias was a devout Jew (**Acts 22:12**) who was a believer in Jesus Christ. He knew what kind of reputation Saul had and that he was coming to Damascus to arrest believers. It was up to a week's journey from Jerusalem to Damascus, but some of the Jerusalem Christians had already arrived at the city in order to warn the saints. We use the word *Christian* most frequently, and yet that name did not appear on the scene until later (**Acts 11:26**). "Disciples" is the name that is used most in the Book of Acts, but you do not find it used in the epistles. There the name "saints" is the most frequently used title for God's people.

Ananias was available to do God's will, but he certainly was not anxious to obey! The fact that Saul was "praying" instead of "stalking and preying" should have encouraged Ananias. **"Prayer is the autograph of the Holy Spirit on the renewed heart,"** said Charles Spurgeon (Rom. 8:9, 14-16). Instead of trusting himself, Saul was now trusting the Lord and waiting for Him to show him what to do. In fact, Saul had already seen a vision of a man named Ananias (Hananiah = "the Lord is gracious") coming to minister to him; so, how could Ananias refuse to obey?

**Acts 9:15** is a good summary of Paul's life and ministry. **It was all of grace, for he did not choose God; it was God who chose him (1 Tim. 1:14). He was God's instrument (2 Tim. 2:20-21), and God would work in and through him to accomplish His purposes (Eph. 2:10; Phil. 2:12-13).** God's name would be glorified because this man would take the Gospel to Jews and Gentiles, kings and commoners, and he would suffer for Christ's sake. This is the first reference in the Book of Acts to the Gospel going to the Gentiles (see also Acts 22:21; 26:17).

Once convinced, Ananias lost no time going to the house of Judas and ministering to the waiting Saul. The fact that he called him "brother" must have brought joy to the heart of the blinded Pharisee. Saul not only heard Ananias' voice, but he felt his hands (Acts 9:12, 17). By the power of God, his eyes were opened and he could see! He was also filled with the Holy Spirit and baptized, and then he ate some food.

Saul stayed with the believers in Damascus and no doubt learned from them. Imagine what it would be like to disciple the great Apostle Paul! He discovered that they were loving people, undeserving of the persecution he had inflicted on them; and that they knew the truth of God's Word and only wanted to share it with others.

Before we leave this section, we should emphasize some practical lessons that all believers ought to learn

To begin with, **God can use even the most obscure person.** Were it not for the conversion of Saul, we would never have heard of Ananias; and yet Ananias had an important part to play in the ongoing work of the church.. The important thing is not fame but faithfulness (**1 Cor. 4:1-5**).

The experience of Ananias also reminds us that we *should never be afraid to obey God's will.* Ananias at first argued with the Lord and gave some good reasons why he should not visit Saul. But the Lord had everything under control, and Ananias obeyed by faith. When God commands, we need to remember that He is working "at both ends of the line," and that His perfect will is always the best.

There is a third encouragement: **God's works are always balanced.** God balanced a great public miracle with a quiet meeting in the house of Judas. The bright light and the voice from heaven were dramatic events, but the visit of Ananias was very ordinary. The hand of

God pushed Saul from his "high horse," but God used the hand of a man to bring Saul what he most needed. God spoke from heaven, but He also spoke through an obedient disciple who gave the message to Saul. The "ordinary" events were just as much a part of the miracle as were the extraordinary.

Finally, ***we must never underestimate the value of one person brought to Christ.*** Peter was ministering to thousands in Jerusalem, and Philip had seen a great harvest among the Samaritan people, but Ananias was sent to only one man. Yet what a man! Saul of Tarsus became Paul the apostle, and his life and ministry have influenced people and nations ever since. Even secular historians confess that Paul is one of the significant figures in world history.

#### For the Care Groups to consider

1. Have you ever suddenly realized that your whole way of dealing with God was wrong? If so, how did you feel? What did you do?
2. Has committing yourself to Christ changed your outlook and way of life as radically as Saul's were changed? (See Phil. 3:2-11.) Why or why not? What would your life be like if you took Saul's attitude?
3. How would you have felt in Ananias' place (9:10-16)? Would you have been comfortable calling Saul "Brother Saul" (9:17)? What does this show about Ananias?

Questions taken from the Life Changer Series