



The Conversion of Saul

Acts 9:1-19

Perhaps the most important event in the life of the early church is that which is recorded in these verses. The Biblical writer considers it so important that he refers to it no less than three times in the book of Acts – here, in chapter 22 and again in chapter 26. The man who had done more harm to the church than anyone else is met by the Savior of the church. He who "breathed in" threatening and slaughter, i.e., it is his life's breath, is to be turned about completely. The man who possessed a fanatical zeal against the believers will later use that same burning zeal for them. The Lord singles out a man, not only of great ability, but a man who will not stop at anything to accomplish his purposes. This man is not a citizen of Laodicea!

The persecutor

We first read of this Saul of Tarsus at the time of the martyr death of Stephen. He agreed with the chief priests that Stephen should be put to death. He thought he was doing God service by persecuting those who followed "*that Nazarene.*" He has not changed his views concerning that "Way" when this chapter opens. He is not satisfied to rid Jerusalem of the followers of Jesus, but asks the chief priests for permission to persecute even those who have fled to Damascus, to extradite them and bring them back to Jerusalem for trial. They readily assent to this request. They have found in this Saul of Tarsus the kind of man which they need to stamp out Christianity at its birth. Why is he so venomous in his view of the Christians? This man has a great zeal for the God of his fathers and for the revelation which He had given in former days. He is well acquainted with the Torah, the law of God. He adores that law! He is firmly convinced that the Christians are opposing the God of Israel and the law which He has given. That being the case, he must stamp out all traces of this "so called" religion. Others may be satisfied to allow it to live on because they believe these people are harmless, Not so Saul! His zeal for his God will not allow him to leave these "heretics" unmolested. They must be removed from the earth. If Jerusalem is rid of them, and it isn't, go to neighboring Syria and bring them back from there so that they may not be able to continue their teaching and proselytizing.

The uncommon zeal of this man is even shown in the time when his conversion occurs. He nears Damascus about "noon," he says in chapter 22. Now, nobody travels about noon in that part of the world because of the brutal heat at that time of the day. But, his mission may not be delayed! He has to make haste and drives himself as well as all those with him even through the hottest part of the day. It would have taken him a few days to travel from Jerusalem to Damascus. Any change of mind now that he has time to think it over? None. He had heard the confession of Stephen and had seen the peace on the face of that martyr when he was about to die, but it takes more than that to change his mind. He is as ruthless now as he was when he started. Christianity must be blotted out!

The Lord's confrontation

But, Jesus meets him! Right at noon, when the sun is the brightest and the hottest, he sees a dazzling light and is enveloped in it. He is not able to remain on his feet but falls down on the ground. Then he hears a voice which addresses him by name.

"Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?"

He is persecuting the Christians! This voice says that he is persecuting "Me!" He is persecuting One individual! In amazement he cries out: Who art thou, Lord? Someone is speaking to him from heaven, from whence this bright light comes. This One is Lord. No doubt about it but, Who? He has thought that the followers of Jesus were going contrary to all that he holds dear and they did this because the One Whom they followed has misled them. The One who is speaking to him out of the light identifies Himself with those whom he is persecuting! Therefore the important question is: Who art thou, Lord? The answer comes immediately, "*I am Jesus whom thou persecutest.*" He is not dead! He is not the heretic Saul thought Him to be because He is now speaking from the heavens in this bright light. Saul wanted to erase the name of Jesus from the consciousness of Israel as well as those who followed Him. This casts an entirely different light on the whole matter. Notice how Jesus is in complete control, as He always is. You go into the city of Damascus and there you will receive further instructions. Saul has intended to enter the city triumphantly and drive fear into the hearts of all those who follow Jesus of Nazareth. Now he is going to be led into the city while someone else holds his hand, because he has been stricken blind. What a difference! What a change! And, nothing more than a bright light shone around him and he has had a very brief conversation with One whom he was not even able to see. Those who were with him heard the voice, but they saw no one — Saul didn't either. There has always been much speculation on just what took place. Why did it affect Saul differently from the men who were with him? We must stick to that which Luke tells us. When Saul gets up he is blind — helpless! They take him into the city of Damascus and the Lord lets him sit there stark blind for three days. In all that time Saul neither ate nor drank. He is too busy with his thoughts!

Ananias' commission

Now the Lord is setting things in motion to relieve Saul of his blindness and to prepare him for his future work. God speaks to a certain Ananias, of whom nothing else is known. This man is a believer in Jesus Christ. In almost Old Testament form, the Lord approaches this man in a vision. He at once responds to the call of his Lord. His orders are: You go to a certain street, to a certain house, and ask for a man named Saul! Do not be afraid because *he is praying*. One doesn't have to be afraid of a praying man, regardless what has been heard of him. He has been rendered harmless. This Saul of Tarsus has also received a vision and in that vision he has seen a man by the name of Ananias come to restore his sight! The Lord speaks to both — the blind man and the one who will come to heal him. Perhaps these visions were seen at the same time. He is in control!

This mandate astounds Ananias. He is always ready to carry out the orders which he receives from his Lord, but this is asking the virtually impossible! This man is too dangerous.

"I have heard how he has wasted the church in Jerusalem and that he has authority from the chief priests to capture all the believers in Damascus."

His notoriety has preceded him. Perhaps the communications of those days left much to be desired, but the believers here in Damascus know all about this ruthless man who is coming to arrest them. The attitude of Ananias is understandable. The fact that the Lord has said that this Saul is praying is apparently not enough to remove his misgivings. To go alone to see this enemy of the church! Ananias reacts somewhat as Moses, Elijah and Jeremiah did earlier.

But, orders are orders! The Lord says to Ananias: Go! (No more objections). I have chosen this man. He is a chosen vessel to me. I will pour the gifts into this vessel and they shall be poured out again in great measure. The Apostles are still at Jerusalem. Peter and John returned there after they had been with Philip in Samaria. *This man* will bear My name before the gentiles and before the kings of the earth and before My people Israel. This man will have a tremendous task to do. Although he does not yet know it, I have already determined that that will be his life's task. I will show him how many things he will have to suffer for my name's sake. He will indeed carry the gospel to the gentiles. He will stand before Felix, Festus, Agrippa and Nero. He will also bring My word to Israel. He will begin his work in every place in the synagogue of the Jews. This Saul of Tarsus who was going to make the believers suffer will suffer more than many others for my name's sake. This man's name will be the most important in the rest of the New Testament history!

The encounter with Saul

Ananias has no more to say. He goes to find this persecutor. He does not ask for a confession of sins! He simply lays his hands on him and addresses him: Brother Saul! How things have changed! Only a short time ago he trembled at the sound of his name. Now he calls him: Brother!

He informs him that the same Jesus who had dashed him to the ground near the gates of Damascus has sent him to restore his sight and that he may be filled with the Holy Spirit. The same One who took his sight away will restore it. The Holy Spirit will also visit him and fill him. The Lord had waited so long to confront this man, allowing him to come all the way to Damascus – the believers in Damascus become more fearful the closer he comes – but, when he is about to enter the city, Jesus meets him. He now meets him again through the instrumentality of this sincere believer, Ananias.

As the hands of this disciple are laid on him, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes and his sight is restored. What will this "seeing" Saul now do? Is the conversion genuine? No doubt about it. He is baptized at once. He receives the sign and seal of God's promises. He, the former persecutor, is initiated into the Christian church. Now he need no longer refrain from taking food and drink and he stays with the disciples in Damascus! If this man could be converted, anyone can!

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Questions for discussion:

1. Why do persecutors of the church so hate the believers?
2. Rome apparently turned its face when the priests gave permission to arrest believers in a foreign land. Why does Saul even persecute these?
3. Doesn't the Lord make it "difficult" for Himself by the kind He chooses?
4. Why is this man later such an asset to the church?
5. Do you understand Ananias' hesitancy? Does the Lord sometimes ask more than we can offer?
6. Isn't it amazing that this man who was a "fanatic" against the church now becomes a "fanatic" for the church? How do you explain this?
7. Do we often find such "honesty" on the part of persecutors as Saul displays when he is faced by Jesus Christ?