

SAUL'S CONVERSION

Dec. 31, 2023

Saul makes his first appearance in scripture in connection with Stephen's martyrdom, in Acts 6:9. When Stephen was stoned to death for his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, Saul was guarding the robes of those involved. He was totally in agreement with whole affair.

There is no question as to Saul's role in the persecution that broke out against the church after Stephen's death. Saul became the mastermind or the ringleader of the persecutors.

The Jerusalem fellowship broke up, many scattered and Saul was on the hot trail to hunt down the Christians, in order to have them arrested and imprisoned.

Saul Hunts Down the Scattered Disciples (Vv1-2)

Saul was a religious fanatic. Religious but lost. A bigot. A zealot. He hated Christ and his followers so much that he did his best to eradicate the new religion as if it were some sort of dreaded disease.

He felt no remorse over his persecution, in fact regarded it as his service to God. His religion, satisfied him in every way and he saw no need for anything for change. He was self-righteous and self-deceived, believing with all his heart he was perfectly keeping all the Law of God.

He wasn't for Christ, but Christ was looking for him. Only God could save a man like Paul, or anybody else for that matter.

Saul Encounters the Risen Christ (Vv 3-9)

- AD 32 / 30yrs of age
- Nearing Damascus/ warrants in the pocket
- Suddenly at about noon-time, supernatural bright light, flashing from heaven, brighter the sun, overpowering presence of the Lord
- Fell to the ground, humbled, blinded
- Voice is heard/ Risen, glorified Lord /friends hear sound /deaf to the articulation of the words /they are frightened them to death.
- *Saul, "Saul, "why do you persecute Me."* Oneness of the body. Jesus is jealous and protective of His church
- Saul all along thought he was defending the Lord.

- *V5 "Who are you, Lord?" I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard to kick against the goads."* Sharp prodding sticks used to make oxen move. Kicking like a beast against Christianity and the truth. Resisting.
- Trembling with astonishment and fear cries out, *"Lord, what would you have me do."* Jesus gives instructions ---- *Arise and go into the city.*
- Saul, blind, led by hand to Damascus.
- Blind for 3 days and three nights, no food and no drink. Fasted and prayed. Total consecration. Revolution in his mind. Prays in the spirit and truth for the 1st X.
- Meanwhile a prominent Christian called Ananias in Damascus has a vision and word from the Lord concerning Saul (v10).

Saul Meets Ananias of Damascus (Vv10-19)

- Ananias is apprehensive / unease about the Lord's command (v13)/ perplexed
- Lays hands on Saul / calls him brother /filled with Holy Spirit/ exception -not the rule / no canon still
- Laying of hands -sign of healing and special calling – Apostle /chosen instrument to the Gentiles and for much suffering / Suffering reciprocated
- Immediately scales (Job 41:15) from his eyes fall off/sight is restored/ also symbolical that he now has spiritual eyes.
- Got up and was baptized v19/ follows conversion

Saul Preaches Christ (V 20-22)

- In the synagogues of Damascus / preached fearlessly v27
- The people are amazed at the radical transformation in Saul.
- So bad was his past reputation that at first almost no one believed that the change was real.
- Saul the great persecutor turns into the Paul the great proclaimer of the faith.
- Preaches Jesus is the Son of God to the Jews, renouncing Judaism and law keeping as the way of salvation.
- God leads him to Arabia/ spent 3 years in wilderness receiving revelations from heaven.

- Galatians 1:11-12, *"I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ."*
- Becomes the greatest Christian Missionary the world has known/ author of 12 -13 Epistles of NT.

There are 2 dominant truths in this remarkable story.

1. Conversion is Exclusively the Work of God
2. Conversion is Evidenced by a Transformed Life

Conversion is Exclusively the Work of God

The Apostle Paul who understood God exclusive work in conversion, by revelation and personal experience, in Romans 9 addresses God's sovereignty in regard to man's salvation. There he uses the illustration of the potter and the clay.

Paul's point is that clay vessels are not self-made or even self-kept. They are created, shaped and kept by God. So, it is with the elect of God.

Paul reaches a climax with these words in verse 18: *"So then He has mercy on whomever He wills, and He hardens whomever He wills."*

Paul here demolishes any notion of man experiencing conversion as result of what some call the "free will" of man. Paul states in the passage, *"It is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy."*

When Saul was confronted by the risen and reigning Lord Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus there was nothing in him or in his character that would commend him to God.

This is no denying that God providentially prepared Paul for his special calling as apostle to the Gentiles. What I am saying is that Saul did not get saved by *self-determination* or by *the self-production of saving faith*.

Consider first what Saul was like when he was confronted by Jesus. In his first letter Paul Timothy, he says that he was a *"blasphemer, persecutor, and violent oppressor"* (1st Timothy 1:13).

To Saul Jesus was a discredited teacher and because Jesus was crucified on a tree, he was under God's condemnation. Jesus was someone accused to Paul.

Saul was the subject of God's sovereign, unconditional election. Paul did not choose Christ. Christ chose him.

If we have heard the proclamation of the gospel and have responded to the summons to repent and believe the gospel of Jesus Christ, then we have done so because God has chosen us in Christ since before the foundation of the world and His Holy Spirit has worked in us the faith by which we believe on Christ.

"But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles" (Galatians 1:15-16a).

The verse reveals that the pre-conversion work of God with Paul began in his mother's womb.

For the prophet Jeremiah, we are also told of pre-conversion work of God which began in his mother's womb, *"Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you; Before you were born, I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations."*

For John the Baptist, in Luke 1:15 we are told of the pre-conversion work of the Spirit while in His mother's womb, *"He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb."*

The pre-conversion work of the Spirit of God, for all believers, begins in the mother's womb. Salvation is one and same for all believers.

God was tracking Saul down from the very beginning of his life. God had his eye on Paul while he was still in the womb. While he was a toddler, God was watching his every step. During his teenage years, good or bad, God kept him in sight. During the long years of rabbinical training, God was calling him to salvation. Saul didn't know it, didn't feel it, was totally unaware of it, and in fact couldn't see it at all until after he came to Christ.

Then he could look back and see God's fingerprints in every part of his life. Nothing had happened by accident. All was ordained as part of God's divine plan.

God brought Saul to a place where he had no other choice but to freely, willingly believe in Christ. On the Damascus Road, God's convicting work of the Holy Spirit was irresistible for Paul.

There is no going around it, the ability to believe in Christ is a gift from God. So that, all the glory belongs to the Lord. Unconditional election is not just a doctrine. It was the experience of Paul and it is the experience of every sinner-turned-saint.

It should humble us, and make us jump for joy, to the praise God and exaltation of His great mercy and grace.

But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth, to which He called you by our gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2Thess 2:3)

Conversion is Evidenced by a Transformed Life

Salvation always produces a changed life. There's always a "before and after" with conversion. Saving grace immediately and inevitably begins the process of sanctification.

-Immediate baptism/ expressing identification Christ / proof of obedience /and newness of life is manifested immediately.

This "before and after" shows the power of the gospel of salvation (Eph. 1:13) and how it changes people.

- Once he had works- religion. Now he has a personal relationship with Christ.
- Once he hated believers. Now he seeks and loves the believers.
- Once he hated the truth. Now he lives by the truth.
- Once he hated the gospel. Now he preaches the gospel.
- Once he was an antagonist; now he is an evangelist.
- Once he was on the way to Hell; now on the way to Heaven
- Same man, but a new man. Everything is different now.

2 Cor. 5:17— Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

Paul knew that he had not reached the end of the road; rather, he was just getting started. God had big plans for Paul and Paul was completely surrendered to Him.

The passage ends on a wonderful note as Paul says that the churches in Judea (which he once terrorized in his pre-conversion days) recognized the amazing change in his life. And they glorified God because of him.

Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

This story underscores the sovereign grace and mercy of God, as well as the potential for redemption even of the most hardened hearts.

No one is beyond the reach of God's grace. If God can save a man like Paul, he can save anyone. That ought to encourage those of us who are praying for friends and loved ones to come to Christ.

Often our prayers seem to bounce off the ceiling. We pray for months and for years with no apparent result. But do not despair. What we see is not the whole story. No one would ever have predicted Paul's conversion:

- Ten minutes before it happened, it seemed impossible.
- Five minutes before it happened, no one had any reason to expect anything.
- Ten seconds before the light broke and the voice spoke, Paul's heart was as hard as stone.

But what is impossible with man, is possible with God.

So, keep on praying, keep on witnessing, keep on believing. You never know what God will do. We don't know who God's elect are. So, we love all, we care for all, we preach to all, and believe for all.

Paul guarantees with God guarantees, which is, that *if anyone confesses with his mouth the Lord Jesus and believes in his heart that God has raised Him from the dead, he will be saved*. There is hope for every sinner.