

The Conversion Of Paul

Memory Text: “But the Lord said to him, ‘Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel’.” (Acts 9:15)

Setting The Stage: There are many evidences that prove the Bible to be true. There is archeology, history, the thousands of manuscripts, the unanimity witnessed, and then there’s prophecy.

Remarkably, this book has inspired millions of people to surrender their lives – and often literally give their lives – for Someone they’ve personally never seen or met face-to-face, and it has been found to contain power enough to change a life.

What was it that Jesus said? “You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free” (John 8:32). The Bible has freed drunks from alcohol, drug addicts from drugs, the impure from immorality, angry people from hate, lost people from damnation. The Bible has changed and transformed and delivered people. There is no other book known in the history of the universe that has had the impact on the countless of millions of lives that the Bible has.

Perhaps that’s the greatest evidence that you can trust and believe in the truthfulness of the claims of God’s holy Word. If you didn’t have anything else, the Bible works. The Bible helps people, it changes lives in a powerful and dramatic way.

One of the greatest conversion stories recorded in the Bible had to do with a man names Saul, later known as Paul. If it wasn’t for the conversion of Paul, the Christian church probably wouldn’t be what it is today. *“From among the most bitter and relentless persecutors of the church of Christ, arose the ablest defender and most successful herald of the gospel.”* (Sketches From the Life of Paul, p. 9)

Sunday – Persecutor Of The Church

Galatians 1:13, 14; Acts 26:9-11; Acts 9:1, 2

Who was Saul? 1) He is first mentioned in the Bible in Acts 7:58 at the stoning of Stephen. 2) He was born in Tarsus (south-central Turkey) an important town on the trade route between Syria and western Asia (Acts 22:3). 3) He was born of Diaspora Jews (Jews not living in Israel) and was from the tribe of Benjamin. As a Pharisee he was probably married. We only know of his sister and nephew (Acts 23:16). He was a Roman citizen (Acts 22:25-28). He was educated in Jerusalem under the famous rabbi, Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). His trade was tent making (Acts 18:3). He was a Pharisee (Phil 3:5), known for their strict observation of all the laws of God.

Galatians 1:13, 14: “For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it. And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers.”

Acts 26: 9-11: “Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities.”

Jesus didn't fit the traditional Jewish expectation of a kingly Messiah. And they would not accept the idea that the One who had died on a cross could be God's Messiah, because the Bible says that anyone who is hung is under God's curse (Deut. 21:23).

Acts 9:1, 2. Damascus was an important city about 135 miles north of Jerusalem, and it had a large Jewish population. The Jews living outside Judea were organized in a kind of network whose headquarters were in Jerusalem (the Sanhedrin), with the synagogues functioning as supporting centers for the local communities. There was constant communication between the Sanhedrin and such communities through letters normally carried by a shaliah, “one who is sent” (from the Hebrew shalah, “to send”). In Greek, the equivalent to shaliah is apostolos, from which the word apostle derives. So, before being an apostle of Jesus Christ, Paul was an apostle of the Sanhedrin!

Monday – On The Damascus Road

Acts 9:3-9; Mark 9:41; Matthew 25:37-40; John 16:8

Acts 9:3-9. As Paul and his companions neared Damascus, suddenly “a light shone around them from heaven.” Paul fell to the ground and heard a voice. He understood what was being said, but his companions didn't. This light was a divine manifestation of the risen Christ (Acts 22:14).

“Why are you persecuting Me?” For Paul, this question was an indication that Jesus had risen from the dead. But, more than that, it was also an indication of the spiritual identification that exists between Jesus and His church.

Isaiah 63:9: “In all their affliction He was afflicted.”

Zechariah 2:8: “He who touches you touches the apple of His eye.”

Matthew 10:40: “He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me.” (cp. Matt. 25:40)

The implication is obvious: any good done to the church is good done to Jesus Himself. In the case of Saul, the bad done to the church, was bad done to Christ.

“Hard to kick against the goads.” The image is of a working animal trying to move against the sharp stick used to guide it. It would hurt; therefore it would be hard on the animal if it kept doing it. Paul was persecuting Christians even though his conscience was continually being pricked. The way is hard for someone who refuses to surrender to the convicting voice of the Holy Spirit.

John 16:8: “And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment.”

It’s not safe to tune out the still, small voice of the God. The more it is done, the quieter the voice of reason and conviction becomes, until at last there is no conviction, no sense that that particular thing is wrong.

Tuesday – Ananias’s Visit

Acts 9:6, 10-19; Galatians 1:11, 12

Acts 9:6, 10-19. The question, “Lord, what do you want me to do?” indicates a submissive attitude Paul took to Christ; a willingness to now be led by Him instead of kicking against the pricks. Isn’t this the attitude of all who have encountered Christ? We may not have had an experience like Paul, but we have been confronted with our sinfulness and the glory of the risen Christ, which has led us to remorse for our sins, and faith in Christ’s ability to save us and guide our lives.

Connection with the church. *“Christ had performed the work of revelation and conviction; and now the penitent was in a condition to learn from those whom God had ordained to teach His truth”* (Acts of the Apostles, p. 121). God connected Saul to His church to provide him with instruction and direction. What should this tell us about the important work Christ has given to His church? How do we help nurture new babes in the faith? Is this work to be left solely for the pastor to accomplish? Are our arms safe to carry and care for a newborn babe in the faith?

Conversion. Saul’s encounter with Christ changed him. Is it possible that we don’t think that change is possible for us? How can we be changed like Saul? Wouldn’t it include humility, repentance, soul-searching, prayer and supplication, and faith in God’s promises?

Galatians 1:11, 12: “But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

Paul had become Christ's apostle. "Only divine intervention can explain how Jesus' most obsessive opponent would suddenly embrace Him as Savior and Lord, leave everything—convictions, reputation, career—behind, and become His most devoted and prolific apostle."

Wednesday – The Beginning Of Paul's Ministry

Acts 9:20-25; Philippians 4:13; 2 Corinthians 12:9; 1 Timothy 4:17

Acts 9:20-25. Saul's background as a Pharisee helped him to be a successful expositor of truth. With his knowledge of the OT and scribal expansions of the same, he was able to extract timeless biblical truths from the tightly woven fabric of Jewish tradition and custom and make meaningful applications of the truth to all those he ministered to.

Preached prophetically. The reference to Jesus as the Son of God is used here in Acts for the first and only time. Paul proclaimed that Christ was indeed the Son of God no less the son of David, and that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ.

Strength. The more Paul engaged in sharing the truth, the more he grew in effectiveness and strength. The Holy Spirit was giving him more and more power as time went on. In later years the word "strength" played a prominent part in Paul's thinking. What The Holy Spirit did for Paul, he will do for every trusting, believing saint today:

Philippians 4:13: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

2 Corinthians 12:9: "And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me."

2 Timothy 4:17: "But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me, so that the message might be preached fully through me, and that all the Gentiles might hear. Also I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion."

The opposition against Paul became so fierce that an angel was sent to encourage him to leave. Paul went to "Arabia" (Gal. 1:17) where in solitude he shut himself into God's presence, made through work of repentance, and, in recalling the words of Jesus and Ananias, strengthened himself for the work of taking the gospel to the Gentiles.

Paul returned to Damascus where he preached Christ boldly. Unable to withstand the wisdom of his arguments, the Jews sought to kill him. With the city gates guarded day and night to prevent his escape, after seeking God for His guidance, the believers in Damascus found a way for Paul to escape (cp. 2 Cor. 11:32, 33).

Thursday – Return To Jerusalem

Acts 9:26-30; 2 Corinthians 4:6-9

Acts 9: 26-30. In Jerusalem, Paul tried to join the apostles, but they were skeptical. It was Barnabas, a Levite from Cyprus (Acts 4:36, 37), who broke the apostles' resistance and introduced Paul to them.

Paul would face resistance all throughout his ministry, primarily because he taught a gospel that freed anyone from having to follow the ceremonial law, and the law of circumcision, and the like. Because Jesus had come, the sacrificial system was no longer needed. But Jewish converts, steeped in their traditions, found it difficult to break with their past and enter into a new way of life.

During the fifteen days he stayed in Jerusalem (Gal. 1:18), Paul apparently decided to share the gospel with the same non-believing Jews whom he had incited against Stephen some time before. With the help of the brethren, he went down to the city port of Caesarea and from there to his hometown in Cilicia, where he would stay for several years before starting his missionary journeys.

Witnessing for Jesus involves suffering for Jesus. It is not by chance that the Greek word for “witness” (martyrs) came to be associated with “martyrdom.”

2 Corinthians 4:6-9: “For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.”

Friday – Further Thoughts

“A general slain in battle is lost to his army, but his death gives no additional strength to the enemy. But when a man of prominence joins the opposing force, not only are his services lost, but those to whom he joins himself gain a decided advantage. Saul of Tarsus, on his way to Damascus, might easily have been struck dead by the Lord, and much strength would have been withdrawn from the persecuting power. But God in His providence not only spared Saul’s life, but converted him, thus transferring a champion from the side of the enemy to the side of Christ.” (The Acts of the Apostles, p. 124)