

Text: Acts 9:1-19

Title: Saul's Conversion to Follow Jesus Christ

Truth: God chose Paul to serve Him.

Date/Location: Sunday September 16, 2012 and 11/15/2023 at FBC

Introduction

The conversion of the apostle Paul was a momentous event in the history of the church. This narrative is important because it sets the foundation for much of the remainder of God's New Testament revelation, for Paul was the human author of it.

I. The Confrontation of Paul on the way to Damascus, 9:1-9

- A. The high priest was probably still Caiaphas (high priest until 36 A.D.). See Matthew 26:3, Luke 3:2, John 11:49, John 18:13-14 (and 24, 28) and Acts 4:6.
- B. How could Saul have the authority to go to a far away synagogue and drag off people from their home town to Jerusalem, 135 miles away? That's like the distance from Ann Arbor to Benton Harbor or Fort Wayne, and almost as far as Cleveland. There is certainly a disconnection from our values of American jurisprudence! First, Paul is arresting someone for *religious* differences—we do not permit that, within the bounds of the Judeo-Christian family of religions. Second, Paul has no local police power in the area to which he is traveling. Apparently, he has some kind of regional authority over the synagogue system. It is hard for us to understand this kind of system, though we have multiple levels of authority that we are responsible to and that could be confusing to an outsider.

If you were raised in other cultures, specifically religiously-based ones, you would have no difficulty understanding that religious differences are a basis for arresting someone because you have grown up with that reality. In those areas, there is a strong religious authority within the state.

Kent writes on p. 82-83 of *Jerusalem to Rome: Studies in Acts*, "Apparently his quarry were ones who had fled Jerusalem and sought sanctuary in Damascus. Roman practice allowed the Jewish

Sanhedrin to control Jewish affairs even outside Palestine proper. Synagogue rulers at Damascus could therefore be expected to cooperate with anyone who bore such authorization from Jerusalem.”

See Acts 8:1 on the scattering that sent some to Damascus.

But note 9:2, “so that if he found **any** who were of the Way...” This does not seem to limit his quarry to those from Jerusalem. Paul was trying to destroy the church (Gal. 1:13).

- C. Verse 3’s light is the light of the glory of Jesus Christ. In verse 4, a voice associated with that light came from heaven asking Saul why he was persecuting “Me.” We are introduced to the idea that persecuting the church = persecuting Christ. When it is put that starkly, it appears to be a very bad idea to persecute the church. What touches the church touches His eye. A variation on this theme is found in 1 Cor. 3:17—“If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy...” The temple is the church. It is Christ’s body, united to Him, and so is a built-in part of that body.
- D. Jesus’ intervention in Saul’s life, even in so scary of a way, was an act of utter graciousness toward Paul. God did not need to choose this particular murderous persecutor to do His work, but He did. Paul thanked God for this in 1 Timothy 1:12-17.

Paul’s conversion was also an act of deliverance for God’s saints in Jerusalem. He was not going to allow any further persecution at this moment against those people. In this way, God chose to limit the sin done against His church.
- E. Paul asks who is talking. Jesus identifies Himself. He was alive, after all, risen from the dead, at the right hand of the Father (Acts 7:55-56). He could still speak into the middle of world history directly and through apostles and prophets.
- F. There is a textual issue at 9:5-6. The wording that straddles the verse boundary is at issue. “It is hard for you to kick against the goads. So he, trembling and astonished, said ‘Lord, what do you want me to do?’ Then the Lord said to him...” See Acts 22:6-11 and 26:12-18. The “goads” phrase appears in a parallel passage Acts

26:14 and “what shall I do” appears in Acts 22:6. These were undoubtedly well-known to copyists and they could have imported them here from memory. Regardless, we seem safe to conclude that some close variation of these words was part of the exchange, so we need not overly concern ourselves with as if there is some difficult problem in the text’s transmission history.

Goads are sticks that are used to keep animals moving along. Perhaps those sticks are sharpened. God was prodding Paul to get with His program instead of to continue on the road of his life that would lead to destruction.

- G. Paul’s eyes could not see after his encounter with Jesus because of the bright light (22:11). Also, he did not eat for three days. He was in fasting mode while he pondered this great revelation.
- H. Saul’s belief in the Messiah seems to start immediately or very shortly thereafter. The time of fasting and prayer seems to be his overwhelmed response to the life-changing information and experience he has just had, and so somewhere during that time, he cements his decision to follow Christ and be obedient to the heavenly vision (26:19).

You see, Saul had to believe that the man Jesus existed. He was alive the whole time of Jesus’s ministry. He knew what the San Hedrin had done. He knew that followers of the Christian way *said* that Jesus had risen from the dead and was still alive, and even in heaven. But he probably also considered Jesus a troublemaker, or rabble rouser, or blasphemer, or false teacher, or bad rabbi, or whatever. Now, however, he knew that Jesus was alive. The heavenly vision was not a hallucination because the other people traveling with Paul experienced it as well, although without understanding what they heard.

II. Ananias and Saul’s Baptism, 9:10-19

- A. The Lord gave a big surprise to Ananias by speaking to Him. Just the fact that the Lord spoke to him must have been shocking and exciting and nerve-wracking. How is it that he responded to the Lord’s call just like the OT prophets: “here I am, Lord”? **Abraham**

answered that way (Gen. 22:11), **Moses** (Exod. 3:4), **Samuel** (1 Samuel 3:4), and **Isaiah** (Isaiah 6:8) did too.

B. God had a job for Ananias to do. He was to find Saul of Tarsus, lay hands on him to return his sight, and—we can be quite assured—tell him exactly what the Lord had said to Ananias. We can add here Acts 22:16 where Paul recalls Ananias urging him to get up quickly and be baptized to symbolize the forgiveness of sin, and to call on the name of the Lord.

This is right at the center of the revolution that was going on in Paul's mind. He was now considering Jesus as Lord, and believing that God raised him from the dead (Romans 10:9-10). He realized that Jesus was God in the flesh, and that only through Him were sins remitted. His poor efforts in Judaism made no effective dent in his sin debt before God. Only Christ could take away that debt. See Philippians 3:1-14.

He is moving out of his strictly monotheistic mind to a Trinitarian understanding in which he could speak of Christ as “God over all, blessed forever” (Romans 9:5). That would be impossible for him to do before his heart was opened.

The Spirit of God was the one who caused this revolution: John 16:9. He caused Paul to acknowledge Christ as Lord (1 Cor. 12:3). He washed and regenerated Saul (Titus 3:5).

C. Ananias's hesitation is understandable. He himself was one of the Damascus church leaders who was probably one of Saul's targets. But when God calls you to do something, even if dangerous, you are required to do it. He will protect you from danger, or through danger.

D. The Lord reiterated to Ananias the command and explains:

1. Saul is a chosen vessel to bear the name of Christ to the Gentiles, Kings, and children of Israel – all three groups, particularly Gentiles as seen in the remainder of Acts and Galatians, etc. Romans 11:13, 1 Tim. 2:7, 2 Tim. 1:11.
2. Saul will suffer for the sake of Christ. Col. 1:24. Paul had caused a lot of suffering, and in effect, he would get a lot in return.

- E. Saul's eyes were healed. We could guess that they were totally healed because he received his sight at once, and although this is the normal method of the Lord when he heals someone, we cannot be 100% certain. Perhaps Saul had ongoing vision issues due to the bright light on the Damascus road. The return of Saul's physical sight is a fitting analogy for the entrance of spiritual sight into his life.
- F. Saul was also filled with the Spirit. This is something that can realistically only happen after regeneration. His eyesight returned, and he submitted to water baptism right away. He was weakened after long abstinence from food so he ate to restore his strength.
- G. He spent some time in Damascus with the other Christians there. What a turn-around!

Conclusion

A real change was wrought in Saul's heart. It was clear from the get-go that he was entirely transformed in his mind and spirit. He was probably in a state of "spiritual shock" at the beginning, but as that wore off he was able to process what happened to him. It took days just to get back on his feet.

God chose Saul. If you are a Christ-follower, God chose you too, before you knew it, and He purposed to transform you like He did Saul. He also purposed to have you do good works for Him (Eph. 2:10). We are indeed chosen to be forgiven, and chosen to serve Him. Will you be like Saul and say, "I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision!" (Acts 26:19)?

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