
ACTS 9:1-9 : WHAT A CONVERSION!

No. EE29

Besides the happenings around the incarnation and death of Christ there could hardly have been an event which had a greater influence on the course of world history than the conversion of Saul, or Paul of Tarsus.¹ After all who, apart from our Lord, has played a greater role in the development of the world's thinking and historical development?

This is indeed the most famous of all conversions. Even non-believers know the story. Luke, the writer of the Book of Acts, writes in some detail about it no less than three times. Here in our text he relates it himself, and later twice reports on how Paul himself describes it in his speeches (Acts 22:1-16; 26:9-18).

A CLOSER LOOK AT THIS CONVERSION

People often talk of a "Damascus Road" conversion, which alludes to Saul's dramatic about-turn to Jesus.

The conversion of one who hated the church.

A dramatic conversion it was indeed. Just think of Saul as he was before the event.

Prior to this chapter Luke refers to Saul three times. In 7:58 it is mentioned that Saul looked after the clothes of those who stoned Stephen. In 8:1 we read that the young Pharisee approved of the murder. And in 8:3 we find his hate-filled persecution

1. In preparing this sermon much use has been made of John Stott's excellent commentary, *The Message of Acts*, The Bible speaks Today, Inter-Varsity Press, 1990.

of the church.

Luke's choice of words emphasises Saul's bitter and unremitting persecution of Jesus' disciples. Calvin describes him as a wild and bloodthirsty animal.

According to Acts 8:3 Saul "began to destroy" the church. In non-Biblical Greek the word refers to the way in which a wild animal tears a carcass to pieces.

In 9:21 we read that the people were astonished upon hearing that the persecutor of the church had been converted and was preaching the gospel. Is this not the man who "caused havoc" in Jerusalem among those who call on His name? The word they used could be translated as *crush* or *destroy*. Paul himself uses the word twice in the letter to the Galatians to describe his obsessive persecution of the church before his conversion (1:13; 23).

Paul was "breathing out murderous threats" against the Lord's disciples (9:1). This expression could also refer to the growling and snorting of wild animals.

No wonder that the apostle in later years said, "In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them" (26:11).

Truly this was a most dramatic conversion in the fullest sense of the word. Within a matter of days the ferocious wolf turned into a lamb - in fact, a loving and caring shepherd.

The Spirit prepared Saul for this moment.

Was Saul's conversion really an out of the blue happening as people seem to think?

Certainly he was changed in a moment from someone full of burning hatred into a broken man who wanted with all his heart to serve the Lord.

But do not think that the Lord had not spoken to him before he went on that journey to Damascus.

In Paul's version of what happened to him (Acts 26) he said that the Lord had spoken to him as he fell to the ground and said, "It is hard for you to kick against the goads" (14). The image used is that of a sharp instrument used to tame a wild animal. The

implication is that the Lord had already for some time been breaking him in.

Are there any indications in the Word that this had been the case? Indeed! The Lord prepared Saul over a period for the Damascus road.

What are the goads against which he kicked?

- We may assume that Paul wrestled with doubts even at the time when he was filled with hate against the Christians. He was about the same age as Jesus and it is most likely that the young rabbi had seen and heard Jesus. How could this intelligent man, versed as he was in the Old Testament Messianic prophecies, not have wondered sometimes about this remarkable Man from Nazareth?

- Another goad must have been Stephen's martyrdom. This godly man's powerful sermon and strong witness simply must have made an impression on this ardent devotee to Judaism. Quite possibly he was in the meeting of the Sanhedrin when they saw how Stephen's face became like that of an angel (Acts 6:15).

- The sharpest goad in Saul's flesh was, however, his own conscience. He could testify later that he had been faultless as far as legalistic righteousness was concerned (Ph 3:6). But to be outwardly exemplary is one thing; what goes on in your mind is something completely different. That is why Paul admits in Rm 7:7 ff. that he had suffered under what went on in his heart. Especially the tenth commandment - against covetousness - gradually convinced him of his depravity.

Once the Holy Spirit starts working on a person's conscience, it is a matter of time before you capitulate.

What we have to recognize therefore, is that Saul's experience on the Damascus road was not merely a sudden conversion, but had probably been preceded by a long process of conviction by the Holy Spirit.

In his conversion Saul was not completely passive.

The Lord's grace was not so overpowering that it ruled out Saul's will and choice.

Yes, the Lord so humiliated Saul that he fell to the ground. But He did not destroy him. He did not make a robot out of Saul. No, the future apostle's mind and will certainly played a role.

In asking Saul, "Why do you persecute me?", the Lord was addressing Saul's mind and conscience. And Saul was not so overcome that he was unable to talk. He asked after all, "Who are you, Lord?" When the Lord replied, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting", the words were etched so deeply in his being that he became and remained for the rest of his life a relentless worker for Christ's honour, gospel, kingdom and church.

Last but not least, Saul could obey a command. He got up and walked to Damascus.

PAUL'S CONVERSION WAS A SOVEREIGN ACT OF GOD

Having said all the above, it must also be stressed that this conversion was an act of sovereign grace on the part of God.

After all, the Lord initiated everything that occurred - the preparatory work, the light from heaven, the voice, the irresistible power. Clearly God decided that the moment had come for Saul's salvation, and thus it was unavoidable.

Furthermore, Paul never tired of stressing in his writings that the Lord had sovereignly taken hold of his life. That is why he wrote in Gl 1:15-16, "God ... set me apart from birth and called me by his grace". He then goes on to say that God had revealed His Son to him so that he could proclaim the gospel amongst the heathen nations.

Paul's conviction that he had been saved by sovereign grace is strikingly underlined by some of the expressions he uses.

- In Ph 3:12 he says that Christ had taken hold of

him. The word also means "to arrest". Ironically, this happened to Paul just before he arrived in Damascus to arrest the Christians!

- In 2Cor 4:6 he compares a true conversion experience to God's sovereign words at creation, "Let light shine out of darkness". Thus, he says, God made His light shine in his heart to give him the light of the knowledge of the glory of God. This, he then says, is the light that shines forth from Jesus Christ.

In 1 Tm 1:14 he writes that the grace of the Lord was poured out on him abundantly. The image he uses is that of a river in flood.

- In this connection Stott in his commentary calls to mind a few metaphors that C.S. Lewis uses in his autobiography (*Surprised by Joy*) with regard to his own conversion. Lewis writes that the Lord reeled him in like a fish; he felt like a mouse being chased by a cat; it was like a fox being overtaken by a pack of hounds; like a chess player gradually being manoeuvred into a position of checkmate.

WHAT DOES ALL THIS TELL US?

1. Think for a moment of your own conversion.

The circumstances and the manner of every person's conversion to Jesus Christ as Prophet, Priest and King are unique. Each one of us has his or her own story.

It may have been more dramatic or more mundane; it happened to us at different ages; sometimes it happened gradually over a lengthy period, sometimes the fight was over very quickly; sometimes there were tears of remorse, sometimes we were surprised by the joy of our salvation.

But there is always one common factor: *it is always a conversion to Jesus Christ!* Take Him out of the picture and per definition there cannot be a conversion.

2. Those who are still resisting Jesus Christ must know that there is no way of escaping a

meeting with Him.

The Word of God states that every knee shall bow before Him. May the Lord in His mercy grant that you will do so in this present time of grace because millions of people will only come to bend their knees when it is too late.

I cannot therefore let this moment pass. If you are still a passionate opponent of the Holy Spirit I must call on you to turn to the Lord. Do so while you still have time, still have access to His grace. It is free - even to those who hate Christ and his church, like Saul of Tarsus!

3. Those of you who are praying for loved ones, never lose hope - no matter how long it takes!

If the first century's most unlikely candidate for salvation could be turned inside out in the twinkling of an eye, who could possibly evade the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ?

Remember, your prayers are woven into the outworking of God's council!

4. Are you also driven to your knees in adoration at the fact that our King converts ardent enemies to loving and life-long servants?

Truly, for those of us who have been taken hold of by His grace, nothing makes more sense than to love and serve Him with an undivided heart!

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