

THE CONVERSION OF SAUL OF TARSUS

BIBLE TEXT : Acts 9:1-31; Galatians 1:11-19

LESSON 301 Senior Course

MEMORY VERSE: "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God" (Romans 8:16).

BIBLE TEXT in King James Version

Acts 9:1-31

¹ And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest,

² And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem.

³ And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven:

⁴ And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?

⁵ And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: *it is* hard for thee to kick against the pricks.

⁶ And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord *said* unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do.

⁷ And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man.

⁸ And Saul arose from the earth; and when his eyes were opened, he saw no man: but they led him by the hand, and brought *him* into Damascus.

⁹ And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink.

¹⁰ And there was a certain disciple at Damascus, named Ananias; and to him said the Lord in a vision, Ananias. And he said, Behold, I *am here*, Lord.

BIBLE REFERENCES:

I Christ's Appearance To Saul on the Damascus Road

1. Saul is commissioned to arrest the disciples at Damascus, Acts 9:1, 2;

Acts 8:3

³ **As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed *them* to prison.**

1 Timothy 1:13

¹³ **Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did *it ignorantly in unbelief.***

2. A sudden light appears about him and a voice from Heaven arrests him, Acts 9:3, 4.

3. Jesus is revealed, and astonished Saul is told what to do, Acts 9:5-7; Galatians 1:11-19;

1 Corinthians 15:8

⁸ And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time.

Ephesians 3:3

³ How that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery; (as I wrote afore in few words,

4. Without sight, Saul fasts and prays three days in Damascus, Acts 9:8, 9.

II Saul a Chosen Vessel unto the Gentiles

1. Ananias, in fear, is sent to Saul, Acts 9:10-14.

2. Saul's call and the things he must suffer foretold, Acts 9:15, 16;

1 Corinthians 15:10

¹⁰ **But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which *was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.***

2 Corinthians 11:23

²³ **Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as a fool) I *am more; in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft.***

3. Saul is filled with the Holy Ghost and his sight and strength are restored, Acts 9:17-19.

4. Saul begins preaching Christ at Damascus in great power, Acts 9:20-22.

III Saul's Escape from the Jews

1. Saul makes his escape from the Jews who sought his life at Damascus, Acts 9:23-25.

2. Barnabas intercedes for him among the fearful saints at Jerusalem, Acts 9:26, 27; Galatians 1:17, 18.

3. Saul preaches with boldness and returns to Tarsus temporarily, Acts 9:28-30.

4. After great persecutions, rest is restored to the Church, Acts 9:31.

NOTES:

Saul's Early Life

Our lesson opens with Saul, the persecutor of the Church of Christ, breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord. Saul was a young man. He was probably

¹¹ And the Lord *said* unto him, Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight, and enquire in the house of Judas for *one* called Saul, of Tarsus: for, behold, he prayeth,

¹² And hath seen in a vision a man named Ananias coming in, and putting *his* hand on him, that he might receive his sight.

¹³ Then Ananias answered, Lord, I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he hath done to thy saints at Jerusalem:

¹⁴ And here he hath authority from the chief priests to bind all that call on thy name.

¹⁵ But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel:

¹⁶ For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake.

¹⁷ And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, *even* Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost.

¹⁸ And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized.

¹⁹ And when he had received meat, he was strengthened. Then was Saul certain days with the disciples which were at Damascus.

²⁰ And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God.

²¹ But all that heard *him* were amazed, and said; Is not this he that destroyed them which called on this name in Jerusalem, and came hither for that intent, that he might bring them bound unto the chief priests?

born about the time Christ was born. His home was in Tarsus in Cilicia, north of Syria, in Asia Minor. Tarsus was a great city of learning, equal to that of Alexandria and Athens.

Probably at about the age of thirteen, Saul was sent to Jerusalem where he is thought to have become an aspirant to a place in the Sanhedrin. At Jerusalem he was brought up at the feet of Gamaliel, a great teacher in the Sanhedrin. For training in the Scriptures and in the principles of Judaism, it was a rare advantage to sit at the feet of such a teacher.

Saul had many things in his favour, so far as family connection was concerned. He was reared in a typical Jewish home. He was of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews and a Pharisee of the strictest sect. To him Christ was the enemy of Phariseeism. To uproot and annihilate this new doctrine of Christianity, which he considered a menace to Judaism, became his passion. He was bent on the destruction of the infant Church. Years later, in writing to the Galatians, he said. "Ye have heard of my conversation in time past in the Jews' religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it: and profited in the Jews' religion above many my equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers" (Galatians 1:13, 14).

City of Damascus

The persecution which had arisen in Jerusalem had caused many of the saints to flee to Damascus. Possibly Saul felt the city of Jerusalem had been rid of the followers of Christ. He may have felt rather proud of the work he had done. Now, with letters of authority from the high priest, he started on his way to Damascus to bring any he found of this faith, men or women, bound to Jerusalem.

Damascus is said to be the oldest city in the world. It is mentioned by Moses (Genesis 14:15). It is situated about 120 miles northeast of Jerusalem, and is a beautiful city, lying like a gem amidst the natural beauty of the Syrian plain. The Abana River, of which Naaman boasted, sends its clear, sparkling waters through the city.

Conviction

Saul was zealous of the Law, and in persecuting the Christians he thought he was doing God's will. He said himself that God had mercy on him because he did it ignorantly. But we believe that from the time that Stephen was stoned to death the convicting hand of God rested heavily upon Saul. The Lord said to him, "It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks."

Many times when conviction seizes the heart of an unregenerated person, all the sins of the life come before him, like a panorama. Saul possibly saw the shining face of Stephen and many of the saints he had cast into prison. He was guilty! He was condemned! Could he find pardon? The Old Testament, with which he was very familiar, states: "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (Isaiah 1:18). Saul was a Pharisee, a self-righteous man, but when the Lord showed him his heart, he was himself the chief of sinners.

Some people are wrapped up in their own righteousness and do not think they are so bad, but Jesus said to all who are in that class, "The publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you" (Matthew 21:31). So long as sin is in the heart, that heart is corrupt, defiled, and unclean. There is only one remedy for sin – the Blood of Jesus. "In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sin" (Ephesians 1:7).

²² But Saul increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ.

²³ And after that many days were fulfilled, the Jews took counsel to kill him:

²⁴ But their laying await was known of Saul. And they watched the gates day and night to kill him.

²⁵ Then the disciples took him by night, and let *him* down by the wall in a basket.

²⁶ And when Saul was come to Jerusalem, he assayed to join himself to the disciples: but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple.

²⁷ But Barnabas took him, and brought *him* to the apostles, and declared unto them how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus.

²⁸ And he was with them coming in and going out at Jerusalem.

²⁹ And he spake boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus, and disputed against the Grecians: but they went about to slay him.

³⁰ *Which* when the brethren knew, they brought him down to Caesarea, and sent him forth to Tarsus.

³¹ Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied.

Galatians 1:11-19

¹¹ But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man.

¹² For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught *it*, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ.

¹³ For ye have heard of my conversation in time past in the

Jesus the Fulfilment of the Law

The light from Heaven and the voice of Jesus suddenly arrested Saul and his party as they neared the city of Damascus. Saul and those who were with him realized something miraculous was taking place. Saul fell to the ground; and when that voice said, "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest," he surrendered to God and cried out, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?"

How fast thoughts must have gone through and crowded his mind. He was wrong! What he had been doing was wrong! Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ! He was the Son of God! Saul saw that the Law he had been so zealous for was fulfilled in Christ, whose followers he had been vehemently persecuting.

Prayer and Fasting

The next three days of Saul's life were spent by him in prayer and fasting. What anguish, what death to self, must have taken place in those three days, together with great rejoicing when he thought how merciful the Lord had been to him to call him and choose him to bear His name! Only a Christian can know the joy that was in the heart of this former enemy of Christ. Because much had been forgiven him, he now loved Christ with a love that was all-inclusive. He had surrendered completely to God on the Damascus road, where, beyond all doubt, he was converted. He showed great submission to the will of God there, and manifested other evidences that point to that fact also.

When Ananias came to the house where Saul was praying, he said to Saul: "Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost." No unsanctified person can receive the Holy Ghost, and no unconverted person can be sanctified. Saul had exhibited the fruits of a sanctified life already, so, therefore, was converted before Ananias' visit. God called him a chosen vessel. He had prayed to God and had seen in the vision God gave him that Ananias was coming to pray that he might be healed of the blindness that had come upon him.

Saul's blindness was physical blindness, for it had its beginning on the Damascus road when the Lord appeared to him. If it were spiritual blindness, it would not have begun there, for Saul was spiritually blind before that time. When Ananias prayed for Saul, "there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith." He was healed! He was ready to be baptized in water. This lesson teaches the importance of water baptism after one is born again. The early Christians were careful not to neglect the observance of this important ordinance.

Transformed

One of the greatest transformations that have ever been wrought in the life of any human being was wrought in the life of Saul, whose name finally became Paul. He was changed by "power divine," changed to "new life sublime."

Time does not transform men. Will power does not transform men. But Christ can and does change the heart and conduct of all those who come to Him in sincere contrition. Nothing but the power of God could bring such a change as was made in the man Saul in a moment of time. The Ethiopian cannot change his skin, or the leopard his spots. If they could, "then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil" (Jeremiah 13:23). A divine act is necessary for such a change to be made in the unregenerate heart; however, "with men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26).

The Lord made the heart. He alone has power to change it.

Jews' religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it:

¹⁴ And profited in the Jews' religion above many my equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers.

¹⁵ But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called *me* by his grace,

¹⁶ To reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood:

¹⁷ Neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me; but I went into Arabia, and returned again unto Damascus.

¹⁸ Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and abode with him fifteen days.

¹⁹ But other of the apostles saw I none, save James the Lord's brother.

The new birth brings about this change. Jesus talked to Nicodemus about it. Nicodemus could not understand how one who was old could be born again. Jesus explained the new birth by using the wind as an illustration. We cannot see the wind, but we can feel it on our cheeks or see the effects of it on the leaves of the trees. When the Spirit of God quickens the heart we cannot see the Spirit do it, but we can feel the changes in our heart. Others can see the effects of it in our lives, too. Jesus said, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3).

Today, people are trying to substitute good works for the new birth. But there is no true substitute. The old-fashioned Gospel is the only way to Heaven. Do not be deluded with a mere acceptance of Christ. "Ye must be born again." The person that is born again is a new creature. Saul was a new creature in Christ Jesus. A new passion was born within him — to know nothing but Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

Miracle of miracles! Saul of Tarsus converted and transformed from Saul the persecutor into Paul the Apostle!

So marvellous is his testimony that three times it is given in Holy Writ. The Apostle Paul was one of the greatest, though merely human souls, who ever walked among men. His life was made illustrious by saving grace, and it was devoted untiringly and joyfully to the service of his divine Master and Lord, Jesus Christ. With his mental and spiritual endowments he became the greatest preacher, theologian, missionary, and writer of all Christian history.

QUESTIONS

1. What was Saul's attitude toward the Christians?
2. What made him think he was doing God's service?
3. What brought about the change in his life?
4. Explain the new birth.
5. Why do you think water baptism is important?
6. Why did Saul have to flee from Damascus?
7. How did he get out of the city?
8. If you think the education Saul had helped him more fully to understand the law, explain why.