

"THE CONVERSION OF SAUL"

The conversion of Saul, a Jew who was also known by the Roman name of Paul, stands alongside Pentecost and the conversion of the centurion Cornelius as one of the key events in the book of Acts. Luke clearly thought that it was pretty significant. Otherwise he would not have recorded Paul's narration of it two additional times in the later chapters of this book. It is certainly the most famous conversion in church history. And a case can easily be made for seeing it as one of the most important events in world history. One commentator even goes so far as to say that "the most important event in human history apart from the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is the conversion to Christianity of Saul of Tarsus." [Larkin, 137] I won't argue with that. After all, it was largely through Paul that the gospel spread to the world beyond Israel. As J. Gresham Machen points out,

"The Christian movement...in A.D. 35...would have appeared to a superficial observer to be a Jewish sect. Thirty years later it was plainly a world religion. This establishment as a world religion, to almost as great an extent as any great historical movement can be ascribed to one man, was the work of Paul." [*The Origin of Paul's Religion*, 7-8]

Furthermore, it was Paul who was responsible for producing the earliest systematic statements of Christian doctrine. In the words of Derek Thomas,

“Without Paul, there would be no New Testament as we know it. Neither would we have many of the doctrinal emphases now considered central to the theology of the New Testament, such as union with Christ, justification by faith, and the significance of Christ’s death and resurrection as an explanation of the Christian life.” [247]

And Martyn Lloyd-Jones has this to say about Paul:

“Consider the way in which [Paul’s] epistles and their teachings have been honoured and used by the Holy Spirit. Their very essence is in all the creeds and doctrinal statements of the church universal, they form the basis of all true dogma. And who can forget the fact that the words of Paul were the means used by the Holy Ghost in the conversion of Augustine, Luther, and Wesley, not to mention scores of others. Let us put it quite plainly. The one who rejects what he calls Pauline theology is

flying in the face of everything that has been most wonderful and noble in the history of the Christian church." [Murray, vol. 1, 284]

There is no disputing the fact that Paul played a crucial role in the spread of the gospel and in the systematizing of Christian doctrine. This explains why it is always those who do not like doctrine who try to drive a wedge between Paul and Jesus, claiming that Paul's version of Christianity ended up being something very different than what Jesus originally had in mind.

Of course, this passage speaks against such claims in that it shows us that Paul was converted and commissioned for his ministry through a direct encounter with Jesus. On top of that, there is not really anything in Paul's teaching that cannot be found in seed form in the teachings of Jesus in the four Gospels. Those who attempt to drive a wedge between the teachings of Jesus and those of Paul inevitably end up being very selective in how they handle the teachings of Jesus. It is simply not true that Paul invented orthodox Christianity. He was Jesus' chosen instrument to carry the gospel to all the peoples of the earth.

But before that could happen, a dramatic change had to take place in Saul's heart. This is what is recorded in the passage that is before us tonight. Saul's

conversion was in many ways a unique moment in the historical unfolding of God's plan of redemption. At the same time, it is also a picture of what takes place in the hearts of everyone who is brought to faith in Christ. This passage shows us that *Jesus Christ is able to subdue those who were once his enemies and bring them into his service.*

What We Are Before We Encounter Christ

In the first part of our passage, Luke gives us a description of what Saul was like prior to his conversion. We are told that Saul was breathing out threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. He was extremely zealous as he went about his work of persecuting the church. He was so zealous that he even went after the Christians who had fled Jerusalem after the martyrdom of Stephen. He went to the high priest and obtained letters of extradition so that he could go to Damascus and bring back any of the Jerusalem Jews who had gone there as refugees.

We might wonder what it was about the Christian faith that caused Saul to be so intent on seeing this sect squashed. Most likely, it was the fact that Jesus' death on the cross is at the center of the Christian message. For a Pharisee like Saul, such claims would have brought to mind the words of Moses in

Deuteronomy, where it says that anyone who is hanged on a tree is under God's curse. After his conversion, Paul would come to see the theological significance of this. But when he first heard Christians saying that a man who died on a cross was God's Messiah, he would have taken those words as sheer blasphemy.

We might not think of ourselves as having been enemies of God or persecutors of his people prior to our conversion, but the fact of the matter is that a person is either for Christ or against him. There is no neutral ground. This is illustrated by considering the name that Luke uses to refer to the church in verse 2. He calls it "the Way." Not *a* way, but *the* way. The Christian faith is the only way of salvation, the only way to life. As Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6) Anyone who refuses to look to Christ as the way, the truth and the life is saying that Jesus was wrong when he said that no one comes to the Father except through him. They are setting themselves against Christ.

Encountering Christ

In the second part of our passage, Luke tells us about Saul's encounter with the risen Christ. This encounter took place just outside Damascus, a city that is about 135 miles northeast of Jerusalem. It would have taken Saul and his

companions about six days to get there traveling on foot. Luke says that as they approached the city, Jesus appeared to Saul and spoke to him. The first thing to note about this encounter is that it was Jesus who took the initiative in Saul's conversion. Saul was not investigating the claims of Christ. He was not what is sometimes referred to today as a "seeker." He already knew what he believed about the Christian faith. He was dead set on stamping it out. Saul did not make a decision for Christ. On the contrary, it was Christ who made a decision for him. The same is true of you and me, and of everyone who comes to faith in Christ. Regardless of how we end up being brought to saving faith, it is always Jesus who seeks us and brings us to himself.

Another thing to point out about this encounter has to do with what Jesus first said to Saul when he appeared to him. He said, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Now, strictly speaking, Saul was not persecuting Jesus but Jesus' followers. The fact that Jesus says this tell us something about the union that exists between Christ and his people. As Paul would later say in his letter to the Colossians, "your life is hidden with Christ in God." (Col. 3:3) Because of our union with Christ, the sufferings that believers experience due to their faith is suffering that Christ counts as his own. Augustine explained Jesus' words to Saul in this way: "It was the head in heaven crying out on behalf of the members

that were still on earth.” What a comfort it is for the church to know this when she is called to suffer for the name of Christ. He counts the sufferings that we experience for the sake of his name as his own.

It is also interesting that, even though Jesus appeared to Saul directly on the road to Damascus, he did not work entirely apart from his church. Jesus certainly could have completed Saul’s conversion right then and there, but he did not do that. Instead, he instructed Saul to go into the city and wait. Then he appointed a Christian named Ananias to come and restore Saul’s sight and baptize him into the church. Even in the case of this highly unusual conversion, Jesus still worked through his church to bring Saul to saving faith.

Being Brought Into Christ’s Church

In the third part of our passage, Luke tells us how Saul was admitted into the church. Jesus spoke to Ananias in a vision, telling him to go and restore the sight of this man from Tarsus named Saul. But Saul was no stranger to the Christians in Damascus. This is made clear by how Ananias protested the Lord’s command for him to go to see Saul. Ananias knew that Saul had done considerable damage to Christ’s church. And he knew why Saul had come to Damascus. We can understand why he would raise objections to what Jesus was telling him to do.

Isn't it surprising that people show their lack of faith even when God addresses them in such direct and extraordinary ways? The Lord spoke to Ananias in a vision, yet Ananias still objected to what Jesus was telling him to do! We see Moses doing the same kind of thing when God tells him to go and speak to Pharaoh. I point this out because it is easy for us to think that we wouldn't have such a hard time trusting God if he did not seem so distant from us, if he came and spoke to us directly. But when we look at how Ananias responds to the Lord here, we see that this is simply not true.

Jesus shows tremendous patience in how he responds to Ananias' protest. Jesus certainly did not need to be told who Saul was or what he was doing. Nevertheless, he tells Ananias that Saul is his chosen instrument to bring the gospel to the nations. There is significant irony in this. As a Pharisee, Saul would have wanted nothing to do with Gentiles. Yet Jesus is going to make him the apostle to the Gentiles. And Luke underscores this by sandwiching this account of Saul's conversion in between the conversion accounts of two Gentiles: that of the Ethiopian eunuch in chapter 8 and that of Cornelius the centurion in chapter 10.

Another thing that Jesus tells Ananias is that Saul will have to suffer for Christ's name. The grace that Jesus is extending to Saul is by no means cheap

grace. It is costly grace, grace that purchases sinners and makes them into servants of God. This man who persecuted the saints would himself become an object of persecution. Yet Paul did not view this as something burdensome. On the contrary, he counted it a privilege to suffer for Christ. Furthermore, he taught that this is a privilege that is granted to every Christian. As he says in his letter to the Philippians, "it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake" (Philippians 1:29)

When Ananias went to see Saul, he addressed him as "brother Saul." It is very telling that Luke includes this detail. I do not think that Paul ever would have forgotten the fact that Ananias addressed him as "brother." Imagine what it would have meant for him to hear a Christian speak to him in this way. He had gone to Damascus in an attempt to destroy the church. Yet the first Christian he meets in the city calls him "brother."

Luke tells us that after Ananias had spoken to Saul and laid his hands on him, Saul's sight was restored. The scales that fell from his eyes were symbolic of the spiritual blindness that caused him to persecute the body of Christ. But now that Christ has appeared to him, he can truly see. He experienced what he would later describe in these words: "[God] has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." (2 Corinthians 4:6)

There is much about this passage that is unique and unrepeatable. Even in the case of those who are brought to saving faith in a sudden and dramatic manner, their experience is still not the same as what happened to Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus. Paul was an apostle. He was Christ's chosen instrument to carry his name before the Gentiles. His conversion was a unique event. Nevertheless, when we think about the things that took place in Saul's heart when he was met by the risen Christ outside Damascus, it is plain to see that the same things take place in the heart of every Christian when he is brought to saving faith. In the words of John Stott, "we too can (and must) experience a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, surrender to him in penitence and faith, and receive his summons to service." [166] That is what happened to Paul at his conversion, and it is what happened to you when you became a Christian. You were made to see your spiritual blindness in sin. You were given the gift of new sight. And you were called to live the rest of your days for the sake of Christ and his kingdom.