



## Applied Faith Men's Bible Study

South Hills Baptist Church

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## Paul, Seeing the Light

### Lesson #2

#### Acts 9:1-19

There is a lot of confusion these days about what it means to be born again. A recent book by researcher Wade Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*, argues that today's "born-again" Christians are united by emotions and experiences, not by shared doctrines or moral beliefs. One-third of America's 77 million baby boomers identify themselves as born-again Christians, but only 5 percent of those have any link to a conservative Protestant denomination. Half say that religions other than Christianity are "equally good and true." One-third believe in reincarnation and astrology. Nearly half support abortion (from *The Watchman Expositor*, vol. 18, number 1, 2001, p. 22).

We all need to be clear about what constitutes true conversion. We need to know it for ourselves, so that we are sure about our own conversion. We need to know it for when we talk with others about spiritual matters, since clearly not all who profess to be born again are truly saved.

We come in our study of Acts to the first of three accounts of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, later known as the apostle Paul. Many regard his conversion as the most important event in the history of the church since Pentecost. It also is regarded as second only to the resurrection of Christ as the most convincing proof of the truth of the Christian faith. If this militant opponent to Jesus Christ was truly converted to become Christianity's most ardent advocate, it demands an explanation. Why would he do so and then endure the terrible suffering that he went through, unless he was convinced that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead? Through the Holy Spirit, Luke saw Paul's conversion as a watershed event, or he would not have repeated the story three times in this relatively short history of the expansion of Christianity.

The story of Paul's conversion teaches us that ...

God is able to convert the most unlikely of sinners and use them as His chosen instruments in the cause of the gospel.

Let's look at some of the spiritual lessons of this story.

1. God is able to convert the most unlikely of sinners.

Humanly speaking, Saul was not a likely candidate for salvation. It would be comparable to hearing that Saddam Hussein had gotten converted and had become an evangelist to the Arabs! There was no human explanation for Saul's conversion! But there is no human explanation for any true conversion, because salvation is from the Lord, not from man. God is able to do what we cannot imagine.

Luke states (9:1) that Saul was still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. He was a man consumed with one passion, namely, to eradicate followers of Jesus from the earth. It was not enough that he had broken up the Jerusalem church after Stephen's death. Now he wanted to go 125 miles to Damascus to find any followers of Christ so that he could bring them bound to Jerusalem. The early Christians had not yet broken away from the synagogues, and so the high priest in Jerusalem had jurisdiction, even in Damascus.

To show Saul's heartless cruelty, Luke mentions that he was after both men and women. He didn't care if he took fathers and mothers away from their children. He had such an intense hatred for Jesus Christ and His followers that he felt that any suffering he inflicted on them was right. Perhaps he justified his zeal by pointing to Phinehas, who out of righteous zeal for the Lord, had speared the Israelite man and the Moabite woman whom he had taken into his tent (Num. 25:6-15). Saul was zealous for the Law of Moses, and these followers of Jesus were spreading a pernicious heresy in Israel. And so, as Saul and his henchmen approached Damascus, perhaps they were bragging about all of the stupid people that they would round up in their effort to squash this dangerous myth.

Just then a bright light from heaven flashed around them and they all fell to the ground. Saul heard a voice saying, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" The other men heard a voice, but could not understand what was said (22:9). In his confusion and shock, Saul replied, "Who are You, Lord?" He knew that it was God who was speaking, but he wasn't prepared for what he heard next: "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." James Boice puts it, "God spoke, and God was Jesus" (Acts [Baker], p. 151). At the same instant, Saul got a glimpse of Jesus in His glory (9:17, 27), but the brightness of the light caused him to go temporarily blind. The Lord continued speaking, telling Saul to go into the city, where it would be told to him what he must do.

Three days later the Lord spoke to the godly Ananias, who only appears in Scripture at this story. He obediently went to Saul and prayed for him to receive his sight. Then he baptized him. The greatest missionary and theologian of church history had been truly converted. What can we learn?

### **A. SALVATION DOES NOT DEPEND ON THE FALLEN WILL OF MAN, BUT RATHER ON THE SOVEREIGN WILL AND POWER OF GOD.**

Everything about Saul's conversion came from God. Saul was not searching for the Lord or for salvation. He would have told you that he was already one of God's chosen people: "circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee" (Phil. 3:5). The Lord did not appear to Saul and plead, "Oh, Saul, won't you please trust in Me as

your Savior? I have done everything that I can do to make that possible. Now the rest is up to you. It's your decision, but I can't force your will."

Rather, the Lord knocked the man to the ground and completely overpowered him. He struck him blind. Then Jesus gave him very direct orders about what he had to do next. How much choice did Saul have? Saul was God's chosen instrument to fulfill a very definite task, "to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel" (9:15). God already had ordained that Saul would suffer much for His name's sake (9:16). It did not all hang on whether Saul would exercise his "free will"! God had it all planned from start to finish! As Paul puts it in Romans 9:16, "So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy."

## **B. SALVATION DOES NOT DEPEND ON THE MERITS OR GOOD POINTS OF MAN'S NATURE, BUT RATHER ON GOD'S FREE GRACE.**

God did not choose Saul because He saw something of value in his nature. Saul had not done anything to make him worthy of God's grace. God didn't look down through time and say, "I can see that someday Saul will choose Me by his free will and then he will make a pretty good apostle, so I'll make him one of My elect." That would make God's election depend on something good in man, namely his wise choice or his faith or his potential. If God grants salvation because of anything in man, then it is not by His free grace; it is by human merit.

The Bible is clear that if salvation depends on anything in us, then no one would be saved, because no one seeks for God (Rom. 3:10). "Those who are in the flesh cannot [not will not, but cannot] please God" (Rom. 8:8). Since faith and repentance are pleasing to God, the natural man cannot believe in Christ or repent of his sins unless it is granted to him (Eph. 2:8-9; Phil. 1:29; Acts 5:31; 11:18; 2 Tim. 2:25). But this is great news, because it means that God can take a man breathing out murderous threats, a committed enemy of the faith, and change his heart from intense hatred to submission by His mighty power. That change of heart takes place instantly, although the fruits of true conversion develop and deepen over the years. God is able to convert the most unlikely of sinners.

## 2. When God converts a sinner, there are inevitable marks of conversion.

There are many more marks of conversion than I can begin to list here. First John gives a number of tests to determine whether a person truly knows Christ as Savior and Lord. Many other Scriptures do the same thing (e.g., 1 Cor. 6:9-11; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 5:3-6; Col. 1:23; 3:5-6; 2 Pet. 1:5-11; see also Jonathan Edwards, A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections, or the modern English version, The Experience That Counts). But in our text, I find at least 8 marks of true conversion in Saul:

### **A. CONVICTION OF SIN IS A MARK OF TRUE CONVERSION.**

Before a man becomes a saint, he must first see himself as a sinner. So, the Lord asks, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" (9:4). The repetition of his name shows the Lord's tender concern for him, as when He said, "Martha, Martha," or "Simon, Simon," or "Jerusalem, Jerusalem" (Luke 10:41; 22:31; 13:34). By the pointed question, the Lord was not trying to gain information! Rather, He wanted Saul to consider what he was doing. He thought that he was zealous for the Lord, but in reality, he was persecuting Jesus Himself. With every Christian he harmed, he was plunging the sword again and again into the wounded side of Jesus!

In response to this traumatic revelation, Saul did not eat or drink for three days. I do not think that he decided, "I need to fast and pray about these things." Rather, as when a person is mourning over the death of a loved one, he doesn't even desire food, so Saul, in mourning over his sins, lost his appetite.

While some may be deeply convicted of sin before conversion, to show them their great need, others may experience it more in depth in the years that follow. That has been my personal experience, as it is with many that are raised in Christian homes. But there is no such thing as a truly born-again person who lacks a growing sense of his own sinfulness. The closer we walk in the light, the more that light reveals the dirtiness of our sinful hearts. In lamenting the shallow and spurious conversions of his day, Spurgeon said, "Today we have so many built up who were never pulled down; so many filled who were never emptied; so many exalted who were never humbled; that I the more earnestly remind you that the

Holy Ghost must convince of sin, or we cannot be saved” (cited by Iain Murray, *Revival and Revivalism [Banner of Truth]*, p. 409).

## **B. HUMBLING FROM OUR PRIDE IS A MARK OF TRUE CONVERSION.**

Pride is the root of all sins, and we all must fight it every day. But no one gets saved who boasts in his own righteousness. No one gets saved who thinks that his good deeds will commend him to God. No one is saved who thinks that his own brilliant choice attained it for him. Saul went storming off to Damascus with authority to arrest Christians. He had power on his side. But after the Lord struck him down, he had to be led by the hand into the city. At first, he was independent and strong; afterwards, he was dependent and weak. No one is truly trusting in Christ for salvation who is boasting in himself.

The Lord no doubt used Ananias, a simple believer, to teach Saul humility. Saul had been educated under the reputed Gamaliel. Before that he had probably studied at the university in Tarsus. But now God forces Saul to receive his sight and instructions for what he should do next from this simple servant, otherwise unknown in Scripture. Humility is not optional. All who are truly saved will freely acknowledge their own sinfulness, and will give all the glory for their salvation to God alone.

## **C. A RECOGNITION OF AND OBEDIENCE TO THE LORDSHIP OF CHRIST IS A MARK OF TRUE CONVERSION.**

Saul asks, “Who are You, Lord?” He got an immediate answer: “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” Saul instantly realized that Jesus was alive from the dead, as all of His followers had been asserting. He also recognized, to his horror at first, that Jesus was not only alive, but also exalted to the throne of God the Father. It followed that Jesus’ death on the cross, rather than discrediting him as a false prophet, fulfilled prophecy and was God’s provision for man’s sin. His resurrection confirmed Him as being Israel’s Messiah and Lord of all the earth.

When this risen and exalted Lord tells Saul, “Get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do,” Saul does not say, “I think I’d like to accept

You as Savior, but I'm not ready to accept You as Lord." He got up and went into the city! After Ananias prayed for him and he regained his sight, the first thing that he wanted to do was not to eat, but to be baptized in obedience to the risen Lord. Only after that did he eat. Everyone who is truly converted recognizes the exalted authority of Jesus Christ and seeks to live in obedience to Him, no matter what the cost.

#### **D. A TRANSFORMATION FROM SPIRITUAL BLINDNESS TO SPIRITUAL SIGHT IS A MARK OF TRUE CONVERSION.**

Paul began the trip physically seeing, but spiritually blind. He ended it physically blind, but spiritually seeing. What he formerly thought that he saw, he no longer saw. What he formerly did not see, he now did see. What was formerly gain to him now was loss. What he formerly despised, he now cherished. Just as Jonah was three days and nights in the belly of the great fish, so Saul was three days and nights in the dark. When the scales fell from his eyes, he saw everything in a new light, the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in Christ. Every truly converted person can say, "I once thought that I saw, but I was blind. Now, by God's grace, I see."

#### **E. SEEKING THE LORD IN PRAYER IS A MARK OF TRUE CONVERSION.**

The Lord tells Ananias regarding Saul, "For behold, he is praying" (9:11). "Behold" is left out of some modern translations, but it is in the original. A modern English version would be, "Whoa, check it out, dude!" Before this, as a Pharisee, Saul prayed often every day. But now, "Whoa! he is praying!" For the first time, Saul is really praying. He isn't just reciting the ritualistic prayers of religion. He is praying from the heart, really seeking God. No doubt he was first and foremost seeking God's forgiveness for the many terrible things that he had done. He was probably seeking God's guidance for what he should do next. He was seeking God's revelation, so that he could really know Him, and Jesus Christ, whom He had sent (John 17:3). Truly converted people begin to pray in the true sense of the word for the first time.

## **F. FELLOWSHIP WITH THE LORD'S PEOPLE IS A MARK OF TRUE CONVERSION.**

Saul was on a mission to destroy the Lord's people. But now, he is dependent on one of the Lord's people to regain his sight. Ananias was a godly Jew who had accepted Jesus as his Messiah. After he receives the confirmation that he needs from the Lord, he goes to Saul and greets him, "Brother Saul." How wonderful those words must have sounded to Saul! "Brother Saul!" Formerly, he was public enemy number one of the church. But after God transformed him, he immediately became Brother Saul. One reason that the Lord sent Ananias, rather than healing Saul's sight directly in answer to his prayers, was so that Saul would begin to see what he later taught clearly, that the church is the body of Christ. We are members of one another.

It is interesting how believers are referred to in this story. They are members of "the Way" (a description of Christians found only in Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22), showing the fact that Christ is the only way to God. They are called disciples (9:1, 10), which means followers or learners of Jesus. They are saints (9:13), or holy ones, which refers to our being set apart from the world to God. They are "those who call upon Your name" (9:14), showing our dependence on God in prayer. And, they are brothers (9:17). But best of all, Jesus tells Saul, "You have been persecuting Me!" By persecuting the church, Saul was persecuting Jesus Himself, the Head of His body, the church. An organic and indissoluble union exists between Christ and His people. When someone harms us, he is harming our Lord. Truly converted people love the fellowship of the saints, because we are members of one another and of our exalted Head.

## **G. A LIFE LIVED UNDER THE POWER AND CONTROL OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IS A MARK OF TRUE CONVERSION.**

Ananias tells Saul that the Lord has sent him not only so that Saul would regain his sight, but also so that he may be filled with the Holy Spirit (9:17). Every Christian receives the indwelling Holy Spirit at the moment of conversion. He gives us the power to overcome sin and His life in us produces the character qualities that are called the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). If you are seeking to live the Christian

life in your own strength, you will be defeated and frustrated. But if you live daily in submission and dependence on the Holy Spirit, you will experience consistent victory over sin and the joy of salvation welling up within you.

#### **H. A NEW PURPOSE AND DIRECTION IN LIFE IN LINE WITH GOD'S SOVEREIGN WILL IS A MARK OF TRUE CONVERSION.**

A truly converted person is no longer his own; he has been bought with a price. He now lives for God's purpose. Saul was God's chosen instrument (or vessel), to bear His name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel. Every converted person needs to ask, "Lord, what will You have me to do with my life?" That leads to the third major lesson:

#### **3. God uses converted sinners as His chosen instruments in the cause of the gospel.**

Formerly, Saul had a mission, but it was self-willed and evil. He thought that he was serving God by eliminating these "heretics," but he was only feeding his pride and lust for power. He was advancing beyond many of his contemporaries (Gal. 1:14), climbing the religious ladder to prominence. But now, he becomes an earthen vessel, filled with God's treasure (2 Cor. 4:7), with a new purpose of glorifying God, whether by life or by death (Phil. 1:20). Formerly, he inflicted suffering on others; now, he will suffer much for the sake of Christ. Formerly, he despised the Gentiles; now, he will offer to them the riches of Christ.

If God has saved you from your sins, He has a purpose for your life, and it is not primarily for you to succeed in the American dream. His main purpose has to do with eternal realities. He wants to use you in His great cause of discipling the nations. He may let you fulfill His purpose by staying in America. But, He may call you to go to a country where Christ is not nearly so well known. The main thing is for you to be a willing and clean vessel, "useful to the Master, prepared for every good work" (2 Tim. 2:21).

## Conclusion

In 1 Timothy 1:16, Paul says, “And yet for this reason I found mercy, in order that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience, as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life.” Paul’s conversion is an example for us all. It is an example of the fact that none are too far gone for God’s mighty power to save. It is an example of what God can do when He takes hold of a life. It is an example to encourage us to pray for and share with every sinner, no matter how wicked. It is an example for us to commit ourselves afresh to whatever purpose God has given us to do for His kingdom. As Paul later wrote, “For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf” (2 Cor. 5: 14-15).

## Application/Activity

Last week we were to prayerfully think of up to six people that we considered “enemies” or groups of people. We were supposed to pray for each of those people/s on a given day. We were to pray for their hearts to be softened. We were to pray for their salvation. This week’s application/activity is one of two things. First, continue to find “enemies” to pray for. Make these prayers heartfelt. Think of these “enemies” as converting to a love of Christ and their lives being transformed from an enemy to a friend. Or, as a second option, you can reach out to one of these “enemies”. Talk to them, ask for forgiveness for whatever perceived wrong you have committed towards them. Bathe this option in prayer before ever approaching this person. See God work in their life and yours. Let God heal that relationship.