

The Conversion of Saul of Tarsus

Acts 9:1-9

According to Dictionary.com the word convert is a verb with the following definitions:

- 1) to change (something) into a different form or properties; transmute; transform.
- 2) to cause to adopt a different religion, political doctrine, opinion, etc.
- 3) to turn to another or a particular use or purpose; divert from the original or intended use:
- 4) to modify (something) so as to serve a different function:
- 5) to change in character; cause to turn from an evil life to a righteous one:

Of all these definitions, I actually like the first one the best. True conversion to Christianity is more than a religion change, it's more than a direction or functional change. It is even more than a change in character. True Christian conversion is to be totally transformed -

“The old things are passed away, behold, all things are made new.” (2 Cor. 5:17)

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” (Rom. 12:2)

Conversion is the process of being converted. Whenever you take the opportunity to read through the New Testament, particularly the Gospels and the book of Acts, you find a multitude of conversion experiences of individuals... and sometimes even whole households.

In the Gospels we see individuals giving up everything, even their businesses to follow Jesus:

- We see some who were healed of diseases and freed from demons, turning their lives over to Jesus, declaring Him as their Lord and Savior;

- We read of tax collectors – hated and despised by their communities;
- Prostitutes and adulteresses – separated by shame and abhorred by those who saw themselves as more righteous;
- We see a man so consumed by demons and demonic power that no one can contain or restrain him. He hated his own life so much that he was constantly cutting and doing himself harm –

Yet the love of Jesus delivered them all, setting them free: free from sin and from the judgments of the past.

Free from their own destructive life choices in order that they might fully follow the Savior.

- We see widows consumed by grief and heartbreak – find hope and joy in the Savior;
- We see those who are both spiritually and even physically dead coming back to life... a new life... an eternal life with Jesus.

Over and over again we see those who are **rejected by the religious and scorned by society** – yet they experience the love of the Savior, coming to know forgiveness and acceptance in the Beloved. That is the power of Christ. That is the hope of the Gospel.

*There is not a man nor a woman
Outside the reach of God's forgiveness.
There is no man low enough or high enough,
But that the love of Christ can still reach them*

*There is not a sin so appalling
or a soul so dark
but that the blood of Jesus Christ
can and will wash it white as snow.*

The promise of the Lord through Isaiah the Prophet tells us clearly:

Isaiah 1

¹⁸ *"Come now, and let us reason together," says the LORD, "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool.*

The conversions we see throughout the Bible attest to the fact that our God is a God of reconciliation... And He's the One who does the work to make available to us the means of reconciliation, the very blood and sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

One of the other things we see as we read through the Bible are the multitude of characters who are outside the will, plan and purposes of God. We see individuals who by their very actions show themselves to be enemies of God, literally fighting against the very One who created them and made way for their salvation. And, there are **none so well known as a man by the name of Saul of Tarsus.**

Saul was a bad guy – yet he didn't think so!

Although he thought himself to be righteous... although he thought himself to be doing the will of God... we know that neither of those things were true. As a matter of fact, the testimony of his own life tells us that he eventually realized that earlier in life he was on the fast track to the judgement of God coming against him, **and all the while he thought he was pleasing God.**

That my friend, is a dangerous place to be.

Saul of Tarsus, first enters the biblical scene at the stoning of Steven at the end of Acts 7 and in the opening passages of Acts 8

Acts 7

⁵⁷ Then they (the Council) cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him (Stephen) with one accord; ⁵⁸ and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

Acts 8

¹ Now Saul was consenting to his death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. ² And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him. ³ As for Saul, he **made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.**

There is no getting around it, **Saul of Tarsus was an evil man, with evil intent.** He cared nothing about the welfare of the ones called Christian, and as a matter of fact sought every possible way to do them harm through every avenue open to him.

Look with me now at Acts 9, beginning in verse 1

*¹ Then Saul, still breathing **threats and murder** against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were **of the Way**, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.*

For Saul, it wasn't enough to harass the Believers living in Jerusalem at that time, he wanted to go wherever he could to make trouble and arrest and even murder those who **had experienced the miracle of conversion, the forgiveness of sin and were following the Savior.** Oh yes, Saul was a bad dude.

A very religious dude, but a bad dude!

Saul's hatred was so great, he had gone to the High priest and obtained letters of introduction to the synagogues of Damascus and something that would be comparable to our "**arrest warrants**". These enabled Paul to go into these synagogues or the surrounding communities and detain any who were **determined by either their own actions or the testimony of witnesses that they were Christians.**

This always brings me to the question:

If an arrest warrant were issued against you as a Christian, would your life or the testimony of those who know you be enough to bring a conviction?

Sobering thought.

Luke tells us he was looking for "*any who were of the Way.*"

This is a **peculiar and rare word** used to designate Christians – those who were *of the Way*, being those who followed the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ himself had declared that He was "**the Way, the Truth, and the Life**". He was also known as the **Way of truth**, and the **Way of Righteousness.**

But, in referring to those who followed Him as **“the Way”**, it is used only in the book of Acts and **in all the cases when it is used**, it is used somehow in reference either to Paul’s testimony or actions of the Church in situations that were **directly connected to the Apostle Paul**. *In my wondering mind, I wonder if perhaps the Apostle (either pre or post-conversion) had been the one to coin the phrase.*

Well, whatever the case, we now find Saul of Tarsus, this one who declares himself as being a Pharisee of the Pharisees, and blameless in the Law of Israel is on the road to arrest any Believers he might find in Damascus: *men or women, (that) he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.*

Now, depending upon the route you take, Damascus was about 150 miles from Jerusalem. If traveling by foot, it would have taken him and his companions about two weeks (give or take a day or so). That’s a lot of time to let your hatred continue to simmer and grow.

Ah, but God...

Acts 9

*³ As he journeyed he came **near Damascus**, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. ⁴ Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" ⁵ And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads."*

Now, real quick, some of your versions may not have that last part: *It is hard for you to kick against the goads* or, it might be translated a little different. Don’t worry about it, we’ll look at it in a moment – it’s not a major issue.

But here, as Paul traveled, *suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. ⁴ Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice...* It was the very voice of **Jesus**, Himself.

Then, in **a very personal way**, Jesus addressed Saul as only Jesus could:

"Saul, Saul..., "

No, Jesus wasn’t yelling at him, trying to get his attention: SAUL! SAUL!

But more as a loving, weary and almost heartbroken parent would address an erring child, **“Oh, Saul, Saul...”**

I find it interesting that we see this same tone and style as the Lord addressed Simon Peter on the night He was betrayed. Do you remember?

Luke 22

³¹ *And the Lord said, "Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat.*

No, I don't think the Lord was yelling at either Saul or Simon. As a matter of fact, you miss the whole connection unless you understand that as a Hebrew idiom, **repeating someone's name was an expression of intimacy.**

We find it throughout the Bible in both Old Testament and New –

- Just before Abraham plunges the knife into Isaac, the Lord stops him by calling out **“Abraham! Abraham!”** (Gen. 22:11)
- As God is encouraging Jacob, even as an old man to join his son Joseph in Egypt He spoke to him in a night vision, **“Jacob, Jacob!”** (Gen. 46:2)
- As the LORD calls to Moses from the burning bush, **“Moses! Moses!”** (Ex. 3:4)
- The midnight call to a very young Priest and Prophet in training, **“Samuel! Samuel!”** (1 Sam. 3:10)
- Even the heart felt cry of Jesus on the Cross, **“My God! My God!”** (Mat. 27:46)

Now, here too was a **heartfelt cry of Jesus** to a man that **thought he was so right, yet was so wrong... so wrong in everything.**

- He was **religious** without a **relationship**
- He had **knowledge** of the scriptures, yet **ignorant** of the One they are pointing to
- Through circumcision he bore the **physical markings** of being a part of the **people of God**, but knew nothing of being a **Child of God**
- He knew the **Law of God**, but not **the heart of God**
- He excelled **beyond his peers** in the ways of Judaism, but traveled **further away** from God with each passing breath

"Saul, Saul, and then Jesus asked that strange question... why are you persecuting Me?"

Saul had been blinded by the brightness of the light that suddenly appeared. It was so intense that he fell to the ground. He was definitely *"knocked off his high horse"* rather than he was riding one or simply walking. He now found himself on the ground, blinded, and in absolute disarray. Then a voice came to him *"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"*

A very strange question indeed and Saul's response was very reasonable, *"Persecuting you. I don't even know who you are. Who are You, Lord?"*

You need to understand that as Saul uses the word *Lord*, even though it is capitalized, it is simply the Greek word *kurios* – a word or term of respect, just as easily translated as *"Sir"*. He is addressing the voice in terms of respect, not in terms of divinity. He really doesn't know who or where this voice is coming from.

I believe we can safely say that the answer to his question **shook his world –**

*"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.
It is hard for you to kick against the goads."*

Jesus, the One whom Saul hated.

Jesus, the name Saul was trying to wipe off the face of the earth.

Jesus, the One crucified, whom His followers say was resurrected.

Jesus, was now here addressing Saul and he couldn't deny it.

This was a hard reality to fight against.

And now Jesus tells Saul that with every Believer he persecuted, everyone he had beaten, each man and woman he had put in jail; with each one Saul was coming against Jesus personally. Whenever an attack comes on you as a Believer because of your faith, the ones doing the attacking are actually attacking **Christ in you**.

And as Saul attacked and persecuted the Christians in and around Jerusalem, he continued to see the **impact of the Gospel** in their lives. What they had was **real**. How much he had actually, personally heard of the teachings of Jesus, we don't know, but we do know that he saw and heard the testimonies of those who knew Christ.

As he and others persecuted those of *the Way*, the strength of these Believer's faith: in the midst of the trials, imprisonments and even death, screamed the reality and validity of their testimony.

Now here on the road to Damascus, Jesus makes the statement, *"It's hard for you to kick against the goads isn't it Saul?"*

The words, "It is hard for thee to kick against the goads" (NKJV), are not in the better and earlier Greek manuscripts. But this statement *is* found in Acts 26:14,¹ where Paul shares the testimony of his conversion with King Agrippa.

So, what is a goad and why would Paul be kicking at it?

A goad was a stick with a sharp point on the end to help "goad" or spur the cattle or livestock into moving in the right direction. As the herdsman would poke the stick into the hindquarters of the animal, the animal would move in a direction away from it. Unless the animal was really stubborn, in which case they would continue on their same course and simply try to kick the "**goad**" away from them.

That's where Saul finds himself.

God used the testimony of Stephen and all the other Believers to **poke** Saul into the right way, into the Truth. But he refused to pay attention and continually tried to get rid of the irritant. Now he's lying on the ground, blinded by the brightness of the light and the One who he hated is speaking to him with great compassion.

Just like many people today, Saul had kicked long and hard against the wooing and direction of God's Spirit in his life... kicking against the testimony of true Believers... try to ignore or the message. God had been speaking to him loud and clear for some time,

¹ Stanley D. Toussaint, "[Acts](#)," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 376.

but Saul wouldn't listen. Now, through much mercy and abundant grace, God finally got his attention..., *Saul! Saul!*

And instead of being **the recipient of God's judgment**, Saul was now receiving **the grace and compassion of God**.

Oh Church, don't ever forget, **our God is a compassionate God**.

Even as God was giving the Law and warning Moses about what would happen if the people disobeyed, He wanted Moses to fully understand His compassion for the people, so God spoke to Moses

Ex. 34

⁶And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, ⁷keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin....,"

The Psalmist knew by the history of Israel and by personal experience, that although judgment is deserved, our God is a merciful God to those who turn to Him –

Psalm 86

¹⁵But You, O Lord, are a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering and abundant in mercy and truth.

We see this and we come to understand that although Saul is **physically blind right now**, he is **beginning to see clearer** than he'd ever seen in his entire life. And as he becomes aware of the grace and mercy of God, he accepts that grace and mercy, **surrendering himself** to the plans and purposes of Christ in his life.

Acts 9

⁶So he (Saul), trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" Then the Lord said to him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

Now, just like Philip, Saul becomes a man willing to go, and willing to be used as a vessel. Even though at this time, he has no clue where that road will lead him. He is simply **obedient to the call**.

He wasn't able to see at this point **either physically or exactly what the Lord had instore for him in the future**, but he trusted the Lord and was ready to move forward at His command.

Acts 9

*⁷And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one. ⁸Then Saul arose from the ground, and **when his eyes were opened he saw no one**. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹And he was three days **without sight, and neither ate nor drank**.*

This was, no doubt, a time of introspection and self-examination for the man soon to be recognized as the Apostle Paul.

He had met the Master and was now surrendered to His leading and care. What the days ahead would hold for him, he had no clue... Other than the fact that his life would never be the same after this.

When we have a true and powerful encounter with Jesus, our lives must change. They cannot remain the same.

But, you need to see that **encounters with Jesus aren't just at conversion**. He desires to have an encounter with us on a regular and ongoing basis. And if that is true in your life, He will continue work and move in your life in amazing, **sometimes scary ways**. But as we trust Him, we know that all He does will move to draw us closer to Him, as we bring glory to His Name.