

## **Acts 9:1-31**

### **The Gospel and the Pharisee (The Conversion of Saul of Tarsus)**

**Introduction:** The Book of Acts is the story of earliest Christianity and we've been following it for sometime now. As we've followed the story through Acts the good news of God's renewal of all things and gracious acceptance through Jesus Christ is making it's way to the ends of the earth. But first, before the Gospel goes to the Gentiles, God will convert his main evangelist to the Gentiles, and who better than a former hardline, fanatical, ultra-nationalist, super orthodox, pharisaic Jew.

This Morning we come to one of Christianity's most famous conversions. Which begs the question- What does it mean to become a Christian? Without question, the story of Saul's conversion is one of the most famous, and important events in all of Acts.

So how does someone as radically devoted to their religion as Saul of Tarsus was, get converted; how does anyone convert to Christianity? What does that look like?

#### **Conversion**

"By conversion we mean the reorientation of the soul of an individual, the deliberate turning from indifference or an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right." -Nock

"Repent and believe the gospel!" (These are words that often begin the Lenten season, which began this past Wednesday) This is the call of the NT and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is for everyone to repent, not just the bad, not just the good, not just mediocre, but everyone, everywhere to repent, to turn around, to be converted.

This is one radical difference of Christianity from other religions - you cannot be born a christian, it cannot be passed onto you, it is not a tribal thing, or cultural club. No, you must be converted - Repent and believe the Gospel.

This chapter shows at least 5 marks of true conversion. I think we could safely say that If these aren't evident in your life (if this hasn't taken place) than you are not a Christian, if only some of them are evident maybe you have some more looking into Jesus and the Gospel to do, as well as some

introspection to know whether you are following the real Jesus, the true Christianity of the scripture - otherwise how can you have any assurance for your life and salvation? ("Stepford God" -that doesn't challenge, offend or ask you to change in any way). Lets look at them.

## 1. An Encounter with Jesus

1. Conversion to Christianity is not about going to church, doing better things for others and yourself. It isn't about moralism. Conversion in Christianity happens because of a true encounter with the person of Jesus Christ.
2. **Who is Saul of Tarsus?** He is a hardline, fanatical, ultra-nationalist, super orthodox, pharisaic Jew. Paul the Apostle uses the word zeal when describing his former life as Pharisaic Judaism. The term was associated with a radical passion for the glory of God that involved taking violent measures. This term is used in the OT for Phineas who's zeal for God's glory led him to bring a judgment of death on an Israelite man and a Midianite woman who were leading the other Israelites into Idolatry... The term is also associated with the Maccabean revolt -when Judah Maccabee and his followers took violent measures to overthrow the reigning Seleucids and punish their country men who had given into Pagan Idolatry. The Point of all this is that we understand that Saul of Tarsus "Zeal for God" was leading him to do great violence to the church, He says in another place that he thought he must do many things contrary to the same of Jesus. He was an enemy of Christ and of Christianity. So what could possibly bring about this man's conversion? What brings about any persons conversion?
  1. **A Revelation of Jesus Christ ...** a light brighter than the noon day sun knocks him to the ground, and he hears a voice saying, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?Who are you Lord? I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. - Jesus??? Risen?? in power and Glory?? - what can it mean?
  2. He is then commanded to arise and go into the city and wait for instruction. But Saul is left blind by the experience - Saul is reduced to powerlessness and helplessness before the Lord. He fast for three days... no doubt he is processing what has taken place..

3. No doubt seeing Jesus shining with glory greater than the noon day desert sun might be enough to convert someone like you or me.. But Saul was a Jew committed to the one true God, Yahweh, and committed to his revelation - the OT scripture. Also, he knew how Jesus claimed to be messiah but had died, not just died, but he was crucified.
4. In terms of a Jewish understanding of Messiah nothing could be more backward, offensive and down right blasphemous. You see the Jews expected the Messiah to be God's ultimate King, unstoppable because of his power, wisdom, and anointing from God, he would usher in God's kingdom reign... but Jesus life had been cut off, not only that, he died the gruesome death of a criminal, according to Jewish law -Jesus crucifixion alone was a sign that he was under a divine curse - **"For it is written, 'cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree...'"** But now what could all this mean, because here is Jesus, alive from the dead and shining with the Glory of God.. (in scripture, Light like this always accompanies a theophany -The brightness of the glory of God) This meant that though Jesus was cursed he had been vindicated by God, and not just vindicated but given a share in God's glory.. God's glory that he shares with no one???... What does it all mean?
5. From Paul's (The Greek translation of the name Saul) later writings we understand that Paul saw that it could only mean one thing. That Jesus was in fact God's Son, God in human flesh, his anointed one, the Christ, who bears the curse, not for his own sins, but for the sins of his people, the sins of the whole world.
6. We also know from Paul's later writings that he was seeing more and more how even he, a hardline, fanatical, ultra-nationalist, super orthodox, pharisaic Jew could not even keep the Law... especially the law against covetousness (Romans 7).. He was beginning to despair of his own righteousness and doubt whether or not he had found favor with God, whether he would be apart of God's glorious kingdom reign. (Even before Saul's encounter with Jesus it is evident God was drawing him, personal conviction and despair in the law, the preaching and testimony of Stephen -It is hard for you to kick against the goads")

7. Remember Paul says in one place (Romans 7), "**Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death???**" He has abandoned all that he had formerly hoped in for his righteousness for his standing before God, for his access to the kingdom of God. He sees that he cannot possibly satisfy the righteous requirements of a perfectly loving, perfectly holy, perfectly just and righteous God. But then he answers his own question - "**Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!**"
8. Paul comes to see that Jesus has come as a suffering Messiah to do what we or the Law could never do, - "**There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.**"
9. **What is conversion?** In Christianity it is specifically this - to completely abandon what you have been living for, trusting in, identifying in, what you have been getting your sense of self value and worth from and finding a whole new way of operating to God through the finished work of Jesus Christ.
  1. Jesus Christ lived the perfect life that each of us owe to God, and yet he dies the gruesome death of a cursed cross that each of us deserve. This means now that we trust completely in the perfect life of Jesus lived for us and his atoning death that was payment for the life we have lived. When you understand what he did, what he became for you,- broken as we are, selfish as we are, insecure as we are, deceitful as we are, sinful as we are. You say, I will live for him, because he lived and died for me! I will center my life on him!
  2. An old hymn puts it like this - Nothing, either great or small— Nothing, sinner, no; Jesus died and paid it all, Long, long ago. "It is finished!" yes, indeed, Finished, ev'ry jot; Sinner, this is all you need, Tell me, is it not? When He, from His lofty throne, Stooped to do and die, Ev'rything was fully done; Harken to His cry! Weary, working, burdened one, Wherefore toil you so?

Cease your doing; all was done Long, long ago. Till to Jesus' work you cling By a simple faith, "Doing" is a deadly thing —"Doing" ends in death. Cast your deadly "doing" down— Down at Jesus' feet; Stand in Him, in Him alone, Gloriously complete."

3. The whole of Saul's life was radically changed by his encounter with Jesus Christ -which resulted in change in every other part of his life.

## **2. A New Way of Relating to God. By grace you have been saved.**

1. **"Behold he is praying."** No doubt Saul prayed often. In fact he prayed at least three times a day and we aren't talking little prayers like "bless this mess or thank you God for this day, we pray that no one gets hurt... but we're talking long, focused times of prayer, devotion to the God of Israel.. but there is something unique obviously about the way in which Saul prays now... what is it? (**The parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee**) Saul is now praying as one who is indebted to God, in a way of complete dependence... as a child to a Father. Saul of Tarsus, probably the biggest legalist, the most self righteous, harshest person ever - is for the first time Praying as a debtor to the mercy of God. As one who has received undeserved favor and grace..
2. This is one of the greatest evidences of Conversion in Christianity - to know God as loving Father. As Brennan Manning puts it - "(To)Define yourself radically as one beloved by God.

## **3. A Whole New Community**

1. To be converted to Christianity means you get a whole new community. You leave whatever community you were a part of before, in Saul's case - The Pharisees, and you join the Church. This new community is where you grow and learn what it means to be a Christian and how to relate to other Christians, where you serve and learn self sacrifice and receive help, love, acceptance and forgiveness. The Church becomes your family as you all submit to God as loving Father, and Jesus as Lord and Savior.
2. Saul is called brother and received as such by Ananias (BTW the name Ananias means the Lord is full of grace)

3. Ananias laid his hands on Saul - always a picture of association or commissioning in Acts."which brings about both physical healing and spiritual awakening..
4. Saul is Baptized into Jesus, and the community of Jesus' followers - We should understand baptism in the book of Acts not only as a theological understanding of identity in Jesus' death and resurrection but also in terms of Allegiance. Baptism is a picture that you have joined a new tribe and pledged allegiance to the Chief.
5. Finally, Saul joined the disciples - Joined the community of faith, he wasn't isolated in his faith or experience of Jesus, not a lone Christian.
  1. We've talked about this before but you cannot truly follow Jesus without a group of believers to hold you accountable and to live out life with..You need the community.

#### 4. **A New Message**

1. After Saul's conversion he immediately preached that Jesus is the Son of God, that Jesus is the Christ. (Vs. 20&22)
2. "He preached the faith he once tried to destroy." - Galatians 1:23
3. Paul doesn't just preach Jesus now instead of the Law, and the idea isn't now that you and I just replace the thing that we were about before with Jesus. The Idea in Christianity is that Jesus has become so awe inspiring, so life giving, and glorious to us, that how can we not make his good news known?!! The Message of Jesus became Paul's life, his very breath was employed with the Message of Jesus as Lord and Savior. It became his all.
4. "The one who is called to be a light to the nations and to open the eyes of the Jews and Gentiles has encountered the Messiah in light and is himself a healed blind man, forced by the messiah's light to recognize his own blindness and to receive his sight through him." - Gavena
5. I don't think you can truly do this unless you know yourself to be one that was brought from darkness into God's marvelous light, unless you know the brutal weight, and shame of your own sin, and you have begun to fathom the Glory of Jesus Christ and the depths of agony that he was plunged into to forgive you of your sin and make you a chosen child of God. To the degree that you know that "You are more sinful and flawed in yourself than you ever dared believe,

yet at the very same time you are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than you ever dared hope.” To the degree that you know that, to that degree you will take up the message, the proclamation of the Gospel.

## 5. A New Reproach

1. The persecutor is now persecuted - the one who hunted for Christians is now hunted as a Christian. Ironic. Saul has to flee for his life, the same people that killed Stephen are now after him.
2. Jesus said of Saul, **“he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”**
3. This is the last evidence of conversion we see in this passage and definitely the most unwanted. But if we have been truly converted we will bear the name, an identity with Jesus, especially in his sufferings.
  1. I was talking with a friend the other day and he was mentioning to me how fascinating it was that he could talk freely about any religion or religious leader in public but the moment he mentioned the name Jesus instantly there was a feeling of shame from others. We’ve talked in weeks past about the offense of the gospel, the inclusiveness and exclusiveness of the message of Jesus that often offends people. The name of Jesus bears a reproach, and all those who follow him will bear it as well. But here is the real point, Jesus bore your reproach, your shame, your guilt, your secret sin, he bore it, not in private, but openly, he was crucified for your sin, for you! Will you not bear the shame of the one who bore all your sin and shame? will you be ashamed of the one who was broken for you?
    1. This is no easy task, the world’s opinions and words feel so powerful, their agenda so incredibly strong - which is why we must again, Identify ourselves as dearly loved children of God for Jesus sake, one’s who have received God’s love and full acceptance. It is only as we know that truth and center our lives on it that we will be able to bear this weight. But as the scripture tells us again and again, if we suffer with him, if we

bear his reproach, we will also reign with him, if we suffer with him we will also be glorified with him.