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THE CONVERSION OF SAUL OF TARSUS

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS
NUMBER 32
ACTS 9:1-8

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This Damascus Road experience of the Apostle Paul is the most famous conversion of all time. However, in the Book of the Acts none of the inner details of this conversion is discussed. We must go to other passages to find the inner mental attitude of Saul of Tarsus so we can adequately understand the significance of this great conversion experience.

Dr. Leo Green, distinguished Professor of Southeastern Baptist Seminary, has described the conversion of Saul of Tarsus in these words--"The setting of the Scriptural story is laid in the Orient. To the right as far as the human eye can see lie the trackless wastes of the Arabian desert. Only a few trees adorn the horizon. The heat waves are dancing in the air, and the winds are frolicking with the sand. From a copper sky the sun shoots earthward its arrows of flaming fire. A stillness deep and profound, pervades the countryside. Down the Damascus Road comes a man of Jewish caste, a university student. Suddenly there is a 'flash and a fall' and Saul of Tarsus 'saw the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ'. He replied, 'Who art thou, Lord?' And Jesus replied, 'I am Jesus whom thou persecutest....Arise... I will send thee unto the nations.'

Saul, the law graduate; Saul, the young Rabbi; Saul, the rising star on the intellectual sky of the Pharisees, had been missing life's central melody, but now God was stroking his heartstrings.

He fell, a menace to the church; He arose, a minister of Christ.

He fell, a persecutor; He arose, a preacher of the good news.

He fell, a misguided misfit; He arose, a missionary of the cross.

For the next three decades the Eternal Spirit breathed through his life and sent forth strains of heavenly music in notes of unselfish service. It was this man, Saul of Tarsus, who turned the Gentile world upside down for Christ and wrote his name indelibly across the horizon of human history."

We must turn to Romans 9, by way of introduction, to discover the attitude of mind of Saul of Tarsus when he became the Apostle Paul.

ROMANS 9:1-2 "I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost, That I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart." This shows the sorrow of Saul's heart because he wants all the Jews to be converted to Christ as he had been.

ROMANS 9:3 "For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh:" He could even wish himself accursed from Christ for the sake of his brethren. Please remember that the Jewish race is unique in the history of the universe for it is the only race founded on regeneration.

ROMANS 9:6-7 "Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect. For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel: Neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children: but, In Isaac shall thy seed be called." Here we learn that Abraham, who was the founder of the Jewish race was originally a Gentile. Abraham personally accepted Jesus Christ as his Saviour (Genesis 15:6). He thus became the first Jew. Ishmael, his son was an unbeliever, and a Gentile. Isaac, his son was a believer, and a Jew. Isaac had twin sons, one a Gentile unbeliever, the other a Jew and a believer. The Jewish nation was founded on regeneration. All other nations are founded on natural generation, but the Jewish race was founded on regeneration. Paul is anxious that every Jew believe on Jesus Christ for this is indeed the

uniqueness of their race. The Lord Jesus Christ was clearly revealed to the Jews, but instead of believing on him, many of the Jews tried to be saved by believing the law and by keeping the law. But remember, human good has never been the basis of salvation.

ISAIAH 64:6 "But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away."

ROMANS 9:30-33 "What shall we say then? That the Gentiles, which followed not after righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness which is of faith. But Israel, which followed after the law of righteousness, hath not attained to the law of righteousness. Wherefore? Because they sought it not by faith, but as it were by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumblingstone; As it is written, Behold, I lay in Sion a stumblingstone and rock of offence: and whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed." So the Gentiles, who did not pursue after righteousness based on keeping the law, obtained righteousness by faith in Jesus Christ. This Scripture says that these Jews who tried to be saved by keeping the law didn't make it. So Jesus became a stumblingstone to the Jews. This is exactly what happened in Paul's life. He was trying to obtain righteousness by keeping the law. He was one of the most moral individuals that ever lived. He prayed seven times a day. He went to the temple at least three times a day. He was a do-gooder.

Now listen to Paul after he was converted. 1 TIMOTHY 1:12-16 "And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry; Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief. Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting." This is Paul's personal testimony concerning his salvation. Christ, to Paul, was the unique man of the universe. Paul, the worst blasphemer, Paul the worst sinner of all time, had now become a believer. Paul found Christ and he had come to understand the amazing and wonderful grace of God.

Now the reason we are not given more of the details here in the Book of the Acts concerning Paul's conversion is this--by the time the Book of the Acts was written the salvation of Paul was one of the best known facts in the Christian world. So the writer here in Acts is not giving the details, just the historical fact of his conversion.

ACTS 9:1 "And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest," Meet Saul of Tarsus. When Judas Iscariot took his life this left a gap in the rank of the Apostles. Paul is now going to step in and fill this gap. Though the church elected another man, they made a mistake and the one they selected falls out of the picture and you never hear his name again. Paul, the chief persecutor of the church, is going to be converted and become the twelfth apostle.

We read BUT Saul--this simply is a contrast of this man, Saul, with Philip, the man we have been studying. Saul of Tarsus like King Saul was from the tribe of Benjamin. He was a Roman citizen and he had been given the best education. With threatenings and slaughter, he went to the high priest. Saul is the leader of the persecution movement and here we see him in sole command of this activity.

ACTS 9:2 "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." He made a request, as a favor to himself, that he might have printed authority to arrest the Christians. "Any that were of the way" is the name they gave Christians of that early time. Saul was out to stop the church if he could. Little did he know that he would soon be converted and would give the rest of his life building churches.

ACTS 9:3 "And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven:" This light that suddenly fell across his path was none other than the Lord Jesus Christ. In John 8:12 Jesus said, "I am the light of the world".

Let us get five characteristics of this light, which was literal light, but was also the presence of Jesus Christ.

1. In verse 8 it was a blinding light.
2. In verse 7 it was an arresting light. No one moved while Jesus Christ talked with Saul of Tarsus.
3. It was an awesome light. The entire party was speechless.
4. It was a powerful light. It knocked him down.
5. It was a revealing light. Through this light he saw Jesus Christ.

ACTS 9:4 "And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" Having been knocked down, he didn't hear any voice until he was flat on his back. You can't get the attention of some people unless you knock them down. The principle here is this--when people present a positive volition, God assumes the responsibility of giving them the gospel. Saul of Tarsus had reached God-consciousness when he was a very little boy. But he got so involved in religion and legalism and self-righteousness that he had to be knocked down before he would listen. This was the case also with Abraham. God told him to leave Ur and also to leave his kindred. Abraham only partially obeyed and got bogged down in Haran. Finally, God had to jolt Abraham through the death of his old father, and finally, Abraham woke up and moved out in obedience. So here in this verse, Jesus makes it personal. It was none other than Jesus Christ who was being persecuted by Saul of Tarsus.

ACTS 9:5 "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." Saul calls Jesus "KURIOS" which means Lord. He was actually calling Jesus God. Jesus said, "I am, and I keep on being Jesus (the humanity of Jesus). In other words, Jesus was saying to Paul that the historical Jesus, the Jesus who was born in Bethlehem and died on a cross, is none other than the Son of God.

Christ was simply saying this--"Saul of Tarsus, the main point of Christianity is your personal relationship to me". Now with that in mind, let us get ten points on our personal relationship to God.

1. The mechanics of our relationship to God.
1 Cor. 12:13 "For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit." This is basically what Christianity is all about. It is union with Christ.
2. Both the carnal believer and the spiritual believer has this relationship. Salvation is the work of God and no man can lose his salvation. Remember, no sin is too great for the power of God. We are in union with Christ once we are saved.
1 Cor. 1:2 "Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours:"

- 1 Cor. 1:30 "But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption:"
3. Our relationship to God protects the believer from judgment.
Romans 8:1 "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit."
It is impossible to be condemned in the last judgment if you believe in Christ
 4. Our relationship to God by faith qualifies us to live with God forever.
Three things you must have--Sins forgiven, eternal life, and righteousness.
This happens to every believer at the time of salvation. When we have the Son we have life.
 5. Our relationship to God by faith defines election and predestination. You have heard that some are elected to Heaven and some are elected to Hell.
This is not true. All election is centered in one person. Christ was elected and predestined in eternity past. Predestined comes from proridzo, which means destined beforehand. Jesus was chosen and elected. We share his salvation. Predestination applies to the believer only, and we get into his plan by faith. Predestination is never used to refer to an unbeliever. The unbeliever is never predestined to anything. Election means to share the election of Christ.
Ephesians 1:3-6 "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ. According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved."
 6. Our relationship to God in salvation produces a new creature in Christ.
Remember, we are not a new creature because of what we gave up. Some people talk about all the things they gave up and then quote, "If any man be in Christ he is an new creature". He is a new creature because he is in Christ. What you do does not determine your salvation. This Scripture has to do with what Christ has done for us. Grace emphasizes what God had done for us. Legalism emphasizes what we have done for God. It isn't what we do that saves us, rather it is what Christ has done for us.
 7. This positional truth guarantees the eternal security of the believer.
Romans 8:38-39 "For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."
 8. This positional truth reaches in two directions.
It is retroactive. We are identified with Christ's death.
It is current. We are identified with his life.
 9. Notice the characteristics of this relationship we have as believers.
 - a. The believer shares the life of Christ. 1 John 5:11-12
 - b. The believer shares the righteousness of Christ. 2 Cor. 5:12
 - c. The believer shares the election of Christ. Ephesians 1:4
 - d. The believer shares the destiny of Christ. Ephesians 1:5
 - e. The believer shares the sonship of Christ. Romans 8:16-17
 - f. The believer shares the heirship of Christ. Romans 8
 - g. The believer shares the sanctification of Christ. 1 Cor. 1:2.
 - h. The believer shares the priesthood of Christ. 1 Peter 2:5
 10. A summary of this relationship with Christ.
It is not an emotion or an ecstatic experience. It is not progressive. Your position cannot be improved. It is not related to human merit or human ability. It is eternal in nature and cannot be changed. It is known only by the Word of God. Our position in Christ is attained in total at the moment of salvation.

ACTS 9:6 "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." Get up and go into the city and it will be told thee what you are to do. So Saul of Tarsus was saved when he was in the dust on his back. Let me repeat--

He fell a persecutor--He arose a preacher.
He fell a menace--He arose a missionary.
He fell a sinner--He arose a saint.

When Jesus said to Saul of Tarsus, "I will tell you what you must do" (Present--active--infinitive) and it refers to a command given to a believer. And the first thing he was to do was to wait.

ACTS 9:7 "And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man." God dealt here only with Saul of Tarsus, not with the soldiers that were with him.

ACTS 9:8 "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." He had been blinded temporarily. He is to sit down and wait. There is a very important principle here. It is important for the new believer to wait on God for instruction. All too often when a terrible sinner is converted we grab him up immediately and have him give his testimony. This has ruined many a new convert. God doesn't need human ability to get his job done. The first thing you need to learn as a new convert is to do nothing and wait on the Lord for instruction. He will move when it is time to move. You have to grow. Please notice that Saul of Tarsus didn't get up and give his testimony while he was still blind. God doesn't have to use human success stories to get his work done. He went to Damascus to capture Christians, but before he got there Christ captured him. Of course, if they could put Saul of Tarsus up to give his testimony, they could have gotten a crowd for he was indeed the eighth wonder of the world. But he needed to shut his eyes, be still and listen for the voice of God. He must first get ordained to the grace of God. You have to have long training in order to be a pilot. That is exactly what we have here. Paul had to sit down and cool his heels and learn a few things before he could go out and preach. Read Philipians 3:1-14 and you will learn the outline of the things Paul needed to know before he started giving his testimony.

Next we are going to study how God used a very ordinary person to help Paul.