

# The Radical Conversion of Saul (Acts 9:1-9)



## A. Introduction to Saul

This is the most famous conversion in history and one of the most important ones. Saul, the greatest enemy of the gospel of Christ became Paul, His greatest preacher. Through Paul, we, the Gentiles, have received the gospel. Half of the New Testament is written by him, 13 out of 27, or 14 out of 27 if we include Hebrews. The historical facts of Jesus Christ and the cross are told in the four gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And Paul's revelations unpack what the cross means for our salvation. Romans 3 transformed Augustine, Romans 5 - Martin Luther, and Romans 8 - John Wesley. So important was Saul's conversion that Acts tells the story three times (Acts 9:1-19; 22:6-21; 24:12-18) However, we need to be aware of two things:

- i) His is not a typical conversion story. Most sincere Christians do not have such a dramatic conversion. What is important is not how dramatic your conversion was, but the changes it produces in your life afterward. The first description of the Christian faith is 'The WAY' (x 7) (18:24-25; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22 c.f. John 14:6; Matt 7:14).
- ii) Paul's conversion was not an instant event. It took months of inner process which resulted in the climactic encounter with the Lord. Jesus said, *'It is hard for you to kick against goads.'* (9:5; 26:14) There was an ongoing inner conflict inside Paul, which made him resist the Lord and his conscience, particularly to do with Stephen's death.

## B. Saul's Background

Saul was a young man who had everything a man could want, except Christ. Therefore, his life had been a complete waste. We can have everything in this world materially, intellectually, and religiously. But if we do not have Christ, we have NOTHING. *'He who has the Son has life. He who does not have the Son of God does not have life.'* (1 John 5:12) Until you have Christ, you have NO LIFE.

- i) Saul was brought up in Tarsus, a Greek city where education was second to none. It had universities, arts, culture, etc. Saul was born a Roman citizen with considerable privilege and impressive academic achievements. He traced his bloodline to the tribe of Benjamin which produced Israel's first king, Saul. He knew the Hebrew Scriptures from youth, and was deeply devoted to his Jewish religion to his fingertips. Saul was also a born leader who was disciplined, passionate, and intellectually brilliant. He showed so much potential that his teacher Gamaliel considered him to be one of the brightest future leaders of Israel.
- ii) Saul's mentor Gamaliel restrained the Jewish leaders from persecuting the Christians. But Saul had a different idea. He was fanatically cruel to the Christians because his legally trained mind could see that the Christian faith and Judaism cannot coexist. Paul's religion was the religion of works – *I must do the best I can so that I will 'deserve' to make it to heaven.* The Christian faith stood on a completely different foundation, the mercy of God - *You will never be good enough to make it to heaven, everyone needs the mercy of God.* The moment you come to Jesus and say, *'Lord, be merciful to me, the sinner though I don't deserve Your mercy,'* you receive God's mercy because Jesus has already taken God's judgement on our behalf. This means the only people who make it to heaven are humble people who ask for God's mercy.

Saul had given his whole life to the religion of self-work and self-righteousness. He could not tolerate the gospel which made his religion obsolete.

- iii) So, Saul decided to show some leadership, and became the first self-appointed anti-Christian missionary. He obtained an arrest warrant against all Christians from the High Priest Caiaphas, and decided to travel even to Damascus to obliterate Christianity there as well. He had no idea he was deeply hurting himself and his conscience. It was like 'kicking against the goads.' Goads are cattle prods – a long stick with sharp ends to 'goad' the animals to move. The greatest goad Saul was kicking against was the death of Stephen, who spoke of Jesus and to Him with a shining face with his dying breath. Saul was there holding the jackets of those stoning Stephen when Stephen prayed to the Lord to forgive them. Saul had never seen anyone die like that. He must have told himself a million times, *'The poor guy was deluded!'* But the question must have haunted him, *'What if he was not deluded? What if it is real?'*

## C. Saul's Encounter with Jesus

1. Damascus was 135 miles from Jerusalem, and was about a 7-day journey. In the middle east, people avoided the hot midday sun and travelled earlier or later in the day. But Paul was travelling in the midday when the sun was hottest (c.f. 22:6; 26:13). He could not wait. He was on a mission to obliterate Christians 'breathing threats and murder' (9:1). C.f. *'I...compelled them to blaspheme ...exceedingly enraged against them [Christians].'* (26:11).

Suddenly something unimaginable happened just outside of the city of Damascus, which was one of the ten cities of 'Decapolis', sitting just outside the holy land. The Lord appeared to Saul when he just stepped outside the religious centre, his comfort zone, the holy land. Suddenly the most brilliant light a far greater than the midday sun struck Saul down to the ground and blinded his eyes. It was the *'Shekinah glory of God', the glory of Israel, or the 'manifest Presence of God.'* Out of this intense light the voice of God spoke to him in Hebrew, *'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?'* (9:4)

Shock #1 - The God of Israel knew Saul personally and called him by name. And the God of glory said Saul was persecuting Him! How could this be? Saul must have been so confused, *'Lord, I am for you. I am only against these heretical Christians who defile Your name.'*

2. Saul two questions to the Lord.

- i) Who are you, Lord? (9:5) *The Lord replied: 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'* (Ἐγώ εἰμι Ἰησοῦς.)

Shock #2 - Jesus is 'Yahweh'! This Jesus for whom Stephen died was not only alive as Stephen had claimed, but He is Yahweh, Israel's God!

Shock #3 - Saul's attitude toward the Christians was his attitude to the Lord. When Saul attacked Christians, he attacked God. When Saul was persecuting the Christians, he was persecuting the Lord. For the first time, Saul had the terrifying realisation he was guilty of persecuting Yahweh. What would you do if you were in Saul's place? Are we also guilty of persecuting God at times? This was a defining moment for Saul, and it led to his understanding later, of the indwelling presence of God in the believers. *'Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy which temple you are.'* (1 Cor 3:16-17) C.f. *'Christ in you the hope of glory.'* (Col 1:27).

Saul just heard directly from the Lord that he is guilty of persecuting Yahweh. What would happen to him next? Get incinerated on the spot? Swallowed up by an earthquake? That would be justice. But Saul did not get justice. He received mercy. In a tender voice, Jesus said to him, *'It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'* (9:5; 26:14) *Persecuting Christians and hardening your already hardened heart is only hurting your soul. You need to stop this now.* The mercy of God is the most wonderful and the most terrifying thing at the same time. Nothing humbles us and reduces us to powder like receiving the undeserved mercy of God. Now with trembling and astonishment, Saul was ready to ask the next question.

- ii) 'Lord, what do you want me to do?' (9:6). Jesus said to him, *'Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.'* (9:6)

Shock #4 - Oh, the graciousness of Jesus! There is not a word of judgment and condemnation from the Lord. Saul was responsible for Stephen's horrible death. And he purposely came to Damascus to imprison as many Christians as he could and hurt them. How was he ever going to atone for his sin against so many?

But Jesus said to Saul was to go on into the city and He will tell him what to do next. What did Saul encounter here? The majesty of Jesus and the kindness of Jesus.

*The majesty of Jesus' glory has blinded Saul so that he could see life through Jesus' eyes, and the kindness of Jesus wrecked Saul's self-righteousness so that he could bear Jesus' name.*

## D. The Lord's Hidden Plan for Saul

1. What was the Lord's plan for Saul who was a cruel murderer and persecutor of God's people? Not to make Saul pay for his horrible sin by making him suffer for it. Jesus already paid for his sins. God planned to

transform Saul and use him as a 'chosen vessel' to bear His name to the Gentiles, and even allow Saul to suffer for His name's sake (9:16). He was not going to suffer for his sins. Suffering for our sins produces little value, but suffering for the Lord's name produces an eternal weight of glory (2 Cor 4:16-18).

However, Jesus did not reveal to Saul His hidden plan yet. Ananias would be sent to Saul to reveal the Lord's plan for him three days later. Why did the Lord not tell Saul His plan right there and then? Jesus was already speaking to Saul! Why then go through Ananias?

- i) Saul was not ready. Saul needed three days of deep cleansing and repentance before he could begin to grasp the depth and height of God's grace for him. It was too much for him to digest at that moment.
  - ii) This is how the Lord produces humility and love in the body of Christ. God does not say to you directly everything you need to know, even if you are a super-apostle. If we are not careful, our spiritual experiences can produce a lot of hot air, and our fragile ego cannot handle that much glory. So, God designed our lives so we are dependent on each other to hear His voice, and determine His will for our lives through imperfect human vessels.
2. The name 'Saul' means 'someone great'. He was a born leader who purposely came to Damascus as a self-appointed anti-Christian missionary to achieve something great for his religion. He became completely broken, blinded with his face in the dust outside of the city of Damascus. He had to be led like a little child by the hand. For the first time in his life, Saul was humbled to the core by the majesty of Jesus, and broken to powder by the mercy of Jesus.

For three days and three nights, Saul was in total darkness, searching for the glimmer of light just like Jonah in the belly of a fish - repenting, praying, fasting from food and water. But the Lord knew that three days later a new Saul would emerge as Paul - a man small in his own eyes. Until Saul was broken, he could not be moulded for the Master's use. The Lord was doing a deep work in Saul. Why did God blind Saul for three days? So that he could finally see clearly through Jesus' eyes. Saul was arrested by Jesus on his way to arrest the Christians, to bear His name and carry His glory, just as we all were.

3. Have you been blinded by the glory of Jesus so that you could see through His eyes? Have you been wrecked by the kindness of the Lord so that you came to the end of your self-righteousness, to sing of His mercy and grace?

Have you asked the Lord the two questions Saul dared to ask? (i) 'Who are you, Lord?' (9:5); (ii) 'Lord, what do you want me to do?' (9:6)