

The Radical Change in Saul (Acts 9:10-31)



It is fascinating to listen to the testimonies of those who came to faith in a dramatic way. But the most important thing is what happens in the person afterward. The real test of the conversion experience is not how dramatic or sensational it is, but whether it lasts and what changes occurs in the person's life as a result of meeting Jesus Christ. The sensational part of Saul's conversion experience is recorded in Acts 9:1-9. Now we come to what happened to Saul's life after his conversion. Did it last? It lasted over 40 years until his last breath. It led to decades of fruitful life of obedience and service.

You can still visit this street called *Straight* in Damascus today. As the result of seeing the glory of the Lord too bright for human eyes to behold, Saul was blinded for 3 days. Why? The Lord suspended the natural light so Saul could see inwardly through the searchlight of the Holy Spirit the eternal things (2 Cor 4:16-18). Saul thought he knew the Old Testament scriptures back to front. He realised he knew ZERO when he encountered the Lord Jesus. This is the common testimony of the Jewish people who come to faith in their Messiah. Saul suddenly saw that the 1,500 years of Israel's history, sacrifice, law, prophecy all pointed to Jesus. At last, he could see with great clarity.

A. Immediate Fruit of Saul's Conversion (9:10-19)

1. Just as the Lord appeared to Saul just outside the city He also appeared in a vision to another man inside the city, Ananias. The Lord gave him a specific instruction to go to the street called 'Straight' and find Saul of Tarsus in the house of Judas and pray for him so that he may receive his sight (v11-12). God was setting up a special connection between Saul and Ananias. Saul could not last much longer in the dark lonely tunnel where everything he believed and worked for was deconstructed. It meant that every relationship he had built was shaken to the core. Saul discovered his 'greatest enemies' were his friends. His friends would now become his enemies. The Lord knew, at the point of Saul's great vulnerability, he needed not only the supernatural vision but also a true friend. So the Lord sent the man Saul needed just at the right time. Ananias was Paul's first Christian friend, a friend to the friendless. Ananias appears and disappears almost immediately, but we never forget our first Christian friend. Saul talks about Ananias years later (22:12).
2. But Ananias started by questioning the Lord. *Are you sure Lord? This is the man who persecuted the saints all over the land. We have suffered greatly at this man's hand.* Ananias already heard of Saul's murderous mission to Damascus. Saul was already famous or infamous among Christians - a monster. Saul was on top of the alert list for all Christians to run from! Christians in Damascus might have been praying for protection from Saul.

But the Lord told Ananias two things: (i) His Mission for Saul: 'He is the chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles' (9:15); (ii) His Compassion for Saul: 'I will show him how many things he must ('dei' – necessary, inevitable) suffer for My name's sake.' (9:16) Saul's future suffering was not to atone for his sins, but for the Lord's name. What did Ananias hear in the tone of Jesus' voice? Compassion. This is the heart of every parent for their children. We want our children to do great things, but we do not want our children to suffer. The Lord shared His heart for Saul with Ananias before He sent him to pray for Saul. The best prayer comes out of the heart of compassion.

3. Ananias obeyed the Lord without further protest. He went and found Saul in the house of Judas. The first word Saul ever heard from a believer's lips after 3 days of total darkness was, 'Brother Saul.' What kind words to a man who has come to destroy Christians with a special letter from the high priest. Not a murderer, monster, hunter, but a brother. Saul's enemy calls him, 'My brother.' Ananias' words were words of acceptance and restoration.

Ananias' prayer was for : (i) the healing of Saul's eyes so that he could see life in a new way. Something like 'scales' fell from Saul's eyes. (ii) Saul to be filled with the Holy Spirit – Paul's Pentecost. Immediately Saul arose and was baptised in water. Water baptism immediately followed the genuine conversion. This is the first part of what happened after Saul's conversion. It is never too late to be baptized. What did he pray in baptism? Saul called on the Lord to wash away his sins. (c.f. 22:16)

B. Eventual Fruit of Saul's Conversion – Rejection of the Jews (9:20-25)

1. Saul began to share his faith with others. When something means so much to us, we tell other people about it. Saul was making public confessions of his faith in Jesus in the most difficult place of all – the very synagogues he was scheduled to preach against the Christians! Saul carried the special permit from the high priest to speak in their pulpits to stir the Jews to hunt down all Christians. All of a sudden Saul was preaching Jesus is the Messiah (v22) and the 'Son of God' (v20). This is the central theme of Paul's gospel. What shock and commotion it must have created in the synagogues! Saul not only gave the testimony of his conversion, but as a man trained in the Old Testament he began to 'prove' from their law that Jesus was the Son of God and the Messiah.
2. What happened to Saul after this? Very soon Paul was in trouble just as Stephen was. If they could not win in a debate with Saul, there was only one way to silence him – kill him. The same set of eyes that were eagerly waiting to welcome Saul to pass them the letter to arrest the Christians, were now watching the gate of the city day and night to catch and kill Saul. But their plans leaked, and Saul was secretly let out of the city in a basket from the walls of the city. How humiliating! (c.f. 2 Cor 11:30 – my infirmities) Saul who was supposed to drag Christians out of the city in chains in the broad daylight, was now hiding in a basket and helped by the Christians to escape in the middle of the night. It must have been hard for Saul as it was an act of the ultimate rejection from his former friends. Saul crossed the line and burned the bridges behind him forever. Yet, it was not God's time for Saul to die yet.
3. How long did Saul minister in the city of Damascus? We know from Galatians that during this period Saul went for a walkabout in the Arabian desert for 3 years (Gal 1:17). In the school of wilderness, Saul was hammering out his understanding of the gospel and his life's mission. Much confusion and unhappiness come out of the lack of clarity about our life's goal. *'But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, to reveal His Son in me...' (Gal 1:15 c.f. Phil 1:20-21)*

C. Eventual Fruit of Saul's Conversion – Rejection of the Christians (9:26-31)

1. After this we find Saul going down to Jerusalem to join with the disciples there (v26). But there was another test waiting for him, a harder test – rejection by the Christians. The believers in Jerusalem did not readily accept him because they knew of Saul's past too well – Stephen's death and imprisonment of other Christians. They were suspicious and afraid of Saul. How do you accept a man as a brother, who put your own family members in jail? But one man who stood up and said, 'I accept this man's faith and I accept him as a brother,' – Barnabas the 'Son of Encouragement'. How we need the *Barnabas's* who can encourage and embrace us in our journey of faith. Saul owes much of his life to godly people like Stephen (for his testimony), Ananias (for his prayer), and Barnabas (for his acceptance). Barnabas even brought Saul to the apostles (v27 c.f. Gal 1:19 – James and Peter). Barnabas' decision was based on the evidence of Saul's words and the real changes in his life, i.e. Saul's testimony of how he met the Lord, and how Saul has been preaching Jesus in Damascus, risking his life.
2. Saul began to 'dispute with the Hellenists' in Jerusalem (v28-29). This was Stephen's ministry! (c.f. Acts 6:9) Stephen was killed for witnessing to the Hellenistic Jews from the Scriptures. Saul who held the coats of those who stoned Stephen, picked up Stephen's mantle! And he continued Stephen's work knowing what it would cost – his life. The Christians found out the Hellenistic Jews' plans to kill Saul as well, and they quickly took Saul to Caesarea and sent him on a ship to Tarsus on his own (v30).

Tarsus was Saul's hometown where he grew up as a little boy. Saul was sent to Jerusalem as a bright future leader of Israel. Now Saul was sent back home as a 'total failure' as far as his chosen career was concerned. Saul was going back home as a Christian, totally rejected by the Jews, and under suspicion by some churches.

D. The Key to Lifetime Commitment to Jesus

1. With Saul going back to Tarsus, the curtain temporarily comes down on his life. But this was not the end of Saul. The Lord was preparing Saul for the work He had planned for him (c.f. Act 13ff).

How long was the preparation? More than 14 years from his conversion experience (Gal 2:1). These are known as Paul's silent years. He must have traveled on foot more than 1,000 miles up to this point - from

Damascus to the Arabian desert, back to Damascus, then to Jerusalem and then to Caesarea, and finally Tarsus. God had to teach this highly driven man with extraordinary calling to be simply obedient, rather than achieve something extraordinary. The common thread of how the Holy Spirit moves through ordinary people in Acts is 'obedience.' Obedience started with Peter, and continued with Stephen, Philip, Barnabas, Ananias, and then Saul. That is the key. Saul had to know that the Lord did not call him to achieve something extraordinary for Him, but to be obedient to Him.

Approximately 30 years later we see Paul retelling his testimony before King Agrippa just as the Lord said he would (34-62AD). '*King Agrippa, Therefore I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision.*' (26:19). Then another few years later around 68AD, Paul wrote from the jail while awaiting his execution, '*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith....*' (2 Tim 4:6-8)

2. Then the churches throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified (9:31). Why? Because their chief enemy who headed up the Christian persecution became their defender and advocate! As a result, the early church was profoundly encouraged and built up. What is more, the church was walking in the *fear of the Lord* and the *comfort of the Holy Spirit*.

It is not how spectacular our testimony is but the fruit of the changed life that truly matters. Paul's conversion was dramatic and radical. But the point is it lasted his entire lifetime. It produced a man of obedience to the very end despite the difficulties far exceeded most of our challenges. What was the key? Paul stayed close to the Lord, and he never lost sight of eternity (2 Cor 4:16-18).

Thus through Paul, the Son of God was revealed (Gal 1:15).

3. Questions

- i) Paul took up Stephen's mantle of taking the gospel to the Greek Jews in the synagogues. Stephen was a seed that fell to the ground, died, and was buried. What is the fruit of Stephen's life? What then should our attitude be when our ambitions and aspirations for the Lord are cut short at times?
- ii) Paul's preparation for the call of God on his life was to be hidden and silent and 'forgotten' for many years. How is the Lord preparing you? How should we respond to the Lord's hand preparing us in ways contrary to our desires and expectations?
- iii) Paul's testimony and commitment to the Lord Jesus lasted all his life, and his love for the Lord burned more brightly with time despite his great suffering along the pathway of obedience. What is the secret to Paul's endurance?