

Armagh Baptist Church
Sunday 18th October 2009 - 11:30am
Acts 9:1-19 – Saul's Conversion

Introduction

It was on the day that Stephen was stoned to death as the first Christian martyr that Saul of Tarsus first appears on the pages of our Bibles:

(7:58) 'Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.'

(8:1) 'And Saul was there, giving approval to his death.'

*(8:1-3) 'On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria...But Saul began to **destroy** the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.'*

Saul of Tarsus was not only the ring-leader at Stephen's martyrdom, but he also became the instigator of an intense period of persecution for the church. He began to wreak havoc on the New Testament Church, doing all in his power to stamp it out, and bring it to nothing. He was like a wild animal trying to tear its prey limb from limb, as he sought to destroy the church.

Saul is introduced to us just as the mission exclusively to the Jews comes to an end at the end of chapter 7, beginning of ch.8.

Now by Acts ch.9 the Gospel has gone to Samaria and the Samaritan people have responded in great numbers. Now we are beginning to enter the Gentile phase of the mission of the early church. Last time we saw how the Gospel got to Africa through the conversion of the Official from Ethiopia. The Gentile phase has already started. So Acts 1:8 is still being fulfilled. The Gospel has begun to spread from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, and now it is about to go to the uttermost parts of the earth.

But how was God going to get narrow-minded Jewish believers to take the Gospel to their despised Gentile neighbours, across the polarization of their day?

To do this he required a special servant – and believe it or not, that servant would be Saul of Tarsus! The man, who at present, seemed intent on stamping out the church, and on making of it a passing blip of history!

But just as Philip had become the man, in God's hands, to bring the Gospel to the Samaritans, so Saul of Tarsus was going to become the man, in God's hands, to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles. He didn't know it yet, but he was! The first thing I want to do this morning is to remind you of...

1. What Saul was like before his Conversion. (Philippians 3:5-6)

This ties in so well with the introduction to Discipleship Explored which Craig Dyer gave us last Monday night. As you know Discipleship Explored, the course we started last week, is based on Paul's Letter to the Philippians. Well, it's in that letter that Paul gives us a very clear potted history of what he was like as Saul of Tarsus, before he became a Christian:

His Family Background –

He had a very strict Jewish up-bringing. He was...

- Circumcised at 8 days
- Of the stock of Israel
- Of the Tribe of Benjamin
- A Hebrew of the Hebrews.
- So he was thoroughly Jewish in every possible way!

His Religious Background –

A Pharisee – The Pharisees were a Jewish religious party that laid great stress on the keeping of the Law, and observing religious festivals and ceremonies. They pretended to be more pious than the common people. Pharisaism was the strictest of all Jewish sects.

A Persecutor of the Church – (Acts 8:1-3)

He was single-handedly trying to stamp out what he saw as a dangerous deviation from the historic Jewish faith. And what is more worrying was that he thought he was serving God faithfully by trying to stamp the church out!

A Perfectionist –

At least as far as the Law was concerned.

He thought he was blameless – sinlessly perfect!

He tried to keep the Law rigorously.

He thought that by keeping the Law he would be righteous in God's sight.

There are many people who still think like that today:

- A Good strict up-bringing – from a good home, of good parents.
- Zealously opposing other faiths: e.g. Ulster Prod → anti-Catholic.
- Trying to keep the Ten Commandments.

If you think you can get right with God by keeping the 10 commandments then I challenge you to go home, take down your Bible and start reading then in Exodus 20. Go through them thoughtfully, one at a time, and answer me honestly, how many of them have you really kept? Think in terms of not only your outward actions, and the things that you say, but also in terms of your inner thought life. As Jesus said in John 7:19 (our passage for tonight):

'Has not Moses given you the law? Yet not one of you keeps the law. Why are you trying to kill me?'

The Jews in Jesus' day, and Saul of Tarsus in the early days of the church, just couldn't see it that killing Christ and his followers, was so blatantly breaking God's Law – 'Thou shalt not kill!' and yet in so doing they thought they were doing God a favour! There are none so blind as those who will not see!

You may not have killed anyone, but if you've broken just one of God's laws, even once, then you're imperfect. In fact the Bible says, if you've broken one of them, you're guilty of breaking them all! So all of us are in the same boat!

It's amazing how blind we can be to our own faults?

Saul of Tarsus thought that, 'As to the Law? He was blameless!'

And yet he was going around murdering Christians!

He was blinkered, he was blind!

He may have been religious, but he wasn't right with God!

He needed to be converted to Christ! (See 1 Tim 1:15).

2. How did God convert Saul of Tarsus? (Acts 9:1-16)

(i) God had to break Saul one day.

Saul arrogantly thought he was perfect in God's sight.

God had to show him he was mistaken.

In a very real sense, God brought him down off his high horse, that day!

Saul was going about his normal business.

He was on his way to Damascus – in Syria. This is more evidence that Christians had been scattered far and wide by the persecution of Acts 8. Syria and Damascus were well north of Jerusalem & Samaria - and indeed Galilee.

Saul was hoping to arrest and imprison, and even execute, many more Christians in Damascus. He was going there with letters of permission from the Jewish authorities back in Jerusalem, to find as many as he could!

So there is no evidence here that Saul was in any way re-thinking his position regarding Christianity. He was still breathing out murderous threats against the Christians wherever he went - even that day as he headed to Damascus.

There was certainly no outward sign that God was at work in Saul's heart that day, anyway. There was no evidence that Saul was under any conviction of sin. And no indication that God was suddenly going to change this man completely!

And yet, surely Saul could still see Stephen's face in his mind's eye.

Maybe he could still hear Stephen's dying words:

'Lord, do not hold this sin against them!'

Perhaps God had been speaking to Saul since that terrible day, when he stood watching Stephen being stoned to death, giving his tacit approval. Maybe those words had been quietly haunting him ever since.

The point I'm trying to make is, that none of us know what God is doing in people's hearts and minds, at any given time. They could be closer to the point of conversion than we might think, as God works quietly behind the scenes in their lives. Perhaps troubling them, perhaps giving them sleepless nights, perhaps convicting them slowly but surely about some sin in their life?

But humanly speaking, outwardly speaking, Saul's conversion happened very suddenly! He was going about his normal business one day, when suddenly God broke into his life, and brought him crashing to his knees!

Acts 9:3 – He saw a light from heaven – the glorious perfection of God.

Acts 9:4 – He fell to the ground – he was down off his high horse, scrabbling around in the dust of the ground. Sometimes a man has to be brought low before he can look up to see God in all his glory, and how small he himself is.

Acts 9:4 – He heard a voice speak: *'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?'*

Acts 9:5 – Saul's reply: *'Who are you, Lord?'*

He knew straight away it was God!

He had refused to accept Jesus of Nazareth was the Lord.

He had refused to accept that Jesus was alive.

So what was said next, cut right to his heart...

In answer to his question, 'Who are you Lord?' he heard this:

'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting!'

Can you begin to imagine how that must have dawned on Saul's mind?

- So Jesus wasn't still in the tomb.
- These Christians have been right all along.
- Jesus is alive – and what's more, he's speaking to me from heaven – so Jesus' voice, was the voice of God!
- Jesus was the Christ – He was the Messiah!
- He was the Son of God after all!
- And He was very much alive!

Each of those facts must have burned their implications into Saul's heart that day in the dust near Damascus.

- So Saul had been wrong.
- The Christians he had been killing - they were right all along!
- Surely in that moment he must have been convicted of the wickedness of his sin!

- He had been persecuting the Church, only to find out that he was actually persecuting Jesus himself – the Christ, the Son of the Living God!

Then the voice from heaven spoke again (v.6):

'Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.'

Saul would be told what he must do once he got into Damascus.

But what could he do?

- What could he do to right his wrongs?
- What could he do to get rid of his sins?
- What could he do to get right with God, after all he had done!?

Well, he wasn't told immediately. He was simply told to go into Damascus. We're told in vs.7-9 that the men who had been travelling with Saul were standing around speechless! They could hear the sound of the voice from heaven, but they couldn't see anyone. And when Saul picked himself up from the ground, he opened his eyes, but he couldn't see anything either! He was blind! So the men did what the voice had said - they took Saul by the hand, and led him by the hand into Damascus. A very humiliating sight compared to how he had intended to enter Damascus on his high horse!

Saul was to be under conviction, in blindness, and in darkness, for 3 days! For those 3 days he didn't eat or drink anything. This was Saul's time:

- Time for him to think,
- Time for him to take stock,
- Time for him to re-orientate,
- To realise the implications of the fact that Jesus was alive!
- And that this Jesus was working in his life there and then!
- There was going to have to be a few changes!

In Damascus, he didn't know it yet, but he was going to meet with a man called Ananias. Ananias was a Christian - one of the Christians of Damascus who would have been in the firing line, if Saul of Tarsus had arrived into that city the way he was, breathing out threats against every Christian who lived there. But Ananias was going to have the privilege of pointing Saul of Tarsus to the Lord – 3 days later!

(ii) Meanwhile, back in Damascus, God was still working on Ananias:

The conversion of Saul, just like the conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch, was a story of two halves. Not only was God working in Saul's life, just as he had been working in the Ethiopian Eunuch's life; but God was also working in Philip to prompt him and move him up to that chariot on the desert road, and likewise God had been preparing his servant in this case too.

God was working on Ananias in his home in Damascus, trying to convince him that he had a job for him to do as far as Saul of Tarsus was concerned! God was trying to coax his servant Ananias into action. Ananias was simply a disciple, a follower, a servant of Jesus. God spoke to him in a vision (v.10). He just called his name, and Ananias responded, *'Yes, Lord.'*

(vs.11-12) The Lord told Ananias to go to the house of Judas on Straight Street in Damascus, and ask for a man from Tarsus, he's called Saul, and he's praying! You can see how the Lord is breaking the news to Ananias gently: He's a man from Tarsus, he's called Saul (yes, Saul of Tarsus!) but don't worry – he's praying! And what's more, in a vision he has seen a man called Ananias coming and placing his hands on him to restore his sight! You can just hear the penny dropping inside Ananias' head – *'That's me!!'*

(v.13) *'Lord,'* Ananias said, *'I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem.'* (Are you sure?) *'And what's more, Lord, he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.'*

(Are you really sure it's a good idea for me to go to see this Saul of Tarsus!) You can almost hear his knees knocking together from here, can't you? Ananias was surprised, shocked and scared, by what God was asking him to do. Certainly among the Christians there was no idea that God was about to transform their arch-enemy, Saul of Tarsus, into a Christian! It doesn't even seem as if they were praying for that to happen either! It's a total surprise.

Did they think he was too hard, too difficult, for God to save?

But then don't we, just like Ananias, often underestimate God's power to change a life. Later Saul, as the Apostle Paul, would describe himself as the chief of sinners – the very worst! Yet God was able to save him.

What about that hardened relative of yours?

What about that unsaved husband, son, daughter, mother, father, you have? What about that friend or work colleague you have? Do you believe that God could save them? Do you believe enough to begin to pray for their salvation?

But look what the Lord goes on to say to Ananias in vs.15 & 16:

'Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.'

- God had chosen Saul
- Not just to be saved, although he did that...
- God had chosen him primarily to be the Apostle to the Gentiles.
- This is the first mention of God's servant to the Gentiles. New!

- But he would also continue to bring the Gospel to the people of Israel. God hadn't totally forgotten about the Jews, even though they had so blatantly rejected the Gospel by killing Stephen.
- But look what else God says: *'I will show **him** how much **he** must suffer for my name.'* Saul of Tarsus had caused an awful lot of suffering to many of the early Christians. Well, now as a Christian himself, he was going to be called on to suffer much for Christ!

Well, on hearing all of this, Ananias now agrees to go to meet with Saul. He enters Judas' house on Straight Street, and when he goes inside, the first thing he does is to place his hands on Saul of Tarsus, and say two words:

'Brother Saul!' – What an amazing thing to say: **'Brother Saul.'**

Saul of Tarsus was now part of the family of God, and Ananias was prepared to accept him as a brother in Christ – the one who had come to kill him!

Ananias: *'Brother Saul, The Lord – Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here – he has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.'* – Those are amazing words to come from his lips!

In the very next verse (v.18)

- Saul receives his sight – *'something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again.'* But not only could Saul see physically again, for the first time, he could actually see spiritually. He could see that he had been wrong all along. He could see that the Christians he had put to death had been right. He could see that Jesus of Nazareth wasn't a fraud – he was the Messiah. He was the very Son of God, come in the flesh. He could now see that Jesus was back in heaven, and it was that same Jesus that had stopped him in his tracks on the road to Damascus and had spoken to him from heaven. Now he could see that all the persecution he had been meeting out, had been wrong. It was time for him to stop; it was time for him to change completely. From now on he was going to be a follower of Christ. He would have to face some of that suffering for being a Christian, that he had meted out on others. Now he could see more clearly than he had ever seen before, for the first time in his life, he could see it!
- He was filled with the Holy Spirit, at the laying on of the hands of Ananias. (v.17). He was now a child of God. Born again. Saved!
- So he got up and was baptised (v.18). That was his definite break with his past. He was leaving Judaism behind, with all its shortcomings; he was now joining the ranks of the Christian Church. Now he belonged to Jesus, and he wasn't afraid to declare it.
- So after his 3 day fast, he took some food (v.19) and he regained his strength.

- And he began to enjoy Christian fellowship *'Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus.'* (v.19b).

Conclusion

The arch-persecutor of the Christians was no more. He was dead and buried! The greatest preacher of the Gospel the world has ever seen was now alive! This was a dramatic change. This was a powerful change. It was a change that meant an awful lot to the Christians (See v.31).

What about you, have you been converted to Christ?

The change in your life might not have been so sudden, or dramatic, or powerful, as Saul's. But I hope there has been a change nevertheless?

That's what conversion means – to be changed.

If God's Holy Spirit has truly entered your life, then there's bound to be a change.

So have you really been converted to Christ?

If even the hardest, chief of sinners could get saved – what about you?

Finish by reading: 1Tim1:15-17.

If God can save Saul of Tarsus, He can save you!

What are you waiting for?

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