

Armagh Baptist Church
Sunday 25th October 2009 - 11:30am
Acts 9:19-31 – The Difference Saul's Conversion Made

Introduction

As we have seen before in our studies in Acts, the battle between good and evil, between Christ and the Devil, never really eases up at all.

Here in this passage in Acts ch.9 we see how the Devil responds whenever Saul of Tarsus gets converted and becomes a follower of Jesus Christ.

He's not too pleased!

You see, before your conversion (no matter how religious you are) you belong to the devil's side. Now that's a bit hard to believe, but it is in fact true. (Even if you're a faithful church-goer, and a nice person). Because if you're not for Christ, you are against him – there are no other alternatives.

Saul was a very religious person, but the devil wasn't giving him any bother before he got converted to Christ, and yet twice in this passage his life is under threat – because he has become a follower of Jesus!

When you become a Christian; get saved; are converted – you change sides.

You step out of the devil's camp and onto the Lord's side, and in so doing you enter a war-zone, and you begin to face all that the Devil can throw at you.

Because you've changed sides!

By God's grace that's what Saul did in Acts ch.9. He changed sides.

This morning I want to ask the question: What difference did Saul's Conversion make? I want to suggest 3 answers to that question:

1. Changing Sides Changed his Circumstances (vs.19-25)

We read in v.19 that immediately after his conversion, Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. So that's the first effect of his conversion:

(i) It changed his company (v.19)

He is having fellowship with the disciples at Damascus for a number of days.

He wants to be with them. He enjoys their company.

He loses a desire for those he used to keep company with. After all, think about it - would a soldier sit in the mess-room of an enemy's barracks?

No – so now he wants to be with fellow believers, to enjoy fellowship with them. That's part of the evidence that someone is truly converted – they realise that they need Christian fellowship to keep them going. Do you?

(ii) It changed his 'tune' (v.20-22)

(Read vs.20-22)

Saul used to try to stamp out the name of Christ, and all those who preached Christ. But now in v.20 – he immediately begins to preach that Jesus is the Son of God in the local synagogues (v.20). He began to prove that Jesus was

the Christ (v.22) - That he was the Messiah! In fact we're told here, that he was 'baffling the Jews' who were living in Damascus. They just couldn't get their heads around the dramatic change that had taken place in this man's life. And when he got to Jerusalem he talked and debated with the Grecian Jews as well (v.29).

These people would have been his friends, colleagues and associates in the Jewish religion previously, but now 'they can't make head nor tail of him!'

So we see that Paul now enjoys the company of the Christians, BUT he also fulfils his responsibility to his old mates too. He doesn't just turn his back on them. He desires to see them trust in Christ too - urgently!

So the very thing that he used to condemn – conversion to Christ – is the very thing he is now so eager to see happen in each one of his friend's lives.

So he has very definitely 'changed his tune' as we would say.

But thirdly...

(iii) It changed his enemies (v.23-25)

We're told in v.23 that '*after many days had gone by, the Jews conspired to fill him.*' Saul used to regard Christ and Christians as enemies of the Jews.

But in Acts 9:4 Saul heard Jesus say to him, while he lay there on the Damascus Road: 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute **me**?'

He had been trying to do harm to the name of Jesus, to the cause of Christ, and to as many of Christ's followers as possible. Christ was his enemy then.

But now Christ is his Lord and his enemy is now the Devil and now he's discovering that all his former friends have become his enemies too!

He has stepped onto the battle-field, he has changed sides, and his old friends and former comrades are now intent on doing him harm – so they plot to kill him (v.23-25).

The Jews have hatched a plan, they are plotting to kill Saul of Tarsus.

But Saul finds out about their plan. If he had set foot outside the City gates of Damascus, they would have seized him, bungled him away, and killed him.

That's why we're told in v.24 that '*day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him.*' If he had set foot outside he would have been dead.

You see the Devil will not let up on a new convert – especially a prominent one like Saul! He will try to bring him down in any way that he possibly can. He is not happy when someone changes sides, and begins to take a stand for Jesus.

But interestingly in v.25 Saul seems to have gathered a few 'followers' around him in a very short space of time. Where these the men who had experienced that vision and heard that voice from heaven on the Damascus Road. Was this Ananias and a few friends, or were these people that Saul had already won for Christ through his preaching of the Gospel in recent days in

Damascus? We don't know who they were, but they were determined not to let anything happen to Saul. So in the middle of the night when everything was pitch black, they let him down over the city wall in a basket so that he could escape into the night and get away from the plot to kill him.

We can't help be struck by the change there has been in Saul's circumstances. This was the man who was going to arrive into Damascus like a raging bull, riding on a high horse, but not only did that not happen, because he had to be led in by the hand, because he had been blinded by the heavenly vision, but he also couldn't leave Damascus surrounded by pomp and ceremony either. He leaves in the dark of night, let down over the wall in a basket! 'How the mighty have fallen' in one sense, and yet in another sense, Saul had been humbled under God's almighty hand, but in due course, he was going to be lifted up to serve God in a mighty way in the years that followed. God now had His servant to bring His Gospel to the Gentiles. So changing sides definitely changed Saul's Circumstances – big time!

2. Changing Sides also Challenged the Church (vs.26-30)

If God had accepted and forgiven Saul for all his many sins, then obviously the Church of God should forgive and accept him too! But would that be the case?

Even today a sinner finds forgiveness and mercy very readily from God, but sometimes they can find a cold shoulder or even doors barred at the church! This should not be, and yet that's exactly what happened whenever Saul finally arrives back in Jerusalem after escaping from Damascus by night.

(i) The Suspicion of the Apostles (v.26)

'When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple!'

What might the disciples in Jerusalem have been thinking about Saul?

'Is this his ploy to infiltrate the church?'

'Is this just a false profession?'

'Will it really last?'

Sometimes we in the church today come across as very suspicious of a new convert. Instead of coming alongside to help a new-born baby in Christ, we sometimes do what the Romans used to do with their children - leave them out in the cold, to see if they will survive! And then if they prove strong enough to survive that treatment, we'll bring them in and look after them!

This should not be! The church is supposed to be an incubator for new born Christians – a place to nurture and disciple new believers in Christ. And I firmly believe if we are a church like that, then God will save more and entrust

more new believers into our care, because he knows there's a neo-natal unit ready to look after them. That's why I'm so keen to see discipleship modelled and practiced in every area of church life here in Armagh. Because if we are faithful in doing our part, then God will be faithful in doing his part, in sending more new converts to us.

But maybe you think the disciples were right to be suspicious of Saul? Maybe so, but is that really how we should treat a new believer? *'Being afraid of him (v.26) not believing that he really was a disciple.'* All I can say, is praise God for people like Barnabas!

(ii) The Courage of Barnabas (v.27)

We read in v.27: 'But Barnabas *took him and brought him* to the Apostles.' This is the second time we have come across Barnabas in the Acts of the Apostles. He appeared before back in Acts 4:36 where he had just sold a field and had brought the proceeds to donate it to the Lord's work. We were told then that his name meant '*Son of Encouragement*'. Well he's certainly living up to his name here in Acts 9:27. He sees that Saul is getting the cold shoulder treatment among the believers in Jerusalem. So he goes and gets Saul, and brings him with him to meet with the Apostles - the leaders of the church. You see, Barnabas accepted Saul, trusted him, and was prepared to vouch for him. He gives a glowing reference for him to the Apostles. That reference or recommendation (v.27) was based on the reality of Saul's conversion experience – and based on the evidence of his fearless witness for Christ since, despite the threats on his life in Damascus.

I suppose this is a bit like the interview we carry out as elders with new converts before we recommend them for church membership. Two of the elders go to have a chat with those who are asking to come into membership. We ask about their conversion experience; we ask about their walk with God since, and how they are seeking to witness for him in their home and family life, in their work and in their community. And then if all is in order, we as elders, will recount a summary of that interview to the existing church members at a meeting called for that purpose, and then the membership has the right to decide whether or not to accept these new members into our fellowship. And from that point onwards we welcome them with open arms.

But you know, membership is not just for perfect saints. Membership of this church is open to those who have professed faith in the Lord Jesus, have acknowledged that publicly by being baptised as a believer, and who accept the doctrines and practices of this church as laid out in our constitution. It doesn't mean that all members of Armagh Baptist Church are perfect. Far from it, but it should mean that all members of this church are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, with some evidence of salvation in their lives, and who

have a desire to grow in their walk with the Lord. So praise God for people like Barnabas, who are prepared to see that evidence and who will go out of their way to make new believers feel at home in the life & fellowship of this church.

So after the suspicion of the apostles & the courage of Barnabas, we now see:

(iii) The Acceptance of the New Convert (vs.28-30)

After the meeting between Saul, Barnabas and the apostles in Jerusalem, we read: 'So Saul *stayed with them* and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord' – He came and went among them, he had freedom and liberty among them – he was '*at home*' among the disciples. So much so that:

- His bold witness continued in Jerusalem (he was all the more encouraged because the existing believers had accepted him). He really did have a sense of belonging now. (v.28b-29a)
- The threats to his life continued (v.29b). But at least the church had got over their suspicion of him. Now they were prepared to stick up for him. He was one of them. He was no longer the enemy!
- So when the Grecian Jews tried to kill him in v.29, the believers could have let him go and get what he deserved for all that he had done to them in the past. But no they didn't! Instead they protected the life of their former persecutor! (v.29-30) They took him down to Caesarea, when they knew it was now too dangerous for Saul to stay in Jerusalem any longer, and they put him on a ship back to his home town – where he had come from – Tarsus! (up in the north-east corner of the Mediterranean). This really was complete forgiveness!

I hope that we will accept new converts into this church as readily as these early believers did in Jerusalem.

- Regardless of their previous religious background – it doesn't matter!
- Regardless of their social background – rich or poor!
- Regardless of their moral background – their slate is now wiped clean!

A new convert often brings great challenges to the church! But as someone has put it, they bring with them the problems of the nursery, which is far better than dealing with the problems of a church that is dying on its feet, that has never seen a new convert walk through their doors in years!

I'd rather deal with the problems that new converts bring to a church, as we try to get them to stand on their own two feet spiritually speaking, than the little niggles and squabbles that church life more commonly throws up. Dealing with new believers in Christ, is what NT church life is all about! Finally...

3. Changing Sides Consolidated the Church (v.31)

Verse 31 is one of Dr Luke's summary verses.

It's like another progress report of how the church is doing. He's taking stock: This is how he puts it:

'Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.'

Saul of Tarsus, the arch-persecutor was no more; now he was the able-preacher, Paul.

So the great persecution he had started back in Acts 8:1 had now come to an end. It literally ran out of steam, as soon as Saul got converted.

So there was a lull in the battle – there was now a time of peace for the church to enjoy. This allowed for a time of consolidation for the church.

Here in v.31 we read about three things:

(i) Their Edification – '*It was strengthened.*' The believers were built up in their faith by the teaching, the fellowship, the prayer and encouragement, of a local church. That is so important for each and every one of us as believers. Each of us needs to be built up in our most holy faith, and God has provided the means for that to happen, as he places us within local churches like this. Let's never take all that we have here for granted. This is God's gift to us. We need it so we can be built up in our faith. Many believers in other parts of Ireland, and in other parts of the world, would give their right arm to have just a little bit of what we have here! They were strengthened in their faith.

(ii) Their Sanctification – They were '*encouraged by the Holy Spirit*' and they were '*living in the fear of the Lord.*' So the believers continued to live lives of clear testimony and witness for the Lord at all times. They were encouraged and enabled to do so by the Holy Spirit living within them, who was continually at work within them to make them more and more like Christ.

(iii) Their Multiplication – '*It grew in numbers.*' The church was being built up in terms of numbers too. The church was still growing! Persecution hadn't snuffed it out! In fact very often a period of persecution causes a church to grow even more strongly and rapidly than a period of peace: e.g. China etc.

Victory is the Lord's, no matter who is on the Devil's side.

God can always convert them, like Saul, if they get too big for their boots!

Conclusion: It's important that a church experiences periods of consolidation. It can't all be action. Sometimes less will appear to be happening outwardly, but as long as consolidation is happening behind the scenes, that's OK. After all discipleship is what a church is supposed to be all about, according to the Great Commission. So let's keep plugging away at that, and God will give the increase in terms of numbers as and when He sees fit to bless us. Amen.

