

## ACTS 9:1-18

### INTRODUCTION

I want you to think of the worst person you have ever met. You know the person who is nasty and evil. Perhaps it was a bully at school someone you once worked with or someone that you know. Imagine if that person suddenly got saved, they became real Christians by the power of God. Imagine if the Soham killer Ian Huntley was converted in his prison cell?

Do you believe that can happen? Do you really believe that can happen? If you don't then you don't really believe in the power of the gospel to change lives. Today we are going to look at the remarkable conversion of Saul, who was a nasty piece of work and thoroughly evil man.

Saul was born in Tarsus an important city (Acts 21:39) in the Roman province of Cilicia. Tarsus was famous for its university, which ranked with the best in the Roman Empire. Saul was a zealous Jew; he was a Pharisee and studied in Jerusalem under the most respected Rabbi of his day, Gamaliel (Acts 22:3).

Saul first appears in Scripture in connection with Stephen's death where he guarded the robes of those involved in his stoning. His position so close to the action suggests he was deeply involved with the whole affair. There is no question as to Saul's role in the persecution of the church that followed Stephen's death he was its mastermind and ringleader.

Read how Saul himself describes the persecution that he was involved in (Acts 26:9-11).

Chapter 9 opens with Saul "still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples" (v 1). He was consumed with persecuting Christians it had become his whole goal in life, he hated anyone who claimed to be a disciple of Jesus; he would not be content until every one of them was destroyed.

On hearing about a group of Christians in Damascus Saul went to the high priest and asked for letters addressed to the synagogue of Damascus that would give Saul permission to apprehend any Christians he found there. Saul intended to bring any Christians that he found there whether men or women back to Jerusalem as prisoners' (v 2).

Having obtained the necessary papers Saul and his entourage set out for Damascus, but God had plans for Saul his plan was to convert him and make him into an apostle who would take the gospel to the Gentiles. His conversion is dramatic but there are a number of things that we can learn from it.

### 1. HOW SAUL CAME TO FAITH IN THE SAVIOUR (vs. 3-9)

Saul was still charging full speed for Damascus when he was suddenly stopped dead in his tracks. A light from heaven flashed around him and Saul was confronted with the appearance of the glorious Lord Jesus who spoke to Saul (vs. 3-4). We are told that the men travelling with Saul heard the voice but didn't see anything (v 7).

Now notice that it is the Lord who initiates the contact with Saul, He wants to save him and so He makes contact with him. That is always the way it is in salvation. It usually is not very dramatic but the Lord initiates contact with sinners when He intends to save them. He quietly arranges the circumstances of our lives so that we can hear the gospel and through the gospel God speaks to us by his Spirit.

Perhaps God brings someone to church, and through hearing the gospel preached you have a sense of God at work in your heart, confronting you with your sin and pointing you to the One who can save you. Perhaps it's through a Christian book that you have been given or through the quiet reading of the bible at home that you become aware of God's power at work within you.

There are many circumstances that God uses to convert people but in every one of those circumstances it is God who always takes the initiative and makes us aware of our need for salvation. Left to ourselves we would have no interest and have no sense of conviction we would continue happily in our sin.

Saul hears the Lord's voice (v 4) calling him by name and accusing him of persecuting notice not the church or Christians but me. The Lord is facing Saul with his sin; He wants Saul to feel guilty and convicted by his actions. In persecuting believers and the church Saul was in fact persecuting the Lord Jesus for you cannot separate the link between Jesus as head of the church and the church as his body.

No blow struck against the church on earth goes unfelt in heaven; Saul who had been so violent is now faced with the enormity of his crimes not against the church but ultimately against the Lord Jesus. If you are not a Christian today then you need to understand that all sin is ultimately against God you will not go to hell for sins against humanity but for sins against almighty God.

Your greatest sin is your refusal to trust in Jesus for salvation, your continual rejection of Him is indeed a great sin. Therefore if anyone is going to be saved they have to face up to the fact that their sin of rejection is extremely serious, serious enough to send one to hell. Could there be someone here today who is continuing to reject Jesus as Saviour you are continuing to depend on yourself and your self-righteousness?

My dear friend that is a damning sin and I trust that God by his Spirit will begin to convict you and expose that sin to you. For until you see just how damning your sin is then you will never turn to Christ for salvation. But notice that it is the Lord who brings about this conviction in Saul by facing him with his sin.

That is how God works in salvation He begins to expose your sin and He begins to show how serious it is and He begins to show the consequences of it. He does that to the extent that you will begin to feel the weight of your guilt.

When faced with his sin and guilt Saul asks a question (v 5). He knew that this voice came from heaven but whose voice was it? Imagine the shock when his worst nightmare became a reality, it was Jesus whom he had spent his life persecuting. However this is the point where Saul is converted, as it is clear from the Lord's command (v 6).

Saul now knew that Jesus was alive that meant that what the apostles were preaching was true and it meant that what Jesus said about Himself was true. All this convinced Saul, the Lord had met with him and changed him and now he is going to serve the one that he has been persecuting all these years. No one is converted or can be converted without an encounter with God.

It is usually a quiet encounter in one's heart, a wrestling that takes place until the Lord changes our hearts and convinces us of our sin and of His person and work on our behalf. However once that happens we are changed people no longer living for self but from our conversion onwards living for God. Now can I be so bold as to ask have you been converted. Has there been a conversion experience in your heart, a conversion that has completely changed you. It may not have been very dramatic and you may not be able to put a time on it but a very definite change has taken place and you are now living and wanting to live for God. If you have not been

converted then you are not a Christian. You might think that you have always been a Christian but a Christian is someone who has been converted.

This conversion experience is from God, He meets with us in our hearts and convinces us of His truth and gives us life so that we begin to live differently we begin to live for God. This experience is not suddenly becoming religious it is being converted by God's grace, an experience that means that we belong wholehearted to God.

The result is a complete change of attitude motives and actions. If you have not been converted, then cry out to God that He might show you mercy and meet with you. If you are converted then praise God for it has nothing to do with you but it is all of God. Pray for those who are unsaved in your family and community that God in his grace might reach out to them and convert them for his glory.

But how do you know if someone is converted? We cannot see what goes on in the souls of men and women. Well the answer is seen in their lives and it is seen in Saul's life (vs. 6-8). From Acts 22:10 we learn that Saul asked "what shall I do Lord" which is a sign of a converted heart.

A converted person immediately wants to serve his Lord, so Saul humbly submits to his new Master, he knew that Jesus is Lord and must be obeyed. The sign that anyone is converted is seen in his or her willingness to serve their Lord in their willingness to put Him first. In fact a good guide as to how we are doing spiritually is to ask ourselves. Do we still have a heart desire to submit to the Lord?

Do we still put Him first in our lives? If the honest answer is no, then there is some spiritual coldness within our hearts and we need the fire of God within us to be rekindled.

The Lord tells Saul to go to Damascus and He will be told what to do (v 6). When Saul got up from the ground he found that he was blind and needed to be led into the city of Damascus (v 8). Perhaps this blindness was part of God's process of humbling Saul. His intention was to go into Damascus with his entourage and bring the Christians back to Jerusalem but now he enters that city helplessly blind, and having to be led by others but at least now he enters it as a Christian rather than a hardhearted unbeliever. His blindness will also teach Saul a very important spiritual lesson about salvation. That he was spiritually blind but then God opens his spiritual eyes just as he opened his physical eyes (v 18).

If God was going to use Saul for his glory then He had to first of all break him and as a blinded man he is certainty broken. That is often how God deals with us as Christian people He often has to break us for we are naturally so proud in order that we may be useful servants for Him.

That breaking process can be very painful and it can be very hard to take, but as long as we respond in the way that God has designed for us we will be more useful in our service for our Master.

## 2. THE AFTERMATH OF SAUL'S CONVERSION (vs. 10-18)

Saul was blinded for three days; we are not told exactly what Saul did for those three days. But it seems that he spent a good part of them praying for we read that he did not eat or drink (v 9) and when Ananias is told to go to see Saul he is told that he is praying (v 11). Perhaps Saul needed this time to reflect upon what has happened to him and how this was going to affect his life in the future.

Although it is true that salvation is instantaneous, it brings us from darkness to light it takes time to reflect upon what has happened to us in order that we might understand the depths of salvation

and its implications for our future life. While Paul was blinded for three days God was at work in the life of another man called Ananias.

We don't know for sure who this Ananias was he is described as devout and well respected (Acts 22:12) perhaps he was one of the leaders of the church at Damascus? If he was a leader of the church then he was one of ones that Saul was willing to bring back to Jerusalem as a prisoner. Ananias is told in a vision to go to Judas' house and enquire about Saul (v 11).

Now that was a severe test for Ananias's faith since Saul's reputation was well known among the Christians (vs. 13-14), and he had no way of knowing that Saul had been converted although perhaps the phrase for "he is praying" (v 11) is a hint to Ananias. God even graciously gave Saul a vision in which he sees Ananias placing his hands on him and having his sight restored (v 12). God treats Saul so graciously there is no sense of revenge for the way that Saul had treated Him and his people. No all his sins have been forgiven never to be used against Saul again therefore the Lord treats him with great tenderness and care as a child of God.

My dear friend God does not punish you for the sins that Christ has already been punished for. Yes there are times when He disciplines us because of our wilful disobedience but He never punishes us for our past sins and there is a big difference between discipline and punishment.

What about Ananias? At first he protested because he knew of Saul's reputation and why he had come to Damascus (v 13). But the Lord kindly and graciously explained to Ananias that Saul was now God's chosen instrument, a man who would go to the Gentiles and the Jews and would have to suffer much for the sake of Christ (vs. 15-16).

In other words the Lord is saying Saul is now my man, and I have plans to use him greatly but that will involve great suffering for Saul (v 16). Ananias obeyed the Lord and immediately accepts Paul as a brother in Christ (v 17) and Paul receives his sight. According to Acts 22:14-15 this was Saul's commissioning as an apostle. As we know God greatly used him to bring the gospel to the Gentiles and to write half of the New Testament. For Paul to be an apostle he needed to be filled with the Spirit, which is what happened here (v 17).

Of course he would need daily fillings of the Spirit but this filling demonstrates to him that as God's appointed man he would be empowered by the Holy Spirit to carry out his commission.

Now as we conclude although we do not have apostles today and therefore none of us are commissioned in that sense yet each believer has a mission to fulfil. That mission is clearly stated for us in Matthew 28:18-20 we are to go into our world and make disciples. That involves telling people the gospel and when God converts them then we are to teach and train such people to be disciples of the Lord.

God saves us for a purpose and that purpose is to serve Him, we are to seek to bring glory to His name by our words and by our actions. Of course we are unable to do that in our own strength so God graciously gives to us his Holy Spirit who empowers us daily to live for our Master. God does not save us so that we can hide away in our homes or in our church building, He saves us to go and proclaim His gospel in our families and in our places of work and in our towns and villages. There is always plenty to do in the Christian life, no Christian should be idle for there is always plenty to do, always someone else to witness too always someone who needs to be disciplined.

Remember it is God who saves; it is Him who takes the initiative and convicts and convinces sinners by His Spirit. Therefore let us obey our Master and be his instruments in our world but let us pray and expect God to work and to save sinners. Yes to save the worst of sinners' men and women like Saul.

Amen