

ACTS 9:19-31

INTRODUCTION

Last time we looked at Saul's conversion and saw how God by his power and grace is able to break and convert a hard and ruthless man like Saul. Now we want to continue to look at Saul and the effects that his conversion had on him and on others.

1. A CONVERTED PERSON SEEKS FELLOWSHIP WITH THE SAINTS (vs. 18-19)

As soon as Saul is converted and receives his sight back he is baptised for he wants to identify with the very people that he hated and persecuted (v 18). His hated enemies had become his friends while his former friends had become his enemy (v 23). That is one of the remarkable changes that take place at conversion.

Christians that you had no time for and had no interest in become your friends and those who you considered to be your best friends become if not your enemy at least disinterested in you. Saul stayed for several days in Damascus after his conversion, no doubt enjoying the fellowship of God's people and being ministered to by those who were the leaders of the church. Now once again this is another clear mark of conversion being shown here by Saul, he longs to be in fellowship with God's people. He now loves those he once hated. A desire for fellowship with other Christians is a sure mark that one is converted and likewise it is a gauge of our spiritual temperature.

We know that we have passed from death to life when we love our fellow Christians (John 3:14), when we desire their company and fellowship then that is a healthy sign. Of course that does not mean that Christians are not to have unbelieving friends but the reality is that a converted person prefers the company of believers to that of unbelievers because they are our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

Now if this is true then there is something spiritually wrong with professing believers when they show no real appetite for fellowship with their fellow Christians. This is often seen in their absence from the formal meetings of the church, but it is also seen in the fact that they prefer the company of unbelievers or even their own company to the company of believers.

One of the reasons why the Lord put Saul in Damascus for a short period after his conversion was that He knew that Saul needed the fellowship of the saints he needed a period of being built up and strengthened in his new found faith.

God places us in churches because we all need fellowship; we need the company, and encouragement and sometimes the quiet rebuke that comes with having fellowship both formally and informally with our fellow believers. So if we have neglected this area of our lives then let us repent of such failures and let us ask God by His Spirit to motivate us and move us so that we actively seek fellowship with God's people.

There will be nothing that will squeeze the spiritual life from us more than failing to have fellowship with our fellow Christians. We need one another, therefore make every effort to seek company and fellowship with fellow believers.

2. A CONVERTED PERSON SHARES THE GOSPEL WITH OTHERS (vs. 20-22)

Those who are transformed by the grace of God cannot help but speak about it to others. That is certainly true when one is first converted although sadly after a few years some seem to lose their

enthusiasm for sharing their faith and this has to do more with our own coldness and worldliness than it has to do with whether we are converted or not. However there is nothing like new babes in Christ for showing those of us who are older in the faith the way when it comes to sharing our faith with others.

Saul can't wait to share his faith, God had blessed him with a gift of preaching for remember he was a preacher before he became a Christian, he used to teach Judaism to others but now he is preaching Christ to others. Saul begins to go into the synagogues and begins to proclaim that Jesus is the Son of God (v 20). Just imagine the scene as Saul enters those synagogues.

The Jews were expecting him to hunt out the Christians and then drag them off to prison but now they find that he is preaching the very same gospel that the Christians preached he is proclaiming what he in fact was persecuting the Christians for. The shock and consternation that Saul's preaching must have produced is unimaginable for us.

The most zealous defender of Judaism now becomes the most zealous evangelist for Christianity. No wonder then that those who heard Saul were astonished (v 21) and asked is this the same Saul who caused havoc in Jerusalem and was planning to imprison those who claimed to be Christians in Damascus (v 21). They simply could not comprehend the vast change in Saul; they could not explain how such a thing could happen. How is it possible?

But happen it did and Saul was becoming increasingly powerful in his presentation as he baffled the Jews who were living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ. So his message was centred upon Jesus, he preached that Jesus is the Son of God, which meant that He is the incarnate One, He is God in human flesh, and He is the Christ, He is the promised Messiah who has come.

So Saul's focus is clear Jesus is God and he entered our world to be the Messiah the deliverer of His people. Of course both those truths went against fundamental Jewish teaching. They did not believe in an incarnate God, they believed that God was far too holy and transcendent to associate with sinful people. They also had rejected Jesus as the Messiah and that is what Saul once believed.

But now because of his experience at his conversion he acknowledges that Jesus is God in human flesh and that He entered our world to live and die for sinners so that he could deliver us from our bondage to sin and Satan.

Conversion changes our biblical theology, it might be that someone didn't even believe in God but God converts that person and suddenly they know that there is a God and a God who cares and saves sinners.

No doubt Saul engaged in open debate about these matters and it seems that his arguments were very convincing for the Jews were baffled or confounded by his teaching that proved to them that Jesus was the Messiah.

Remember Saul had received the finest education both secular and Jewish education and he knew the scriptures thoroughly but now he understood the scriptures for he had met the One who the scriptures were pointing too. Once he understood who Jesus was, he had the key that unlocked the whole Old Testament and from that day on he saw the Old Testament in a new light.

He was then enabled by the Holy Spirit to use his brilliant mind and thorough knowledge of the Scriptures to prove that Jesus was the long awaited for Messiah that He was the Son of God, God in human flesh who entered our world to deliver us. My dear friends the key to understanding the bible is to be converted, for once you are converted you know Jesus personally and He is the Key

to the whole bible. Perhaps you read the Bible before you became a Christian but yet you failed to understand it.

You missed its central point. Then one day God by his grace brought you to faith in Jesus Christ, suddenly the whole bible opened up for you in a way that you had never seen before.

Now the lesson for us is that converted people engage others in conversation about who Jesus is. I wonder could you show people from the Scriptures that Jesus is God and that He is the Saviour. When the JW's knock on your door and deny the deity of Jesus can you turn them to the bible and point them to one or two references that clearly show who Jesus is?

It is important that we know our Bible's sufficiently well enough to be able to engage people in conversation about the person of Jesus. It is also important that we try to direct our conversations about spiritual matters to Jesus, for He is the key and the focal point for all the Scriptures. He is the one who entered our world to live and die for us so that we could receive the gift of salvation. If we want to see people converted and delivered from their sin then we must tell people about Jesus. We must point them to the One who died to save them to the one who has paid the price for our sin and to the One who can give them eternal life.

Let us pray that the Lord will give us many opportunities to present Jesus Christ to our friends, family and neighbours. Let us pray that God will convert sinners and that he will use the witness of His people in the process.

3. A CONVERTED PERSON IS PREPARED TO SUFFER FOR THEIR FAITH (vs. 23-31)

The little phrase "after many days" (v 23) needs to be understood in the light of Galatians 1:17-18. The many days here refers to a period of three years and it seems that Saul spent those years in Arabia which must not be confused with modern day Arabia but this place was located near Damascus.

No doubt he needed this time to think through his conversion and he would have to learn to understand the Scriptures in the light of his discovery of Christ. We assume he spent much of his time searching the Scriptures and coming to a Christian understanding of them rather than a Jewish understanding. He must have spent time in prayer asking God to enlighten his mind and to open his heart to the truths that he found in his word.

Whatever he was doing for those three years he returned to Damascus and no doubt started to preach but during that period, opposition had arisen against Saul and he learns of a plot to kill him, a plot that was hatched by his fellow Jews (vs. 23-24). My dear friends conversion to Christ will lead to persecution of some form or another and we all must understand and realise that.

Perhaps some of your unbelieving friends will desert you; they no longer want your company because you no longer do what you once did. Perhaps work colleagues begin to give you a hard time, by making sport of you. School friends might even try to bully you because they oppose your Christian faith. Even family members might cut themselves off as a result of your faith in Christ.

The truth is that converted people must be prepared to suffer for their faith in one way or another. That is the price of belonging to Christ because that is how He was treated by the unbelieving world therefore we should not expect to be treated any differently. If we are persecuted then praise God that we have been given the privilege of suffering for our Saviour. However we must be careful because it is possible that we do not suffer much for Christ because we do not live as we ought to for Christ.

The cutting edge has been blunted and our faith is not as effective as perhaps it once was, therefore our lives do not challenge the unbeliever as much as they should. We need to examine ourselves on this point. If we are not suffering much for being a Christian then perhaps we are not living much like a Christian.

We know from 2 Corinthians 11:32 that the Governor of Damascus under the authority of King Aretas had the city guarded in order that Saul would not escape arrest. Therefore they watched the city gates day and night for a wall surrounded the city so the city gates were the only way in and out of the city or so Saul's enemies thought.

For Saul's followers in the city (v 25) which shows that his leadership ability is already beginning to shine through had found another way out and they took Saul by night lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall. Having made his escape from Damascus Saul goes to Jerusalem and he tries to associate with the followers of Jesus in that city but they were afraid of him and did not believe that he was a real disciple of Jesus.

After all they had not heard from him for three years now so perhaps they thought that it was a con in order to get to know who the Christians were and then he could persecute them by taking them to prison (v 26).

It is no surprise that Saul was not accepted by his fellow believers they knew that he was a ruthless man who had shown no mercy towards them, so it is understandable that they thought this was just a new tactic, that he was a wolf in sheep's clothing.

How long this impasse between Saul and the believers at Jerusalem lasted we do not know but the word translated "he tried" (v 26) is in the imperfect tense which suggests that he made repeated attempts to be accepted but he was rebuffed on many occasions by the believers. How dejected Saul must have felt, he was rejected and was being persecuted by the Jews and now his new family of believers was also rejecting him. But God is in control of the situation and Barnabas came and took him to the apostles (Peter and James - Galatians 1:18-19) and spoke up for him (v 27). With the highly respected Barnabas to vouch for him Saul was finally accepted and he began to preach boldly about Christ in the city of Jerusalem (v 28).

He talked and debated as Stephen did with the Grecian Jews but like Stephen his ministry was not accepted and they tried to kill him (Acts 6:8-10). Once again Saul is faced with opposition the persecutor becomes the persecuted. Anyone who desires to be a follower of Jesus has to understand that persecution and opposition is par for the course.

Do not expect to be popular or well liked or listened too by the world for they are naturally opposed to the gospel, which we proclaim. Even if people are nice to us when speaking face to face, do not be surprised if people speak about us in a derogatory way behind our backs. Don't get upset if people ridicule our church for that is what we ought to expect.

Christ was persecuted, so were his apostles and the early church and every generation of believers since have faced intense persecution. Thank God that in our nation we have freedom to preach the gospel and live as Christians. But that is not the case with all our brothers and sisters and therefore we ought to pray for Christ's church in our world as it faces fierce and intense opposition. It's only crime is that it proclaims Christ and his gospel of salvation.

The church at Jerusalem soon discovered that it was almost as bad having Saul with them as it was when he was against them. He soon stirred people up with his debating skills and abilities therefore they decided to send him home to Tarsus, no doubt they did this for their own benefit but also for the safety of Saul (v 30).

With Saul removed from the scene things quieted down and the church once again enjoyed a period of peace (v 31). The main reason of course why it enjoyed peace again was that its chief persecutor is now on their side, he has been converted by the grace of God and therefore no longer opposed to Christ or his church. That alone is a good reason why we should pray for our enemies as instructed by Jesus (Matthew 5:44).

If God converts our enemies then life is considerable easier for us. As Luke brings the account of Saul's conversion to an end he gives us another one of his summaries that you find throughout the book of Acts (v 31). He tells us that during this time of peace the church was strengthened and encouraged by the work of the Holy Spirit and it grew both in numbers and in their fear of the Lord (v 31). The church has spread throughout Judea Galilee and Samaria; it is ready to spread even further into the Gentile world, which is what we find in chapter 10.

But notice that although the church of Jesus Christ was meeting in all those places and would have had more than one church in each place. Luke tells us that it was one church. There is only one true church, it might meet in various places throughout the world but each bible believing church is united to Christ and therefore united to one another.

That's why when Christ's church is facing persecution in some part of the world we should also feel that pain. We should do all we can to support Christ's church during such times because we belong to one another because together we are the body of Christ. When one part suffers the whole body suffers.

This is why we need to seek fellowship with one another both individually and collectively and this is why we need to support one another in preaching and proclaiming the gospel to this lost world. We belong to one another, so let's have fellowship with all true believers, let us encourage other churches that preach the same gospel we do and finally let us pray and support one another as we suffer together for the cause of Christ.

Amen