

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Key events in the Acts: The conversion of Saul of Tarsus – Acts 9

You have probably heard the expression, “He’s seen the light!” This I believe has its origin in Acts 9 and the conversion of Saul of Tarsus as he journeyed to Damascus. The expression is often used in connection with situations, for example, when a solution to a problem suddenly becomes apparent. This morning we are going to consider the original source of the expression in the second talk on “Key events in Acts”. We will consider the historical event in chapter 9, which was a significant milestone in the progress of Christianity from Jerusalem out to other nations, as well as touching upon the gems of basic Christian truths imbedded in the narrative.

Introduction to Saul

We first come across Saul in Acts 7, where he is involved in the stoning to death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. 7:58 states, “They cast [Stephen] out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul”. Saul was no bystander, as he later records his involvement in Acts 22:20, “I also was standing by consenting to his death, and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.” We read more of Saul in chapter 8, as he actively persecutes Christians. Verse 3 describes him as making havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison. 9:1-2 states, “Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.” Saul was not content to confine his persecution to the country of Judah, he extended his campaign into foreign countries also. Persecution in those early days of the Christian movement has continued to this present day, in some form or other, in every country where there are Christians!

Divine Intervention

When Saul neared the city of Damascus, an amazing heavenly intervention occurred that changed both the life of Saul and dramatically the progress of Christianity in the first century AD. Saul, “as he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven”, verse 3. The light that shone was a great light above the brightness of the noon day sun. (See also Acts 22:6 and 26:13). This was an extremely bright light from heaven illuminating Saul. The light caused Saul to fall to the ground. But far more dramatic was the accompanying voice which spoke to him personally with the challenging question, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”

There could be no mistake; Saul is named twice by the heavenly voice. For Saul there could only be one response. “Who are You, Lord?” Let us notice that as far as Saul was concerned, such a light and voice could only come from God. If this event was not amazing enough, the next statement was ground breaking theology for Saul. This truth is at the very heart of Christianity. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads”, verse 5.

The very person, whose name Saul was seeking to obliterate from the face of the earth was the person who was speaking from heaven. For Saul, Jesus had been a blasphemer, impostor and the destroyer of his own religion. Now, Saul is confronted with the most radical of facts that this Jesus was alive, in heaven and He must be all that He said He was, the Son of God, the Jewish Messiah, the upholder of the whole truth of God and the risen glorified Saviour. At the heart of Christianity are these basic facts of the Christian faith. Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God. Faith in this person and acceptance of His sacrificial work at Calvary are the only means of obtaining forgiveness of sins. A living Saviour who is God, not a god which is the product of mankind’s imagination and manufacture. To quote from Colin Curry’s book, “*The Heart of Christianity*”, “Not only is Christ at the very heart of Christianity, but He is the very sum and substance of it! Of course Christianity is ‘about’ Christ. But Christianity is Christ Himself!”

Now, Saul was persecuting Christians wherever he could find them. Yet the voice from heaven states that Saul was persecuting Him. How can this be? An attack on Christ’s followers was an attack on Christ. It was personal, known and experienced by Jesus in heaven. How could this be? Again it is another basic truth of Christianity that our Lord Jesus Christ is the Head in heaven and He is livingly linked to every believer on earth. The whole sum total of all living Christians on earth are Christ’s body. Just as in a natural body when a toe is stubbed or a thumb hit with a hammer the pain is felt and known by the head, which immediately seeks to find a means of healing the hurting member. This

living link is due to believers having a new kind of life, being born again, and that the person of the Holy Spirit lives in each believer. (See also Galatians 3:14).

Saul's Conscience

The next statement that the voice from heaven makes is "It is hard for you to kick against the goads", (9:5; 26:14). Here we understand that, although Saul had this inveterate hatred for Christians, his conscience was also at work. Saul had no doubt heard what Christians preached and believed. He would have listened to Stephen's defence before the Jewish council and certainly heard his last words as he was being stoned to death. The Lord now in effect is saying, Why are you resisting what you know is true? In this country and probably in many countries of the world there are people who over the years have heard the Gospel message and yet are resisting its truth. Dear listener, if you are one such person then I implore you to yield your life to Christ now and stop fighting God. God always wins in the end.

Divine Commission

At this, Saul has only one answer, "So he, trembling and astonished, said, 'Lord, what do You want me to do?'" We can understand Saul trembling and indeed being astonished at the impact of such divine revelation in just 30 seconds. We must remember that Saul was an amazing man and had risen in the ranks as a well qualified Jewish scholar. Saul was taught by Gamaliel in the exactness of the law, becoming a Pharisee and he lived his life conforming to those principles, see Acts 22:3, 26:5 and Philippians 3:5.

Saul's question,

"Lord, what do You want me to do?" was to change his whole life. It was the most open ended question that any newly converted person can ever say to the Lord Jesus Christ. In truth, this should be the question that all believers say on the day they trust Christ as their own personal Saviour and Lord. First, Saul acknowledged immediately that the Jesus in heaven had to have total control of his life. When we say 'Lord', we are saying, have full control of my life. It is a challenge because I wonder how many of us say 'Lord' to Jesus but only intend to give Him part, but not all, of our lives. Giving our lives to Jesus in this way means we should be careful as to what we say, what we do and how we do things, where we go and what we let into our minds through eyes and ears.

The Lord gives Saul direction,

"Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." However, the Lord Jesus does communicate briefly the fundamental nature of Saul's commission. We read this in Acts 26:16-18, "I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of the things which you have seen and of the things which I will yet reveal to you. I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me."

It is possible that Saul had enough revelation at this point in time. He was no doubt in shock and turmoil at what had happened. He needed time to think through and consider what had been revealed so quickly and simply and yet the implications would need considering. The Lord was being gracious, letting His new servant have a breathing space, before his commission is communicated in detail.

We learn initially from this heavenly communication that the Lord Jesus Christ was going to preserve Saul in his work for Him. Saul would be preserved from both Jew and Gentile, though the main thrust of Saul's activity would be with the Gentiles. Saul's work was to open their eyes so that they might be turned from darkness to light. This would be achieved by the power of the Gospel. It is just the same today. A sinner needs a Saviour and that Saviour is the Lord Jesus Christ. There is more, the Lord Jesus Christ needs to be my Saviour, He needs to be your Saviour! Many people know that there is a Saviour; they know about Him and may even be able to quote passages from the Bible. But knowledge is not necessarily reality. A personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ is required. When that is true, then a person's life is changed. You can tell when a person becomes a Christian because they become a completely different person to what they were before. Life has different interests. There is a concern about others who are lost in their sins. There is a compelling desire to be truthful, honest and caring. There will be a genuine love for others and a great interest in learning about the person of the Lord Jesus Christ through reading and studying the Bible. The Lord becomes the object in life rather than self.

Notice what the Lord said about people. They were in darkness. Paul writing to the Corinthians could say, "Since we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness nor handling the word of God deceitfully, but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel

of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them. For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord" (2 Corinthians 4:1-5). Satan, the god of this world, works unceasingly to keep people in darkness, blinded to the eternal realities of salvation or condemnation. It is one or the other and the apostle felt the tremendous burden to preach the Gospel and so should all Christians.

This darkness is achieved because of the power of Satan. In western countries, the message is either that there is no such person as Satan or we have turned him into a comic character to be laughed at and therefore he is of no cause for concern. Yet in other parts of the world where Satan openly shows his power through witchcraft and other similar cults, people believe he is real and they do not laugh!

Years later, the apostle Paul writing to his friend Timothy could say, "Do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner, but share with me in the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God, who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began, but has now been revealed by the appearing of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, to which I was appointed a preacher, an apostle, and a teacher of the Gentiles" (2 Timothy 1:8-11). What eternal blessing is available through accepting the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour - life and immortality as opposed to eternal condemnation in the "lake of fire".

Saul's stay in Damascus

At this point Saul discovers he has been blinded by this experience and is led into the city to the place where he was to stay. Saul's companions had not the same experience as Saul. They saw the light and they heard a sound but there was no perception of the actual words spoken (see Acts 9:7 and 22:9). This experience was directed to and solely for Saul. Verse 9 of our chapter states that Saul was without food and drink for three days. The experience was certainly dramatic and no doubt the three days were spent fasting that he might totally concentrate on what had happened. Saul would expect the Lord to approach him for whatever was to come next.

Now in the early days of the Church the Lord intervened personally. Today, the Lord speaks to us through the Scriptures. In the Scriptures, we have everything that we can possibly need to help us through life's journey. Here the Lord communicates through another Christian called Ananias. We might ask why the Lord did not deal with Saul directly, why use someone else? The Lord was to use Ananias both to instruct Ananias himself as well as Saul and so each would learn a valuable lesson to do with Christianity.

In verses 10-12 the Lord speaks to Ananias, "Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, 'Ananias.' And he said, 'Here I am, Lord.' So the Lord said to him, 'Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying. And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him, so that he might receive his sight.'" As the Lord speaks to Ananias we notice that Ananias is ready to listen. The Lord knew exactly where Saul was; there is no hiding place to escape the eye of God. The Lord knew the street name and the owner of the house in which Saul was staying. The next thing that comes to our attention is the confidence that Ananias has with the Lord. "Then Ananias answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name'" (verses 13-14). Ananias is not afraid to bring to the Lord his concerns. This is one of the things we do in prayer. The Lord knows our concerns but He desires to hear them. Why we might ask? As we bring every detail of our life to the Lord in prayer, it is a simple acknowledgement that we prefer to rely on the Lord than on our own strength. Reliance in prayer must be combined with taking the Lord's advice. This is what happens next.

"The Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake.' And Ananias went his way and entered the house" (verses 15-17). The Lord is gracious in His dealings with Ananias, and with us, as He gives more information. Saul has been specially chosen to extend the Gospel far beyond its current sphere of activity. However, connected with this commission is the fact that Saul would suffer for the Lord's Name. At this Ananias goes as directed.

Ananias enters the house and says, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptised. So when he had received food, he was strengthened. Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus. Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God. Then all who heard were amazed, and said, 'Is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name in Jerusalem, and has come here for that purpose, so that he might bring them bound to the chief priests?' But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this Jesus is the Christ" (verses 17-22). The way Ananias addresses Saul as he enters the

house, “Brother Saul”, teaches a very simple but very important truth, that all Christians belong to the same one family of God. As a result of this encounter Saul has his eyes opened and his first concern is to be baptised, identifying publicly with his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Saul then fellowships with other believers in Damascus, who were probably amazed at this conversion. Then Saul embarks upon the commission given to him and initially preaches in the synagogues of Damascus proving that the person proclaimed is indeed Christ, the promised Messiah and Saviour of the world.

We might not all be as well instructed as Saul but the challenge that comes to each believer is to preach Christ. Not simply in our own church fellowships, but out in the world where the lost are!

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