

THE CONVERSION OF PAUL

Acts 9:1

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4th August 2019



The story is told of a Dutch missionary in Irian Jaya. He heard about two men from a tribe with a cannibal, head hunting history. The local villagers regarded them as very dangerous and were terrified of them. On one occasion the missionary was teaching in a village and said 'God loves everyone. So, as a village you should pray for everyone to be converted.' The villagers disagreed with him. They argued that surely God would not want those two evil head-hunters in his heaven. So, they refused to pray for the conversion of those two men. Have you ever come across someone that you think 'There's no point praying for them'? 'Why share the gospel with them'. Here is this loud, opinionated, aggressive, strongly antichristian person. Would you pray for them to be converted? What about someone off the scale like a murderous dictator, or a paedophile? Would you pray with passion that such a person to be converted? Or would you prefer they 'rot in hell as they deserve'?

I'm asking this to get you in the right frame of mind as we focus on Saul and his conversion. Here in Acts 9 we have the most dramatic of conversion experiences. We see Jesus and his Spirit powerfully at work and can understand why this preaching series in Acts is called 'Mission Unstoppable'. Jesus said to his disciples (Acts 1:8) *"You will be my witness in Jerusalem and in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."* So far, we have seen the Apostles witnessing in Jerusalem and converting thousands. We have seen Stephen tried by the Sanhedrin and put to death. The result was the Christians in Jerusalem were persecuted. They fled to *"...Judea and Samaria"* sharing the gospel wherever they went. God in his providence used the persecution to scatter his people and ensured the second stage of the mission. Now in chapter 9 we are getting close to the third stage, sharing the gospel *"...to the ends of the earth."* God was getting a person ready to take the gospel to all the Gentile world. And God, we see, has a great sense of irony. The person he was preparing was the last person in Israel anyone would have considered. A terrible man, 'Saul of Tarsus'.

Luke makes clear how bad Saul was. He first mentions him in chapter 7. After Stephen was stoned Luke closes the chapter (Acts 7:60) *"And Saul was there, giving his approval to [Stephen's] death."* Chapter 8 tells us how Paul went after the Christians (Acts 8:3) *"Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women*

and put them in prison." So far Luke has given us clues about Saul. But now in chapter 9 all the attention is on Saul. Luke paints him as a very ugly character. (Acts 9:1,2) *"Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem"*. The people of 'the Way' were believers in Jesus. They weren't called 'Christians' till later. The language Luke uses here paints the picture of the snorting of a wild beast as it mauls its victim. We read in Acts 9:21 that Saul *"caused havoc in Jerusalem"*. The verb there can also be translated "mauled". You see why I asked about us praying for a terrible person. That is how Saul was seen in his pursuit of Christians. His hatred for the Christians was such that he was not satisfied chasing Christians around Jerusalem. He wanted to get them all the way to Damascus, about 300 kilometres away. He got what we could call extradition papers for the synagogues in Damascus. That way any Christian refugees, that had escaped the persecution that far away, he could drag back. It's very clear that Saul was dedicated in a shocking bloody zeal to eliminate what he regarded as the cult of the Nazarene. Paul himself confessed (Acts 26:9-11) *"I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the Lord's people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even hunted them down in foreign cities"*.

In Saul's chase of Christians, we see the providential hand of God. Saul may be described as the wild animal chasing the Christians. But God was like that poem that describes him as the 'The Hound of Heaven'. God is always on the track of those he is after. Till in his own time, he nabs them. Like CS Lewis who says he was brought into the kingdom kicking and screaming. God maneuvered Saul away from Jerusalem all the way to Damascus. It would have taken Paul about a week to get there. On the road God gets him (Acts 9:3-6) *"As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."* Saul was just outside Damascus, which is an oasis in the desert. In his testimony in Acts 22 we find out that this event occurred at midday. So, a light, brighter than the desert midday sun, blinded him. He was lying in the dust, the position of someone soundly beaten. He said in Acts 26 (14) he heard a voice in Aramaic (26:14) *"Saul, Saul why are you persecuting me?"* You notice, it's not why are you persecuting my 'followers', but 'me'. That shows how closely Jesus identified with his church. It's what we mean when we say Jesus is the head and we are his body. If you touch a Christian,

you touch Christ. If you abuse, mock, slander a Christian you are doing it to Jesus. Jesus made clear to Saul in this extraordinary way that he was alive. And that he was Lord and Master. Jesus forced Paul to consider his actions, what drove him, what made him such a murderous animal. *"Why... are you persecuting me?"* During the time of his blindness Saul would have really searched his motives. Why had he been so violent? Why so systematic and zealous in his violence? Other Jews had let the Christians alone. Many had converted. The Christians had been no threat to others. Why had Paul been so murderous? When God takes a hold of us and shakes us with the gospel, it challenges us to look at ourselves. As we search ourselves, we come to terms with what drives us. There's much that is not pretty. It's humbling to say the least. I put it to you, that if a person resists the gospel, they are afraid to have a long hard look at themselves. In answering Jesus' question, Paul got a serious awareness of himself. As he wrote in Romans 7 *"What a wretched man I am!"*

What Jesus said next was also very significant. (Acts 9:6) *"Get up and enter the city and there you will be told what to do."* That shows us the huge reversal of Saul's whole approach to life. He was no longer entering Damascus as a zealous, self-confident opponent of Jesus. Saul was led as a blind, humbled captive of the very Jesus he had come to oppose. He then experienced what it was to be a Christian. Paul later wrote (1 Corinthians 6:19-20) *"You are not your own, you were bought at a price."* That was slave language. The first thing Saul experienced as a convert was the right for Jesus to tell him what to do. That goes for all of us. If you don't see yourself as a servant of Jesus, you don't understand your relationship with Jesus. He not just your saviour. He is Lord.

Seeing Saul coming into Damascus, led by the hand, we are struck at the might of the risen Jesus. His mission is unstoppable. The 'mauling animal', Saul, had become a humbled man. That should inspire us to pray for our unconverted family and friends. No matter what they are like, how antichristian, none of them can resist the power of the Spirit. If God has set his will on them, they will change. So, pray. Plead with God. If Saul could be converted, then no one is beyond the pale of redemption. You see that is precisely the point here. God's design in converting Saul was to have Saul realise if he could be saved anyone could be saved. Saul needed to know that given the task God had assigned for him. He was to bring the gospel to all the pagan world. The point is also to give you hope. Hope for yourself and hope for the people you would love to see converted. Remember what Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 1:15-16. That he was *"... an example to those who would believe"*. In other words, God had you in mind when he saved Saul. That is an awesome thought. God saved Paul for your sake. In Paul you would see "grace poured out". You would see "mercy" and "unlimited patience". If God

wanted to save and could save someone as antichristian and violent as Saul, then what can he do in your life? What could he do in the life of the ones you are praying for?

Paul's pre-conversion life was one long rejection of Jesus. That's why Jesus said, "Why do you persecute me?" Paul had been set apart for God from before the time he was born. His life was one long rejection and mockery of Jesus who loved him. That is why Paul says his conversion was a demonstration of Jesus 'unlimited patience'. So, don't lose heart as if you are too awful to save. Don't think you have gone too far for God's grace. Don't think that daughter, that son, that in-law, that brother or sister, that friend is too far gone to be saved. God in his power is totally awesome. He not only saved Paul. God made him the greatest of the apostles. He was the one who would bring the gospel to all the known world. Paul wrote more of the New Testament than anyone else. Who knows, that person you are praying for, might not only be converted but used by God greatly in some form of ministry. You might be the one who introduces the next Billy Graham to Christ and the world.

That is what Ananias needed to come to terms with. The Lord came to him in a vision and told Ananias to meet Saul and restore his sight. But Saul's reputation was such that Ananias was terrified at the prospect of meeting him. He knew that Saul had come to Damascus to round up the Christians. His "murderous threats" were well known and it scared the living daylights out of everyone. But God commanded him "Go!" and then explained what Paul had been chosen for: *"This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before my people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name"*. Ananias must have been stunned. We often think that those called for ministry must be someone from a good family, behaved well all their life, been in church since birth. But God might be calling that bright young man in your office, that arrogant know-it-all who laughs as you struggle to witness about Jesus. God took hold of John Newton, the despicable slave trader who later wrote 'Amazing Grace'. We often think way too small. If we look at the map of Paul's missionary journeys, we see how much Jesus did through him. Wherever he went Paul planted churches. He ended up before governors and kings. And eventually before the Emperor of Rome. And converted people in the Emperor's household while imprisoned. The last group on the list is the 'people of Israel'. Paul wanted to go to them first and it would be a struggle all his life. But Paul was not running the program. God was. Paul would simply do as he was told. We see that he would suffer. Not just the rejections and beatings, the shipwrecks. It would be the suffering of loving a people and seeing so many reject the gospel. Sometimes we will avoid praying for others to be converted because we want to avoid the hurt. But true love is open to being hurt, it embraces and cares and prays despite the hurt.

In the closing scene we see Ananias enter the house on Straight Street, which is still there in Damascus. Note what he does: *"Placing his hands on Saul, he said 'Brother Saul...'"* How moving. The gesture of the hands placed lovingly on Paul as he was healed of his blindness. And those first words "Brother Saul". The first words Saul hears from the Christian Church. 'Welcome brother, you are part of the family'. Saul the dreaded fanatic, the murderous persecutor of Christians, forgiven, welcomed, loved, healed. That is the welcome each new convert should have. Those we pray for and who show interest in the church, should also sense the joy of being received into the family. We are told that Paul's blindness was healed "like scales falling from his eyes". I think that was both physical and symbolic. Paul really saw things for what they were. His bigotry and distorted view of Jesus was removed. He went on to become the greatest apostle of all. In fact, we today should spare a moment to give thanks to God for Paul, apostle to the Gentiles, missionary to the world. It is through this man that God brought the gospel to our forbears and so to us. God in his grace and power can do awesome things. We need to trust him in that and keep praying, keep witnessing, keep telling the story of Jesus.