

Week 3: Paul's Conversion Experience

Introduction: It is hard to overestimate the drama which took place in the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. By his own definition he was a zealot and eagerly sought to destroy the followers of Jesus. Yet Jesus sought him and conquered him even as he was in the act of terrorizing Jesus' followers.

I. Saul the Persecutor

[T]hreatening and slaughter had come to be the very breath that Saul breathed, like a warhorse who sniffed the smell of battle. He breathed on the remaining disciples the murder that he had already breathed in from the death of the others. He exhaled what he inhaled... The taste of blood in the death of Stephen was pleasing to young Saul and now he reveled in the slaughter of the saints both men and women.¹

- A. Its Background – *Acts 7:58; 8:1²; 9:1-2; Philippians 3:6*
- B. Its Fury – *Acts 8:3; Galatians 1:13*
- C. Its Motivation³ - *Acts 6:9; 26:9, 11*

II. Saul the Convert

- A. Accounts of the Conversion⁴
 - 1. Luke's narrative of the event - *Acts 9:1-20*
 - 2. Paul's explanation before the angry mob at the Temple - *Acts 22:1-16*
 - 3. Paul's defense before Festus, Agrippa and his accusers - *Acts 26:1-20*
- B. Details of the Conversion
 - 1. Saul was on his way to Damascus to persecute Jesus' followers - *Acts 9:3*
 - 2. A bright light appeared on the way - *Acts 9:3*
 - 3. There was a voice from heaven which said, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" - *Acts 9:4*
 - 4. Saul asked the speaker's identity and was told that it was Jesus, whom he was persecuting - *Acts 9:5*
 - 5. Everyone with Saul fell to the earth - *Acts 26:14 (c.f. John 18:6)*
 - 6. Jesus told Saul that it was hard to kick against the ox goad - *Acts 26:14*

¹ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (B&H Academic, 2000)

² Was Saul's approval conceptual or actual? See also Acts 26:10.

³ Bruce, p. 71 "The law and the customs, the ancestral traditions, and everything that was of value in Judaism, were imperiled by the disciples' activity and teaching. Here was a malignant growth which called for drastic surgery. The defence [sic] of all that made life worth living for Paul was a cause which engaged all the zeal and energy of which he was capable. When the chief priests and their associates launched their attack on the disciples, Paul came forward as their eager lieutenant."

⁴ The conversion event likely took place between 32-34 A.D., that is, fourteen years before the famine relief visit to Jerusalem (Acts 11:28-30 compared with Galatians 2:1-2)

III. Paul the Apostle⁵

- A. The commission in Acts 9:15-16
 - 1. Bear Christ's name before Gentiles
 - 2. Bear Christ's name before kings
 - 3. Bear Christ's name before the children of Israel
 - 4. Suffer greatly for Christ
- B. The commission in Acts 22:14-15
 - 1. Know God's will
 - 2. See the Just One (Christ) and hear His voice⁶
 - 3. Be a witness to all men
- C. The commission in Acts 26:16-18
 - 1. Be a minister (*hupērētes*) and witness (*martus*) to Jews and Gentiles
 - 2. Suffer persecution from both Jews and Gentiles
 - 3. Bring spiritual sight and deliverance
 - a) Forgiveness of sins
 - b) Inheritance with Christ by faith⁷

Conclusion: "Only the Damascus encounter with Christ was powerful enough to cause the young Jewish rabbi to reconsider the death of Jesus; only his meeting with the risen Christ was sufficient to demonstrate that God had vindicated the claims and work of the One he was opposing. Humanly speaking, Paul was immune to the Gospel. Although he was ready to follow evidence to its conclusion, he was sure that no evidence could overturn the verdict of the cross; that is, that Christ died the death of a criminal. But...the eternal God 'was pleased,' as Paul says by way of reminiscence, 'to reveal his Son to me' (Galatians 1:16). Thus, Paul was arrested by Christ and made His own (Philippians 3:12)."⁸

⁵ Was Saul's name changed to Saul at his conversion? Roman citizens had three Latin names – the *cognomen* or family name (probably *Paulus*), the *nomen* or name of the founding member of the clan, and the *praenomen* (what Westerners would label the *first* name). Of these we only know Paul's family name and Hebrew name (Saul). See R. Reynolds, *Paul: Missionary Theologian*, 46. Note also how both Saul and Paul are used in Acts 13:7-9.

⁶ Authenticated Paul's qualification as an Apostle – he had seen the risen Lord (c.f. 1 Cor. 9:1; 15:5)

⁷ This constitutes Paul's first glimpse of the mystery of the church: Jews and Gentiles in one body in Christ.

⁸ Richard N. Longenecker, *The Ministry and Message of Paul* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 34-35.