

SAUL'S CONVERSION

Acts 9:1-31

Key Verse: 9:15,16

"But the Lord said to Ananias, 'Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.'"

In the last passage we saw that God used a great persecution of the early Christians to spread the gospel all over Judea and Samaria. We learned that our great and amazing God is the Sovereign Ruler of his redemptive history. He fulfills his own glorious purpose of world salvation, even through persecution. We have been praying for the gospel to spread to Muslim countries. We believed this prayer topic pleased God. However, we could not see or imagine what God might be doing in Muslim countries. The "front door" seems closed. The front door to Muslim countries goes through the Middle East. These countries seem to be impenetrable at present. Still, six precious missionary house churches are there and they are giving their lives to conquer the language and pray for gospel work in the Middle East. Recently, we learned through the mission reports of Mother Barry, Missionary Grace A. Lee and Dr. Mark Yoon that the "back door" to the Muslim world has been widely opened. In Central Asia, there is a great work of God among Muslim young people. They are coming to know Jesus and taking a stand on the gospel even though it means severe persecution for them. Many of them are praying to pioneer the Muslim world with the gospel. God is working mightily to bring the gospel to the Muslim world. Praise God!

Today we want to study the conversion of a young man named Saul. He was introduced to us at the time of Stephen's martyrdom as one of the Jewish leaders responsible. Saul gave approval to Stephen's death. Saul shed the blood of a righteous man, Stephen. Then he became a madman. In today's passage he appears, breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. Not content to persecute the church in Jerusalem, he determined to wipe from the face of the earth all Christians, those who were known as the Nazarene sect of Jesus. Saul received from the high priest credential letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that he could arrest Christians there and bring them as prisoners to Jerusalem. On the way, Saul met the Risen Jesus and was converted. The story of Saul's conversion may be the most famous in all Bible history. In this passage we mainly learn the wonderful grace of our Lord Jesus Christ upon a man named Saul and how his conversion was possible. We also learn God's great purpose for Saul.

First, Stephen's prayer (7:59,60). As we studied, Saul was in charge when Stephen was stoned to death. At the moment he was executing Stephen, he undoubtedly thought that he was right and that Stephen was wrong. Needless to say, Saul thought he was righteous, upright, wise and holy--even while he was committing murder, for this pride is innate in all sinful human beings. To this arrogant man something unusual had happened. He saw what Stephen did when his body was being mangled and bloodstained by the stoning. He saw that Stephen was praying. It was incredible to him to see Stephen praying. He heard Stephen's prayer in extreme anguish: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (7:60). It was indeed incredible to him to hear Stephen's prayer. Saul had condemned Stephen to death, but in Stephen he could see God. After murdering Stephen, Saul must have been just like Raskolnikov in Dostoevsky's "Crime and Punishment." Saul must have hardened his heart not to think of Stephen's prayer. Then he was befuddled all the more by Stephen's prayer. The more he tried to erase Stephen's prayer from his memory, the more it resounded in his soul. He found no respite from the anxiety of his conscience, for he was made in the image of God. So he redoubled his efforts to convince himself that

he was right and that Stephen was wrong. But he failed to extricate from his mind the constant sense of crime and punishment. Saul was a high-ranking official of the Jewish people. He must have tried to look strong and brave. But when he saw Stephen, he didn't understand how Stephen could face such peril, suffering and death absolutely unafraid. Moreover, he couldn't understand how Stephen could pray for such bitter enemies. Probably he said to his associates, "I defeated Stephen. I am the champion, and Stephen is a loser." The problem was that he could not convince himself that he was the champion. His inner man told him, "You are not really the champion." In a sense, he had won a battle, but it was a physical battle. As history attests, a physical battle does nothing but damage and kill others. Therefore, there is no true victory in a physical battle. There is true victory in a spiritual battle, because it is a battle against Satan; it is a holy battle to win people over to God.

Saul won a physical battle, but lost the spiritual battle to Stephen. Stephen was a warrior of faith. He had a potent weapon; it was his prayer. While Saul had mangled Stephen's body with stones, Stephen pierced Saul's heart with his prayer; his prayer was at work within Saul. We remember Monica, who prayed and prayed for her son Augustine for many years until her son, who had been sick with intellectual hedonism, was converted into a true man of God. We must pray for the conversion of others.

Second, the Risen Jesus visits Saul (1-6). Saul was a promising young man in the Jewish world. He studied the philosophies of East and West. He also studied the Law of Moses under Gamaliel. He knew Judaism well. But he did not know God personally. As Saul did not know God, so he really did not know himself. He was ambitious, as others were. By persecuting Christians in Jerusalem, he became very popular among Jewish rulers. Again, he seized the opportunity to make a big success in Jewish society. It was through stamping out those early Christians who had scattered to remote places.

Saul decided to take a 140-mile journey from Jerusalem to Damascus. Damascus was an ancient city, an important junction en route from Palestine to Assyria and Babylon. 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" (6). Up to this moment, Saul had lived before people's eyes. He did everything to feed his pride and satisfy his selfish ambition. In the course of living in this way, he became a man who should not exist in the world. He became a man whom no one wanted to see again. King David was a man after God's own heart. But because his son Absalom had killed his brother Amnon, David not only refused to visit Absalom, but refused even to see his face when he came back to Jerusalem from exile (2 Sa 14:24). But the Risen Jesus visited Saul first and said to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" The Risen Jesus visited him so that he might come to know God and know himself. Jesus is God. But he humbled himself and visited this murderer Saul first. It is truly amazing that he visited such a person. This one visit reveals more than enough that Jesus is God (Jn.1:14).

When the Risen Jesus visited him, he did not condemn him; rather, he gave him a command. Look at verse 6. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." Before meeting Jesus, Saul did not know his chief purpose of life. So he lived to fulfill his selfish ambition. Through this visit Jesus told him to live for God's great and glorious purpose for him. Peter also did not know his chief purpose in life. So he lived to fulfill his selfish dreams. While following Jesus, he dreamed of becoming the top man in an earthly messianic kingdom he expected Jesus to establish. The Risen Jesus also visited Peter and said, "I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you

wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go" (Jn 21:18).

The Risen Jesus also forgave all of Saul's sins unconditionally. The Risen Jesus embraced him with the grace of God. This is God's one-sided grace. This is God's unconditional love. Saul could not resist this grace. He surrendered himself to this grace. His conversion was surrendering himself to God's grace. By meeting Jesus personally through his visit, Saul realized that Jesus is God himself. He also realized that he was a sinner who was destroying the work of God for world salvation just as it was beginning. Before meeting Jesus personally, he called himself "Saul," meaning "the Greatest." But after meeting the Risen Jesus personally, he came to realize that he was not the greatest one, but a small one. So he changed his name from "Saul," "the Greatest," to "Paul," "a small one." So from now on, let's call him Paul. After meeting Jesus, Paul could see himself with God's eyes and said, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst" (1 Ti 1:15b). In the past he had tried hard to pretend to be a bold and happy man. But after meeting Jesus personally, he was free indeed. He did not have to cover himself with a bushy beard or a Pharisee's robe. He admitted freely that he was a sinner and that Jesus is the Savior. He said in Romans 7:24-25, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God--through Jesus Christ our Lord!" After meeting Jesus personally, God's grace was the meaning of his existence. He said, "By the grace of God I am what I am" (1 Cor.15:10).

Paul's meeting Jesus on the road to Damascus was truly a great moment in his life. By meeting Jesus personally, he was changed from a chief sinner to St. Paul. Let's pray that many Sauls in our nation may meet Jesus very personally and be converted into St. Pauls for this generation.

Third, Ananias' help (7-19a). After listening to the Risen Jesus, Paul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So into Damascus he went as a blind and helpless man, instead of being an avenging fury. He needed someone's help. The Risen Christ called to Ananias in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight" (11,12). Then Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name" (13,14). Ananias was afraid to go to Saul because he knew who Saul was. But the Risen Jesus commanded him to go and help him. He said to Ananias in verses 15,16, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." In this we learn two things.

Firstly, Jesus had a great hope for Paul. Paul was the last person Jesus could put hope in, because of his proud mind and misconduct in the past. But Jesus saw in him the greatness of God and was ready to use him for the work of world evangelization.

Secondly, Jesus had a definite plan to fulfill world salvation work through the apostles. The world was very dark and hopeless. The early Christians were helpless to do anything because of fiery persecutions. But Jesus believed that the world salvation plan of God would be accomplished in the course of time. Jesus believed that God's will would be done on earth as it is in heaven. When we look at the present situation, we only despair. We must not despair, but have hope in God.

What did Ananias do when he was told to go and help Paul? He went to Paul in obedience to God's command. When he placed his hands on Paul, immediately something like scales fell from Paul's eyes

and he could see again. Paul got up and was baptized and after taking some food, he regained his strength. Ananias had an obedient heart toward God. He was very fearful to go to Paul but when he was willing to obey God's word, God gave him strength to overcome fear. In this way, Ananias helped Paul see again. We learn from Ananias that we must overcome our fear and visit our sheep.

Fourth, Paul's internship training (19b-31). What did Paul do after his conversion? At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. It was not easy for him to preach the gospel of Jesus after his conversion. He had to overcome fellow Christians' distrust. Look at verse 21. "All those who heard him were astonished and asked, 'Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?'" Also, it was not easy for him to preach the gospel because of his old Jewish friends' persecution. The Jews conspired to kill him (23). Paul was in a conflict that seemed to have no way out. He could not go back to Jewish society since he had been converted to Christianity. Also, he could not gain the trust of Christians since he had done so much harm to the people of Jesus.

Paul was at the end of his rope, but he did not give in to the situation. He did not take a neutral stand. Those who always take a neutral stand are selfish and not trustworthy. Paul was great because from the beginning he stood on Jesus' side clearly and preached the gospel. Paul preached the gospel of Jesus, so God could work mightily through this person, Paul. Look at verse 22. "Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ." When Paul preached the gospel wholeheartedly, he was in danger of being killed. But his followers rescued him. Look at verse 25. "But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall." The Lord trained Paul to depend on God alone and to preach the gospel with a life-giving spirit.

When Paul went to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him. When everyone else was steering clear of Paul, suspecting that he was an agent of the Jewish rulers, Barnabas did his best to persuade the disciples that Paul's conversion was genuine and real; he spoke of his fearless preaching in Damascus. Paul was fearless because he feared God. At last, the disciples accepted Paul into fellowship. Paul spoke boldly in the name of the Lord in Jerusalem. So the unbelieving Jews tried to kill him. When the brothers learned of this, they took Paul down to Caesarea and sent him to Tarsus. Look at verse 31. "Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord."

In this passage we learn that we must meet Jesus personally so that we may know God and his grace through his Son Jesus Christ. In addition, we must pray that many Sauls of this nation may meet Jesus very personally and receive his grace and holy mission. In this way, may God raise North America as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation for world salvation, one person at a time.