

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (23-7-1995 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Conversion of Saul

Acts 9:1-18

Additional Bible Reading: Acts 7:54-8:4; 1 Timothy 1:12-17

Introduction

This is surely the most famous conversion story in all history. We speak of “red-letter days” in our lives, and this certainly was a red-letter day for the church, the day when Saul, later Paul, the bitter persecutor of the church, was changed into a humble obedient and zealous disciple of the Lord. The date was 33A.D. and this was the pivot on which turned not only Paul’s own career, but also the future of the Christian church.

As we look back over 2000 years of the Christian church, we can say Paul was the greatest and most outstanding Christian, the most important single Christian writer, the most influential theologian, and the most effective. He was not much to look at – his enemies said of him that his bodily presence was weak and his speech contemptible (2 Corinthians 10:10). Tradition tells us he was little of stature, had crooked legs, thin hair, joining eyebrows, hooked nose. And yet he was this remarkable and unique person.

By birth Saul was a Jew, by citizenship a Roman, by education a Greek, and by grace a Christian. He was missionary, theologian, pastor, evangelist, organiser, leader, thinker, statesman, man of affairs, and above all a man of God, of prayer, and of the Word. How did it all happen? Luke saw Saul’s conversion as so important that he records it three times in the Acts of the Apostles (chapters 9, 22 and 26).

Saul was on the 150-mile journey from Jerusalem to Damascus, and as he was drawing near to his destination where, on the High Priest’s authority, he had the power to capture and kill as many of these hated Christians as he could, suddenly and miraculously he was confronted by the risen Christ Himself. He totally submitted, was amazingly transformed, and unreservedly became His from that day forward.

But what can we learn from this? How is it relevant to us? How far are we expected to identify with it? Some people feel there is little to learn, because it was an exceptional supernatural event – the voice of the Lord addressing Saul, a resurrection appearance of the Lord, and a commission to be an Apostle. Yet even in such an exceptional event there are certain features which apply to every genuine conversion.

All must be confronted and meet with Christ, surrender in penitence and faith, summoned to His service, and know the power of God. The dramatic outward accompaniment need not apply, but the inward experience is Saul is relevant to everyone.

Preparation for conversion

This is often described as a “sudden” conversion – but it was not really. The final intervention of the Lord was sudden: **Suddenly a light from heaven flashed around**

him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice (Acts 9:3,4). But before this there had been a long period on preparation. Saul as a young man had been like a young bullock resisting the goads on an ox cart (Acts 9:5; 26:14). The Lord had been prodding him already in his life and pointing Saul to Himself. Things he had seen and heard and thought about had been challenging and disturbing him already.

Firstly the facts about Jesus Christ had challenged him. We do not know if Saul had actually seen Jesus. He could have done, because they were contemporaries. Was Saul the rich young ruler? Perhaps not, but he knew plenty of people who had met with Jesus. He belonged to the Pharisees, Christ's enemies, constantly watching Him, criticizing Him and causing His death. Christ made a deep and disturbing impression on men by His teaching, character and claims. Then when it was claimed that Jesus had risen from the dead and was alive, how they must have even more disturbed and filled up with hatred for Christ and His followers.

Then there was the impressive witness of Jesus' followers. Stephen, in particular, had the face of an angel when before his accusers. His arguments when on trial were irresistible, and even in death, as boulders were hurled at him, he claimed to see Jesus at the right hand of God, and he prayed for his enemies – just like his master had done. Something was very different about that man Stephen. What had he got that Paul had not got?

The state of his own life also disturbed and dissatisfied him. He was a Pharisee, he believed in God and morality, and was committed to every detail of the Jewish law. He was zealous in what he believed to be God's service. Yet he hated it all for it was false and unsound. But discovering that religion and morality is not the answer does not save from sin or save the soul. He attempted to earn salvation by religious practices and moral effort, but that did not work. It did not give peace to his accusing conscience or satisfy his hungry heart. It led to failure, frustration and despair. He was fundamentally a discontented man. Despite all efforts on the outside, he knew he was not clean within and he was defiled in God's sight. No man can save himself by his works – a lesson which human pride resists.

Here is Saul's situation as he travelled to Damascus. These were the goads he was kicking against. His very zeal in destroying the Christian church was a sign of his uneasiness. "Fanaticism is only found in an individual who is compensating for secret doubts" (Jung).

When men are converted, it is the climax of preliminary work of God in their souls over many years of preparation. As with Saul, the evidence and facts about Christ, the changed lives of others, and a sense of failure within and helplessness, help bring him to that point.

The book "Far from home; near to God" contains the testimony of a Roman Catholic priest whose journey to conversion took years of doubt, mental agony, struggling to earn salvation, outward pomp and inward emptiness. He writes of his 22-year search and struggle to choose between Rome and the Bible. "Finally, on the authority of the Bible alone, by the grace of God alone, I accepted Christ's substitutionary death alone. To Him alone be the glory.

Nature of conversion

Details of conversion vary. No two conversion experiences are exactly the same. But there are certain basic marks in every conversion which never vary. It always begins with God's initiative. The first step is always with God.

This is never clearer than in Saul's case. Before conversion, he behaved like a wild animal, creating havoc, breathing threats and murder against the disciples. It was in that murderous frame of mind that Christ appeared and spoke to him. Nothing was further from his mind at the time. He did not "decide for Christ"; he was persecuting Christ. Rather, Christ decided for Saul and intervened in his life. **Christ Jesus took hold of me** (Philippians 3:12). **God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me** (Galatians 1:15,16).

The initiative is always with the Lord. It is not good luck that we came to the Lord. If we think back as far as can, we did not start the process off. This was C.H. Spurgeon's memory: "One night I was sitting in the house of God. I was not thinking much about the preacher's sermon because I did not believe it. Then a thought struck me – how did I become a Christian? I sought the Lord. But how did I come to seek the Lord? A thought flashed across my mind – I should not have sought Him unless there was some previous influence in my mind to seek him. I prayed – but why? Because I had been induced to pray by the Scriptures. But why had I read the Scriptures? In a moment I saw that God was at the bottom of it all and He was the author of my faith, and the whole doctrine of grace opened up to me."

But lest we are tempted to excuse ourselves by saying God has not moved me to seek Him, remember that He has commanded in His Word that we do seek Him. **Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near** (Isaiah 55:6). **Come to me** (Matthew 11:28). **Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ** (Acts 16:31).

*"I sought the Lord and afterward I knew
He moved my soul to seek Him, seeking me.
It was not I who found, O Saviour true,
No, I was found of Thee"*

Another common feature of all conversions is an awareness of sin. We must be aware that we are in the wrong and deserve judgement. The sin Saul was convicted of was the sin of persecuting the Church. In persecuting the Church, he was persecuting Christ. **Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me** (Matthew 25:40). So in his persecution, Saul had struck blow after blow at Christ Himself. **Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight** (Psalm 51:4).

At the heart of every conversion is a face to face dealing with Christ. The convert has been in touch with the Lord Himself. He has not just turned over a new leaf, or had a change of views, or become more religious or church going. He has dealt on a personal and deep level with the living Son of God.

So here we see Saul on the ground before the Lord, speaks to Him, calls Him Lord, and comes under His authority and control. Saul stresses his personal dealings with

Christ in his letters: **Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?** (1 Corinthians 9:1), **God was pleased to reveal His Son in me** (Galatians 1:15,16), **For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ** (2 Corinthians 4:6).

As a result of his encounter, he placed his whole trust and confidence in God to save him from his sins – and it is the same for every convert. He dies for us all, and henceforth He is the Lord of life. Saul entered Damascus as new person, a different and changed man. He had begun his journey as a proud intolerant self-righteous persecutor, and ended his journey as a humble broken-hearted penitent believer in Christ. The murderer of saints became the Apostle of the Gentiles. He became a captive of the very Christ he had opposed. Something new had entered his life. Now Paul was in Christ. Christ Jesus had dealt with him and remade him.

This is one of the clearest demonstrations of divine power in the history of the Christian church. "Apart from any other arguments, Saul's conversion is sufficient in itself to prove Christianity to be a divine revelation" (Baron George Lyttleton to Gilbert West, 18th century). "This man moved the world and changed the whole course of world history. This was not the work of a lunatic" (Sir William Ramsey). When someone suggested that Saul's experience was just a fit of epilepsy or sun stroke, Dr Parker replied, "Then fly abroad, thou mighty epilepsy".

The final mark of Saul's conversion was that he gave public outward expression to this inward spiritual experience, as always happened in the early church. **Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized** (Acts 9:18). So his conversion was complete and sealed. He was not baptised in order to be converted, but in baptism he publicly declared he was converted and a changed man, after the command of Jesus.

Results of conversion

When conversion is real, clear results are seen. Unless there is evidence, we have no right or justification to say we are converted. In Christ everything becomes new – outlook, nature, attitude, aims, purposes – whatever social or educational background or temperament. There is new attitude to God.

When Ananias went to see Saul, he was told he would find him praying (Acts 9:11). Through faith in Christ, Saul now had this new relationship to God, and was aware of His Fatherhood. Saul's heart was full of love and gratitude, for God was now so near and precious. There was a new desire to know and serve and please God. There is no conversion unless there is godliness.

Then Saul entered a new relationship with the Christian church. He was visited by Ananias, who calls him "brother", and later Saul joined the church in Jerusalem after spending some time with the believers in Damascus. So he now belonged to the very company he tried to destroy. He threw his lot in with them.

The final result was that he began to witness and serve the Lord. **This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. At once he began to preach in the synagogues that**

Jesus is the Son of God. Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ (Acts 9:15,20,22). Luke also reminds us that all this Christian service and new life was not done relying on himself and his own resources. Ananias had said **Brother Saul, the Lord has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit** (Acts 9:17). The Holy Spirit was filling and controlling him.

The new Christian may have many weaknesses and failures, but surely these three things are indispensable evidences of conversion – a new relationship with God, a new relationship with God’s people, and a desire to serve the Lord. If these three things are not there, what evidence is there of a changed life?

Conclusion

Many of us find echoes of our own lives in this story. We look back and realize the years of preparation before we were saved – our home life, the church we attended and its teaching, some individual who impressed us, a book we read which challenged us, an awareness at times of emptiness and the reality of sin. Over the years, these things were preparing us for God’s grace.

Then God took the initiative, and intervened in our lives. We realized we were wrong with Him, and trusted Him and became obedient to Him as our Lord and Saviour. After that we sensed everything was new. Now we have a new relationship with Him, a new attitude to His people, and a new desire to serve Him. Supernatural events did not accompany these events, but the change was fundamental and real. We have passed from death to life.

But what if you cannot echo these experiences? Has He spoken to you, but you have failed to respond? Do you think you do not need a Saviour? Do you think you are not good enough?

*“All the fitness He requireth
Is to feel your need of Him.”*

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst (1 Timothy 1:15).