

Installment 2

Breathing Vicious Threats

The word “conversion” basically means to change one’s belief or action with regard to another thing, person, or idea. Simply put, to convert is to change or exchange. Conversion is a voluntary act whereby one expresses his or her preference for one thing over another. Conversion in a biblical sense is to leave pre-Christian values and adopt Christian ones on the conviction that Christ is best. This is why “conversion” is such a good word to describe the beginning of the Christian life. With regard to Christ, we change our belief and our action from what we were before accepting Him as Savior and Lord to becoming Christian, a “little Christ.”

Saul is a super example of the word “conversion.” As we will see, after meeting Jesus on the road to Damascus, Saul was in all important ways a new man. No longer a persecutor of the Lord and His people, Saul was a true follower of Jesus and a witness for the church. This staggered first century Jews. I might add that it also astonished first century Christians, at least until they realized that in Saul Christ had done the impossible. Christ had changed a hater into a lover!

This is a good place to stop and read Acts 9:1-31. Pay special attention to verses 1-19 and what Jesus has to say about this man who thinks he is serving God by hating God’s new people!

Looking Back a Bit

The culture into which Saul was born was a mixture of Jewish, Greek, and Roman influence. Some think Saul’s mother was a Christian; his father a Roman. Saul’s city was one of the largest in East Asia Minor. There he would have an excellent education, studying under the renowned Jewish scholar Gamaliel. Saul probably would have been a Hellenist, that is, one who, though a Roman citizen, was partially shaped by Greek art, architecture, literary knowledge, medicine, and maybe even religion. Did you know that the idols of gods and goddesses were all Greek; that the Romans borrowed heavily from them, having no idols of their own? If there were Roman idols, none remain.

As a native Roman son, Saul was always aware of Roman power and might. It is certain he was familiar with Emperor worship among Roman citizens, whether deep down they actually believed the emperor was divine or not. I did read that the philosophers could not stomach the idea of worshipping the emperor. But Roman philosophers were also practical men and did not broadcast their views. As far as Saul goes, I suppose you could say that he grew up something of a “Renaissance Man,” in a manner of speaking.

It is striking to me that this young man also became a Pharisee. He tells us this in the third chapter of Philippians. You know that Pharisees were the religious conservatives of the day. In fact, Pharisees considered themselves guardians of the Torah, and they practiced their understanding of Judaism faithfully...and to the letter. Naturally Pharisees considered themselves enemies of Jesus. Given this background it is easier to understand why, at about the age of 23, Saul started out with a group of armed men for Damascus to gather up as many Christians as possible and bring them back to Jerusalem to stand trial. *One more thing:* there was a problem deep within Saul’s heart: he hated those Christians. And it would take a divine power to take away that hate and put love in its place.

On the Road to Damascus

Saul kept on threatening to kill the Lord's followers. He even went to the high priest and asked for letters to the Jewish leaders in Damascus. He did this because he wanted to arrest and take to Jerusalem any man or woman who had accepted the Lord's Way. When Saul had almost reached Damascus, a bright light from heaven suddenly flashed around him.¹

Later on, after he was known by the name of Paul, the apostle wrote to a younger Timothy about this period of his life. His words tell us of the depth of his guilt feelings when the Lord confronted him.

Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ

¹ Acts 9:1-3, [Contemporary English Version](#).

Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.²

No wonder Paul praised the Lord in his writings and no wonder he endured such suffering in his ministry: Paul knew what it meant to be a “saved sinner.” And this man wanted everyone he met to know the same Lord Jesus Christ that met him on the road and who took Paul to the “third heaven.” Do you see what implications there are here for you and me regarding Paul’s experience? Can you say “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance?”

At the beginning of this study we tinkered with some working definitions of the word “conversion.” Now I want to give you a much more precise one. Please note where I have underlined words.

“...conversion [is the] reorientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right.”³

Paul would say “Amen” to that definition. That is, to “reorient” one’s soul by a “*deliberate* turning” which is a “great change” from what one believed at first as to who Jesus Christ is and what He does. I wish I could underscore the word “deliberate” in more ways than I have done. The Lord comes to us and we reach out in desperation to Him! Paul knew that the old was indeed wrong and the new [the Lord Jesus] was and is and will be right! Yes, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”⁴ Hallelujah! Paul moved from “breathing vicious threats” to obedience to the Christ of his vision.

The text says that a bright light suddenly “flashed” around Saul. I suspect that his horse saw something and reared up, throwing the young man to the ground; he was undoubtedly dazed at first, overpowered. Then the voice: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” I like the Contemporary English Version translation of this sentence: “Saul!

² 1 Timothy 1:13-15, NIV.

³ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, The Acts of the Apostles, pp. 420-421.

⁴ Hebrews 13:8.

Saul! Why are you so cruel to me?” And to whom was Saul cruel in his vindictive mission? That’s right! Jesus! “I am the one you are so cruel to.” The Lord told Saul to get up and go on into Damascus. Needless to say, Saul’s original idea in going to Damascus was forgotten.

There is another biblical event as striking as the one that happened to Saul, found in the Book of Exodus. Does that give you a clue? If not, what about this? It happened to a man who became the most prominent person in Israel’s history, and I do not mean Father Abraham. Yes! It was Moses at the burning bush, found in Exodus 3:16-20. What parallels do you see between Saul and Moses? How does your experience fit into this picture? Maybe I should ask, can you describe your conversion to Christ? What did God want you to do in response to His saving grace? And...have you done it or are you doing it?

The remainder of our passage (Acts 9:1-31) is very important and we will take it up with installment 3, “Isn’t He the Man?”

What do we learn from our passage?

In reflecting on the ideas below, think back on the whole of today’s passage: Acts 9:1-31.

1. We have learned that conversion is a radical change of heart, moving from sin to forgiveness, from serving self to serving Christ.
2. Conversion requires a personal decision followed by action. In Saul’s case, he confronted his sin (against God), turned from the wickedness he was doing, and became obedient to what God told him to do.
3. Saul, being a strong Pharisee from the tribe of Benjamin, believed Christians were a threat to the Jews because of the Christian view of Christ as Messiah of Israel. It is interesting that many Jewish believers are still looking for the Messiah.
4. We learned in Paul’s words to Timothy that even after his conversion he considered himself the worst of sinners. In a sense, it was this belief that thrust Saul/Paul into the far country of the Roman Empire over many years to help spread the gospel of Christ.

Were there other lessons you learned in this installment? Why not write them down so you won't forget. Review them in the light of your own commitment to Jesus. As with our last installment, why not make what you find as concerns for your prayers?

Remember, our next installment digs a little deeper into the passage for today, so it will help to reacquaint yourself with Acts 9:1-31 before you tackle "Isn't He the Man?"

*--Jerry Mercer
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