

## #33 - Paul's call - Acts 9:1-31

### Engage:

The last story introduced the beginning of the persecution of Christians because of their revolutionary message and faith (Acts 4). Since then, Stephen became the first known martyr (Acts 6-7). Many of the believers fled from Jerusalem to throughout "Judea and Samaria" (Acts 8:1). This enabled the gospel to be shared with those outside of Jerusalem as Jesus had planned (Acts 1:8). Philip continued this process of taking the gospel to the ends of the earth by going to Samaria. There he saw many accept Jesus as Lord and Savior. Then he was directed to meet up with an Ethiopian eunuch, who also became a follower of Jesus (Acts 8).

This takes us to the next account in our study of **God's Redemptive Story**. It is one of the most dramatic and impact filled conversions in the history of the church – the conversion of Saul – a Jewish persecutor of Christians.

### Thoughts about the story:

Acts 9:1-9 - The call from Jesus that led to the conversion of Saul (Paul) - a persecutor of Christians

We first meet Saul when Stephen was stoned to death (Acts 7:58-8:1). Saul was a Pharisee (Philippians 3:4-6) who sat at the feet of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). He later described himself as a fanatical persecutor of Christians (Acts 26:9-11). This raises the question: Why would the Jerusalem Jewish leaders persecute Christians as far away as Damascus (about 150-175 miles northeast of Jerusalem)? Here are five possible reasons given by the Life Application Bible: "(1) to seize the Christians who had fled, (2) to prevent the spread of Christianity to other major cities, (3) to keep the Christians from causing any trouble with Rome, (4) to advance Saul's career and to build his reputation as a true Pharisee, zealous for the law, (5) to unify the factions of Judaism by giving them a common enemy."

"The Way" - This is a little known or used description of first century Christianity (also see Acts 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22 and John 14:6).

Saul's purpose in going to Damascus was to take both men and women Christians as prisoners and to bring them back to Jerusalem where the Jewish leaders could decide their fate. But along the way something happened – Jesus appeared to Saul just before he arrived at Damascus. Jesus asked an important question of Saul: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?" Note: To persecute the church or Christians is to persecute Jesus. After all the church is the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27; Ephesians 1:22-23). Also, we see that when Ananias "lied to the Holy Spirit", he also lied to God (Acts 5:3-4).

Saul quickly recognized that it was Jesus who was speaking to him. Note: Jewish tradition associated bright light and a voice from the heavens as that which comes from God. In a later personal testimony of this event, we see that Saul/Paul said that his response was simply: "What shall I do Lord?" (Acts 22:10). Note: Here we see evidence of the change that happens when a person sees Jesus and is converted. Before conversion, you do what you want to do; afterwards, your desire is to do what the Lord wants you to do. Note: Beginning with Acts 13:9 Saul was called Paul. Saul is the Hebrew or Jewish equivalent of the Greek name Paul. From this time in the ministry of Paul, his work is primarily away from Jerusalem

in other parts of the Roman empire.

Saul was made blind. He was told to go to Damascus and there he would be told what he “must (Greek *dei*) do.” He was led to Damascus where he did not eat or drink anything for 3 days. Note: Instead of coming to Damascus as a conqueror over Christians, he was led as a blind man who soon regained his sight as a Christian.

Those who were with Saul did not see what he saw, but they did hear what he heard – and they became “speechless.”

Acts 9:10-19 – The vision of Ananias from the Lord to go to Saul.

Can you imagine how Ananias must have felt when he received this vision from the Lord? We know what he asked. He said: “Why me, Lord? How could a man like Saul become a follower of Jesus?” Even though Ananias was troubled by the Lord’s directive, he went to Saul and did what he was told to do – and left the rest up to the Lord. After all, Ananias was told that Saul was God’s “chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles (see Romans 1:13-14; 11:13; Galatians 2:2; Ephesians 3:8) and their kings (see Acts 24:1-26:32; 26:1) and before the people of Israel” (Acts 9:20; 13:5, 14; 14:1; 17:2, 10, 17; 18:4; 19:8; 26:17-20; Romans 1:16). Also, he was told that Saul would suffer as a follower of Jesus (See 2 Corinthians 11:23-29).

Note: “saints” (Acts 9:13) - This is the first time in Acts where followers were called “saints”, which refers to people who accepted the call to be set apart for the purpose of the Lord’s work.

When Ananias found Saul, he placed his hands on him and he was made to “see again.” Saul was then baptized and he was also filled with the Holy Spirit. The last thing that we read that Saul saw before he was made blind was the appearance of Jesus (Acts 9:17; 1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:8).

Note: The love that Ananias showed for Saul followed the principle laid down by Jesus: “A new command I give you. Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (John 13:34).

Note: The master strategy of our Lord is to use people like Saul, like Ananias, and even people like you who are willing to follow the Lord’s lead so that His will can be accomplished in this life. God is no respecter persons. Everyone has a place where he or she can serve, no matter who you may be or what your past has been.

Note: The name Ananias is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Hananiah which means “the Lord is gracious/shows grace” (see Daniel 1:6).

Acts 9:20-25 – The Jews from Damascus and Saul’s witness to them

Paul, who had persecuted the cause of Christ, became a witness for the cause of Christ. It all started in Damascus right after his conversion. He went to the synagogue and there he proclaimed that “Jesus is the Son of God.” His witness was described as both “powerful” and it was said to baffle the Jews. It seems only logical to conclude that his life agreed with his testimony. And we know that such a witness is always powerful!

Because of Saul's conversion, the once persecutor Saul became the one the Jews sought to kill. Saul was much like Benedict Arnold during the American revolution in the eyes of the Jewish leadership. Therefore some of Saul's new found friends in Christ found a way to help him escape from Damascus by lowering him over the city wall in a basket during the night.

Acts 9:26-30 – The Jerusalem disciples, including the Grecian Jews and Barnabas in Jerusalem, and Saul

We find from Paul's testimony that it was three years later before he returned to Jerusalem (Galatians 1:17-19). Even after that amount of time, the disciples there were still afraid of him. It was at this time that Barnabas (whose name means "Son of Encouragement" - Acts 4:36) stood up and defended Saul. The affirmation by Barnabas of Saul enabled him to speak "boldly in the name of the Lord" just as he had "preached fearlessly" in Damascus. "Formerly Saul was arguing against Christ; now he is forcefully presenting Jesus as the Messiah" (NIV Study Bible). But even in Jerusalem, Saul's life was in danger from the Grecian Jews. Saul did exactly what Stephen had done, but his life was spared. Thus his stay was short - only 15 days (Galatians 1:18-19). From Jerusalem he was taken to Caesarea and then to his home town of Tarsus.

Note: It is also possible that the Grecian Jews were part of the same group that had been violently against Stephen that Saul had one time supported.

Acts 9:31 - The story ends with a short update of the church at that time in its infancy. It "enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit" and "it grew in numbers, living the fear of the Lord." Oh that the same thing might be said of the church today! This is certainly something to pray about!

Note: "He summed up his ministry in these words: ' I did not disobey the vision I had from heaven. First in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and then in the whole country of Judea and among the Gentiles, I preached that they must repent of their sins and turn to God, and do the things that would show they had repented' (Acts 26:19-20).

Thank God we have Paul's testimony of what Christ had done for him. May it strengthen us to tell what he has done for us" (Birth Of A Revolution).

### **Discussion starters:**

- How did the Lord first get your attention? Was it a dramatic event like Saul's or something different?
- Are there any people in your mind that seem to be beyond the reach of Christ? If God "spoke" to you about such a person, what would you do?
- Has there been an Ananias type person in your life? To whom could you be an Ananias?
- There either is or will be a person in your life who needs a Barnabas type person, just as Saul did. Would you be willing to be that person? How could you see yourself doing so?