**THE AMAZING CONVERSION OF SAUL**

 July 17, 2016

Acts 9:1-31

Key Verses 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.’”

Today we want to study the conversion of a young man named Saul. He gave approval to Stephen’s death. Saul shed the blood of a righteous man. 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. 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. He thought he was righteous, upright, wise and holy—even while he was committing murder. 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: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (7:60). It was incredible to him to hear Stephen’s prayer. He couldn’t understand how Stephen could face such suffering and death absolutely unafraid. Moreover, he couldn’t understand how Stephen could pray for such bitter enemies. After murdering Stephen, he must have suffered from the sense of crime and punishment. The more he tried to erase Stephen’s prayer from his memory, the more it resounded in his soul. So he redoubled his efforts to convince himself that he was right and that Stephen was wrong. Probably he said to his associates, “Stephen is a cult member and blasphemer. I must wipe out this cult group.” Saul may have won a physical battle, but lost the spiritual battle to Stephen. Stephen 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 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. 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. 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).

The Lord is about to forgive the one who led the execution of Stephen and answer his prayer. Our Lord identifies for us this very significant reality that to persecute any of his people is to persecute him. Every member of the body of Christ is a member of Christ, is one with Christ, the glorious head of the body. And if one believer is punched in his face on earth, that punch is felt in heaven. That is how identified we are with him. Truly, he bears our griefs and carries our sorrows. Saul was persecuting Jesus when he persecuted his people. In Acts 26:14 he adds the words of Jesus, “It is hard for you to kick against the goads.” A goad was any sharp, pointed instrument which was used to pierce or perforate, and you would use them to stab an ox to keep him moving. What does it mean to kick against the goads? It means to just inflict pain on yourself by continuing to do what you do. Saul was literally bashing his own conscience by resisting God. You can’t fight God, rebel against God, make war against God and not feel the pain. There are a lot of sins in the world, but the sin that is most important is the sin of rejecting Jesus Christ. The issue is not that a man is a liar, not that a woman is cruel, or unkind, or deceptive, or whatever else, or immoral; the real sin for which people are condemned is the rejection of Christ. It had been a very difficult battle for Saul. He had been kicking against the goads. But now the battle was over. Saul cried out, “Who are You, Lord? What shall I do?” He surrendered to God.

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. Before this meeting, Saul was convinced that Jesus of Nazareth was dead and was buried in a tomb in Jerusalem. What a shock! The glorified Jesus appeared before him. By meeting Jesus personally through his visit, Saul realized that Jesus is God himself. It changed the entire direction of his life. He also realized that he was a sinner who was destroying the work of God. 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 holy man. But after meeting Jesus personally, 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 be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Ananias was a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ. He may have been the leader of the Christians in Damascus. He actually might be one of the main targets of Saul’s persecution campaign. What did he 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. It is amazing that the Holy Spirit was given to Saul through the laying of hands of the layman, an ordinary disciple.

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. 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.” It was a humiliating exit, but Paul could endure any humiliation for the sake of Christ. 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. What are the marks of his conversion? First, he met Jesus personally. Second, he was filled with a longing to obey the Lord and to do his will. Third, he began to pray. Fourth, he began to testify powerfully. 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.

Not many people have this kind of conversion experience. I certainly didn’t; neither did you. God usually calls in a still, small voice. But in the case of Paul, he called with a blazing, smashing appearance. Paul gave his own testimony in 1 Timothy 1:13-16, “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…Here is a trust worthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.” If God can save Paul, he can save anybody. If God can show his grace to Paul, he can show to anybody.