



TEEN TREE OF LIFE

The Conversion of Saul

Part 1

September 19, 2021

Before you begin, ask yourself a very important question: Do you believe that Jesus Christ died on The Cross for all of your sins? If you answered yes, you will need to be sure that you are filled with The Holy Spirit. How do you do this? You name your sins to God The Father in His Son's Name. This is called Rebound. As a Christian, you must rebound any time you sin. This is taught in 1 JOH 1:9: *If we confess [name] our sins [directly to God], He [God] is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* Now, if you have never believed that Jesus Christ died on The Cross for all of your sins, all you have to do is say to yourself that you believe in Him and you are saved! The Bible verse which teaches us this is ACTS 16:31: *"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved."*

Through the centuries, there have been many stories about people who were dramatically converted to believers in Our Lord and Savior, but none are as dramatic, or has had as great an impact on the church, as that of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus into Paul, the apostle. This story is recorded in several places in **The Book of Acts**, and it magnifies the fact that it is God Who intercedes in the life of individuals to call them to Himself. This study will also show us that Saul was the least likely candidate to become a Christian!

ACTS 9:1-2 (The Message Bible) describes what Saul was up to following the Life, Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ: ***All this time Saul was breathing down the necks of the Master's disciples, out for the kill. He went to the Chief Priest and got arrest warrants to take to the meeting places in Damascus so that if he found anyone there belonging to the Way, whether men or women, he could arrest them and bring them to Jerusalem.*** Saul had literally become consumed with stopping the Work of Our Lord and Savior.

To understand better why Saul was so intent on persecuting the followers of Jesus Christ, we need to know a little more about his background. Saul was born in Tarsus, the large capital city of the province known as Cilicia. It was located about ten miles inland from the coast on the Cydnus River in southeastern Turkey. Cilicia was an important center of trade, agriculture, education, and business. It was also on the Roman Road that ran from the coastal plain up through the Cilician Gates in the Taurus Mountains. Because of this, it was in a strategic location to control access between the central and western parts of Asia Minor. Julius Caesar had granted this city all the privileges of Roman citizens, which is why Saul had Roman citizenship from birth.

Like his father before him, Saul was a Pharisee and had had the best training available, having been educated in Jerusalem under Gamaliel, the most respected Rabbi of the time. His own testimony of his life during this period was that if anyone could have had confidence in his flesh, it was him. Look at what he wrote in **PHIL 3:4-6 (The Message Bible):** *You know my pedigree: a legitimate birth, circumcised on the eighth day; an Israelite from the elite tribe of Benjamin; a strict and devout adherent to God's law; a fiery defender of the purity of my religion, even to the point of persecuting the church; a meticulous observer of everything set down in God's law Book.*

Saul may have been absent from Jerusalem during the years of Jesus Christ's Ministry since there is no solid record of him meeting Jesus prior to the account in **ACTS 9**. He had returned to Jerusalem, and was possibly one of the Hellenistic Jews that had been debating with Stephen (and losing), for he was present and consenting when Stephen was stoned to death: *They dragged him [Stephen] out of the city. They began to throw stones at him to kill him. The people who had brought false charges against Stephen took off their coats. They placed them at the feet of a young man named Saul. While the members of the Sanhedrin were throwing stones at Stephen, he prayed. "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit," he said. Then he fell on his knees. He cried out, "Lord! Don't hold this sin against them!" When he had said this, he died. And Saul had agreed with the Sanhedrin that Stephen should die. (ACTS 7:58-8:1 New International Reader's Version)*

Paul was also the one at the forefront of ravaging the church to the extent that the believers fled Jerusalem and scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. This is taught in **ACTS 8:2-4 (New International Reader's Version):** *Godly Jews buried Stephen. They mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. He went from house to house. He dragged away men and women and put them in prison. The believers who had been scattered preached the word everywhere they went.*

With that in mind, we can now understand Saul's attitude of "**breathing down the necks of the Master's disciples, out for the kill.**" The persecution of the disciples of Our Lord had become Paul's quest in life. He was fulfilling what Jesus had warned in **JOH 16:1-3 (The Message Bible):** *"I've told you these things to prepare you for rough times ahead. They are going to throw you out of the meeting places. There will even come a time when anyone who kills you will think he's doing God a favor."*

Since the disciples had fled Jerusalem, Saul's zeal was compelling him to go to other areas to persecute them. So he went to the High Priest to get letters granting him authority to pursue them, bind them, and bring them back to Jerusalem – both men and women! Though the Romans had their appointed governors, they also gave the local people a certain amount of self-rule, and the Romans viewed the High Priest as the authority over Jewish matters, both domestically and internationally. So the Synagogue leaders would certainly have recognized Paul's authority in Jewish religious matters. Because of this it's very unlikely that they would have denied him the opportunity to go after the followers of Jesus Christ.

Luke uses two different references for the early Christians. The first is "**the disciples of the Lord.**" "Disciple is the most common name used for Christians in **The Book of Acts** where it's used 29 times. A "**disciple**" is simply a learner or follower of a teacher. This name puts emphasis on the fact that those who are saved are also followers of Jesus Christ. The second reference is those "**belonging to the Way.**" This is used six times in Acts. This name is probably derived from the fact that Jesus Christ is "**the way, the truth and the life**" according to **JOH 14:6: Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.** It's only through faith in The Lord Jesus Christ that you can know the "**way to God**" or the "**way of salvation.**"

One place in particular that Saul wanted to go to persecute the disciples was Damascus. This is because it had a very large Jewish population. With letters from the High Priest in hand, Saul set off on the 150 mile journey to Damascus. The trip would have taken five or six days, so you can imagine Paul becoming even more upset as he found that those who had fled from him in Jerusalem had made even more disciples of The Lord Jesus Christ throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria through which he was traveling. But, unbeknownst to Paul, he was about to have an unexpected meeting with The Lord on that journey.

On his journey, Saul approached Damascus. Suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground. He heard a voice speak to him, "Saul! Saul! Why are you opposing me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus," he replied. "I am the one you are opposing. Now get up and go into the city. There you will be told what you must do." The men traveling with Saul stood there. They weren't able to speak. They had heard the sound. But they didn't see anyone. (ACTS 9:3-7 New International Reader's Version) There are several things that we should note here. The first is that this was a completely unexpected event. Saul had not requested, prayed for, or desired to meet Jesus Christ. Second, it was a supernatural event. We learn from Paul's account that the light that flashed from heaven was brighter than the midday sun and was shining all around him and his companions. Third, note that while Saul heard and understood what was said, those with him only heard the voice, but did not understand it, nor did they see anyone. Also, while they stood speechless, Saul had fallen to the ground.

Our Lord's question to Saul in verse 4 was self-revealing. There was only one group that Saul was persecuting and here Jesus identifies Himself completely with His disciples. To persecute them is to persecute Him. Saul's question back, "**Who are you, Lord?**" is a full recognition that this Being that had revealed Himself in such a supernatural way was The Lord Himself. It was a question of clarification, but probably asked with hesitation since it would be his worst fear to find out it that was actually Jesus Christ and that he was guilty of fighting against God just as Gamaliel had warned the Sanhedrin. Jesus' answer must have cut him to the core, but that answer also came with directions of what he was to do next.

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