

## **Paul's Conversion**

### **Acts 9:1-22**

#### **Introduction**

The sermon this morning is on the conversion of Paul on his way to Damascus. Paul's conversion is perhaps one of the best known stories in the New Testament. As we keep coming back to the old stories, God continues to speak to us, exhort us, encourage us, convict us, and call us to Himself and to follow Him in taking dominion over the world as Christians. This is one of the glories of the Word of God. So as we study this familiar story, consider what you need to be reminded of, what you need to hear again. Consider also what new things God is calling you to this week. Consider what old things He is calling you to renew your walk in. Above all, consider Who it is that grabs Paul and gives him true life.

#### **Saul/Paul**

Saul (or Paul, as he is later identified – Acts 13:9) was a devout Jew and zealous Pharisee, of the sort whose name Jesus trashed for all time (Matt. 23). He was a great persecutor of the early Christians. He would enter homes and drag off men and women to prison (8:3), beat some (22:19), cast his vote against them (26:10), and put them to death (22:4). In short, he was “a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man” (1 Tim. 1:13). Saul's reputation preceded him as he journeyed to Damascus, filling believers with fear for their lives (9:13-14). But in this story, we see the abundant and thick grace of God poured out upon the chief of sinners. This story is given to you who will believe as a pattern, a model, of the mercy and grace of our Lord Jesus (1 Tim. 1:15-16).

#### **The Road**

Saul was raging against the disciples of Jesus and so obtained permission to go to Damascus to bind any believers he found there (v. 1-2). On his way, a light shines around him, such that he falls to the ground. He hears a voice from heaven: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” (v. 3-4). It is Jesus Himself (v. 5). What a comfort that Jesus identifies the persecutions of His people as persecutions of Himself! He has not left us here to fend for ourselves but is with us always (Matt. 28:20). So the Lord intervenes between Saul and his prey and overpowers him with His light and His Word.

Jesus tells Saul, “It is hard for you to kick against the goads.” There are a number of things to see here. First, Paul, as a Pharisee especially, would have known and taught the law and the prophets. Jesus says that these Scriptures point to Him (John 5:39). But apart from Christ, there is no eternal life in the Scriptures. Paul, seeking to follow God's law, even in his persecution (Acts 26:9), found himself only being more and more pricked by the goads. It is hard and painful to kick against Christ and His Word (Prov. 13:15). Second, the other goad here is Jesus Himself. When Jesus designs to make Paul His own, Paul cannot successfully resist. There is no sense in resisting Christ. It will do no good, but will only increase your misery until you turn to Him and call Him Lord. Nothing and no one can resist the grace of God.

## **Paul's Surrender**

So Paul, at the height of his career as a zealous Pharisee and purger of the land, a dragon-like persecutor, surrenders. "Lord, what do You want me to do?" *"He who had been a blasphemer of Christ's name now speaks to him as his Lord"* (Henry). Jesus' first instructions to him are very simple. Go and wait in Damascus for further instructions (v. 6). *"Thus he who thought to have led the disciples of Christ prisoner and captives to Jerusalem was himself led a prisoner and captive to Christ into Damascus"* (Henry). Paul may have known right from the beginning what the Lord's long term plan was for him (Acts 26:15-18), but did he know how walking blind into Damascus fit with this? And then, the waiting itself was like death. No sight, no food, no water, for three days (v. 9).

We do know, though, that in this time, Paul first begins to pray (v. 11). His terror at Christ's revelation and the revelation of his own sin turned him to call on the One who could save. God sends to him Ananias, a disciple who at first was fearful of Paul (v. 10-14). The Lord tells Ananias of His plan that Paul would be His witness before Gentiles (Gal. 2:8), kings (like Agrippa and even Caesar), and the Jews (preaching to the Jews first). Paul was specially chosen by God to spearhead the spread of the gospel through the Roman Empire. With this grand promotion would also come much suffering (v. 15-16, cf. 2 Cor. 11:23ff).

## **Eyes to See**

Ananias comes to Paul as Jesus directed and lays his hands on him. Something like scales fall from the convert's eyes, and he can see. He is baptized, is given food, and is strengthened (v. 18-19). Paul is given new life. At this point, there is no record of Paul asking again what he must do. Rather, he immediately preaches Christ (cf. Ps. 22:19-22, Ps. 51:12-14). When God gives life, when He transforms a sinner, when the scales fall from our eyes, the natural response is to tell about the grace, righteousness, and glory of Christ. The result of all of this in the immediate time is that Paul confounds those who opposed Christ and strengthens the believers (v. 22, 31). Paul had planned to take Damascus by storm and destroy the church there. Instead, Christ destroyed the old Paul and then through Paul took Damascus with the gospel to establish and strengthen the church.

## **Conclusion**

God's grace is deep and thick. God chose Paul, whom none of us would ever have chosen, to be the bearer of the gospel of grace to the Gentiles and to write much of the New Testament. He chose a blasphemer and Jesus-hater to be the foremost teacher of the gospel under the Lord Jesus. God chose him to be an example and pattern for believers (1 Tim. 1:16). You cannot outdo or escape the grace of God.

What does Paul's conversion teach us? It teaches us of the abundant mercy and patience and grace of God. This is the God we worship, who sent His Son into the world to save sinners, the worst of sinners, you and me and Paul. God sent His Son Jesus into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.