

# SAUL'S CONVERSION

Acts 9:1-31

Key Verses: 9:15-16

*But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."*

In the heyday of ISIS, we saw the horrible pictures and videos of them beheading many young men just because they were Christians. Now, if I were to tell you that an ISIS could become a disciple of Jesus, what would you say? It seems unthinkable. But in today's passage, we learn that such unthinkable thing happened to a young man. An active persecutor of the church was changed into a great disciple of Jesus Christ. The grace of God is truly amazing. May the Lord help us to learn the heart of God shown in the conversion of St. Paul!

## I. WHO ARE YOU, LORD? (1-6)

It appears St. Paul was converted into Christianity out of the blue one day. It is true that his conversion was sudden and dramatic. But I believe that God was preparing his conversion without him realizing it.

When Stephen was stoned to death, Saul was a young Jewish rabbi in Jerusalem who was studying under Gamaliel (Ac 22:3), a prominent rabbi who was respected by all Jews (5:34). Saul aspired to become a great rabbi like his teacher. When he saw how the Jewish leaders were alarmed by the Christian movement, he decided to quash it by destroying the church himself. The first thing he did was to take charge of murdering Stephen (7:58). Saul personally gave approval to stoning Stephen to death (8:1). On that day, a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem. All its members were scattered to Judea and Samaria. And Saul began to destroy the church systematically. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison (8:3). So how was God preparing this man to be a disciple of Jesus? I believe that what Stephen did and said as he was stoned to death shook Saul's conviction from the foundation. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (7:59-60). This prayer of Stephen left a lasting impression on Saul's heart.

How could a man pray like that when his body was crushed with big stones? Saul tried to suppress a voice of truth inside him. He doubled down in his persecution of the Christians in an attempt to convince himself that he was right and Christians were wrong. He tried hard to get Stephen's prayer out of his mind. But he couldn't do that. The more he tried to erase Stephen's prayer from his memory, the more it resounded in his mind. He found no respite from the anxiety of his conscience, for he was made in the image of God. Saul was a rising Pharisee in Jerusalem. He must have tried to look strong and brave. But when he thought about Stephen, he didn't understand how a man could face such suffering and death with a smile on his face. And how could he pray for the

people who were stoning him to death? Saul told himself that he was a victor and Stephen was a loser. He thought he was serving God by persecuting the church. But now he could no longer convince himself that he was on God's side. Stephen's prayer prepared Saul's conversion by breaking down his self-righteousness and blind ambition.

Still he didn't know what to do. Verse 1 says that he was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He was not content with persecuting the church in Jerusalem; he was determined to wipe out all Christians. What did he do? He went to the high priest to obtain a letter of authorization so that he could go to Damascus and destroy the church there. His plan was to find anyone there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, and to take them as prisoners to Jerusalem (2). However, on the way to Damascus, a dramatic thing happened to change his life and the Christian church forever. The Risen Jesus came to meet him personally. Saul was converted to Christian faith. What can we learn from his conversion? The most important thing to remember about his conversion is that it happened because of God's one-side grace upon a young man.

At that time, Saul was ready to do anything to advance his career. He seized an opportunity to make his name known by persecuting the church. He thought he was doing a service to God (He said in Galatians 1:13-14: "For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers"). But he did not know God personally. He did not know the Son of God. So he did not know himself. He persecuted the Church in his spiritual ignorance. To our surprise, God had mercy on this man. Look at verses 3-5. *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.* Amazingly, God personally visited Saul to speak to him. Saul heard the voice of Jesus, but he did not know who it was. He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" Jesus said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." Jesus is God. God humbled himself and reached out to Saul first. It is truly amazing to know that God had mercy on such a self-righteous and ambitious person. This grace of Jesus melted the heart of the proud young man.

What did the Risen Jesus say to him? He did not rebuke Saul; rather, he gave him a command that would give him a new direction in his life. Look at verse 6. *"Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."* Up to this point, Saul did not know God's purpose for his life. So he lived to fulfill his selfish ambition. Now Jesus told him that he would be told what he must do. Jesus would help him to find God's purpose and vision for his life. This had happened to another disciple named Peter, a fisherman in the sea of Galilee. He had no purpose in life, other than catching a lot of fish to support his family. Jesus called him, saying, "From now on, you will catch people." Jesus trained him to be a shepherd for his sheep. The Risen Jesus said to him, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these? Feed my sheep."

Saul was the most unlikely person in all of Jerusalem to become a disciple of Jesus. But it happened because of God's grace. His meeting with Jesus on the road to Damascus changed his life 180 degrees. A proud sinner was changed into St. Paul. He never forgot this grace. He would testify again and again, "I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am" (1Co 15:9-10).

The TIME magazine once had a cover story entitled "The Prodigal Son." It was about Franklin Graham, the eldest son of the late Billy Graham. I think having a world-famous father is a blessing, but also a burden. How can you measure up to your father? Anyway, Franklin was a rebellious teenager. He did everything against what his father preached—drinking whisky, shooting guns, speeding on a motorcycle, ... His parents were devastated. They could do nothing but to pray for him. One day, Franklin was staying at a hotel in Jerusalem when he realized how his life was going nowhere. He had no purpose or hope in life. He opened a Gideon Bible in the hotel room. Romans 8 was staring at him. He read: "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death" (Ro 8:1-2). He realized how much God loved a sinner like him. He broke down and cried with tears of repentance and thanksgiving. He became a new person on that day. Now he is serving the ministry his father started. God can use even a prodigal son in his salvation work!

Do you feel that you are or someone you know is a very unlikely person to become a disciple of Jesus? Then remember how God changed a man like Saul. Let's pray that many proud young people among us may meet Jesus personally and be changed into disciples of Jesus.

## II. MY CHOSEN INSTRUMENT (7-19a)

Look at verses 8-9. *Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.* The once proud and ambitious man became a helpless blind for three days. It was God's way of teaching Saul how he had been blinded by his misguided zeal for Judaism. He did not know the truth. So God prepared a man of faith to help him. In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him 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" (10-12). What was Ananias' initial reaction to the Lord? Look at verses 13-14. *"Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."* We can understand Ananias' reluctance. He knew what kind of person Saul was and why he came to Damascus. His reputation as a ruthless persecutor of the church preceded him. It was natural for Ananias to resist to go to meet him, let alone to help him. But Jesus told him to go and help him. And Ananias obeyed. Ananias played an important role in Saul's conversion.

Let us read verses 15-16. *But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."* Wow! Saul had done all he could to destroy the church. Yet, Jesus had a great vision for his life. Let us think further about God's grace for Saul.

**First, Jesus had a great hope for Saul.** Saul was the last person Jesus could put hope in, because of his pride and ambition. But Jesus saw in him potential to be a great servant of God and was ready to use him for the work of world salvation. This is what Paul testified later: "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. 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" (1Ti 1:12-14). Likewise, God has hope for each one of us. No one is without hope as long as he or she remains in Christ.

**Second, Jesus saw a vision for world salvation through one man.** The world was very dark. The early Christians were going through fiery persecutions. But Jesus had a vision that all people of the world would hear the gospel of salvation through his chosen servants. Jesus' calling of Saul teaches us about the broken heart of God toward the sinful world. God wants no one to die in sin without hearing about his wonderful grace of salvation. For this, he even called a man like Saul to use in his redemptive work. Jesus had a vision to use Saul to preach the good news to many people who were perishing in their sins. His vision reminds us of God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis. God had vision for him to become a source of blessing to all peoples of the world. Indeed, Abraham became a source of blessing to many, including us. Indeed, Saul became an evangelist who brought many people to the grace of salvation. One person is important in God's history. Each of us is important before God. God can use each of us in his redemptive work if we are willing to be changed in him by his grace.

**Third, God used his servants to raise St. Paul.** Saul did not become a great servant of God on his own. God used several faithful servants to help him. We said earlier how God prepared Saul's conversion through Stephen's prayer. Ananias had to overcome fear and hatred toward the murderous young man to help him. We also learn in verse 27 and in later chapters of this book that God used Barnabas to raise Saul to be a great evangelist. There is an African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child," which means that it takes an entire community of caring people to raise a child. We can say the same about raising a disciple of Jesus. It takes a community of caring and praying people to raise a disciple of Jesus. Let us remember this when we pray for our Bible student to grow to be disciples of Jesus.

What did Ananias do when he found Saul staying in a house, blinded, but were praying? Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Immediately, something like scales fell from

Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength (17-19).

### III. SAUL BEGAN TO PREACH THE GOSPEL (19b-43)

What did Paul do in Damascus after his conversion? After spending several days with the disciples there, he began to preach at once in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. 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?"* His sudden 180-degree change made the Christians uneasy and the Jews furious. For the Christians, it was hard to believe that such a person could be converted overnight. They could not forget what happened to Stephen and many other fellow believers because of him. Saul had done so much harm to the church. The Jews felt betrayed by his sudden change and they conspired to kill him (23). Paul could not go back to the Jewish society because he was a Christian now. He couldn't gain the trust of the Christians because of what he had done in the past. He was in a very difficult situation. But he did not take a neutral stand. Paul was great because once he was converted, 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 Messiah.* As Paul preached the gospel of Jesus Christ in Damascus, he faced the danger of being killed. Day and night the Jews kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall (24-25). Saul, the once proud man, became like a basketball for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Lord had said that he would show him how much Saul must suffer for his name. Jesus did not promise a comfortable life for Saul.

Later Paul went to Jerusalem and tried to join the disciples. However, the Christians there were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple of Jesus. They were suspicious of him. Perhaps they suspected that he was a secret agent of the Jewish intelligence service. But there was one man who believed in him. Barnabas persuaded the apostles that Paul's conversion was genuine. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him personally, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. Look at verses 28-30. So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He talked and debated with the Hellenistic Jews, but they tried to kill him. When the brothers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus, his hometown. In the midst of distrust and persecution, Paul proved himself to be a future leader of world evangelism. In this way, the gospel of Jesus was spreading over the world. Look at verse 31. *"Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers."*

In summary, Saul was changed from an active persecutor of the church into a preacher of the gospel by the grace of God. God can change a person to use in his

salvation work, no matter who the person is. God uses his servants to raise a disciple of Jesus. We can have hope in God no matter what our situation may be. Most of all, Saul's conversion teaches is about the broken heart of God toward the sinful world. He wants to use his servants to reach out to all people who are dying in sin. May the Holy Spirit convict our hearts to know this heart of God!