**BIBLE TALK Radio Broadcast**

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**The Conversion of Saul of Tarsus**

Have you ever seen someone make such a drastic change in his life from bad to good that someone said of him, “it’s hard to believe that this is the same person”? He made such a dramatic change that what he is now hardly even resembles what he was before. We have an example of this in the apostle Paul. Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 1:15, *“This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.”* Paul refers to himself as a chief of sinners. But Christ saved him. Paul changed and his change was a dramatic change. Today I want to talk about Paul’s conversion. Three questions I want us to look at today: first why would Paul refer to himself as the chief of sinners? Second, how dramatic was the change that he made? And third, why did he make that change?

Now I want to mention that in scripture, before Paul was converted, he was called Saul of Tarsus. So whether we are talking about Saul or whether we are talking Paul, we are talking about the same person.

The first question is why would Paul refer to himself as “chief” of sinners? This goes back to before he was a Christian, when he persecuted Christians. The first time we are introduced to Saul is in Acts 7. Stephen, a preacher of the gospel is being stoned to death. He is being stoned because of his preaching. Acts 7:58 says, *“and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.”* Evidently those who were stoning Stephen cast off their outer garments to free their arms so they could throw the stones better. They laid aside their garments and Saul is over there guarding them. Chapter 8:1 says, *“Now Saul was consenting to his death,”* that is he was in full approval of the stoning of Stephen. Look at verse 3, *“As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.”* Can you imagine being a disciple of Christ in that day, and you hear a knock on your door, and an awful fear overtakes you, thinking, “could that be Saul of Tarsus coming to take us off to prison?” In Acts 9:1,2, *“Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.”* He’s not content to persecute the Christians in Jerusalem, but he wants to go to a foreign city to imprison them. Saul was determined to squelch the faith of Christians and to do it by force.

That raises our second question, “How dramatic was his change?” Well, the very man who was zealously trying to stamp out the faith in Christ, turns around and becomes one of the greatest proponents of that faith. He zealously builds up what he once was so fervently trying to destroy. Paul said in Galatians 1:22-23, *“And I was unknown by face to the churches of Judea which were in Christ. But they were hearing only, ‘He who formerly persecuted us now preaches the faith which he once tried to destroy.’”* In 1 Cor. 15:9-10, Paul said, *“For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.”* Paul says, “I’m not worthy to be called an apostle. I persecuted the church of God.” Now he says, “I labored more abundantly than they all.” Here is a man who has changed, from a persecutor of Christians to, maybe, the greatest advocate of faith in Christ that the world has ever known.

Whenever you see such a dramatic change in a person, the question that comes to our mind is what brought about the change? This takes us back to Acts chapter 9 when Saul was on the road to Damascus for the purpose of binding Christians. As we read about what happened here I want us to notice five things that happened to Saul of Tarsus. The first thing that happened to him is that he saw a light. Look at verse 3, *“As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven.”* Later Paul said that it was *“brighter than the sun”* (Acts 26:13). Second he heard a voice. Look at verses 4 and 5, *“Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’ And he said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ Then the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’”* Thirdly, he saw the Lord. Some have questioned whether Saul saw the Lord on this occasion. But there is no question about it. The Bible is clear about this matter. Look at verses 26 and 27 of this chapter. On this occasion Saul has already been converted and he is going back to Jerusalem. *“And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. And he declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus.”* Did Saul see Jesus? The answer is yes, he saw Him on the road. Paul said in 1 Cor. 15:8, *“Then last of all He was seen by me also...”* It is essential that Saul sees Jesus because the Lord is making him one of His apostles. One of the primary works of an apostle is to be a witness of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But to be a witness of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, he had to see the Lord after His resurrection.

And so Saul saw a light, he heard a voice, the voice of the Lord, and he saw the Lord.

Now, a fourth thing that happened to him is that he came face to face with his sin. Can you imagine what was going through Saul’s mind when that voice said to him, *“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting”*? All this time Saul has thought Jesus is a fake. He is a false teacher. And all of a sudden this voice says to him, “I’m Jesus.” Saul then sees himself as a sinner.

Not only does he come face to face with his sin, a fifth thing that happens is that he comes face to face with his Savior. Verse 6 says, *“So he, trembling and astonished, said, ‘Lord, what do You want me to do?’ Then the Lord said to him, ‘Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.’”* Some people believe that Saul was saved from his sins on the Damascus road, at the moment he believed in Jesus. But the Lord tells him here on the Damascus road to go into the city, and he will be told what he must do. He comes to the city, and a disciple by the name of Ananias is sent by the Lord to Saul to tell him what he must do. In Acts 22 we read of when Paul is telling about his conversion and in verse 16 he says that Ananias says to him, *“And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.”* I suggest it’s hard to wash away something that is already gone. If Saul was saved on the Damascus road then his sins would already be washed away. But evidently they were not, because Ananias tells him to arise and be baptized and wash away his sins. Back in Acts 9, verse 18 says, *“Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized.”* We know exactly when Saul of Tarsus was forgiven of his sins. It was when he, a believer who had repented of his sins, was baptized into Christ.

One more question I want to ask before we close. Can we believe this story? You know, this is really a fantastic story? This is what Paul says happened to him, but can we really believe that story? I can think of only three possibilities. First, Paul was mentally deranged, given to a rather fantastic imagination. What he thought happened on the road to Damascus was really him going into one of his strange spells in his mental derangement and it really never happened. Anybody that has read the New Testament and is familiar with these writings knows that Paul wrote 13 and maybe 14 of the 27 books. And when you read his writings you see purity in ethics, you see sophisticated arguments to prove his points, you see well organized material, you do not see writings written by a mentally deranged man. Paul was one who could sit in the presence of governors and kings and speak persuasively. He could move them. This is not a man who was mentally deranged.

The second possibility is that Paul was lying. If that be so, what did he have to gain by his lie? What we know about Paul is that for the rest of his life he suffered tremendously for his testimony to the resurrection of Christ. Look at 1 Cor. 4:9. Paul said *“For I think that God has displayed us, the apostles, last, as men condemned to death; for we have been made a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men.”* Verses 11-13 he said, *“To the present hour we both hunger and thirst, and we are poorly clothed, and beaten, and homeless. And we labor, working with our own hands. Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure; being defamed, we entreat. We have been made as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things until now.”* Now, this is what Paul gained by his lie, if it was a lie. I believe that somewhere along the way after I went through some of that I would have said, “Folks, I’m getting tired of this. I’m quitting because I have been lying all along.” But Paul doesn’t do that. Rather he continued until his death. If Paul was lying about seeing Jesus then he suffered the rest of his life and finally gave his life for a lie. Do you really believe that?

There is a third possibility, and that is he saw the Lord. And the Lord spoke to him. And if he truly saw the Lord, then Jesus was raised from the dead. And if Jesus was raised from the dead then He is Lord and Christ. And if He is Lord and Christ, salvation in only in Him. Peter said concerning Jesus, *“Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”* (Acts 4:12) Jesus said while he lived on the earth, *“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”* (John 14:6) Paul was not mentally deranged. It is not conceivable that he was lying. The only reasonable conclusion is that he was telling the truth. And if he was telling the truth then what we have in Jesus Christ is One who was raised from the dead, Who ascended to the right hand of God, who is now Lord and King, who appeared to Saul of Tarsus, and the only One through whom we can have salvation from sin and the hope of eternal life.

How was Saul saved by Jesus? He heard the gospel, he believed it, repented of his sins, and was baptized to have his sins washed away. If we are going to be saved today, we must come to Christ in the same way that Saul did.

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