

THE LORD'S CHOSEN INSTRUMENT The Conversion of Saul

Acts 9:1-31

Key Verse: 9:15,16

“...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.”

Chapters 8, 9, 10 and 11 are about the work of the Holy Spirit through God's word in Judea and Samaria. (Following Acts 1:8) But the roots of God's mission to the world—to the ends of the earth—are also found in these chapters. There is the conversion of the Ethiopian in chapter 8. In chapter 9 we find the conversion of Saul, God's chosen instrument for the evangelization of the Gentile world. And in chapters 10 and 11 we find the Gentile Pentecost. It happens, most surprisingly, because of the ministry of Peter in Judea.

Because of the persecution following Stephen's death, the church scattered. The scattered church grew in numbers and new territories were pioneered because the believers shared the gospel and started house churches wherever they went. The Apostles remained in Jerusalem, facing the persecution, but under the protection of God. Among the Apostles, James was martyred in Jerusalem. Saul was a student in Jerusalem. He was from the Roman city of Tarsus and his family was rather well-to-do. They were in the tent making business. He was a bright and zealous young man and he was deeply committed to the Jewish religion, so they went him to Jerusalem to study. He studied the Bible and the religion of Judaism under a renown teacher, Gamaliel. Gamaliel was a man known for his fair-mindedness and wisdom. He was not a fanatic. (See chapter 5.) Saul, however, was a zealous defender of his faith. He took part, perhaps a minor part, in the stoning of Stephen. He saw Stephen die with a countenance full of peace and confidence. He heard Stephen's prayer for his murderers. He picked up his coat and left the terrible scene. Doubt about what he was doing sprouted in his mind. He began to try to cover his uneasiness and doubts by working against believers in Jesus more zealously than ever before. He invaded houses of believers and dragged them off to court and to prison. He sought to extend his efforts to purge Judaism of what he considered a cancerous cult.

* The Road to Damascus (1-8)

Saul, still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples, went to the high priest and obtained letters to synagogue leaders in Damascus introducing him and his mission and asking for their cooperation. He wanted to arrest followers of Jesus and bring them to Jerusalem. The church was called “the Way.” It was not just a doctrine; it was a way of life. It was a way based on grace and truth and demonstrated by love. And

it was quite different from the legalistic Judaism from which it arose.

Damascus was an old city. It was located in the Roman province of Syria, and was a leading city in the Empire. It was the hub of a commercial network. Trade routes reaching Syria, Mesopotamia, Persia and Arabia went through Damascus. If the "Way" took root in Damascus, it could quickly spread throughout the Empire. Damascus was about 150 miles from Jerusalem. There was a large community of Jews living there. As Saul and his companions neared Damascus, something totally unexpected happened. Saul met Jesus. A blinding light flashed from heaven and Jesus spoke to Saul. *He spoke in Aramaic.* "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me. *It is hard for you to kick against the goads.* (Ac 26:14) Paul answered, "Who are you, Lord?" I think he already knew. And Jesus answered, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Now, get up and go into the city." Something in Saul had been building up for this encounter ever since Stephen prayed for him. He had tried to cover his inner conflict by becoming more zealous. But doubts about what he was doing continued to grow. Indeed, he was like an ox kicking against the goads that prodded him forward. A stubborn ox kicks the goads and suffers more. When the light blazed and Saul fell from his horse to the ground, the men traveling with him didn't know what was happening. They heard the sound but saw nothing. But when they looked at Saul, it was plain that he needed help. He was blind. He was groping around trying to find direction. They led him by his hand into the city.

* Saul in Damascus (9-25)

He was taken to the house of a man named Judas who lived on Straight Street in Damascus. He could not eat or drink for three days. He just prayed and waited on God. He believed that God would tell him what to do.

There was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord called him and sent him to Saul. He was to go and pray for him and God would restore his sight. Ananias knew about the man named Saul. He and his fellow believers in Damascus had heard that he was coming. His reputation had gone before him and everyone knew that he hated followers of Jesus and was out to destroy the church. They knew why he had come to Damascus. Ananias was afraid. He thought that this might be a ploy to expose the followers of the Way in Damascus to their most vicious hunter. Ananias hesitated. But the command of the Lord was clear and persistent. God wanted to use Saul in his world redemptive work. God sent his Son Jesus because he loved the world. Jesus' mission was to be the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world. Jesus had finished his mission. Now, his chosen people must carry the good news of salvation to the people of the world for whom Christ died. God had a special mission for Saul. He told Ananias his plan: "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." Our Lord is amazing! How could he choose this proud and ardent Jew, this man steeped in Judaism and in the Jewish prejudice against Gentiles that goes with it, to take the good news of salvation to the Gentile world? Saul, however, had a commitment

that was higher than Judaism. He was a man who loved the truth. He sought God with all his heart. Moses promised, "But if from there you seek the Lord your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul." (Dt 4:29) Saul believed the Scriptures. He knew that the Bible was the word of God. He began his life as a follower of Jesus with repentance before the Risen Christ. He was obedient to the heavenly vision and to the Lord Jesus Christ. But he also diligently searched the Scriptures and found that the whole Old Testament, the Law and the Prophets, pointed to Jesus Christ the Messiah. He found that the Christ is the Son of God. This would become his message in the synagogues of Asia Minor and Europe and the Roman world.

The Risen Jesus had personally called a man to be an apostle who did not meet any of the established qualifications for Apostleship. Saul had not been with Jesus from the time of John's baptism until he was taken up into heaven (Ac 1:21-22). As far as we know, he had not even seen Jesus during the three years of Jesus' earthly life. But our Lord is not legalistic. He had prepared this man in another way. The Risen Jesus met him on the Damascus road and called him to be an Apostle to the Gentiles. (Gal 2:8) This was God's grace. Saul never forgot that he was the chief of sinners. He never forgot that he was a debtor to the grace of God who forgave him. He considered God's calling to apostleship also to be the great grace of God. God took a useless and destructive sinner and changed him into an apostle of love who could bring the good news of God's love to the whole world.

Ananias obeyed the Lord with his whole heart. He went to the house on Straight Street. He placed his hands on his enemy, Saul, and called him "Brother." He told him, "Jesus who appeared to you on the road sent me to you so that you might see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." God did his part. Saul's blinded eyes were open and he could see. He was filled with the Holy Spirit. He was very hungry, so he ate dinner and his physical strength was restored. (According to his statement in Galatians 2, he left Damascus and went into the Arabian desert to pray and study the Bible. He then returned to Damascus. It was about 3 years before he left Damascus.) He preached in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. The Jews of Damascus were amazed and puzzled and shocked. They finally got their wits together and realized that this man who had come to search and destroy followers of Jesus had become one of them. After many days had gone by they conspired to kill him. But the disciples of Jesus helped him escape by lowering him over the wall in a basket.

* A time of peace in Judea, Galilee and Samaria (26-31)

Saul went to Jerusalem. When he left Jerusalem some three years before, it was as a violent, zealous anti-Christian. He returned as a lover of Jesus, an ardent disciple of Jesus, dedicated to the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The disciples in Jerusalem couldn't believe it. They were afraid of him. They had experienced too much of his violence and anger and had seen God's precious children cruelly abused and

killed at his hands. They did not trust him. His conversion seemed to be a trick.

Then, Barnabas, the man of encouragement, met him and talked with him and found out what had happened. He brought him to the apostles and told them how he had met Jesus on the Damascus road and how he had been proclaiming Jesus fearlessly in Damascus. They accepted him and he stayed with them. He was a man of action, and he was irrepressible. He freely went about in Jerusalem preaching Jesus. He especially talked with and tried to convert Grecian Jews. (He was a Grecian Jew.) These men had been the ones responsible for Stephen's death. The persecution had all but died out for a time. Now, all Jerusalem was stirred up. All followers of Jesus were in danger. When the disciples learned that the Jews were plotting to kill Saul, they took him down to the port of Caesarea and put him on a ship bound for his home city, Tarsus. He remained there some 12 years, until Barnabas called him to come and help him teach the Bible in Antioch. This became his time for deep personal Bible study and prayer.

After Saul left, things settled down. "The church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened and encouraged by the Holy Spirit and it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord. God was building his church.