

Acts 9:1-18

The book of Acts is full of amazing turning points that defined the course of Christian history. God used situations that would seemingly be the end of the church to turn the church in a new direction and give it new life. In today's chapter we see another such turning point for the church. The conversion of Saul is so important that Luke gives three versions of it. (Also seen in Paul's speeches in Acts 22:6-21 and Acts 26:12-18)
The mysterious young man who stood holding the garments of those who stoned Stephen now comes into focus.

V1-2

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

Paul's murderous rage

He was silent till now. But hatred was brewing in his heart for a long time.

Student of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), member of the Sanhedrin council (Acts 26:10), Stephen speaking at synagogue of Cilicians (Acts 6:9) – these were all places where he must have encountered Christians.

Paul's zeal and pride in his Jewishness

Philippians 3:5,6 - circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.

Being a zealous Jew and a leader in the making, he must have thought that it was his righteous duty to persecute Christians.

Letters from the high priest

Letters of authority to hand over Christians and destroy.

Damascus

Distance from Jerusalem to Damascus was 130 miles and Damascus was an important city in the Roman kingdom where many Christians would have fled to and spread their faith in the synagogues after the martyrdom of Stephen.

Emphases

Words used to describe Christians till then – “the disciples of the Lord” (v1)

“the Way” (v2)

the living presence of Jesus with the persecuted (v5) showing Jesus's solidarity with the persecuted

“the saints” (v13)

“all who invoke the name of the Lord (v14).

V3-6

3 Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” 5 He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 6 But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”

A bright blinding light brighter than the noon day sun flashed around him. He fell down and heard a voice. Fell out of fear and realization.

(Interesting to note that the Bible doesn't say he fell down from a horse. It is assumed he was riding a horse, probably due to depiction in paintings.)

"Saul, Saul": When God repeats a name twice, it is to display deep emotion, but not necessarily anger (as in the Martha, Martha of Luke 10:41 and the Jerusalem, Jerusalem of Matthew 23:37).

"Why are you persecuting Me?": Saul was confronted by the true nature of his crime: He persecuted God, not man. Saul thought that he was serving God in viciously attacking Christians, but he discovered that he was fighting God.

(This has been sadly true throughout history of many religions. Often zealous people who are convinced they are doing God a favor, do much of the worst persecution and torture ever practiced.)

"Why are you persecuting Me?" : Fulfilment of Gamaliel's prophetic words in **Acts 5:39** – "if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them." Saul's failure to destroy the movement is a sure sign that this movement is from Jesus, the risen Lord and God.

Who are You, Lord?: Paul's helpless exclamation – acknowledging the voice as the voice of God even without knowing who it is. Or else, may be this was the question he was wrestling with all this while as he persecuted Christians, "who is this Jesus? Is he truly Lord?"

"I am Jesus...enter into the city...you will be told what to do" : Now like a humble slave of the master, Saul will obey Jesus in complete surrender. He is led by the hand by his companions.

Paul is shaken and humbled by the experience. This must have challenged all his earlier notions about God and now he saw Jesus as the messiah. For three days he is blind and fasts from food awaiting God's direction – baptism and commissioning.

V10-18

10 Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." 11 The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, 12 and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." 13 But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; 14 and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." 15 But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; 16 I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." 17 So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." 18 And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, 19 and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

God uses an ordinary Christian named Ananias for the healing and conversion of Paul. Ananias is not called as an apostle or evangelist or an elder. Ananias's willingness to listen "Here I am Lord" shows his availability. In God's vision to Ananias, God specifically mentions the person, location, attitude and activity of Paul.

Ananias meets Saul

Laying of hands...brother Saul...healing and Holy Spirit.
Sight restored, baptized, strength regained.

Emphases

Often the random people and incidents that come into our life are brought by God's specific design.

Ananias's objections are logical. Saul is well known as the persecutor and his having the letters of authority are known. So there is risk to Ananias. But more than the risk, Ananias is highlighting, do you really want this person?
But God tells him that the persecutor will now become the persecuted and the preacher.

"chosen instrument...before gentiles and kings and people of Israel...suffer" : Paul's ministry in a nutshell

Emphases

1. The greatest miracle is a transformed human. What can transform a man's convictions? What can make him put his trust in God? Arguments may or may not. We don't see Saul transformed when he had heard the disciples preaching.
But a life experience of God's grace can.

Illus – College canteen proprietor Joy stricken by Cancer
Different fishes need different bait/net/harpoon.

2. **Suffering** - an integral part of Christian life and witness. Suffering is not a qualification. But rather an integral part. It refines us. Make us trust and rely more on him. It makes us realize that our destiny is in him alone.

Questions

1. Why would Jesus have chosen a zealous enemy of the church as his instrument to evangelize the nations?
2. Paul's encounter with Jesus brought him from a state of zealous arrogance to helpless dependence. Why was it necessary?
3. Does suffering have any role in molding Christian life?