

Acts Week 27

From Saul to Paul, The transformation from Persecutor to Believer

Verse 9:4; Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”

This becomes a transformation of one who not only denied our Lord Jesus but knew in all his heart his persecution of the Way was what was required of him. Our question here is what was in Paul’s heart, was he a defender of traditional orthodox Judaism? If so, was the persecution done with a heart of hatred or zealousness for tradition? Let’s look at this a bit closer. If it were done for hatred it would be pure evil, if it was done to safeguard all the traditional practices in which he was raised and taught... then would it not be justified and more about a heart devoted to the manner in which he was raised?

Verses 9:1-2; 1 “Then Saul, still breathing (empneō¹) threats (apeilē, ap-i-lay²) and murder (phonos³) against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2 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.”

To better understand our verses we need to better understand how certain words are being used. **threatening** and **slaughter/murder** “were so to speak the element from which he drew his breath,” From the definitions of these words we find Paul’s heart was seeking the death of the disciples and believers of the Way. Murder, slaughter, these are things God spoke against in the Old Testament, so how is it that Saul can be seen as a righteous man walking in the Lord when he made it his mission to murder/slaughter the innocent? It obviously appears that Saul’s heart was not in a good place. Saul represents a man determined to kill or prosecute any who were of the ‘Way’, meaning the new Christian church. There is no manner of which he could justify his doings in front of God.

Believing himself to be the one sent to destroy this new movement he presses on, convinced this to be the right way to put an end to the heresy. In **Philippians 3, Paul states “I was 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.”** Of the “Law.” Which law would he be thinking of here? Surely not the laws of God, **Exodus 20:13; “You shall not murder.”** However,

¹ Breathing (empneō), threatenings and slaughter were so to speak the element from which he drew his breath. <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g1709/nkjv/tr/0-1/>

² ἀπειλή apeilē, ap-i-lay' from G546; a menace:—X straitly, threatening. <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g547/nkjv/tr/0-1/>

³ Slaughter, (phonos) murder:—murder, + be slain with, slaughter. from Homer down, murder, slaughter: <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g5408/nkjv/tr/0-1/>

Paul as Saul saw himself above others prior to the conversion. **Galatians 1:14: And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers.** Does the use of traditions change anything about how we are to treat others? No, but it does help us better understand what we were first asking, why was Paul/ Saul persecuting the church. The transformation is now taking place even though Jesus continues to call him Saul it is not the name change that brings change. Saul and Paul were both names he was called by, see Acts 13:9.

9:3-4; As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

As we read Greek and Hebrew we must keep in mind the importance of the placement or sequence of words. As we look here at our verse we find the sequence of the event taking place. 1) Saul is on a journey to persecute the new church, 2) we find a light that shone around him. 3) he fell to the ground, 4) the conviction of his persecution by the voice of our Lord Jesus. In his zealousness he drew his strength for the destruction of the Christian movement, but now he must hear from the head of the church who is our Christ Jesus. The sequence might have been in a different order, such as, Saul heard the Lord's voice and in conviction he cried out who are you? Then he saw a bright light around him and then dropped to the ground. However, the sequence is very important and as we study we should take note of this.

When we think of baptism we find believing is the first step, although we might not find the actual word, believe, such as in Acts 2:38, repent and be baptized, and other combinations, we do find faith, believe at the core of the reason for baptism. Can one be repentant and not believe, that would be remorse not repentance, or what power does anointing have if they do not believe? Paul is probably the best example of a conversion we have, the stark differences and changes are at extreme differences. Light and dark.

What happens as the light glows around him is the power and realization that Jesus has been raised and is still very much active in the growth of the Way. Here Saul becomes Paul and he collapses to the ground. I like this picture, for we are actually seeing an enemy of our Lord Jesus fall before him and not only due to conviction but much more in transformation. If Paul knew the Old Testament then he should have known this verse for he later will teach it carrying it into the New Testament.

Isaiah 45:23; I have sworn by myself, the word is gone out of my mouth in righteousness, and shall not return, That unto me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear. Paul writes this later in his teachings. **Romans 14:11; For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God. Philipians 2:10; That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth;** As we look at this event which do you believe it to be, the Lord's conviction or Saul's fright. Perhaps it was the combination of the two.

9:4-5; Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting⁴ 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.” Notice here that when Saul replies, Luke, the author of the event, uses capital letters for “You” and “Lord.” Was this a moment of understanding given to him to know who was talking to him? Obviously it was. Next look how Jesus replies. **“Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”** This is an interesting comment from Jesus, because Saul is clearly wondering when he directly persecutes the Lord. Jesus uses this same analogy in **Matthew 25:35-36; for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; 36 I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.’**

We find here we are to treat others as we would like to be treated, and there must not be prejudice in our actions. Often people give to others because of who they may be, but our hearts are not to look upon others this way. When we persecute or deny others we may not be aware of what that may teach those who observe our actions. What is the message they might take away from this, that it is fair to give favor to one and not others? Jesus closes in **Matthew with, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.’** We are at risk of judgment when we fail to offer respect even to those we may believe are unworthy.

James says in verses 2:1-4; My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. 2 Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. 3 If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, “Here’s a good seat for you,” but say to the poor man, “You stand there” or “Sit on the floor by my feet,” 4 have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

When we judge in such a manner we should first reflect upon ourselves, am I above others, not at all, **Philippians 2:3; Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself.** This is a hard lesson for many of us, including me, you see someone and you can tell right away they are on drugs and you resent that and want nothing to do with this person, yet our Lord is nudging you to help, will you help? These are questions I have faced and struggled with for many years and finally I came to understand and recognize those God wants me to help, it is not everybody. God knows the heart of man, who is willing to change and who needs help accomplishing that change, will you honor and allow Him to use you.

As hard as it may seem at times, God is never going to allow you to fill this position He has chosen you to do without first equipping you. Others struggles may not seem as bad as some make them out to be, but they are struggles just the same and to them they can be very damaging . I am glad that so many times in my life God has sent others to be there for me in my

⁴ Persecute, diōkō, Pronunciation dee-o'-ko, 3. in any way whatever to harass, trouble, molest one; to persecute,

struggles. This is the hand of God, that hand that does not reject but instead helps us to identify the problem and then gives us the strength to fix it. Jesus never turned His back on the lepers, the murders and thieves, He healed the sick, cured the blind and raised the dead and not once did He look for reason not to do so. Who then are we to think ourselves better than others?

John Stott brings us to a place where we are to look upon our own conversions. He points out that not all conversions are going to be as Paul's was, we might not see a bright light about us nor hear our Lord speak directly to us, but conversion does happen. I have shared with you numerous times as I was ready to walk out of my third marriage, how the Lord got my attention. Determined to leave, as I walked out to the garage it felt as though I was hit in the back of my head with a 2x4 and I heard the words, "I don't think three women can all be wrong." It was a time and cause to reflect on my understanding of marriage and commitment. Marriage is not a promise of ongoing joy, bliss or an owed gratification. We must look to the marriage of our Lord and the church as His bride and all He endured for you and me. We must never discount the cross and Jesus being God removing the pain and suffering and then acting as though it pained Him, the blood He shed and the persecution He endured were very real and necessary to cover our sin.

Our Lord will get our attention when He wants it, the question then becomes, will you recognize it, will you act upon it? It was for me as it was for Paul, a time of reflection in my life, to look at who I was and how I was acting, then in humility surrender that which I was so steeped in, self-reliant, and self-centered attitudes. Although at the time I did not bow my knee or my heart in understanding, it would later come, my perspective was altered for the better. How much more important was this for Paul? Now I have learned what it is to bow a knee. I believe our bibles would be missing much of the deeper teaching if we never had Paul, he went from persecution to compassion, from hate to love for the things of God. We must all do as Paul did.

Verse 9:5; "It is hard for you to kick against the goads." What the heck is this about? to kick against the goad, i. e. to offer vain and perilous or ruinous resistance: "A goad was a long, extremely sharp stick used to get an ox going the way you wanted when plowing. One jabbed the hind legs of the ox with the goad until the ox cooperated."⁵

The convictions the Holy Spirit is here to give us should be a goad in our lives, not to harm but to entice us to be better, to be more observant of others, to live as Christ. Looking at this through our own eyes it seems an impossible goal, and on our own it is, we will never achieve the task without our Lord God's hand holding onto us.

Isaiah 41:10 – "Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand."

Psalms 46:1 – "God is our refuge and strength, A very present help in trouble."

⁵ David Guzik, https://www.blueletterbible.org/comm/guzik_david/study-guide/acts/acts-9.cfm?a=1027005

Isaiah 40:29 – “He gives power to the weak, And to those who have no might He increases strength.”

Philippians 4:13 – “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

Psalms 18:32-33 – “It is God who arms me with strength, And makes my way perfect. He makes my feet like the feet of deer, And sets me on my high places.”

2 Corinthians 12:9-10 – “And He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

Psalms 27:1 – “The Lord is my light and my salvation; Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; Of whom shall I be afraid?”

Ephesians 6:10 – “Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might.”

Isaiah 12:2 – “Behold, God is my salvation, I will trust and not be afraid; ‘For Yah, the Lord, is my strength and song; He also has become my salvation.’”

Psalms 73:26 – “My flesh and my heart fail; But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”

[From Viral Believer](#)