

## Saul's Conversion, Part I

Main Text: Acts 9:1-19

### Introduction:

Following the death and martyrdom of Stephen, a great persecution arose, causing many of the brethren to spread out, into all of Judea and Samaria. And as they spread out, they preached the Gospel wherever they went. We then followed the ministry of Philip, who had great success in Samaria, as many believed the Gospel, and were united to the resurrected and living Christ, by faith. And following this, Philip went down to Gaza, where he had preached to an Ethiopian Eunuch, who was likewise saved. Finally, Phillip travelled up the coast, preaching from city to city, until he settled down in Caesarea, for the remainder of his recorded ministry.

In all of this, we have seen that Christ was at work, fulfilling His revealed will, given in chapter 1:8. Speaking to His Apostles, He declared, "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." The Spirit had empowered them at Pentecost, Jerusalem was filled with their preaching/witnessing, the great persecution (following the death of Stephen) pushed the Gospel into all of Judea and Samaria, and the ends of the earth (the gentile world) was just being breached, at the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch. And all in all, what we have been meant to see, more than anything, is that this is the work, *not* so much of the Apostles/disciples of Christ, but rather of the risen Christ, Himself, who was, by His Spirit, laying the foundation of His church, and advancing His glorious kingdom.

Well, this morning, we will begin to see God's preparation of the specific instrument that he will use to break much ground in the Gentile regions, up north and west, in Asia Minor, Greece and all the way into Rome. This morning, we begin to consider the conversion of a self-righteous Pharisee, named Saul, whom Christ will use to do great things for His great and glorious name's sake! And brethren, as great as the Apostle Paul had become, he would have us see; we must see, the power behind it all, namely, the divine power of God, fulfilling all His will through Paul!

### I. The Conversion of Saul

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."

The last we saw Saul, he was holding the clothing/garments of those, who had stoned Stephen to death. And we were told in chapter 8:1, 3, "Now Saul was consenting to [Stephen's] death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles...As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison."

And so, we had seen already, that Saul, was a key component and leader in the great persecution that was taking place in Jerusalem, which pushed the church outward into all of Judea and Samaria. Saul was making havoc of the church, dragging Christians (men and women) off to prison. Well, now we are told that, in light of the fact that the Gospel was spreading throughout all of Judea; in light of the wonderful things that were happening up in Samaria and beyond, Saul was anxious to flush out the light of the Gospel beyond Jerusalem, and into those other areas, where it was spreading. You will notice, that we are brought back to Saul, in such a way as to fill in the summary blank, of what he has been doing, the whole time, we have been following Philip's ministry. He was, "still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of The Lord..." Again, Paul never wants to sugar coat his conversion experience, as if to make light of how hardened in sin, he was. He wants the whole truth put out, ensuring that God receives all of the glory for what transpires, specially since our natural tendency is to exalt and worship men [see 1 Tim. 1:12-17]. And so, he says here, as it were, "Follow what led to my conversion. I was, the whole time that the Gospel was spreading, reeking havoc on the church; in contention with it, casting men and women in prison, threatening the disciples and all who named the Name of Christ, with persecution and even death. I was on the polar opposite of the Gospel equation."

"And furthermore, I was so determined to destroy the Gospel and those who professed it, that I got permission from the high priest, to travel north and east, some 150 miles, so as to flush out the light of the Gospel from Jerusalem, into Samaria, and as far as Damascus, of Syria." Hearing of the spreading of the Gospel, and all that was happening, following the dispersion,

Saul would attempt to quench the flame, wherever it went, bringing back men and women, bound in chains, to be imprisoned in Jerusalem. He had gotten written permission from the high priest, to do this. And so, with letters in hand, he set off to Damascus. Indeed, Paul was no lazy man. His blind zeal carried him a great distance, in order to oppose the Gospel.

Notice, as well, brethren, here we find that a name was adopted for those, who embraced Christ and His Gospel, "the Way." Paul asked for letters 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. Clearly, so as to contrast the blind and present Judaism, which pervaded the Promised Land, the Christians took on this title, as a whole, so as to highlight their union with, and commitment to The Lord Jesus Christ. In John's Gospel, chapter 14:6, while speaking to Thomas, Jesus had boldly claimed Himself to be, "the Way, the Truth and the Life," the only Way to the Father/God. And I believe that this designation in Acts, was meant to highlight their embracing of Christ, as that reality; a reality, which, obviously, the Jews and every other heathen religion, rejected. The "Way," set down the line of exclusivity, boldly stating that, "Christ alone is the Way to the Father"; He is the Way of salvation, and we are in Him! Such an exclusive notion is hardly desirable or approved of, in our own day, brethren! And yet, like the disciples of the Lord, and the early church, we would do well to profess this reality, firmly, though humbly, never forgetting from whence we came, and how we got here. [Look also at Acts 16:17; 18:25-26; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22].

And brethren, this was the mindset and the determination of the Apostle Paul, at the time of his conversion. He wants us to see that he was not merely indifferent, nor was he a silent opposer of the truth, such that he might justify something good about himself, leading God to save him. No, he was vehemently opposed to the Gospel, imprisoning those of The Way, breathing out threats and violence toward the church, and traveling great distances to destroy her! Christ's grace met Saul right here, brethren! And in doing so, it has given us great hope in the grace of God, as well, has it not? We can be honest about our own conversion experiences. We don't have to shutter or hide from the truth, about how the Gospel found us. We can be honest. We can look back and find nothing; not an iota of a thing, worthy in, or good about us, that might somehow make us a worthy recipient of grace. We can be honest, without the fear of thinking that perhaps God might, at some point, be rid of us! We can emphasize the totality of God's grace in our salvation; even to the extent that we might have been directly opposing the

Gospel in word and deed, with the full assurance that, "He who began a good work in us, will complete it unto the Day of Christ Jesus!" We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, brethren! Oh, joy in the unfathomable love of Christ, that saved a wretch like me! Oh, joy in His unchanging commitment toward us, in spite of us, though we have not a red cent of merit to claim for our own, based upon our own thinking or good works...it is all of grace, all of Christ, brethren! In this, is the love of God manifested, not that we loved Him, but that, in Christ, He loved us first!...when we wanted nothing whatsoever to do with Him; indeed, when we opposed Him!

Paul was on a mission; a mission to destroy the church; running in the very opposite direction of God's will...and Christ met him, right there on that path, in that mindset, and brought him into the Way! What a wonderful and glorious Savior! What was the only difference between Saul and all of the other unconverted and condemned Pharisees, who maintained their hatred of Christ and the Gospel, to the end? All of Grace! Next time, Lord willing, we will get into the details of the apostle's conversion experience, beginning on the road to Damascus.

[\*If time, perhaps, following questions/comments, seek out a *brief* testimony or two, from the brethren]

Amen!!!