

Explore the Bible: Converted

April 20, 2016

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for May 8 focuses on Acts 9:3-20.*

I Saw the Light

Saul of Tarsus, the man who eventually would write a majority of the books that make up the New Testament, first appears in Acts guarding the robes—possibly the priestly robes—of the men who stoned Stephen to death. He was in “heartly agreement” with this act of mob justice (Acts 7:58-8:1). He reappears as an agent of the high priest, speaking of murder and deputized to arrest disciples in the synagogues of Damascus.

What motivated Saul to agree with Stephen’s murder and to pursue the scattered disciples? Saul later records he was a Pharisee in his stance to the Mosaic Law, and his zeal led him to persecute the church (Philippians 3:5-6). His “zeal” was passionate devotion. Like other Pharisees, Saul of Tarsus believed that the future of God’s people hinged on their rigorous keeping of the Law. That is, the promises of God to restore the fortunes of Israel in a new and dramatic way depended on their obedience, and that promised future would continue to be delayed as long as Israel remained unfaithful.

So, when a fringe group appeared with questionable devotion to the Temple, to the Law, and worst of all with devotion to a crucified man as the Messiah, this was for Saul and many other zealous Jews a recipe for disaster. It was blasphemy for them to declare someone holy (“seated at the right hand of God!”) who according to the law was cursed (Deuteronomy 21:23 by way of Galatians 3:13). Disobedience, blasphemy and more than a dash of idolatry—this was how Saul of Tarsus viewed “The Way,” as the still young movement had begun to be known.

On the way to Damascus, Saul meets the last person he would have expected. Light shines from heaven, and the resurrected and exalted Christ asks him a personal and pointed question. Saul later will classify himself as a witness to the resurrection, one to whom Christ appeared, though his timing was badly off (1 Corinthians 15:3-8). Without knowing his identity, Saul recognizes the mode of communication as belonging to one to whom he owes allegiance. “Who are you *Lord*?”

Jesus’ initial question and his answer reveal the depth of his identification with his followers. He takes their suffering personally. “Why do you persecute *me*? I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.” Saul’s later letters to the churches are full of the teaching of Jesus’ followers’ identification with him. They share in his death, his sufferings, his righteousness, his eternal life and his resurrection. Could it be that the seed of these truths was Jesus’ introduction to Saul?

Saul is left blind after the encounter, and the man who planned to scour the Damascus synagogues for blasphemers must be led helpless into the city. For three days, he does not eat or drink. What was he doing? We discover later in the chapter he was praying, and that in that time he had a vision. Beyond that, he must have been rethinking everything. He must have recalled every scrap of Scripture he could remember and tried to place it in this new paradigm, this new work of God in which a crucified and humiliated man is risen from the dead and reigns as Lord of the world. He must have rethought over and over every piece of the story of Israel—his people’s story, his story, from Adam to Abraham to Moses to David to Isaiah to Jeremiah, in the new light that had shined on him and left him in darkness.

“Brother Saul”

God, of course, did not intend to leave Saul in the dark. Jesus appears to a Damascene disciple named Ananias in a vision. Saul himself will later

describe Ananias (to a group of zealous Jews) as “a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there” (Acts 22:12). Although the circumstances of Paul’s description need to be borne in mind, there is no reason to believe that was not true of Ananias. In fact, a devout law-keeping Jew who worshipped Jesus as Lord would have been the perfect bridge person for Saul of Tarsus to help him move from who he was to who he had now been called to be. Jesus gives Ananias specific instructions, including names and an address! Jesus recruits him for a miraculous healing. Ananias doesn’t have any questions about the directions or the command to heal a blind man, but he does want to clarify his identity. *That* Saul, the one who has harmed your people and came here to do the same? Jesus answers with “Go!” Ananias becomes the first to hear of Christ’s new life plan for Saul. The man who caused suffering to those who professed Jesus will himself suffer for Jesus’ name. The man who was so passionate about Law-keeping will be the chosen vessel to carry the good news to the lawless Gentiles.

With this instruction, Ananias goes to the house and speaks two of the most powerful words in the New Testament—“Brother Saul.” Jesus has chosen Saul, and that’s good enough for Ananias. Whatever his original intention in coming to Damascus, Jesus has changed his identity. The enemy has become a brother. Ananias fulfills his mission, and Saul’s sight is restored. Before even eating after his extreme fast, Saul is baptized. First things first. His new life begins with his identification with Jesus’ death and resurrection. Saul regains his strength and eventually makes it to the synagogues of Damascus. Now, however, he is the agent of different authority. Saul the former Pharisee likely was welcomed as a sort of guest preacher and delivered a message that must have shocked everyone—“Jesus is the Son of God.”

The powerful story of Saul’s conversion is a testimony of the truth that encountering Christ will permanently change a person’s life. As Saul later

moved through the Greek-speaking world he began to be called by the Greek name "Paul," his new name a sign of his new vocation as apostle to the Gentiles. It was his allegiance, however, that changed. His identity now was bound up with Jesus, and Saul would serve as a bridge person. His encyclopedic knowledge of Israel's Scriptures is revealed in his letters, as he tells Gentile believers that in Christ, God's story is *their* story, with no distinction between Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, but that they are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28).