

14. From a bragmony to a testimony

November 3, 2013

Have you ever had a feeling that when you just heard a particular news that you thought it was impossible to happen and caught you totally off-guard, or you just met someone whom you've thought that you'd never meet, or what you have believed all your life turned out to be nothing more than a big fat zero, nothing , nada?

Do you know that feeling? The feeling that your stomach just sank below the bottom of the earth; the feeling that your blood completely drained out of your head and face; the feeling that there is absolutely no strength in your feeble knees?

The person whom we are about to encounter had experienced all of the above at once. Apostle Paul, formerly known as Saul of Tarsus was the one. He met Jesus whom he thought that he was just another very dead deceiver and rebel prophet.

In one of his letters, Philippians, he gives us a brief background of himself before he met Jesus face to face:

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; 6 concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless

What an impeccable resume for a Pharisee to have! But that stunning resume became a worthless paper when he met the resurrected Jesus for the first time. All the things he could brag about before became nothing more than rubbish, and, in turn, what he received from the Lord Jesus became his testimony that was heard around the world for two thousand years and still going strong .

Philippians 3:7-8 But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. 8 Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ

This reminds me of what the late missionary Jim Elliot said:

"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

The conversion of Saul of Tarsus to apostle Paul was one of the greatest events in church history. Let's see how it unfolds.

A. FROM A LEADER TO A BLINDED FOLLOWER

Acts 9:1-9 Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder 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. 3 As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. 4 Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" 5 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." 6 So he, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" Then the Lord said to him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." 7 And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one. 8 Then Saul arose

from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. 9 And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Last time when we met Saul in Acts 8:3, he was making havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison. Here he continued and expanded this work with the authority of the high priest Caiaphas to the city of Damascus which was located about 150 miles northeast of Jerusalem. It has been estimated that there could well have been thirty to forty synagogues in the city.

Saul was an angry, violent man who was absolutely convinced of his own righteousness and he thought he was doing God a service by eliminating the followers of Jesus of Nazareth.

In the beginning of Christianity, it was called 'the Way.' In a way, I like it because I think that it is a fitting one. The name 'the Way' means that Christianity is more than a belief or a set of opinions or doctrines. Following Jesus is a way of living as well as believing.

Please note what Jesus said to in v4:

Acts 9:4 Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

When God calls your name twice back to back, it is far worse than your mama calling you, including your middle name in staccato. Speaking of middle name, you may wonder what my middle name is. I don't have one. None of the Southern Swedish people has a middle name.

Now that Jesus got Saul's full attention, He asked, "*Why are you persecuting Me?*" The Lord was taking the unbelievers' persecutions against His followers very personally. The unbelievers around you who ridicule your faith in Jesus will face the same question from the Lord when they stand in front of Him at the White Throne Judgment Seat.

In v5, Saul discovered two things that changed his life forever:

- 1) Jesus of Nazareth is VERY ALIVE and Jesus is God.**
- 2) He was persecuting the followers of Jesus wrongly and he was against the Lord.**

You may say, "Where did you get that idea about Jesus being God from Paul's comment?" I am glad that you asked. When Saul asked Jesus, "*Who are You, Lord?*", he used a Greek word 'kurios' for 'deity' in this context.

Saul asked the Lord two very important questions for every human should ask:

1) Who are You, Lord?

All of us must know who our Lord Jesus is through His Word the Bible. I like what A.W. Tozer said, "God being who and what he is, and we being who and what we are, the only thinkable relation between us is one of full lordship on His part and complete submission on ours."

2) What do You want me to do?

We often are quite interested in what God wants others to do. But the surrendered heart asks, "Lord, what do You want me to do?"

When Saul left Jerusalem with his men, he was the leader with glowing arrogance. He was an up-and-coming star of the Sanhedrin member, the future chief priest, yet spiritually blinded. When he entered Damascus, he had to be led by his men, humbled, and physically blinded, but his spiritual eyes were opened to the truth.

B. FROM RAGING BULL TO BLEATING LAMB

Acts 9:10-19 Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." 11 So the Lord said to him, "Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying. 12 And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him, so that he might receive his sight." 13 Then Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. 14 And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name." 15 But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. 16 For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake." 17 And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." 18 Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized. 19 So when he had received food, he was strengthened. Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus.

We don't know anything about Ananias from either before or after this meeting with Saul. Later apostle Paul described him in chapter 22 as "a devout man", but we don't know how he came to Damascus, or what happened to him afterward. He was one of those unsung heroes of Christianity and an ordinary man yet willing servant to do God's work obediently against his own opinion about the former persecutor.

Are we willing to do what the Lord tells us to do in spite of our own opinion? The experience of Ananias also reminds us that we should never be afraid to obey God's will.

V15 is a good summary of Paul's life and ministry. It was all of grace, because he did not choose God; it was God who chose him. He was God's vessel, and God would work in and through him to accomplish His purposes. God's name would be glorified as His servant would take the Gospel to Jews and Gentiles, and as he would suffer for Christ's sake.

I just love the way Ananias ministered to Saul in v17. No doubt Ananias' hands were gently applied to Saul. But what reassured Saul more than this was the opening word in his greeting: "Brother Saul." To be counted as a brother in Christ after his attempts to destroy the church must have enlightened his soul with astonishment and joy. That is a picture of grace and forgiveness. And that is how our Lord accepted all of us into His family. It is no wonder 'grace of God' was the most important subject of apostle Paul.

Do you pray for someone who hates you and despises you for whatever reasons? Do you pray for that person's soul if he or she is an unbeliever? Someone asked me how I can pray for President Obama's salvation some time ago. For a couple of reasons: first, we are commanded by the Lord to pray for the leaders of the country.

1 Timothy 2:1-2 Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, 2 for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence.

Second, if Obama becomes a born-again Christian, he will stop all the ungodly things that he has been doing. I am sure that the entire liberal media will be up in arms against him if that happens.

Pray for those who don't like you. That is what the Lord wants you to do. He didn't say that you have to mend your relationship with that person. Just pray for God's will for him or her.

Matthew 5:44 But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you,

C. FROM A PERSECUTOR TO A PREACHER

Acts 9:20-25 Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God. 21 Then all who heard were amazed, and said, "Is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name in Jerusalem, and has come here for that purpose, so that he might bring them bound to the chief priests?" 22 But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this Jesus is the Christ. 23 Now after many days were past, the Jews plotted to kill him. 24 But their plot became known to Saul. And they watched the gates day and night, to kill him. 25 Then the disciples took him by night and let him down through the wall in a large basket.

Because Saul was a skilled student of the great rabbi Gamaliel, he took advantage of the synagogue custom that invited any able Jewish man to speak from the Scriptures at synagogue meetings immediately. No one could be matched with Saul's knowledge of the Scriptures that connected the OT and Jesus as the Messiah.

The message of Saul was all about Jesus. He knew they needed to know Jesus in truth, that He is the Son of God as he did.

Many people think when Jesus is called the 'Son of God' it is a way of saying He is not God, but something less than God – mere "the son of God." But in Jesus' day, everyone knew what this title meant. To be called the "son of" someone meant you were totally identified with that person. When Jesus called Himself the Son of God, and when others called Him that, it was understood as a clear claim to His deity.

In fact, on two occasions in Matthew 26 and John 5, when Jesus called Himself the Son of God, He was accused of blasphemy, of calling Himself God. Everybody knew what Jesus meant in calling Himself Son of God, and everyone knew what Saul meant when he preached that Jesus is God.

When Saul left Jerusalem with his group of men, he thought that he would leave Damascus as a conquering victor with the followers of Jesus in captivity. He'd never thought that he would escape the angry mob of the Jewish people who wanted to kill him in a large basket. I guess you can say that Saul was a basket case. The Lord has His way to humble His servant.

D. APPLICATIONS

- 1) Don't look back what you had before Christ with longing eyes. They were traps of this world that kept you from the Lord's freedom.
- 2) There is only one will that we must follow – not ours, but God's.
- 3) Win over your enemy's heart with prayers.