

## **FROM SAUL TO PAUL**

### **His Conversion, His Life, His Example to Follow**

We can learn a lot from the examples of other Christians, men and women of God. That's one of the reasons we have the Bible—to learn from what God's servants have said and written, and the way they lived their lives following God.

The person I'd like to talk about today has been called the "Greatest Christian of all time", apart from Christ. Philip Schaff in "The History of the Christian Church" volume 1, talks about an occasion which was *"the most fruitful event since the miracle of Pentecost—the event which secured the universal victory of Christianity."*

It's always hard to single out one event as more important than any other, but there was a person and an event which was vital in propelling forward the cause of Christianity—probably the most major event in the Church age between Jesus Christ's first and second comings.

Philip Schaff was talking of the conversion of Paul, or Saul. A watershed event I'd like to look at today, and admire the work of Paul, certainly one of God's greatest servants of all time!

Where would the Church be without Paul? Of course, God would have looked after it, and could have worked through whomever He liked. But He chose to use Paul to be a servant and apostle of immense importance.

Jesus only preached in Palestine, so at His death the gospel hadn't gone far—it was limited to the Jews living there. In Acts 2, it began to be preached to the Gentiles, and when Peter saw the vision of the animals and realised the Gentiles could now be included in God's people, that was an important step. But the greatest step forward was the conversion of Paul, who became the Apostle to the Gentiles, and took the message to the known world at that time, through his remarkable missionary journeys.

Acts 1-12 is about the early Church, and Acts 13-28 is about Paul. The next 14 books are written by Paul! Then a few more books to conclude the New Testament.

What was Paul like? There's a book written in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century, called The Acts of Paul, which says "He was a man of little stature, partly bald, with crooked legs, of vigorous physique, with eyes set close together and nose somewhat hooked." We're not sure how accurate that is, but even from the Bible we see passages that indicate he was small, not strong, near-sighted or with some eye problem, and not a powerful speaker.

"I was with you in weakness and fear and much trembling." (1 Corinthians 2:3).

"Rude in speech." (2 Corinthians 11:6).

"Through infirmity of flesh I preached the gospel." (Galatians 4:13).

But he was a man of learning and culture, an intelligent and well educated man. And he had a big problem—he hated the Christians! Let's read about his background, and see what he was like before his conversion.

Acts 22:3 “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today.”

His parents were Jews who had become Roman citizens, but remained loyal to their Jewish faith and practice, so he was a Roman citizen by birth, but also very proud to be a Jew, and educated strictly in the Jewish teachings. Gamaliel was the most famous rabbinic teacher of his day. That’s why Paul’s writings are sometimes difficult to understand—he was very highly educated and an intellectual. Gamaliel’s training involved a rigorous study of the Old Testament scriptures, together with extensive comments of the learned Rabbis concerning them. He spoke Hebrew, Latin and Greek, and quoted from the books of poetry and philosophy of the time.

Philippians 3:5-6 <sup>5</sup>“circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup>as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.”

As strict and devout a Jew as you could find. This helps us understand his writings. When he talked about the law and its burdens, he really knew it inside out and had observed every detail with great discipline—yet he was a murderer of the Christians! And so he persecuted the Church, because Jesus hadn’t been kind in His words to the Pharisees. They treated the Christians as a heretical sect.

Acts 7:57-58 <sup>57</sup>“At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, <sup>58</sup>dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.”

Acts 8:1-3 <sup>1</sup>And Saul approved of their killing him. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. <sup>2</sup>Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. <sup>3</sup>But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.”

He was a man of great zeal! Surely he is the last person on earth you would choose to be the Apostle to the Gentiles! As a Jew, he didn’t like the Gentiles, he didn’t understand their background—how could he help them? And as a Pharisee, he hated the Christians with purple passion. What an amazing change God made in him! This must be one of the greatest transformations of a person in history! Sometimes you hear of a murderer becoming a Christian, a Mongrel Mob member leaving the gang to follow God. Even Paris Hilton has recently “found God.” But Paul’s transformation is much greater.

Isn’t it encouraging and inspiring to see how God can change someone? Nothing is impossible for God! Let’s read about how the change happened.

Acts 9:1-9 “Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest <sup>2</sup>and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup>As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. <sup>4</sup>He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”



<sup>5</sup> “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. <sup>6</sup> “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.” <sup>7</sup> The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. <sup>8</sup> Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. <sup>9</sup> For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.”

Verse 2 The only way you could travel on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus would be on horseback, a 6 day journey.

Verse 4 Jesus said “Why do you persecute me,” but of course he was actually persecuting the disciples (Verse 1). Here’s an example where Jesus is identified with His Church—the wounds inflicted on the saints were wounds inflicted on Jesus. “Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of my brethren, you did it to me.”

Paul must have been confused to be charged with persecuting God. Rather, he believed he was defending God and His laws! So all he could say was “Who are you?” – and knowing this was from heaven, he said “Lord’.

What a shock: “I am Jesus” must have been! Now he knew Jesus was alive, the resurrection was true, and Christians he had persecuted were right after all!

Verse 8 He was blinded, but when his eyes were opened he could see physically and spiritually. He had been spiritually blind all his life, as we all are before our conversion.

Acts 9:13-14 <sup>13</sup> “Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup> And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.”

You can easily understand Ananias’ reluctance!

Acts 9:15,17 <sup>15</sup> “But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. <sup>17</sup> Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

Ananias can be commended for his obedience. Another example of God asking someone to do something that just doesn’t make sense: the opposite of what you would think! God’s ways are different to ours, and He can make anything work out!

Verse 16 <sup>16</sup> “I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.” It’s interesting that the suffering Paul was going to experience was paramount; the blessings weren’t mentioned.

Verse 17 Ananias called him “Brother” already!

Verse 18 “Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized.”

That’s when he received spiritual as well as physical sight.

Verse 20-22 <sup>20</sup> “At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. <sup>21</sup> All those who heard him were astonished and asked, “Isn’t he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn’t he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?” <sup>22</sup> Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.”

This is an amazing thing—he went into the synagogues and tried to win over the Jews and Rabbis to his newly-found faith! That took some courage, and could have got him into big trouble (vv23-25), but it shows the zeal of the man. Zeal which had been used against God’s people was now being channeled towards God’s Work, and what a zeal it was, what results it achieved.

Galatians 1:15-18 <sup>15</sup> “But when God, who set me apart from my mother’s womb and called me by His grace, was pleased <sup>16</sup> to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, my immediate response was not to consult any human being. <sup>17</sup> I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus. <sup>18</sup> Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days.”

He was set apart from birth, even though he had that time of persecuting God’s people.

Around this time Paul went to Arabia, where it appears he was taught personally by Jesus. We see this in 1 Cor.9:1 “Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord?” He saw Jesus. Possibly referring to the conversion.

1 Cor. 15:7-8 <sup>7</sup> “Then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles, <sup>8</sup> and last of all He appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.”

Actually he must have been born about the same time as Jesus—was about 30 when Jesus died and he started persecuting the Church. But he didn’t personally see Jesus until this time, it appears.

Abnormally born—of a miscarriage—not a normal member of the apostles, but snatched by God supernaturally. Notice how he felt, in 1 Cor. 15:9 “For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.”

His story is a testimony to the absolute forgiveness God offers to us. If anyone should have been condemned, it would be Paul. Yet God forgave him completely and made him one of His greatest servants. God can forgive anyone, as long as they are willing to accept that gift and repent.

Isn’t it encouraging and inspiring to see how God can change someone? These changes can only be explained by the fact that the resurrection is true, that Jesus Christ is alive today! Paul had to see Christ in order to suddenly change from hating the Christians so much to loving them so much!

Compare the man who dragged Christians into prison and breathed out murderous threats against them, to the man who wrote “live a life of love”, and “love is patient, kind, not easily angered”.

A writer, Lord Lyttleton, wrote in his “Observations on the Conversion of Paul”—“*The conversion and apostleship of Paul alone, duly considered, was in itself a demonstration sufficient to prove Christianity is a divine revelation.*” Why else would Paul suddenly decide to help the Christians?

And of course this applies to us—we also change our life when we see Christ. No wonder Paul could write about the old man and the new man—he really experienced the transformation of his life! No wonder he could write about the pre-eminence of grace over the law—he had experienced life as a Pharisee observing all the minute details of the laws and now he came face to face with the grace and forgiveness of God, and started preaching Jesus Christ as the centre of everything. Even his name changed, from Saul (his Jewish not Hebrew name) to Paul (his Greek or Roman name) first used in Acts 13:9.

The Worldwide Church of God has gone through a change similar to that of Paul. Every individual goes through this transformation when we are converted, and it is possible for an entire church to go through that transformation too, if God decides to strike them and transform them.

Because Paul understood the Old Testament laws so comprehensively, he was in a unique position to teach the old and the new. I believe the WCG, because of our Paul-like experience, because we kept the Old Covenant laws almost as if we were Jews, we are uniquely able to understand the Old Covenant and the New Covenant and the difference between them.

Paul went on to complete 3 great missionary journeys as the Apostle to the Gentiles. These trips took about 10 years and covered 12,000 Kms—insignificant in these days of jumbo jets, but remarkable back in those times when there were no planes, cars, trains or fast sea vessels. He covered a vast circuit of countries—taking the gospel wherever he humanly could.

And as he went, he suffered.

2 Cor. 11: 24-28 <sup>24</sup> “Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. <sup>25</sup> Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, <sup>26</sup> I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. <sup>27</sup> I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. <sup>28</sup> Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.”

What incredible commitment to the Work of God! We can learn from a person like that! What an example for us to follow!

And the 14 books he wrote—aren’t they fantastic? They are unsurpassable literature, from a brilliant mind inspired by the Holy Spirit. It was Paul who began to write the New Testament—some of his books were written before the gospels. If you could count up the

number of books written about the books Paul wrote, and the number of sermons based on those books, the total would be colossal!

I hope this brief look at the life of this wonderful servant of God inspires us to try to follow and serve our God as faithfully as Paul did! I'll leave you with the words of Paul himself in 1 Corinthians 11:1 "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ."



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