

## The Disciples of Jesus: Paul, the transformed religious fanatic

...it is impossible to exaggerate the importance of St. Paul's conversion as one of the evidences of Christianity. That he should have passed, by one flash of conviction, not only from darkness to light, but from one direction of life to the very opposite, is not only characteristic of the *man*, but evidential of the power and significance of Christianity. That the same man who, just before, was persecuting Christianity with the most violent hatred, should come all at once to believe in Him whose followers he had been seeking to destroy, and that in this faith he should become a "new creature"—what is this but a victory which Christianity owed to nothing but the spell of its own inherent power? Of all who have been converted to the faith of Christ, there is not one in whose case the Christian principle broke so immediately through everything opposed to it, and asserted so absolutely its triumphant superiority. Henceforth to Paul Christianity was summed up in the one word, Christ. (Frederic William Farrar)

Acts 9: 1 – 20

### 1) Paul, the religious fanatic

- Paul was a Jew, born in Tarsus, which is in modern day Turkey, and grew up in Jerusalem. He was a religious student who studied the law of Moses under Gamaliel, who was a leading authority in the Sanhedrin at the time. In other words Paul wasn't a "man in the street" Jew. He was a well learned Jew
  - Acts 22:2-3 Then Paul said:<sup>3</sup> "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.
- Not only was he learned he was zealous for God to the point that he persecuted the Christians, probably because they were drawing Jews into their fold.
  - Acts 22:3-5 I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today.<sup>4</sup> I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison,<sup>5</sup> as the high priest and all the Council can themselves testify. I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.
- He truly had a zeal for God, but without knowledge. He had his own interpretation about righteousness before God and was zealous for that form of righteousness. He could therefore later write about the Jews:
  - Romans 10:1-4 Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved.<sup>2</sup> For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Since they did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.<sup>4</sup> Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.
- As a religious Jew he had much to boast about in his natural heritage.
  - Philippians 3:4-6 If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more:<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 far as religious standards are concerned Paul was the perfect religious person.
  - He was the type of person who other religious people admired and that young religious people strove to be like.
  - He was a Pharisee, a sect of Judaism that were experts in the law of Moses, but often went beyond the law and created their own strict interpretations of the law that were burdensome for people to live by.
  - As a Pharisee he believed in the resurrection of the dead, unlike the Sadducees.
- Paul, whose name was Saul, was present and gave his approval of the martyrdom of the first Christian martyr, Stephen.
  - Acts 7:54 - 8:1 When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.<sup>55</sup> But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.<sup>56</sup> "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."<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.<sup>59</sup> While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."<sup>60</sup> Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.<sup>1</sup> And Saul approved of their killing him

## 2) Paul, the transformed apostle

- Paul's transformation started in the midst of one of his murderous tirades against the disciples of Jesus and even travelled to Damascus to find them there to take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.
  - Acts 9:1-2 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.
- It was on his journey to Damascus that Paul had an encounter with Jesus
  - Acts 9:3-6 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."
- Paul's transformation from being a religious fanatic to being a disciple and apostle of Jesus was initiated by Jesus and not by himself. He thought he was already pleasing to God in what he was doing.
- In fact Jesus possibly had Paul in mind when he said this
  - John 16:2-3 They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think they are offering a service to God. <sup>3</sup> They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me.
- Paul's transformation was immediate and radical after his conversion to Christ.
  - Acts 9:17-20 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." <sup>18</sup> Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, <sup>19</sup> and after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. <sup>20</sup> At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.
- Paul expressed his transformation to the church in Philippi
  - Philippians 3:7-9 But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. <sup>8</sup> What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.
- Paul saw what he really was after Jesus had opened his eyes.
  - 1 Timothy 1:15-16 Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners —of whom I am the worst. <sup>16</sup> But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.
- We can so often have a high opinion of ourselves in our self-righteousness and need Jesus to open our eyes for us to see what we really are and our immense need of him.

## 3) Paul, the caring father

- Jesus changed Paul from a hard, proud, religious fanatic who upheld his religious principles at the expense of people, to being a loving and caring father of those in the faith and a compassionate heart for those who weren't in the faith.
  - Galatians 4:19-20 My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, <sup>20</sup> how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you!
  - 2 Corinthians 2:5-8 If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you to some extent—not to put it too severely. <sup>6</sup> The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient. <sup>7</sup> Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. <sup>8</sup> I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him.
  - Romans 10:1 Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved.
- The grace of God transforms us from being self-righteous religious people to being Christ centred caring and compassionate disciples of Jesus.