

Episode #1145 Acts 9 Part 1-Saul on the Road to Damascus

I. Acts is unique in the New Testament. Rather than the ministry of Jesus Christ on earth, it focuses on what came after, when the Lord had ascended back into heaven. The Lord left His disciples with many commands to carry out, and Acts tells us how they did them.

II. The conversion of Saul was very different from the experience of any other believer in the Acts period or today. This event is recorded three times in the book of Acts, in chapters 9, 22, and 26. This shows how pivotal this event is in the history of Acts and the works of God.

- A. The conversion of Saul is the most dramatic of any that is recorded in the Word of God. It has individual features and exceptional features that are not duplicated in any other person's experience as far as the Word of God is concerned. Nevertheless, the essentials of his experience will be repeated over and over a million times in that day when God converts and restores the seed of Abraham, the people of Israel, to Himself.
- B. I Corinthians 15:8, Paul was one born out of due time. Scofield: "Paul thinks of himself here as an Israelite whose time to be born again had not come nationally, so his conversion by an appearing of the Lord in glory was an illustration or instance before the time of the future, national conversion of Israel." With that I fully agree, for Paul was the pattern believer, and he gives us a pattern of what it will be like in that day when Israel is turned to God.
- C. As we survey this passage, it would be well to note that Paul was brought to submission and faith wholly apart from the preaching of the gospel. We cannot say he was saved by the preaching of the gospel. Many would argue that Paul had previously heard the gospel, but there is no record of this in the Word. If he had heard it, he could have hardly claimed to have been in ignorance, as in I Timothy 1:13. If God had seen fit to communicate with him, then God would have communicated with this man. So we cannot say he had heard the gospel before. In the day when Israel is saved, they will not be saved by the preaching of the gospel. They will be saved by direct actions of God that have nothing to do with the preaching of the Word.
- D. In this historical account we have in Acts 9 by Luke, then in two other chapters, Paul tells of his conversion in two addresses, Acts 22 and 26, no credit for his conversion is given to anything that happened before that moment when the great light shined on him on the Damascus road. If Paul had seen Christ in the days of His sojourn on earth, if he had heard Peter, if he had heard others, then it had been without effect on his life. In all the records, Paul begins his dealings with Christ and Christ's dealings with him from that moment when the great light shined about him. If he had heard anything before, it was not a fragrance of life or a fragrance of death, I Corinthians 2:15-16. The Holy Spirit had preserved this man for that supreme moment right here on the Damascus road.
- E. These facts make him all the more an illustration or a pattern of the future, national conversion of Israel. When Ezekiel 20:35-38 and Hosea 2:14-17 are fulfilled for that people, when they are turned to God and brought into relationship to God, it will not be through the preaching of the gospel, but through God acting from heaven through the Holy Spirit upon the earth, just as He did in the case of Paul. We have every right to say that Paul was converted by an *apokalupsin*, by an unveiling of Jesus Christ, for

certainly Jesus Christ was unveiled to him. That is the way it is going to be with Israel, for Paul is the pattern of Israel's future conversion.

- F. It should also be noted that God visited Paul in love and not in wrath, for if Paul had not responded to this great display of love, he would have been purged by God as a rebel. But speculations about his failure to respond are of no value. The fact is he did respond, as he said before Agrippa, Acts 26:19.
- G. That Paul is a pattern or illustration of the future, national conversion of Israel will be demonstrated as we consider this chapter in its fullness. However, one thing needs to be emphasized. If some insist that a pattern must be identical in every respect to the thing for which it is a pattern, then my teaching will be of no value to them. For example, the pattern of a suit or dress may be of paper, and as such the pattern is never stitched together, but the fact is the suit or dress must follow the pattern and must be stitched together. So in Paul we have a true preview of the future, national conversion of Israel.

III. Saul on the Road to Damascus. Acts 9:1-9.

- A. Acts 9:1. This is where we last saw Saul in Acts 8:3. He was the focal point of this persecution, a figurehead for the Sanhedrin, and one to take the blame. Saul is so zealous it is as if with every breath he takes he breathes threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. Yet all he has done is scatter them to carry the gospel! Thus Saul is carrying his persecution where the disciples have scattered, beyond even Samaria and Galilee into Syria. Right here Luke, the writer of Acts, resumes the thread of the narrative he broke off at Acts 8:3. Saul had given hearty approval to the murder of Stephen, and he seems to become the leader of the persecution that follows Stephen's death. The great business of persecuting the followers of Jesus Christ has been officially dedicated to Saul. In other words, this was an official enterprise. He is not just doing this on his own as an individual. This is a work that is being done in Israel, and Saul is the one placed in charge of it by the Sanhedrin. As a result of the persecution that followed Stephen's death, Jerusalem is emptied of the out-called ones, all those out-called individuals, those believers who had a position out of Jesus Christ, except the apostles. Saul was implacable in his hatred, and every breath he breathed out was a threat of destruction against the disciples of the Lord. For nothing that has happened, either before or since Saul first appeared in Acts 7:58 when we saw him standing there and the witnesses laid their clothing at the feet of a young man whose name was Saul, not once has his ardor in the least abated in regard to the persecution of the disciples of the Lord. Probably in this, we see the first point of comparison between him and the rejecters in Israel. None of the suffering they have experienced has changed the scorn and contempt in which they hold him. They will continue in this attitude until a great light comes to them from the Lord, the One Who now sits in the heavens. Many people believe the next experience for Israel will be the great tribulation. They hold that this unparalleled time of trouble will bring them to their senses and turn them to Jesus Christ. But if all the troubles they have experienced in the last 1950 years has not changed their attitude, there is no evidence that a new and greater trouble would open their eyes. It would not have changed Saul of Tarsus if the Lord had plunged him into some great tribulation, but it did change him and made a different man out of him when a great light shone from heaven.

- B. Verse 2. Saul wanted official documents giving him authority to arrest believers in Damascus and transport them back to Jerusalem. He was even ready to arrest women! We are used to calling believers “Christians,” but this name is rare in Scripture, occurring only three times and not in a positive way. One of the other names used is “any who were of the Way.” John 14:6, the Lord Jesus is the Way.
- C. Verse 3. From those words we learn that Saul at the time of his conversion was outside the land of Israel and near Damascus. Suddenly a miraculous light flashed out of heaven and enveloped him. Acts 22:6, this was about noon, when the sun is highest in the sky. The sun was shining brightly on the Damascus road, but this light was brighter than the sun. Even here, the sun was turned into darkness by the presence of a greater light. Acts 2:20 describes when God’s light again will outshine the sun. Isaiah 60:1-2, describes the time when Israel will receive God’s revelation as Saul did while outside the land, scattered in the dispersion, and most in rebellion and unbelief. Heaven means the sky, though its source was clearly God.
- D. Verse 4. Now this light was not a single, momentary flash, even though it came as a flash. There is no question that it shone around Saul for a time, and the effect it had on him was immediate. He fell to the earth, and on the ground, he hears his name repeated in its Hebrew form that was most personal to him, *Saoul*, rather than the usual Greek form *Saulos*, so the Lord was probably speaking Hebrew. The Lord does this many times: Luke 10:41, Luke 22:31, Matthew 23:37. This indicates deep intensity and great concern. Why is Saul treating Him this way? The Lord treats Saul more like a sheep gone astray than an enemy.
- E. Verse 5. Saul responds.
1. The miraculous light and the Lord’s question forced Saul to examine himself in regards to his attitude toward the despised Nazarene. He cried back in great intensity, “Who are You, Lord?” Saul no doubt replied in Hebrew, and when he said Lord, he no doubt used the tetragrammaton, Yahweh. He recognizes this one as Yahweh, but is confused by His words. He thought He knew who God was, and thought Jesus Christ was just a pretender. Many people have a picture of God in their minds that they think He is like, derived from human traditions and their own experiences and reasoning. These pictures are often totally wrong. The only real source for information about God is the Word of God, the Bible.
 2. The Lord identified Himself at once. This was the exact moment to which Paul referred later in Galatians 1:15-16, for God here revealed His Son in Paul.
 3. As already mentioned, in all of this the pattern of Israel’s future conversion is clearly seen. Israel will be converted when she is still in dispersion, and will be restored to the land as a people who know God. If some of them should be living within the borders of the land when God begins the gracious work that will bring them to Himself, that will neither aid God, nor will it hinder His work. While they are still in their attitude of rejection, the Lord will speak from heaven and He will decree that there shall be light for Israel. Isaiah 60:1-2. Now when this light shines for the people of Israel as a whole, God’s Word will also be impressed on them, and this will cause them to enquire who it is who speaks to them, who it is who is dealing with them in such strange and

miraculous manner, and when they ask the question, the answer will be granted. The One dealing with them is the historical Jesus Whom their leaders formerly crucified and whom many of them have rejected. This will be the revelation, the *apokalupsin*, of Jesus Christ to Israel, and this is not the second coming. This is related to that time when God pours out of His Spirit upon all flesh.

IV. Conclusion. Saul's conversion is a great pattern, not of how others believed the gospel in the Acts period, nor of how we believe the gospel today, for Saul never heard the gospel preached to him when he converted to Christ. Instead, his conversion is a pattern of all that will happen to Israel in the day when God acts to establish His kingdom among them by unveiling Jesus Christ to them and turning them back to Himself. In this great conversion of Saul, we can see the power of God even to arrest the most ardent God-hater in his wicked actions and turn him toward Himself when He turns on the light. May the day God acts in this way come soon!