

Conversion, obedience and encouragement

Tonight I want us to look briefly at the three main Characters in these chapter – Saul/Ananias and Barnabus. Luke the narrator paints pictures for us of the events though fairly brief in detail yet vivid enough to fire our imagination.

Saul - Conversion

^{NIB} **Acts 9:1** Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest ² 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.

We were introduced to Saul at the stoning of Stephen

Acts 7:57 - 8:1 ⁵⁷ At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸ dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ 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. ^{NIB} **Acts 8:1** And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

Saul was a 'Super Pharisee'. This is how he described himself

Philippians 3:4-7 I have more: ⁵ 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; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. ⁷ But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.

Saul was vehement persecutor of the church. Called at that time the way. You can imagine him on the way to Damascus, letters in a satchel, fire in his eyes – probably a scary bloke to know even if you were on his side.

Acts 9:3-4 ³ As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

Acts 22: 6 tells us it was noon. In the middle of the day the sun is blaring so it must have been some light to shine brightly.

This can only be God who Paul describes to Timothy in **1 Timothy 6:15-16**

'God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, ¹⁶ who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no-one has seen or can see.'

Holiness, majesty, infinite in strength and power the radiance of whose character outshines the sun

It is reminiscent of Samuel in the temple isn't it? This is the God of eternity speaking isn't it?

It is interesting how the Lord says why are you persecuting me? The Christians are taking the blows but it is Christ who is feeling the pain. Saul will the future write to demonstrate Christ's close relationship with the church. It is worth noting in a time when Christians can sometimes undervalue the importance of church Christ values it highly.

"I am a Christian, I don't need to go to church."
Really Christ said that was the very thing he came to Do – I will build my church!

Saul is blinded by the light. See what the Lord does here. Saul says Lord which can mean sir. Is this an angelic visitation he is experiencing? In reply so that rather than using a divine title the Lord calls himself Jesus. Saul needs no other explanation he can do the sums in his head – Jesus is risen, that can mean only one thing – he is God. Oh my goodness. Saul should have feared for his very life at this point and maybe he did. He had been arresting and presiding over the killing of the Lord's people

Interestingly he is given this instruction.

Acts 9:6 ⁶ "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

Acts 9:7-9 ⁷ The men travelling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. ⁸ 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. ⁹ For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

We will see in a moment the logic of what has happened but for the moment let's press the pause button and ask

What comes to mind when you hear the word conversion or seeing the light or Damascus road experience?

Is Paul's conversion the model for all conversion?

Well Bunyan the writer of Pilgrim's Progress said he was so happy he wanted to tell the cows of the field about his Christ. Spurgeon the great Victorian preacher said he danced all the way home the night of his conversion. Blaise Pascal the 17th century French philosopher describes 2 hours of ecstasy. Contrast that with CS Lewis the writer of the Chronicles of Narnia who said "I gave in and admitted that God was God and knelt and prayed: perhaps the most reluctant convert in all England" John Wesley the hymn writer brought up in a Christian family said 'His heart was strangely warmed' and that was it. Others seem to drift seamlessly into the faith without any great fireworks, they are just conscious that either they have always trust in Christ as Saviour and Lord or looking back

there was a period over several months maybe when things seemed to change.

Conversion is then a turning around, a change of moral and spiritual direction and it will be evidenced by a moral and spiritual reversal or change. The real evidence of a person having truly come to faith is not the experience then but the fruit in their lives.

It is important to note that conversion begins with God. Saul may have seemed a hard nut to crack to you and I but he was child's play to God. The Christians in his day probably thought he would never become a Christian. When we come to faith it is not so much us seeking God but God seeking us and that is a good thing because on our own we might never have sought him. Missio Dei – the Mission of God to seek and to save the lost. And it is to that mission that God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) asks us to put our shoulder to.

In coming to Christ there is a personal encounter – it is not just imbibing a certain theology but an encounter which is the beginning of an ongoing relationship with Jesus Christ.

There is also a surrender. Not just a commitment to him or a decision for him but a surrender. It can be nothing else if we are truly to call him Lord.

There will not always be joy – Paul was really humbled before the Lord.

What there will be is a realisation that something has changed and is changing. That scriptures that were unclear begin to make sense. That some things that used to interest you just don't any more. You want to gather with other Christians and you want to learn more of the faith. The whole orientation of your life begins to change from selfward to Godward. Attitudes begin to change, relationships can start to get ironed out. A sense of forgiveness and newness can predominate. You feel totally new. That is conversion or surrender!

Ian – confused. Loved to be Lord's people. Oil rigs – lost appetite for money and coarse environment of the rigs. Loved to be at the prayer meeting and bible study. Slow dawn.

Paul – Conversion - change of moral and spiritual direction. Surrender. Borne out in the fruit we bear.

Then there is Ananias

Ananias - Obedience

Take a couple of minutes to read verses 10-19

How would you have felt if you were him. Objections? Concerns? How does the Lord deal with him? What significance is there in the way Ananias addresses Saul? Do other similar stories of reluctance come to mind?

Concerns: Spy? Persecutor? Arrest?

Lord 1. gives him a vision

2. GO! He is important and it will not be easy

Place of suffering in the Christian life

By using Ananias in this way Saul is being integrated into the church. The church as a body is vital to the purposes of God. We need each other.

Barnabus – encourager

The gap between vs 25 and 26 is three years

Galatians 1:18-19 ¹⁸ Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter and stayed with him fifteen days. ¹⁹ I saw none of the other apostles--only James, the Lord's brother.

The thing about Barnabus, that was his nickname which mean son of encouragement. His real name was Joseph (Acts 4:36) was that his encouragement was not just limited to the 'you did that well', 'you know you have a real gift there', 'let me share with you what the lord has been saying to me' type comments. He also took risks with his encouragement. He reached out a hand to Saul, he stood by him when others doubted. Vs 26 they were all afraid vs 27 But Barnabus took him and brought him to the apostles and stood up for him. In a sense

he sponsored him, he took an interest in him, found out his story and was prepared to vouch for him. Goodness knows what would have happened if he had not! Others saw fear he saw a friend. Other saw a threat he saw potential. They would become great friends he and Saul but I think it will be this very aspect of barnabas's character that will cause them to fall out because barnabas will want to take John Mark his cousin and the eventual writer of Mark's gospel with him (Acts 15:6) but Paul wanted to leave him because he had run off one time before. Paul saw a drain on resources barnabas saw future leadership and thank goodness he did – we might just have four gospels if not!

What about us what can we learn from these three characters?

In our coming to faith we have experienced the work of God. What is the Lord requiring of us? What are our excuses? (Chicken story). Who are we encouraging in the faith at this time? Taking time with? Seeing a future for them in the faith?

The church vs 31 "was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord".

In the process of surrender, obedience and encouragement the church is built up and strengthened. If these things are not happening then the opposite must be true the church will be

discouraged and weakened and the numbers will drop.