

The Calling and Conversion of St. Paul

The Story

The conversion of Paul/Saul is mentioned briefly in some of his letters. The more developed narrative comes from the Acts of the Apostles. Acts presents three accounts of what happened on the road to Damascus. I am using mainly the first version from chapter 9. It seems least complicated. Chapters 22 and 26 are legal arguments before Roman government officials and therefore assume a more rhetorical dimension. What they recount is directed toward winning a legal case brought against the Apostle. Also, time sequence in all these versions feels at times compacted. How a man whose whole life has been turned completely around could within days be preaching this new way of thinking challenges human experience. One does not usually endure such radical changes and then days later be preaching a point of view once vehemently opposed. Events may move too rapidly in the telling, particularly after such an explosive conversion event. Time usually is needed to digest something so traumatic. The mind may move quickly but emotions usually take longer.

Saul/Paul traveled with men who were probably Temple police. They were sent to arrest Christians. What happens then becomes unclear. Versions have variations. For example, it seems unclear what those with Paul saw or heard. They seem to be aware of something bizarre taking place. Paul alone is asked why he is persecuting Christians. The significance of the question shows in identifying Jesus with his followers. "Why do you persecute me?" Thrown off balance in more than one way, Paul misses the point. In his confusion, he only wants to know who is speaking. Then the connection is made more obvious, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting". That simple statement would take most people a while to grasp. He probably had heard of Jesus' death when he first came to Jerusalem. Who was talking to him?

Paul then receives a commission but at this time only a minor one. He is told to search out a certain Ananias in Damascus. Blinded now, the fierce persecutor who left Jerusalem breathing fire, now is led by the hand into the city. The power attached to letters from the high priest meant nothing now. He enters the city as though a child might. He needed someone to hold his hand. Paul/Saul finds his way with untold help to the house of someone mysteriously named Judas, Judas may have been a Christian. Paul remains three days waiting for Ananias, the leader of the Christian community in Damascus. No mention of what happened to the Temple guards who witnessed the mystical experience.

Here the story takes a unique turn of events. Paul is not alone in receiving an appearance of Jesus. The Lord also appears to Ananias and tells him to seek out Paul who is praying and waiting. Ananias suspects trickery in this sudden conversion and is reluctant. He is told he must go. From the words of Jesus to Ananias, we learn of

Paul's mission. He will become a chosen instrument to preach to the Gentiles. Ananias arrives and heals his blindness, baptizes him and bestows on him the Holy Spirit. Ananias must have chosen moments later to reveal to Paul what Jesus had told him. The conversion experience of the Risen Lord opened Paul to receive this new vocation. Ananias probably talked with Paul further about his new commission and new ministry.

At this point the three accounts in Acts become confusing. One does not clarify the others. They begin to contradict each other. Paul is on the move but what happens next? Since agreement is difficult to find, I have moved to Paul's letter to the Galatians. Given an experience so impactful that it knocked him off his feet, I see something traumatic and long lasting,

Few Biblical figures demonstrate physical effects from a visionary experience. Jacob comes to mind as one. He wrestled with an angel and limped the rest of his life (Genesis 32, 23-33). His name was then changed from Jacob to Israel. In the Christian Era, St. Francis of Assisi may be the most famous. After experiencing the Lord Jesus, he carried the wounds of the Crucified for the two years of life left to him. Acknowledging the depth of Saul/Paul's encounter, it seems he would need time to piece together what this mystical meeting meant. And then, what he was told about his future.

Guilt must also be considered. It must have swept over him. He imprisoned and ordered the execution of innocent people. A bitter pill to swallow for someone trained with the strict conscience of a Pharisee. Some scripture scholars point out the conversion of Paul may be a popular misunderstanding. Christianity was not yet a separate religion. At that time, Christians were viewed as a branch of Judaism. The real conversion may have been moral. His former righteous rage would have appeared darker after being pierced by blinding light and then confronted by the Risen Lord. Shame may have been a new but lingering feeling for him. He had done something terrible. One does not get past feelings that dark in a hurry.

It feels unreal to accept he would be standing up preaching Christian sermons days after something mystical knocked him down. More realistically, The Letter to the Galatians tells us he traveled to Arabia after his baptism (Galatians 1, 15-18). He would be there for an unknown amount of time before returning to Damascus to begin preaching in their synagogues. Time was needed to confront his own dark side and digest it. Some memories of darkness would follow him the rest of his life. He writes of a thorn of the flesh which would not leave him. I suspect it to be shame. It probably haunted him in waves of greater or lesser extent. As an Apostle, he had also seen the Risen Christ. Although not present at the Pentecostal event, he had also received now the Holy Spirit. He became an Apostle but in a different way. He himself describes being born out of the normal course. The more literal meaning of the birth is being born a fetal monster (1 Corinthians 15, 8). This description he derives from his persecution of the Church. And maybe from the shame that came with it.

One of the great themes of Scripture is call and response. Another theme of similar importance is Divine election. One affects the other. Why are certain people called and not others. Of those called, some demonstrate no merits to justify their call. The call comes as a surprise. Why the choice of the Apostles? One of my Scripture teachers would refer in class to St. Peter, St. James, and St. John as Rocky (Peter the Rock), Jimmy and Jack. We thought he was being funny until he explained he wanted to make clear these men were not saints when first called. Mystery also hovers over the election of Paul to be the chosen missionary to the Gentiles. Merit was not an obvious cause. He himself would preach and write how God initiates any human response of merit. He would set out faith in Jesus and that relation as more important than the demands of the Law. As a former Pharisee, who followed the Law so strictly, his writings attack the Law as dead in itself. More necessary is opening oneself to receive the love of God and the Holy Spirit, relationships that reach beyond mere human achievements attached to the Law.

You have heard , I know the story of my former way of life in Judaism. You know that I went to extremes in persecuting the Church of God and tried to destroy it. I made progress in Jewish observance far beyond most of my contemporaries, in my excess of zeal to live out all the traditions of my ancestors.

But the time came when he who had set me apart before I was born and called me by his favor chose to reveal his Son to me, that I might spread among the Gentiles the good tidings concerning him. (Galatians 1, 116)