

Acts of the Apostles study 8 – The Conversion of Saul:-

Read Acts chapter 9, verses 1 – 31:- The conversion of ‘persecutor Saul’ into the ‘Apostle Paul’ is one of the most dramatic events in the Acts of the Apostles. Read also Paul’s own testimony in Acts chapter 22, verses 1 – 21 and Acts chapter 26, verses 1 – 23.

Acts chapter 9, verses 1 – 2:- Saul, who was first mentioned in Acts chapter 8, verse 1 where he was named as complicit in the stoning of Stephen, is now named as the leader of the persecution of believers. Remember that there had been a general exodus of believers from Jerusalem and Saul is determined to have them caught and removed from the synagogues in other towns and cities. He would be regarded as a useful agent on behalf of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem and he obtained authority from them to act on their behalf in Damascus.

Verses 3 – 9:- The totally unexpected dazzling light caused Saul to fall to the ground. The voice of the Lord Jesus accused Saul of personally persecuting the Lord’s ‘body’, the church (1 Corinthians chapter 12, verse 27; Ephesians chapter 1, verse 23, etc.). The command from the Lord was simply to “*rise and enter the city and you will be told what to do.*” The first step of faith for this young self sufficient Pharisee who, up to this point, was sure that he was doing the Lord’s will in persecuting those who already believed that the Lord Jesus was the Christ. The one who was leading the expedition now had to be led helpless by the hand into Damascus. He was blind and unable to eat or drink for three days.

Verses 10 – 19:- the story now moves to the preparation of someone to minister to Saul in his need. We know nothing of this Ananias apart from these verses. We know that he was a faithful man of prayer and open to hearing the Lord’s will, even to questioning the wisdom of a visit to this persecutor of the ‘saints’ in Jerusalem. The Lord is firm in his instructions! “*Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine . . .*” and Ananias in faith obeyed!

Notice that Ananias says that he was sent by the Lord Jesus. It was through the Lord Jesus that Saul was healed and received the Holy Spirit. Ananias was necessary as the human ‘ambassador’ ministering to Saul. See 2 Corinthians chapter 5, verse 20.

The healing and baptism happened “*immediately*”. We need to be aware of the fact that both the Ethiopian Eunuch and Saul were well versed in the Jewish scriptures! So often new converts today know very little of either the Old or New Testaments, some teaching is often necessary before full commitment and baptism.

Verses 20 – 22:- Saul was quickly seen to be an active witness for the Lord Jesus, testifying that “*He is the Son of God*”. With his knowledge and background, Saul was immediately an effective preacher and teacher of the Christian faith. After his escape from Damascus he spent some time “in the wilderness” (Galatians chapter 1 verses 17-18).

Verses 23 – 31:- Because of his boldness Saul became a focus for persecution. His move to Jerusalem brought him into contact with the Apostles who understandably were reluctant to accept him at face value. Barnabas (his name means ‘son of consolation’) accepted him and spoke on his behalf to the other disciples. Again there is a threat to Saul’s life and he is sent back to Tarsus.

With the removal of Saul, the persecution of the disciples died down. The result being a time of peace and the opportunity for growth and strength as the “*Holy Ghost, the comforter*” worked among them.

We sing the glorious conquest
before Damascus gate,
when Saul, the church's spoiler
came breathing threats and hate;
the ravening wolf rushed forward
full early to the prey;
but lo, the Shepherd met him,
and bound him fast today.

Lord, teach thy church the lesson,
still in her darkest hour
of weakness and of danger,
to trust thy hidden power:
thy grace by ways mysterious
the wrath of man can bind,
and in thy boldest foeman
thy chosen saint can find.

John Ellerton 1871

Set to the tune ‘Ellacombe’ in the Ancient and Modern (best known to ‘The Day of Resurrection’)