SAUL'S CONVERSION

Acts 9:1-31

Key Verse: 15

**But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.**

There are many stories about personal encounters with Jesus in the Bible. A selfish tax collector, Zacheous, climbed up a tree to see Jesus and he was changed into a merciful man after meeting Jesus. A Samaritan woman met Jesus at the well and she was turned into a witness of the Messiah. Peter met Jesus in the boat while he was throwing the fishing net and he found Christ. I’ve been heard many people’s different life stories and their personal encounters with Jesus. All converted Christians have their personal story to encounter Jesus. It is my joy to share my own story and to hear others’ stories. Do you have a story to tell about your personal encounter with Jesus?

Today I would like to think about the story of Saul’s conversion through today’s passage. Saul’s conversion story is very dramatic and extraordinary. As we study on this passage, I would like to also think about a way how God reveals himself in one’s life and how God helps converted one to live a new life.

**I. “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”(1-6)**

Verses 1-2 show the picture of an angry and violent man who was convinced of his own righteousness. We saw Saul in Acts 8:3, which says, **“But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.”** Here he continued and expanded this work to the city of Damascus about 210 kilometers away from Jerusalem.

Look at verses 3, 4. **As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”** Isn’t it amazing to know God’s sovereign plan upon Saul’s life? Saul hated the disciples of the Lord. He was breathing out murderously to persecute God’s people. However, Jesus was seeking him while Saul was going in the opposite way against God. We can’t understand God’s sovereign plan to save sinners and we don’t know who is chosen. However, one thing is sure that God suddenly visits the person he chooses in his time and God reveals himself to convince sinners’ hearts. Jesus as God incarnate confronted Saul with a heavenly light and audible voice from heaven. It was a very dramatic and unusual way for God to reveal himself. God confronts people in many different ways and this divine confrontation happens every day around the world. Once I read an article about one ISIS terrorist’s conversion. A former ISIS leader, named Mohammad, had a dream one night. He received a white envelope dripping with the blood from an evangelist. Giving him the envelope God’s servant told him **“Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness.” Mohammad felt scared and he woke up.** Soon after, he tried to contact an evangelist and shared his dream with him asking about its meaning. During their conversation, the Holy Spirit worked and he met Christ. He became a committed disciple after receiving the forgiveness of Jesus through his blood.

Personally I also had a unique experience to be confronted with my Lord Jesus. I was not really a sincere Bible student when I was a first year university student. I kept 1:1 Bible study and Sunday service regularly but my heart was not committed to God yet. There was a time that all church members were preparing the Christmas worship service in 1995 but I was unhappy to worship Jesus. I left church and went to my parent’s home to stay there during the holidays. But on Christmas eve, God visited me through the movie ‘Jesus of Nazareth’. I was watching this movie alone late at night. As I was watching Jesus’ passion and his glorious ascension, suddenly my heart was filled with joy and hope. Right away I felt that I must kneel down to ask Jesus’ forgiveness. During my prayer, I felt I was a sinner before Jesus’ holy presence and I was truly convinced by Jesus. That was my first encounter with my Lord Jesus. Truly God visits his chosen ones in various ways and God’s visit is a turning point for them to live a new life in Jesus.

When Jesus visited Saul, he was calling Saul twice. Jesus calls his name twice to display his deep emotion, but not necessarily his anger. Jesus knew that Saul did not know what he was doing. Instead of rebuking, Jesus was calling his name with deep compassion. **“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”** As the heavenly light along with Jesus’ voice overwhelmed him, Saul was confronted by his sin; He persecuted God, not man. Saul heard the voice of Jesus, but he did not know who it was. He asked, **“Who are you, Lord?”** Jesus said, **“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”** Paul must have been shocked by knowing who Jesus was. He thought that he was pleasing God through his intense persecution on God’s church. However, Saul actually persecuting God. Jesus as God incarnate was suffering with his people as the head of the church. Saul could come to realize who truly Jesus was and he also knew how terrible sinner he was. This is a clear sign when a person encounters with Jesus personally.

Then what did the Risen Jesus say to him? He did not rebuke Saul. Rather he gave him a command that would give him a new direction in his life. Look at verse 6. **“Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”** Up to this point, Saul didnot know God’s purpose for his life. So he lived to fulfill his selfish ambition. Now Jesussaid to him that he would be told what he should do. Jesus would help him to find God’spurpose and plan for his life. When conversion takes place in one’s life, it always involves with God’s purpose and plan. This had happened to another disciple named Peter, afisherman in the sea of Galilee. He had no purpose in life, other than catching a lot offish to support his family. Jesus called him, saying, **“From now on, you will catch people.”** Jesus trained him to be a shepherd for his sheep. The Risen Jesus said to him, **“Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these? Feed my sheep.”**

Saul was the most unlikely person among all people in Jerusalem to become a disciple of Jesus. But it happened because of God’s grace. His meeting with Jesus on the road to Damascus changed his life 180 degrees. A proud sinner was changed into Apostle Paul. He never forgot this grace. He testified it again and again, **“I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am”** (1Co 15:9-10).

Christians are the people of God’s grace. By his grace, we are confronted with him. By his grace, we are found. By his grace, we are told what we must do. I pray that Jesus may visit us so that we may have personal encounter with Jesus and Jesus may show us clear way to go and to do for his name’s sake.

II. My chosen instrument (7-19)

In verses 7-9, we see the death of Saul’s inner person. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything. The proud and ambitious man became a helpless blind for three days. All Saul could do was simply to sit in a blind silence. In the three days of blindness and deprivation, Saul was dying to himself. Galatians 2:20 **I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.** Paul could declare the principle of living a new life in Jesus after his personal experience of dying to himself in Damascus. This course of dying to his old-self is necessary for all converted Christians. Unless our old sinful person dies, we would have no room for Jesus to live in us. Saul’s entire being was crushed by the light of Jesus and he was now conceiving a new life in Christ.

Look at verse 10. **In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, “Ananias!” “Yes, Lord,” he answered.** We don’t know much about Ananias. He was an ordinary disciple living in Damascus. Saul was in need of spiritual help and a direction. In other words, Saul needed a shepherd who could take care of him with the words of truth and God chose Ananias for this purpose. God’s command was very specific to locate him in the place where Saul was. God told him what to do. In verses 13-14, Ananias was reluctant to meet up Saul because he knew what kind of person Saul was and why he came to Damascus. But Jesus told him to go and help him. And Ananias obeyed. Shepherd’s role is very important in helping God’s flock. In this passage Ananias played an important role in Saul’s conversion. He risked his life to confront Saul by simply obeying God’s command. An evangelist that I mentioned earlier was also in the same situation as Ananias. When he was contacted by Mohammad, the ISIS fighter, he was scared of fear of terror. However, he trusted God after much prayer and God gave him conviction to meet him and to help him out. As shepherds and Bible teachers, we sometimes should meet up and help unlikely persons. However, we must read the heart of God first instead of our own thought, and we should obey to go and help if it is God’s will.

Let’s read verses 15-16. But the Lord said to Ananias, **“Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”** Here the words ‘chosen instrument’ has a significant meaning upon the call of Saul. Saul had done all he could to destroy the church. Saul was not worthy of God’s calling from a human perspective. Another version of the Bible translates that **He is a choice instrument**. How a murderer and a persecutor can be called as a choice instrument? However, God’s grace and his calling is beyond our understanding. God had a great plan for Saul and God considered Saul preciously as a choice instrument even long before. Peter has been learning the clarinet together with Samuel. I wanted to provide him a choice clarinet to let him master the clarinet. So I searched it but it was very costly. The one he has now is not too good and not too bad.

God chose Saul as his precious instrument to carry Jesus’ name. As all musical instruments make wonderful harmony in orchestra, God has his world salvation plan. For this purpose, God chooses his instruments and He calls them at the right time. Though Saul was not worthy for this call, God made him worthy and precious through the sacrifice that Jesus made for Saul. Then let’s think about what kind of call Saul did receive? Look at verse 15-16 again. **“Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”** God called Saul to proclaim who Jesus is and what Jesus has done to the Gentiles, to kings, and to the children of Israel. His call was glorious and great from above. But Saul should leave a life of privilege to embrace a higher call with much suffering. Faith in Christ brings great blessings but often great suffering as well. God calls us to commitment, not to comfort. He promises to be with us through suffering and hardship, not to spare us from them. Ananias obeyed God and went to meet Saul. He did what God told him to do and Saul restored his sight and was baptised.

III. Saul began to preach the gospel (20-31)

What did Paul do in Damascus after his conversion? After spending several days with the disciples there, he began to preach at once in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. Look at verse 21. **All those who heard him were astonished and asked, “Isn’t he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn’t he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?”** His suddenchange made the Christians suspcious and the Jews furious. For the Christians,it was hard to believe that such a person could be converted overnight. The Jews felt betrayed by his sudden change and they conspired to kill him (23). Paul could not go back to the Jewish society because he was a Christian now. He couldn’t gain the trust of the Christians because of what he had done in the past. He was in a very difficult situation. But he did not take a neutral stand. Paul was great because once he was converted, he stood on Jesus’ side clearly and preached the gospel.

Later Paul went to Jerusalem and tried to join the disciples. However, the Christians there were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple of Jesus. They were suspicious of him. But Barnabas persuaded the apostles that Paul’s conversion was genuine. Paul must have been very much encouraged by the man of encouragement. He joined to the community of the apostles in Jerusalem. He freely spoke in the name of the Lord in the midst of persecution and the gospel was even more prosperous as verse 31 reads **“Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.”**

Today we learned the conversion of Saul. It was God’s grace upon Saul to be chosen as his instrument to proclaim the name of Jesus to the whole world. It is not an accident that we are all here in a same place in the name of Jesus. We are God’s chosen instruments for God’s great plan. Let us desire to encounter our Lord Jesus personally for those who didn’t encounter him yet. For those who met Jesus, let us go and help people who are in need within the church and outside the church. May God use all of us here as His choice instruments for his purpose.