

### **Christ's Power To Transform**

Last time we were together, we looked at Philip and the conversion and baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch. This man was, by all Jewish standards a least likely candidate for conversion. He was unclean, from a cursed people group and not among any of the religious elite; praise to God, His choices are not man's. God took the initiative at every step, sending Philip to the eunuch, teaching him Christ, he accepted Jesus as his Savior and was baptized on the spot. A most unpredictable event! Is not your own salvation much like the eunuch's? I was doing my own thing and Christ took the initiative, turning my world upside down so I would seek Him. Well, if the salvation and baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch was unexpected and unpredictable, our account in today's passage was completely unfathomable.

Last week I asked you to notice all the things God did in the salvation of the eunuch, how at every step God was taking the initiative and leading both the eunuch and Philip exactly as He ordained. In our text today observe with me that Jesus Christ overpowers Saul, His worst enemy, throwing him to the ground in a display of supernatural power and majesty. This even is not Saul choosing Jesus for he was Jesus' enemy. This is an event of Christ controlling just as He had determined. Jesus transforms Saul into Paul, just as Christ chose you and then orchestrated you choosing Him as your Lord and Savior. Jesus transformed you from sinner to saint, just as He did with Saul to Paul, even though your conversion may not have been as dynamic.

Saul hated Jesus and all His followers right up until our Lord overwhelms him with power and majesty. Jesus, as it were, grabs Saul in a death grip and body slams him to the ground but instead of the death he deserves, Christ saves Saul of Tarsus, the archenemy of the Christ's Church.

Who was Saul and what did he believe about Christians up to this encounter with Christ? Notice with me that the only interest in Jesus that Saul had was to kill everyone associated with Jesus.

Let me ask, what would Saul have thought of Christianity before he met Jesus on the road to Damascus? Well, he would have thought that Christianity was wrong. He was a monotheistic Jew. Christians were claiming that Jesus was God. He would have regarded that as polytheism. If Jesus is God and if Jehovah is God, there must be two gods at least. Christianity was therefore incompatible with Judaism and the truth is; Christians believe in One God but is still incompatible with Judaism.

There would have been more to Saul's rejection of Christianity than Jesus as the Son of God. Not only would Paul have considered Christianity wrong, he would have considered it deceptive. This is because it made such great claims. It claimed not only that Jesus was the Son of God, but that He also had proved His Godhood by His resurrection from the dead. If Christianity was wrong, as Paul believed it was, then Jesus had not risen from the dead and was not God. Those who were going about saying that Jesus had been raised from the dead and therefore was God were obviously and consciously trying to deceive the Jewish community. Saul would have been frustrated that the body of Jesus was not found and blame the disciples for stealing and hiding the body. So, for Saul, it was not

just a matter of Christianity being wrong but rather, Christianity was a damnable deceit. It was leading people away from the truth of Judaism.

If Saul needed justification for his fierce actions, he could have found it easily in the Old Testament. For example, there is the story of Phineas, the grandson of Aaron in the Book of Numbers, chapter 25, tell of his killing an immoral Jewish man and a Midianite woman with a spear, piercing through them both and God honored the action by halting a plague He inflicted on Israel for worshipping false gods. Phineas is praised by God. In Saul's mind he was trying to stop the plague of Christianity, which he determined was a "false" religion seeking a false god and therefore, he thought his actions were righteous before God.

Having spearheaded the persecution of Christians in Jerusalem and hearing that the sect of the Christ followers, which in this story is now called "[the Way](#)," had begun to spread and was taking root in Damascus, Saul turned his persecution in that direction. Then our Lord answers in a mighty way!

### **Christ's Enemy Attacks His Bride** (vs. 1-2)

The passage begins with a very powerful Greek idiom; *Eti empneo* meaning "*still breathing out*" Luke is emphasizing, at this point in time, Paul's life mission was to utterly destroy Christianity. He was the most vicious and violent persecutor of the early church. The saying "*still breathing out*" threats means that his every breath was breathed to accomplish his only mission; destroy the people of "[the Way](#)". Every inhale of breath fueled his wicked heart and every exhale - breathed out threats and murder. Paul was as wicked as any mass murderer of history who violently pursued their goal resulting in masses of people suffering and dying. He was as bad as any modern-day terrorist who justify what they do in killing innocent people in the name of a false god. He thrived on driving the Christians out of

Jerusalem. The problem was driving them out of Jerusalem was not good enough because once they were driven out, they began to spread like cockroaches and took the Word of God with them. So, Saul devised a plan to track them down in order to imprison and kill them. Reading at Acts chapter 9, verse 1, “But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest<sup>2</sup> and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.”

Saul goes to the High Priest and obtains letters that authorize him to have jurisdiction over the local synagogues in various cities. His sole purpose was to find Christians to arrest them, bind them, beat them and put them into prison in Jerusalem where they would be tried, convicted and executed as blasphemers. Notice the wording of this passage, “so that if he found any”. He was embarking on his ordained mission and he would not leave a stone unturned. He was going prepared, he would have had temple guards accompany him and would violate even a person’s home, just in case there was a family praying to Jesus behind closed doors. If a neighbor accused someone, he could burst in and chain them all and drag them back to Jerusalem and place them in prison to be tried and executed. He was out to conquer and eradicate Christianity or as it was being called at that time the people of “the Way”. They were called people of “the Way” because of Jesus’ saying, “I am **the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.**” (John 14:6) Saul sets out to the city of Damascus to end Christianity before it spread any further. Damascus is the capitol of Syria, the oldest capital in the world according to some and the fourth holiest city in Islam. It lies 135 miles north from Jerusalem.

**Christ’s Enemy Overpowered** (vs. 3-5)

Saul was almost to Damascus when he saw an intense light. What was this light? In the past, whenever God had come to earth, whether it was at creation, during the Exodus on the mountain or in Ezekiel's visions, He came in the form of fire, flashing light and lightening. This light was Paul coming in contact with the glory of Jesus Christ. Reading at verse 3, "Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him." <sup>4</sup> And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' <sup>5</sup> And he said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And he said, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.'" Paul admitted he was convinced he was to persecute the people of "the Way" in Acts chapter 26 as you heard read earlier. We hear Paul's confession before Herod Agrippa the 2<sup>nd</sup>, Paul said, <sup>9</sup> "I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. <sup>10</sup> And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. <sup>11</sup> And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities." Paul continues testifying and comes to his experience on the road to Damascus and he testifies before Agrippa the Light was Jesus Christ, the Son of God the Father.

Our Lord's power sends Saul to the ground in fulfilment of God's words to the prophet Isaiah, "By myself I have sworn; from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return: 'To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance.'" (Isaiah 45:23) The Son of God threw Saul to the ground and demands he explain why he is persecuting, not just the people of "the Way" but persecuting Him. Jesus says, in Hebrew, "ego emi Jeshua" or "I am Jesus!" The Hebrew name is Yeshua and the Greek is Jesus and the name means deliver;

Jesus as God the Son is the Deliver of all who surrender to Him. Interestingly, this is the same response Jesus gave when he was betrayed by Judas and the Roman soldiers came, Jesus asked, “‘Whom do you seek?’”<sup>5</sup> They answered him, ‘Jesus of Nazareth.’ Jesus said to them, “ego emi Jeshua” or ‘I am Jesus!’ ...<sup>6</sup> When Jesus said to them, ‘I am he,’ they drew back and fell to the ground.” (John 18:4-6) When Jesus pronounced who He was - the Romans, Judas the traitor and later Saul are driven to the ground. Jesus is in complete control; the Romans are ordained to crucify the Christ and Saul to become the great evangelist, Paul. This is further proof Jesus is the Son of God the Father for by pronouncing who He is, “I am Jesus” people are driven to the ground. Like is Exodus when God instructed Moses as he returned to Egypt after 40 years, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” (Exodus 3:14) not all believed – some remain in rebellion and some He calls to salvation, but all is as He ordains.

Saul travels to Damascus to persecute people of “the Way” and finds he has been in truth persecuting not only these people but Jesus, the long await Messiah. Jesus demonstrates who He is, Jesus is the Messiah, He is the Son of God and He is Saul’s Savior by His command. Jesus did not ask Saul if He could be His Savior, He saved him by His supernatural power. Rebellion is now gone and submission has come and in the matter of few days Saul is transformed and begins to understand all; who Jesus is and what Jesus’ calling is for his life.

Jesus answers Saul’s questions as he lay in the dirt on the road, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” When our Lord identifies Himself, Saul’s belief system is completely turned upside down. He thought he was actually serving God by persecuting the Christians. He thought was stamping out this unorthodox sect and he was keeping Judaism pure. The truth was, his very soul was eternally lost until Jesus acted. If Jesus had not saved Saul that day, Saul, as devoted as he was

to Judaism would have died in his sin and when he died, he would have gone to hell. He was living a life in the midst of a works religion. This is true for many religions today, they are man-made and centered on works for their salvation, but understand, apart from the God of the Bible, the One true Triune God; God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, there is no salvation. As often is found with the truths of Scripture; God's truth goes against human logic - even though Saul is blind, he sees more clearly than he ever has. Saul's soul was dead to the truth of God and now it is spiritually alive. Let me ask, what are your blind spots concerning the Lord? What can you do to see the Lord more clearly with your eyes, heart and soul?

### **Christ's Enemy Submits** (vs. 5-9)

Saul is lying helpless in the dirt, on the road, his world completely turned upside down and Jesus continues saying, <sup>5</sup> “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. <sup>6</sup> But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” <sup>7</sup> The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. <sup>8</sup> Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. <sup>9</sup> And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.” Saul's rebellion is gone, no more will he be the persecutor and murder of those who are of “the Way”, now Christ will transform Saul the persecutor into Paul the bold proclaimer of Christ, a defender of the faith, an international evangelist and inspired author of much of the New Testament – Paul would model what it meant to be completely transformed and devoted to Jesus, the Son of God, to live as His slave, servant, child, brother and proclaimer.

Saul does as he is commanded; he gets up to finish his journey to Damascus, but being blind he has to have the help from others. Upon his arrival in the city his training by the Holy Spirit begins. Paul submits and is no longer the man whose desire was to be self-reliant and seeking his own authority and power. Once the Lord transforms Saul, the new Paul will be the greatest preacher and church planter in the history of the Church. The very one who tried with all his might to destroy Christianity became its greatest missionary.

Let me now ask after we have explored this passage, “Why did Jesus save Paul?” To answer, let me read Paul’s own words, <sup>15</sup> “The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. <sup>16</sup> But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, **Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience** as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.” (1 Timothy 1:15-16) Here, Paul clearly states that Jesus saved him to “**display his perfect patience**”. Paul states that he was the foremost of sinners. What Paul means is that he was the wickedest of all sinners. Paul is marveling at the grace of God in saving him, just as I marvel that by God’s grace, He saved me and I hope you marvel Christ’s salvation of your sinning soul.

But, beyond this Paul says something here that we should take note of; “**Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience.**” So, how did Paul’s conversion display Christ’s patience? One answer might be that Jesus was patient with Saul during the time of Saul’s persecuting of the church. If that was our answer we would be partially right. But I think we need to go back further, all the way back to Saul’s birth. Reading Paul’s words written to the Galatian church, “**But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace.**” (Galatians 1:15) God had set Saul apart and had placed His calling on Saul from his birth. So,



every moment spent in self-righteous endeavors was rebellion against God. Saul spent his entire life pursuing his own glory rather than God's glory. When by God's grace, Jesus came along - Saul's very worldview was drawn into suspicion and he hated everything about the Messiah because it conflicted with his view of the world and God. He hated that Jesus was saving people who were not working like he was to be a pious Jew. He hated Jesus for healing those who had never lifted a finger to seek righteousness; either their own or God's. He spent his entire life in utter rebellion against the very God he claimed to serve. So, he could also marvel all the more that when God saved him by His grace and by his salvation God was showing perfect patience with a horrible sinner.

Jesus loved Saul even while Saul hated Jesus. Even though Saul had rebelled all his life, Jesus still loved him. The time came in God's sovereign plan to change Saul from a persecutor of Christians into Paul a teacher of Christians. Paul saw the glorious light, met Christ on the Damascus Road, Jesus changed his heart and Saul was now transformed to begin fulfilling his calling from God.

## **Closing**

My beloved, have you been running away from God's call for your life? Have you been sensing God's call but have tried to silence it so you can continue as you are? Let implore you, come to Christ and in the quietness of time alone with Him, in prayer and surrender your rebellion and like Paul rise up to serve your Lord and Savior Jesus. Paul suffered for serving Christ, but he would not have traded Jesus for anything of this world. Luke tells us and Jesus is telling us, give up the world and live in service to our King. Jesus saved Paul that day and Paul's life became a wonderful picture of a loving follower of Jesus Christ that impacted the world for the kingdom of God. When it comes your time to go home

to the Lord, what picture will your life leave behind for those you love and those who will follow on the journey to eternity? These are serious questions. So, now I want us to take some time to be quiet where we sit and listen to God speak to our hearts and hear His calling. I will call us when it is time to end.

**Benediction** – A blessing for all of God’s goodness to rest in you.

The Lord Bless –

your heart and mind, as you come to know the heart and mind of Christ.

your work and your rest, as you remember Christ’s work and rest for you.

your hands and feet, as you become the hands and feet of Christ to others.

<sup>24</sup> “The LORD bless you and keep you; <sup>25</sup> the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; <sup>26</sup> the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.” (Numbers 6:24-26) Amen!