Acts 2024 Juan Seo (June 9, 2024)

**SAUL’S CONVERSION**

Acts 9:1-19a

Key Verse 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?”***

What is your conversion story? If you were to write an autobiography, how would you describe your encounter with Jesus? One of the books that I have read with a deep impression is St. Augustine's *The Confessions*. Augustine was living a life of debauchery, but one day, he was so distressed by his sins that he cried out, “How long, O Lord?” While he was weeping in the most bitter contrition of his heart, suddenly he heard the voice of a boy or a girl: “Pick it up, read it; pick it up, read it.” Immediately, he opened the Scriptures and saw Romans 13:1314: ***“13 Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. 14 Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.”*** This word of God touched his heart, and he repented of his sins and had a personal encounter with Jesus. Afterward, he made a significant contribution to the development of Christian theology.

Today's message is about the famous conversion story of the Apostle Paul. Who is the Apostle Paul? He is probably the person who made the greatest contribution to spreading the Gospel of Jesus throughout the world in Christian history. Through him, Christianity spread out into the Gentile world, from Antioch to Rome. Furthermore, he laid the foundation for the Christian faith, teaching that salvation is only by faith in Jesus Christ. There are 21 epistles in the 27 books of the New Testament. More than half of them, 13 epistles, were written by the Apostle Paul. How did this great servant of God come to meet Jesus and be called to be an apostle to the Gentiles?

The Apostle Paul was born in Tarsus, which was the capital of the Roman province of Cilicia and is about 355 miles north of Jerusalem. He was born into a Pharisee family and grew up with a religious education based on strict Jewish law. He went to Jerusalem as a teenager and studied Jewish law under Gamaliel, who was one of the greatest rabbis of his time. Saul, before he became known as Paul, was very zealous for the God of Israel. There are two historical stories that demonstrate the zeal of the Jews for God. One is the story of Phinehas in Numbers chapter 25. At that time, the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land. The men of Israel fell into sexual immorality with Moabite women and idolatry. God was angry and would judge the Israelites. It was then that Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, the high priest, saw an Israelite man bring into the camp a Midianite woman right before the eyes of Moses and the whole assembly of Israel. Phinehas, who was very zealous for God, took a spear in his hand and followed the Israelite into the tent. He drove the spear into both of them, right through the Israelite man and into the woman's stomach. What happened then? God was pleased with Phinehas' action in his zeal for God, and the plague against the Israelites was stopped. Phinehas's behavior seems very radical. From a modern perspective, it was too much. But from a Jewish perspective, his zeal was a heroic act that saved his people from God's judgment. Another story is that of Elijah. When he was fleeing from Jezebel, he met God on the mountain of Horeb and said, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty.” (1 King 19:10) Elijah's zeal for God led him to fight against 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah and to kill them all. When he prayed earnestly, God sent rain and ended the three-year drought. Because of his zeal for God, Elijah performed an amazing work of turning his people from idolatry to God.

Saul, like Phinehas and Elijah, was very zealous for God. He was waiting for the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel. But when he learned that there was a group of followers of Jesus, he watched them closely. As he listened to Stephen's speech in the Sanhedrin, where Stephen called them “you stiff-necked people,” anger began to rise in Saul's heart. When Stephen shouted, ***“Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God,”*** Saul couldn't take it anymore. “This is blasphemy!” When the Jews who were there dragged Stephen out of the city and began to stone him, Saul thought that Stephen was getting the punishment he deserved. And Saul approved of their killing him. Furthermore, Saul's zeal for God led him to actively persecute Jesus' followers. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. He went from one synagogue to another to have them punished. But that wasn't enough. He asked the high priest for letters and hunted them down in foreign cities. Saul was convinced that he was doing it for God. He was convinced that arresting, killing, and destroying Jesus' disciples, as Phinehas and Elijah had done, was the right way to exercise his zeal for God. So 9:1 says that ***“Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples.”***

How did Saul change and become a disciple of Jesus and an apostle spreading the gospel? Here is the story. He was on his way to Damascus after receiving an arrest warrant from the high priest authorizing him to arrest Jesus' disciples with the cooperation of the synagogues in Damascus. The distance from Jerusalem to Damascus was about 140 miles, a journey that would take about four or five days on foot. As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. And he fell to the ground. This remarkable event happened at about noon. The sun was shining brightly, but the light was even brighter than the sun. And the light shone not only on him but also on his companions, and they all fell to the ground. Where did that light, which was brighter than the sun, come from? We have no scientific explanation for the light. But we believe that the light that came down from heaven was the light of the risen Jesus Christ. Who can dare to stand upright in the presence of the intense light of Jesus Christ? The Apostle John met Jesus as a light on the island of Patmos and fell at his feet as if he were dead. We, too, will fall to the ground the moment we see the light of the risen Jesus. Don’t you want to experience this intense light of Jesus?

When Saul was lying on the ground, he heard a voice speaking in Aramaic, ***“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”*** At that moment, Saul's heart must have frozen in shock. “What is this?” Taken aback, he replied, ***“Who are you, Lord? ”*** Saul didn't know who the voice belonged to. But because the voice came from heaven, he called ‘Lord,’ thinking it could be God. The answer he heard was quite shocking: ***“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”*** 'Jesus? The same Jesus who was executed on a cross for blasphemy? The same Jesus whose disciples testify that he rose from the dead and is the Son of God? The same Jesus whom I have been persecuting with zeal for God by searching houses and synagogues in Jerusalem and other cities to arrest his followers? A great fear came over him. Saul immediately asked, ***“What shall I do, Lord?”*** He was an active man, so he asked for direction on what he should do in his current situation. Jesus gave him direction, ***“Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”***

The text mentions that ***“the men traveling with Saul heard the sound but did not see anyone.”*** Saul's companions were also knocked to the ground by the light of Jesus, but they didn’t understand Jesus' voice. Perhaps they heard some sound, but it was not a human voice that they could understand. When Saul heard Jesus' command, he got up and tried to go, but when he opened his eyes, he could see nothing. His eyes were covered with something like scales, so he became blind. He was not in a condition to enter Damascus on his own. So, his companions had to take him by the hand and carry him to Damascus. And for three days, he was blind and didn’t eat or drink anything. Imagine Saul's physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual conditions at that time. He was a robust young man in his early 30s, full of energy and good health, traveling nonstop to arrest Jesus' disciples. Then, after seeing the powerful light of Jesus, he became blind. We've had the experience of not being able to see because something happened to our eyes. How did it feel? It's very frustrating. When we can't see, we can't do anything. No matter how capable we are, we become completely powerless. Saul must have been in great mental turmoil. His beliefs must have been shattered. He could no longer discern what was true and real. He must have been shocked as his entire Judaic value system was shaken. His emotions must have been very volatile. Beyond surprise, he must have been anxious and fearful. He must have been frustrated by his situation. And most of all, he must have been in a great spiritual crisis. He must have been questioning the God of Israel, whom he had believed in and followed throughout his life. He must have faced a great spiritual conflict as he now had to accept the reality of Jesus, the Son of God, whom he had so strongly denied and persecuted. Now, he had to go through the process of forming a new self in Jesus Christ. Saul had to find out what had happened to him and what God's will was for it. In verse 11, we see that Saul was praying. He was fasting and praying for three days, seeking God’s will.

In the meantime, Jesus appeared in a vision to his disciple Ananias. Ananias was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there (22:12). Jesus commanded Ananias to go and find a man from Tarsus named Saul, who was staying in the house of Judas on Straight Street. In verse 12, we see that Jesus had already appeared to Saul in a vision and showed him that Ananias would come to him and place his hands on him to restore his sight. Jesus could have healed Saul directly, but why did Jesus send Aninaias to do it? It was so that Saul could be accepted by the other disciples and be welcomed into the Christian community. Saul could be accepted into the Christian community because an influential disciple named Ananias went to Saul, met him, witnessed his conversion, and received him as a brother in Christ. However, it was not easy for Ananias to immediately accept Jesus' command because Saul's reputation as a persecutor was too great. Perhaps Ananias was target number one for Saul's arrest. It would have been difficult for Ananias to go directly to the person who had come to arrest him.

However, Jesus clearly expressed His will 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.”*** (15-16) “Go!” Jesus' command was decisive. Jesus had great plans for Saul and called him. Saul was his chosen instrument to proclaim the name of Jesus to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. It was a call that Jesus made unilaterally, choosing Saul. Why Saul? We might look for reasons based on Saul's various human conditions, but in fact, only Jesus knows the exact reason. Jesus had already chosen Paul before he was born and had prepared him with a great purpose and had appeared to him in his time and called him. So, does Jesus have plans and a calling only for special people like Saul? No! Ephesians 1:4 says, ***“For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.”*** This indicates that all who believe in Jesus have been chosen by Jesus. All believers are called to ***“love God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind”*** and ***“love our neighbor as ourselves.”*** There are no exceptions to this - we are all called by God to love God and love our neighbor. Additionally, each of us has received a specific calling. Serving as a shepherd, Bible teacher, or minister in the UBF church is also a calling from Jesus. The important thing is that God has called each of us with great hope, and we are to discover the hope of Jesus and live according to it.

Ananias obeyed Jesus' words. He went to meet Saul, placed his hands on him, and prayed for him. Then he called Saul ***“Brother Saul.”*** What a loving title this is! Saul had regarded Jesus' disciples as enemies and wanted to find and kill every last one of them. In fact, many of Jesus' disciples were captured, imprisoned, and killed by Saul. But now Ananias is calling Saul his brother. Look at the spiritual maturity of Ananias, who accepted as a brother the very man who had persecuted and sought to kill him and his fellow believers. This is the power of the gospel of Jesus. This is the true Christian community of love, united in Christ. Through Ananias’ prayer, Saul regained his sight and was filled with the Holy Spirit. He was baptized and welcomed into the church community. The one who opposed Jesus finally met Him as the Savior. The one who persecuted Jesus became His disciple and, while proclaiming His name, became the one who is persecuted. The one who sought to destroy Jesus' church became the one who gave his life to build it. How amazing is God's work! What a beautiful story of conversion!

Through the story of the Apostle Paul's conversion, we can see that God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit directly intervene in each step and carry out the work of salvation. The history of salvation is God’s design and direct intervention. Do you believe in God's direct intervention in your life? Like Ananias, we can participate in God’s work of salvation by obeying Jesus’ commands. May God use us in His work of salvation. May spiritual leaders like the Apostle Paul be raised up through our prayers and the preaching of the gospel.

At the beginning of this message, I asked you about your conversion story. All who believe in Jesus have different conversion experiences and stories. Some of us, like the Apostle Paul, suddenly encountered the glorious Jesus one day and were dramatically transformed. But not all of us have that kind of conversion experience. Some of us were born into Christian families and had a gradual conversion experience. Some of us don't even know when they were converted. Many people who encountered Jesus at UBF had conversion experiences after receiving the Word of God at a Summer Bible Conference. I am one of them. I have always believed that my conversion was special. When I was a freshman in college, not having attended the main conference, I attended the supplementary conference, and within the short period of three days and two nights, I experienced a dramatic conversion. The opening message of the conference, ***“What is your name?”*** (Mk 5:9), made me realize my sin, shattered my prideful ego, and filled me with fear of God's judgment. From the first night of the conference, the struggle to hear God's voice of forgiveness began. I prayed to God late into the night, but I couldn't hear His voice. But the next day, during the message, I heard Jesus’ voice saying, ***“Neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin.”*** (Jn 8:11). The message about the crucifixion of Jesus made me burst into tears because of Jesus' love for me. I became assured that Jesus had forgiven my sins. I was saved by the grace of Jesus! More than 100 people worked at the conference to participate in Jesus’ work of salvation and to save me. It was a special conversion grace that Jesus granted me. After this, the direction and purpose of my life changed, and my faith grew through my personal experiences with Jesus. Every conversion grace given to us is a blessing from God that happened in God's special plan. What is your conversion story? We should always remember this grace and obey the Lord every day to live the life that Jesus, who saved us, wants us to live. May the love and grace of Jesus Christ abound among us always. Amen.