

PAUL'S CONVERSION

Do you ever find yourself wondering why God chooses to use certain people that would not be our first choice or even our last choice if the options were up to us. We can recall many examples in the Old Testament of unlikely people whom God chose for special task. Yet these worked out well and they accomplished great things for God's purposes. We are surprised to learn that Abraham (Abram) was a worshiper of idol before God called him. We continue to be amazed at how conniving Jacob was. We see Gideon hiding in a wine press lest the Midianites steal what little grain he had and wonder why God would use him. Even Samuel wondered about God skipping over all the first sons of Jesse and ending up with David.

The first time we see Saul of Tarsus it is not in a very good light. We see a person so caught up in a religion that is missing out on what God is doing. Saul was a Pharisee of the Pharisees. In other words, he followed the letter of the law in everything he did. In fact, in some of the latter writings, he said of himself that he was blameless regarding the Law. There was nothing in the Law that said you could not or should not try to silence all other religious views that did not agree with your own. Saul saw in Christianity a real threat to the Jewish religion as he knew it. Therefore, it is not surprising to find Saul at the stoning of Stephen.

Stephen was among the first deacons of the Church. These men ministered to the physical and spiritual needs of the Church. Acts 6:8 tells us that Stephen was full of faith and power and did great wonders and miracles among the people. This type ministry greatly upset the religious leaders of that day. When Jesus did great wonders and miracles that also upset them. It still upsets the religious leaders to have wonders and miracles being done. The wonders and miracles Stephen did by the power of the Holy Spirit validated his ministry and showed a great contrast to the sterility of the religion practiced by the majority of the Jews. Their arrest and trial of Stephen did not still his voice but provided a forum for him to declare the judgment of God on those who reject God's only means of salvation. The Jews accused Stephen of blasphemy and the mob dragged him outside the city and stoned him to death.

ACTS 7:59-61, 8:1 The stoning of Stephen started a wave of persecution that scattered Christians into many of the surrounding areas. Jesus had told them, "You will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria and the uttermost parts of the earth." We are still working on the last part of that combination command and prophecy. As the followers of the Way were chased from Jerusalem they took with them the truth of the gospel. It is ironic that those who wanted so much to stop the spread of the gospel were directly involved in causing it to be spread through the persecution they inflicted on the Christians.

Not only were those members of the early Church affected by the persecutions, but some of the persecutors had their lives touched by the response of the Christian community. The death of Stephen was a testimony to the kind of love that took Jesus to the cross and had Him pray "Father forgive them." It is the love that caused a follower of this same Jesus to pray the same prayer as he was being killed. It is a love that pricked the heart of a man of religious zeal like Saul who was not satisfied to persecute the Church in Jerusalem but was on his way to Damascus to find more people of the Way.

ACTS 9:3-8 You've heard of people who were so stubborn and set in their ways that you have to use a 2x4 to get their attention. This incident on the road to Damascus is an example of God's application of an equivalent 2x4 to Saul. He now had Saul's attention. Saul recognized that something of a greater power than he had ever encountered had confronted him. He could

have rebelled. He could have remained blind for his rebellion. Instead he submitted and indicated his willingness to follow. He asked, “What will You have me to do?”

You’ve probably heard it said that God will not cause anyone to be saved against his or her will. This may be technically correct; however, we see in the case of Saul, a man who had no desire to join himself to be those followers of Jesus, yet God brought about circumstances that caused him to change his will. I guess that the important thing in the life of Saul before his conversion was that he wanted to do the right thing. He really thought that persecution of the followers of Jesus was the right thing to do. He was sincere and though he was sincerely wrong, God saw that He could use that sincerity and enthusiasm in the Kingdom of God. Part of the problem in the Church today is that many people have the correct belief and doctrine – they have the truth but they are sincere nor enthusiastic about this truth.

Paul’s conversion experience was life changing. He remembered it and related it many times to others. He share that experience and its lessons with Church leaders, with Gentiles converts and with kings and governors.