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From Blasphemy to Belief

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FROM BLASPHEMY TO BELIEF

Herald of Truth
radio programs

Number 765
TRANSCRIPT OF THE
From Blasphemy to Belief

Have you ever found yourself intensely believing an error? Have others been physically and mentally wounded by your sincere efforts for an invalid cause? Why is it that often those who believe in something most fiercely believe a untruth? These are some of the questions that flood into our minds as we consider the life of a dedicated young Jewish lawyer, Saul of Tarsus.

During the next few minutes I am asking you to study with me the conversion of this exceptional character in the history of early Christianity. What kind of man was he? To what extent did he believe Christianity was God's final revelation to man? What prompted so dramatic a change as we will soon witness? These are the questions along with many others that we now consider in our Herald of Truth radio program, number 765, "From Blasphemy to Belief."


In the next two chapters of the Acts repeated references are made to the increasingly important role played by this zealous figure. In verse three of chapter eight we read, “But Saul laid waste the church, entering into every house, and dragging men and women committed them to prison” (Acts 8:3). At the beginning of chapter nine we hear Luke say, “But Saul, yet breathing threatening and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, . . .” (Acts 9:1).

This visit to the High Priest, most Bible students will remember, was for the purpose of gaining authority to persecute Christians in all the surrounding territory. In keeping with this aim the next verse of Acts 9 tells us that Saul went to Damascus to find “any that were of the Way, whether men or women” that he “might bring them bound to Jerusalem” (Acts 9:2). The picture becomes strikingly clear as an angry, dedicated, malevolent, troubler of early Christianity appears in the early chapters of Acts.

The early Church as a result of the activities just noticed formed a definite opinion about Saul of Tarsus. When the Christian, Ananias of Damascus, was instructed to assist with Saul’s conversion his reply was, “Lord, I have heard from many of this man, how much evil he did to thy saints at Jerusalem: and he hath authority from the chief priests to bind all that call upon thy name” (Acts 9:13, 14).

The reports had reached Damascus and the band of Christians meeting in that city must have greatly feared the impending visit of one of their arch persecutors. Later, when Paul returned to Jerusalem as a Christian, he found Christians there hesitant about fellowshipping him. Luke explains the basis for their wariness in the words, “they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple” (Acts 9:26).

But no New Testament description of Saul’s life without Christ, and as an enemy of Christianity, compares with those honest reflections Paul himself, as a Christian, later offers. Before a group of his own Jewish people in Jerusalem the Apostle spoke these words: “And I persecuted this Way unto the Death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women. As also the high priest doth bear me witness, and all the estate of the elders: from whom also I received letters unto the
brother, and journeyed to Damascus to bring them also that were there unto Jerusalem in bonds to be punished” (Acts 22:4, 5).

Later in the same speech he admits to imprisoning and beating Christians (Acts 22:19). He also confesses to “standing by, and consenting, and keeping the garments of them” that killed Stephen (Acts 22:20). In his testimony before King Agrippa Paul relates the following: “I verily thought with myself that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And this I also did in Jerusalem; and I both shut up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, and when they were put to death I gave my vote against them. And punishing them oftentimes in all the synagogues, I strove to make them blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto foreign cities” (Acts 26:9-11).

Here in his own words we see Saul the trouble, the murderer, and the angry persecutor. Listen again as he describes his “manner of life . . . in the Jews’ religion.” “Beyond measure,” Paul asserts, “I persecuted the church of God and made havoc of it” (Galatians 1:13). Finally, in writing to Timothy, he expresses his profound gratitude to God for rescuing him from a life of hatred and strife, describing his former life as that of “a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious” (I Timothy 1:13). For those who question, “Why?”, Paul answers, “I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief; and the grace of our Lord abounded exceeding with that we were there unto Jerusalem in bonds to be punished” (Acts 26:9-11).

But, from this period of blasphemy in Saul’s life we now turn to his encounter with Christ. Saul first met the Lord Jesus on his way to Damascus to further harass Christians. Listen to Luke’s account of this strange meeting. “And as he journeyed, it came to pass that he drew nigh unto Damascus: and suddenly there shone round about him a light out of heaven: and he fell upon the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: . . .” (Acts 9:3-5).

Ananias, who later visits Saul in Damascus with God’s Word for him, actually remarks, “Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, who appeared unto thee in the way which thou camest, hath sent me, . . .” (Acts 9:17). Paul would much later in life, as an Apostle of Christ, write the church in Corinth asking, “. . . have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” (I Corinthians 9:1). We cannot mistake the direct and supernatural confrontation of Saul by Christ on the road to Damascus.

The heart of this meeting was a direct question from Christ. It was a question Saul had never really faced; “Saul Saul, why persecutest thou me?” (Acts 9:4). Saul himself, in turn, asks two questions that herebefore would have been unthinkable for him. First, groping in the confusion of this strange event he inquires, “Who art thou, Lord?” (Acts 9:5). Later when Paul recounts this experience he further reveals that he asked a second question, “What shall I do, Lord?” (Acts 22:10).

Our Lord Jesus Christ has promised to answer one’s sincere quest for truth and righteousness. In keeping with this promise Saul hears Jesus say to him, “. . . rise and enter into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do” (Acts 9:6). Paul later records that Jesus said, “Arise, and go into Damascus; and there it shall be told thee of all things which are appointed for thee to do” (Acts 22:10). One obvious conclusion may be reached at this point in our study: the confrontation of Saul and Christ on the Damascus road was the beginning, not the end, of Saul’s conversion.

In fact, the New Testament teaches clearly that all conversions begin with one’s encounter with Christ. John, the Apostle and author of the Gospel, states this as the prime objective of his and other New Testament Gospels. “Many other signs therefore did Jesus in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name” (John 20:30, 31).

Jesus speaks to you right now, as you listen to this program, saying, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me” (Revelation 3:20). Our Savior attempts continually to initiate this encounter with me and you. Only our rebellion hinders such a meeting.

That there was much more to Saul’s conversion may be discovered from the Apostle’s words before King Agrippa. Paul states, “Wherefore, O king Agrippa, I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision: . . .” (Acts 26:19). Although the context shows Paul referring to his entire ministry, the fact remains that he did begin obeying Jesus from the first word of instruction on the road to Damascus.

One writer has properly commented that Jesus, in this initial encounter, “. . . confronts him with his sin and crime; he smites him, and crushes Saul’s heart with a consciousness of its awful guilt. But Jesus does not preach the gospel to Saul, he orders him to a place where the appointed minister of the gospel will proclaim this to him: . . .” (p. 355, R. C. H. Lenski, An Interpretation of Acts). For three days and nights following his confrontation with Christ Saul was “without sight, and did neither eat nor drink” (Acts 9:9). Here was the opportunity that all of us must have at some time or another, to stop, think, and assess who we are, where we are going, and why!

Observe with me now Saul’s change from blasphemy to belief. His faith in Christ certainly had begun to grow on the road with the encounter. He heard the voice of Jesus with clear instructions to go into Damascus and wait for further word. The same man, later writing as the Apostle Paul, explains, “So belief cometh of hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17).

Saul experienced the agony and revolution of repentance during his three long, lonely days following the Lord’s appearance. No other New Testament writer could appreciate the condition that prompts genuine change of heart and redirection of life better than the Saul who gropes for ultimate meaning in a darkened Damascus room. In fact, when writing to the Corinthian Church, the First Epistle, the changed and penitent Paul reveals, “For godly sorrow worketh repentance unto salvation, a repentance which bringeth no regret: but the sorrow of the world worketh death” (II Corinthians 7:10).

While preparing for the final change from blasphemy to belief, in the very midst of rudimentary faith and undirected repentance, comes God’s promised messenger, Ananias. As we noticed earlier in our lesson Ananias was highly reluctant to visit such an infamous character upon the first request from Christ. “But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he (Paul, jac) is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings, and the children of Israel: for I will show him how many things he must suffer for my name’s sake” (Acts 9:15, 16).

Listen now to the remainder of Luke’s account of Ananias’ visit to Saul. “And Ananias departed, and entered into the house; and laying his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, who appeared unto thee in the way which thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mayest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”
Spirit. And straightway there fell from his eyes as it were scales, and he received his sight; and he arose and was baptized; and he took food and was strengthened.” (Acts 9:17-19).

This Ananias, Paul later explains, was “a devout man according to the law, well reported of by all the Jews that dwelt” in Damascus. This means that the address “Brother Saul” in the previous reading from Acts chapter 9, has no significance other than to indicate a physical relationship (Acts 22:12).

In the same account by Paul of his conversion we are privileged to see his conversion as he saw it through his own eyes. According to this account Ananias also said, “The God of our fathers hath appointed thee to know his will, and to see the Righteous One, and to hear a voice from his mouth” (Acts 22:14). This is also the time when Paul learns “thou shalt be a witness for him unto all men of what thou hast seen and heard” (Acts 22:15). Then came, Paul says, the instruction, “And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on his name” (Acts 22:16).

The only element in this great event that calls for further explanation is Saul’s reception of the Holy Spirit. The “filling” of the Holy Spirit was in fulfillment of and for the purposes set forth in Jesus’ promise to the other apostles in John 14:26: “But the Comforter, even the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said unto you” (John 14:26).

Paul’s apostleship, strongly suggested by Ananias, depended on the revelation of God’s Word to him, a revelation which could come only through the agency of the Holy Spirit. Even though Paul later describes himself as “the child untimely born,” that is, an apostle called in a peculiar manner, this does not change the fact that, in his words again, “I am not one whit behind the very chiefest apostles” (II Corinthians 11:5).

It has been rightly pointed out that any unique element in Saul’s conversion either not seen in other inspired accounts of conversion or not experienced in conversion today are directly attributed to the two calls he received and accepted: the one surrender in “obedience of faith” in Christ; and the other to become an apostle of Christ.

Have you met Christ either by looking at a true Christian’s life (Philippians 1:27; I Peter 3:1-3) or by honestly examining the Gospel records? (John 20:30, 31.)