



Conversion of St. Paul on the Road to Damascus
by Michelangelo Caravaggio (Rome, 1600)

Bible Study for the Third Wednesday of Easter "C" focusing on The Conversion of St. Paul, Acts 9:1-19a

From Acts 9:1-19a:

¹Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ²and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

³Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' ⁵He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.' ⁷The men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. ⁸Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

¹⁰ Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, 'Ananias.' He answered, 'Here I am, Lord.' ¹¹The Lord said to him, 'Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, ¹²and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.'

¹³But Ananias answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; ¹⁴and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.' ¹⁵But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; ¹⁶I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.' ¹⁷So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' ¹⁸And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, ¹⁹and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Some Questions to Consider:

- 1) What kind of man was Saul? (to answer this question, you may wish to re-read Gal. 1:10-17, Phil. 3:1-6, and Acts 22:1-5, and 22-28).
- 2) In the passage from Acts 9, how does God get Saul's attention? Why are these circumstances important?
- 3) In what state is Paul placed after God reveals Himself, and how long does it last? Why is this important?
- 4) What is the first meaningful encounter Saul has after his conversion? Why is this significant?
- 5) Now, here are two questions on Scripture to consider before we close this lesson. What do you think Paul means when he says in Acts 22:4, "I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death" (NIV)? Also, read, Phil.3:7-11. What do you think he means when he says, "I consider them (that is, the old things) rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God is by faith"?

Some reflections: In the passages that I asked you to read from Galatians, Philippians, and Acts 22 you were able to determine certain things about what kind of person Paul was. In Philippians we read about Paul's impeccable Jewish pedigree, how he was circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. In Galatians we find out about Paul's ambition and commitment, how he advanced in Judaism beyond many among people of his same age, for he was far more zealous for the traditions of his ancestors. And in Acts 22 we read of Paul's exalted position in society, how he was born into a family of pedigree, born into the citizenry of Rome, and we discover that he received a five-star education, being sent to study in the very center of knowledge, in Jerusalem under the instruction of Gamaliel, a Jewish Rabbi of such stature that he is mentioned no less than twice in the Christian New Testament (see Acts 5:24, 22:3).

Yet, suddenly all of this was like so much dust. Because, you see, in that house on Straight Street, Paul's eyes had been opened. The scales had fallen away, and for the first time he could *really* see.

But how could God have brought about such a radical change in this man? Only by a dramatic sequence of events. The baggage that Paul brought with him had to be dealt with. And boy, did he have **a lot** of baggage! So, of-course only a dramatic occurrence was going to be enough to convert this man who had been do deeply indoctrinated into the legalism of his orthodox Jewish world.

And did you notice how he had to go through a period of confusion and introspection? His universe had just been completely uprooted, so a little "down-time" was essential in order to begin and sort things out. I believe these occurrences which "knock us out of the saddle" so to speak, and then leave us in a state of searching introspection are really hallmarks of Godly

conversion. There are probably times in your life, or at the least you have heard of times in the lives of other people when something similar has happened – a series of event which resulted in a radical shift in a person's lifestyle. That's very often the only way God can get our attention, and it frequently involves pain or loss.

But did you notice what happened to Paul during this time of introspection? He was visited by Ananias, a messenger who could only have been sent by God. This is a key point. God will never leave you hanging endlessly, wondering as to the origin of those events which cause us to change course in life. God is not interested in playing mind games with us. In His time, He invariably sends to His children a sign to clearly manifest to them that He is the sovereign Lord, and the events that result in pulling us back from a path to destruction – these events invariably bear the hallmark of His divine imprint.

Lastly, a note on the two passages of Scripture I had you read at the end of the lesson. In Acts 22:4, when Paul talks about persecuting the followers of "the Way," he uses the word for path or road, which in Greek is ὁδός (pronounced "hohdohs"). This is indicative that by the time Acts was written (probably between 63 and 70 AD), the early Christians were already known as "those who followed "the Way." It's interesting to think about how many lessons Jesus taught to His disciples in the Gospel accounts "along the way." Did Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John mean to allude to something very special that was happening to the Disciples as they were following Jesus in his journey? Were they saying to their readers that this trip the Disciples walked with Our Lord was much more than physical travel? I certainly think so.

And finally, in Philippians 3:9 when Paul says his righteousness comes from faith in Christ, is he talking about his (Paul's) own faith in Jesus? Or rather is he referring to the perfect faith that Jesus exhibited when He walked among us and carried all the way to the Cross? Once again, it seems to me that the answer is a resounding "both." James Barnhill, 04/28/10