

From Saul to Paul

His transformation and our own

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Chapter 4: A personal experience with God

Our encounters with God are often sudden and unexpected and happen to persons that are on their way somewhere. Such encounters are like a collision with the unexpected. And the unexpected is God and his plans for our life. Each encounter with God produces an important change, both in ourselves and in our circumstances.

Road to Damascus

Having obtained the special authority requested and commissioned by the principal priests to arrest all the disciples of Christ in Damascus, Saul struck out on his journey there.

Saul was at the top of his career within the most important structure of the Jewish people, the Sanhedrin. He was recognized and respected. He had the authority and the ability to crush that movement of those who blasphemed the instructions of the principal teachers of the Law. Nothing could stop him! With that confidence he left for Damascus.

When I think of Saul's attitude upon leaving Jerusalem on his way to Damascus, a phrase comes to mind that was pronounced a little before embarking by a famous naval captain of the Twentieth Century:

“When any one asks me how I can best describe my experiences of nearly forty years at sea I merely say uneventful. Of course, there have been winter gales and storms and fog and the like, but in all my experience I have never been in an accident of any sort worth speaking about.”

“I will say that I cannot imagine any condition which could cause a ship to founder. I cannot conceive of any vital disaster happening to this vessel. Modern shipbuilding has gone beyond that.” Edward J. Smith, Captain of the RMS Titanic.

At the time of his conversion, Saul faced no crisis nor was he upset; he felt no insecurity about what he was doing. On the contrary, just when he felt he was on the highest point and with the best performance in his service for God, Jesus appeared to him, calling him by name: “Saul, Saul...”

An unexpected encounter

(Acts 9:1-19, 22:6-16, 26:12-18)

It happened while he was on the road, at noon and close to Damascus. Suddenly he saw a light from heaven that exceeded the sun's splendor, surrounding him and all those traveling with him.

When all had fallen to the ground, he heard a voice that said to him in Hebrew: Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads (NKJV). The reference was to a proverb of the time, based on the image of an ox that was kicking against the goad (a pointed stick) used by the ox driver to get him to move.

Saul then asked: Who are you, Lord? The word translated "Lord" here, in the original Greek is *kyrios*, and was used as the most elevated title given to an authority. In the Roman empire this term was reserved for the Caesar. Saul was recognizing that he was speaking with his God, acknowledging his authority.

And the Lord said: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting".

Then Saul understood. I am Jesus was spoken to him by the *Kyrios*, the Lord. In one second that seemed like an eternity, he understood that the person speaking to him was really Jesus. He was alive, just as Stephen and others had affirmed. And this Jesus not only loved the Christians that Saul was persecuting. He also loved Saul. It is hard for you to kick against the goads, he said to him. Not even a word of reproach.

He had never been able to admit it, not even for himself, but he had felt the pricks of a goad during Stephen's sacrifice. And now, suddenly, the awareness impacted him that he was struggling against God. In the midst of all the evil that was dominating his life, his God was working to bring him to this moment and save him.

He broke down, under the impact of the intense light, trembling and unable to analyze the pros and cons implied in changing sides in the struggle. He only knew that he had heard a voice and seen the Lord. Nothing else mattered but to understand and obey his will. He had been totally and absolutely forgiven; completely loved. The same God that had said "Let there be light", was calling him now into his kingdom.

Saul spoke for a second time, using the same word, *kyrios*, as before. But now that title included all the praise and worship of which he was capable. Trembling and fearful, he asked: Lord, what do you want me to do?

The Lord told him: Rise up and enter the city, and there you will be told what you must do. Now he only had to obey that humble and almost trivial first instruction.

Those that traveled with Saul were dumbfounded, for they heard the voice but did not understand it, nor did they see anyone. Then Saul rose up from the ground and, opening his eyes, he could see nothing. He had to walk blindly in the midst of this new and unknown world, although he was no longer in the darkness but in the light. He was left blind... in order to see.

Prior to this event he was not an insecure or doubting person, but now his very foundations had been shaken. Suddenly he became aware that the total sum of his own abilities to carry out God's purposes had only served to turn him into... an enemy of God.

What does it mean to live a holy life before God? This was not a question of being a little mistaken regarding some doctrinal problem. He had placed himself in total and direct opposition to God. How had that happened? How was it possible? He had spent his entire life studying the Scriptures, and was instructed by the most respected teacher in Jerusalem. He not only learned the theory, but sought with all his strength to practice what he learned. However, he wound up recognizing that he had become an enemy of God, actively struggling against him, even while believing that he was serving him.

Three days to rethink everything

Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything (Acts 9:8-9, NIV).

His colleagues took him directly to the house of Judas, a resident of Damascus, probably a merchant sufficiently important to receive a high official of the Sanhedrin. Saul made no request about speaking with anyone. Nor did he want to eat or drink; he closed himself in his room and asked to be left alone.

Surely the leaders of the synagogue were expecting Saul's arrival. Even the disciples, fearing the persecution that was approaching, would be expecting this fearful personality. Surprisingly, both groups lost sight of him.

Saul was sufficiently intelligent to understand that he needed a while to process everything. And to review his understanding of God from the very foundation, as well as the world and his place in it. His entire personality was in the process of mutation, from deep within, as he allowed the light of Jesus to illuminate his soul.

It was time to reconsider everything: Who is God? What are his purposes? In what way do the Scriptures, that he had studied intensely, relate to all of this? "I must have misinterpreted everything to get it so wrong, to be so limited in my knowledge of God that I would wind up being opposed to him".

Saul had imagined he was serving God. He supposed that he was moving up the steps of his "ecclesiastical" career in order to achieve God's favor. His standards of holiness were based on comparing himself with others. But now, in contrast to Jesus, whose Spirit was working in his deepest being, he understood that his holiness was a cheap falsification, a mockery of true holiness. Even though with his lips he honored God, he was dedicated to evil, justified by religious rituals. And yet, the risen Jesus was not seeking to destroy him but to rescue him with love and forgiveness.

He had to face his past. As Saint Augustine said: "I saw myself and was filled with horror". His conscience awakened to the damage he had caused, to the unfair treatment of those who were now his brothers in the faith, and his participation in the death of the first martyr. To his blasphemies and insults against Christ, the Lord, God become man. And yet, God's response was to appear before him, love him and rescue him. The deeper he delved into God's love, the greater was his awareness of the enormity of what he had done.

This encounter with the risen Jesus completely changed Saul's life in many ways. Before finding Jesus, Saul tried to save himself, by doing all that was required by the Law of Moses. Therefore, the Law was a barrier that separated him from God. Following this encounter, Saul was justified before God through faith in Christ. The barrier of separation between men and the full presence of God had been broken down, in the same way that the veil had been torn that had impeded access to the Most Holy Place in the temple, at the moment when Christ died (Mark 15:38).

In the past, the Law and circumcision formed a barrier not only between Saul and God, but also between Saul and those on the "outside". It kept the promised blessing of Abraham from reaching the Gentiles. Now, through this new faith in Jesus, all the barriers had been destroyed.

From that moment, Saul enjoyed free access to God and the possibility of having a relationship with the Gentiles. It was the fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham that through his seed (his descendants, the Jewish people) all the nations would be blessed.

Some speak of a Pauline theology, but in reality it is nothing other than the truth of the gospel applied in the life of Paul. There is no human merit before God. If anyone sought to qualify himself based on his own merit, it would be Saul. However, he became no more than a persecutor of the church. A person can find justification only through Christ, not by his own efforts.

With every hour that Saul spent meditating on this, and throughout the rest of his life, he found increasingly that growing within him was the revelation of the length, breadth and depth of God's love through Christ Jesus who loved us and gave himself for us (Ephesians 3:14-19).

From that point forward, Saul could be dealt with as a man who had never sinned. He was embraced and loved. He could be trusted. On the road to Damascus the Lord had freely given him a complete and absolute forgiveness. Forgiveness is Christ. It cannot be won by our own merit. Having Christ, Saul had everything.

From one moment to the next he had been transformed into a follower of Christ, just like those he had formerly persecuted. Where did that leave all that he believed he understood of the Scriptures (the Old Testament)? Everything had changed. His identity, based on being a Pharisee. The relationship with his own people, with his family and friends. His religious traditions. His relationship to the Gentiles. Everything would be different from now on.

Motivated by his pride, Saul had rejected Jesus, since no person who was not cursed could be hung on a cross, according to Deuteronomy 21:22-23. As Saul faced the reality of his own sin, he became aware that Jesus had born the curse on the cross. Yet not his own, but that of Saul and of everyone.

From the depth of his heart Saul knew that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ, the Savior of the world. It was not a question of a mere logical conclusion, even when that was included. It was something deeper. He knew it because he had known Jesus. And by knowing Jesus, he understood what happened on the cross.

Saul opened his heart to God. Surely he felt the urgent need to intercede for all those whom he had persecuted, especially those that he had obliged to blaspheme, and for the Jews who still did not know Jesus.

Together with prayer a hunger possessed him to know the words of Jesus, his teaching. From the moment when he asked: "What do you want me to do now, Lord?", Saul accepted Jesus' authority. He needed to know what he had ordered, promised and revealed. The attitude of Christ toward those who hated him, toward those who loved him. All that he taught about the Father and about himself.

He felt the urgency to share with others what he had just discovered. But he must wait. The Master's command had been clear: "Go to Damascus and there it will be told you what you need to do". And with that meditation, prayer and waiting, three days passed.

This experience on the road to Damascus must have been so important for Paul that much later Luke, his disciple and author of the book of Acts, relates it on three occasions. The first, inserted in the chronological moment of its occurrence (Acts 9:1-19), was without a doubt based on the later testimony of Saul himself, and two other occasions when he related the way Paul presented his testimony, underscoring the fact that he was an instrument to proclaim the kingdom of God (in Acts 22:6-16 and in 26:12-18). As it often occurs that when we present our testimony, each account emphasizes or synthesizes different aspects of that experience, according to the audience and context at each opportunity. For example, when speaking before King Agrippa (Acts 26:12-18), he summarizes what God said to him, including in the same phrase what was received directly and from the message communicated by Ananias. Just as with the four Gospels that describe the ministry of Jesus on earth, these three accounts of Saul's conversion complement each other to provide the full picture.

How does this apply to our life?

Change of attitude

Nothing in the Christian life makes sense until we have a personal encounter with our creator. There is no substitute for this: neither theological studies, intellectual capacity, social category, or relations and responsibilities in the religious structure of a church. Nor the experience of a father, spouse or son, no matter how important that may be.

Perhaps you and I have not had an experience in which God has confronted us in an audible voice. But to begin a walk in the Christian life we need to have had a spiritual encounter of such magnitude that our entire life thereafter is transformed.

If you still have not had such an experience, ask God for it in your own words, sincerely, from the heart. He will grant it to you. The fact is that he is more interested in granting it to you than you are in receiving it.

If you have this testimony, write it down. Then you can use it effectively as the most powerful tool for evangelism that you could find. Let's consider Paul's example. He wrote most of the epistles of the New Testament. Even so, his tool for responding to those who questioned him about his faith was to give his

testimony. You are the only one who can tell your testimony in that way, and there is no greater power than that of the Holy Spirit moving through you to touch the persons around you.

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