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The Conversion Of Saul

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The Conversion of Saul

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Acts

by

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Thesis Statement: The conversion of the Apostle Paul was an extraordinary event that saw a murderer and persecutor of the church turn into one of the greatest evangelists in history and providing all Christians with thirteen books of the New Testament that give guidance for our daily Christian walk.

I. Introduction
   a. Who was Saul?
   b. What was Saul’s position?

II. Paul’s Past
   a. Stoning of Steven
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III. Paul’s Conversion
   a. The Event
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   b. The Missionary Journeys and Discipleship

V. Conclusion
   a. What was the overall change in Paul?
   b. What can be learned from Paul’s conversion?
Few people in the Scriptures are as intriguing as the Apostle Paul. In Paul, there is a murderer, a preacher, a father, a friend, a legal mind, a religious leader, a ruthless tormenter, and a kind and compassionate caretaker. But in Paul’s life, there was a turning point that reconciles these roles. The conversion of the Apostle Paul was an extraordinary event that saw a murderer and persecutor of the church turn into one of the greatest evangelists in history and providing all Christians with thirteen books of the New Testament that give guidance for our daily Christian walk.

Who exactly was Saul? Saul is first mentioned in Acts 7:58 at the stoning of Stephen. Luke states that Saul was a young man and that the witnesses of Stephen’s death laid down the victim’s garments at Saul’s feet.1 Luke continues that Saul approved of Stephen’s death.2 Saul continues and begins going from house to house throwing Christians in Prison.3 These descriptions give the first glimpse of the ruthlessness of Saul in his persecution of the early church. They were to be stopped at all costs and he would set himself up as the arbiter of justice against the church.

The exact date of birth of Saul is not known, but it is known that he was born in Tarsus and likely in the same decade as Jesus Christ.4 Saul was born into a family of Pharisees, one of the ruling religious bodies of the Jews.5 Acts 22:3 states that Paul was actually brought up in Jerusalem and it is believed that this means he was likely brought up in an entirely Jewish

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1 Acts 7:58 ESV
2 Acts 8:1 ESV
3 Acts 8:3 ESV
4 *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Paul the Apostle."
5 *Who’s Who in Christian history*, s.v. "Paul, the Apostle (Saul of Tarsus)."
environment despite his dual citizenship. Saul had dual citizenship, he was a Roman citizen as well as a Jew. However, it is not known who in Saul’s family line gained the Roman citizenship.

Saul’s position was that of a Pharisee primarily. He also was a persecutor of the church and of the tribe of Benjamin. Partner points out that Saul was also a tentmaker.

Saul’s past is largely unknown. As has already been mentioned, he is first mentioned in Scripture at the stoning of Stephen. This gives a glimpse into the mindset of not only Saul but the Jewish leaders in general regarding the Christian church. Saul approved of this ruthless killing of Christianity’s first martyr. The mere presence of Saul at Stephen’s execution is evidence to the fact that he was familiar with the claims of the church regarding Christ as His resurrection. Witherup points out that the use of the word ἑυδοκέω indicates that Saul not only approved of the event at the time of its occurrence but that it was an ongoing state of approval. This indicates Saul’s utter hatred toward the Christian church which makes future events that would happen in his life more miraculous.

After the stoning of Stephen, Saul continued to go on rampages against the church of Jesus Christ. Saul had made a name for himself among the Christians as well, leaders in the church did not want to go meet him after his conversion because of the things they had heard

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6 Baker encyclopedia of the Bible, s.v. "Paul, the Apostle."
8 Philippians 3:4-6 ESV
9 Ibid
10 Who’s Who in Christian history.
11 Acts 8:1 ESV
14 Acts 8:1-3; Acts 9:1-2 ESV
about him.\textsuperscript{15} An interesting point has been made regarding Saul’s persecution of Christ, by way of his followers, and King Saul’s persecution of David. The message of note is that in the Old Testament Saul was the persecutor of the Messiah’s ancestor, and in the New Testament Saul, who became Paul, is the persecutor of the Messiah and his followers.\textsuperscript{16}

In the ninth chapter of Acts, Saul comes to a crossroads while on the road to Damascus. He is met by Christ himself and told to stop persecuting the church and to serve the Lord.\textsuperscript{17} The foremost persecutor and murderer of the church was now to become the most prominent figure of the church that he so desperately sought to destroy.

Saul was on his way to Damascus to find Christians and bring them to the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{18} It should be of note that Saul requested this trip from the High Priest. He wanted to persecute the church and the first verse of the chapter tells us that he was still breathing threats and murder against Christ’s disciples. However, Christ had a different plan and stopped Saul with blinding light and asked why he was persecuting him.\textsuperscript{19} It is no surprise that this event shook Saul. First, he had assumed he had been doing the Lord’s work and did not believe Christ was who he claimed to be.\textsuperscript{20} Second, the physical nature of the event, leaving Saul blind, would have shocked anyone.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{17} Acts 9:1-19 ESV
\textsuperscript{18} Acts 9:1-2 ESV
\textsuperscript{19} Acts 9:4-6 ESV
\textsuperscript{20} William J. Larkin, Jr., \textit{Acts}, vol. 5 (Downers, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995).
\textsuperscript{21} Acts 9:8-9 ESV
Saul was instructed to go on into the city to receive instructions by Ananias who would be waiting for him.\textsuperscript{22} The Lord had visited Ananias to tell him that Saul, from this point to be called Paul, would be visiting him, but Ananias objected. Ananias knew the things Paul had done to the Christians and was in disbelief that the Lord now had plans for Paul to use him for his work.\textsuperscript{23} Ananias, however, obeyed the instructions given to him by the Lord and ministered to Paul and healed him.\textsuperscript{24} This would be the launchpad for Paul’s ministry.

It is important to understand that the meeting of Paul and Christ on the Damascus road is not a work of fiction. This was an event that was substantiated by available witnesses. Acts 9:7 tells us that there were men traveling with Paul and that they heard the voice speaking to them. We do not know how many men were there and we do not know who exactly they were, but the fact that there were witnesses to the event solidifies the plausibility of the record.\textsuperscript{25}

Paul’s life dramatically changed after his conversion on the road to Damascus. He became an apostle of Christ as well as one of the most renowned and impactful evangelists the Christian church has seen throughout history. Paul seemed to take the commission given in Acts 1:8 seriously and worked with an attitude of going to the Jews first in all his missions.\textsuperscript{26} Paul makes very clear in his writings that he is not just any believer, but set apart as one of the apostles of Christ and has the authority of an apostle.\textsuperscript{27} This, of course, is significant as he was a persecutor, the chief persecutor as argued by some, of the church.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} Acts 9:6 ESV
\item \textsuperscript{24} Larkin.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Polhill, 235.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Ralston, 214.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Romans 1:1, 1 Corinthians 1:1, 2 Corinthians 1:1, Galatians 1:1, Ephesians 1:1, Colossians 1:1, 1 Timothy 1:1, 2 Timothy 1:1, Titus 1:1
\end{itemize}
As an evangelist, Paul embarked on three major missionary journeys. It was on these missionary journeys that Paul gave Christianity great theological grounding by way of his letters to various churches. In particular, the letter to the Galatians was written at the conclusion of his first missionary journey.²⁸

Paul also used his time on his missionary journeys, as well as other times, as a mentor to young leaders in the faith in discipleship. Perhaps the most recognized of these leaders is Timothy. Paul takes Timothy with him while he was in Lystra.²⁹ Paul considered Timothy to be a son to him. He referred to Timothy as his, ‘true child in the faith.’³⁰ This makes clear the special relationship Paul had with those he chose to mentor, but specifically, Timothy had a close place and unique standing in the heart of the apostle.³¹

Paul, also called Saul, is one of the most fascinating characters in all of Christianity past, present and future. Paul once had a fervent hatred for Jesus Christ and everything and everyone that had anything to do with his church. He approved of the murder of the Christian believers, most notably Stephen, and actively sought to destroy them and bring them to a type of justice that he created in his rebellious and blind thinking towards what God had been showing the Jews all along. However, Paul did a complete turnaround after his conversion on the road to Damascus because of an encounter with the Savior. This lead Paul to change from a fervent persecutor to a fervent evangelist of the known world.

There are many applications and lessons that can be taken from the life of Paul and, specifically, his conversion. There is nobody that God cannot use for his purposes. Paul himself

²⁹ Acts 16:1-3 ESV
³⁰ 1 Timothy 1:2 ESV
even noted that he was the chief of sinners. In using people, God can break the hardest of hearts and turn them towards him. This should be of great comfort to all those who are weary and guilty of sin, which is everyone. There is comfort in knowing that God can use someone no matter what their past holds.

32 1 Timothy 1:15 KJV
Bibliography


