

LESSON - 25

THE CONVERSION OF ST. PAUL

References : Acts. 9 : 1-18, 22 : 1-21

Acts. 26 : 1-23

Memory Verse : 1 Timo. 1 : 13-16

Objective : To realise the truth that the Lord is ever at work to transform lives. He transforms even his foes into friends.

Introduction : We have learned in the last lesson about Saul's home, birth and education. Now we will learn about his conversion. The life and testimony of St. Stephen were very helpful in the conversion of Saul. Let's study in detail how Saul was led to the Lord when he was still a youth.

In the history of the early church, Saul's conversion was a most amazing fact. There are three passages in the book of Acts which describe it. The author Luke writes about it in the 9th chapter; Paul himself speaks to the Jews in Jerusalem in Act 22 and in chapter 26 Paul relates his conversion story again before the royal court in the presence of King Agrippa.

SAUL WITNESSES STEPHEN'S MARTYRDOM :

After his education in Jerusalem, Saul returned to his home in Trarsus. Saul again came to Jerusalem in order to argue with Stephen the strongest Christian preacher. Nevertheless, Saul could not refute the wisdom of Stephen. Stephen's spirit filled speech and Saul's defeat before him arosed breath-taking thoughts in Saul's mind. He had also seen Stephen's face shining like an angel's before the Sanhedrin Council - the highest Jewish civil court. (Acts, 6;15). The Jews who were dumbfounded before Stephen's forceful words, become furious. They

gnashed their teeth against him. They dragged Stephen outside the city of Jerusalem. They kept their clothes at the feet of Saul and pelted stones at Stephen.

The last prayer of Stephen while dying might have made a deep impact on Paul's heart. Stephen prayed for the angry mob who were stoning him. "Lord, do not charge them with this sin?" Who else could love his enemies and pray for his persecutors except he who was a true disciple of Christ?

SAUL PERSECUTES THE CHURCH :

Instead of yielding himself to the truth, Saul again ventured to rebel against it. Saul determined in his mind to persecute and destroy Christianity in unparalleled proportions. Stephen's death was only marking the beginning of a strong opposition and persecution against the Church. It was Saul who gave leadership to all such destructive measures against Christianity. He used all his potentials fanatically to wipe out Christianity. He went from house to house, dragged out the believers, both men and women, and threw them into jail. Many were put to death. (Act. 8:3, 9:1, 22:4, 26:9-11, 22:19, 20, Gala. 1:13,14). Being mad within, by the Zeal for the Jewish traditions, he was blind to see how shameful and reprehensible before God were his threats and persecutions. He became aware of it only later (1 Tim. 1:13-16).

By the persecutions following Stephen's death the early Church was scattered outside Palestine. Wherever the believer went, Churches arose because of their witnessing (Act 8:1-4, 11;19-20) Christianity grew in Damascus one of the important cities of Syria also. Nothing would anger Saul more than this. He decided to expand his operations further to Syria. The Sanhedrin Council and the High priest had power over the Jews no matter where they lived.

SAUL GOES TO DAMASCUS:

Saul secured a letter of authority from the High priest to arrest or even kill the Jewish believers. Accompanied by a band of Zealous men, Saul started out. But Saul was caught by Jesus Christ whose disciples he was going to arrest and kill. When the believers at Damascus heard about Saul's coming over there they prayed to God for His mercy.

It took one week for the journey from Jerusalem to Damascus.

Most of the way lay in the deserts where animals like horses or mules were probably used. Thus they reached almost near the city of Damascus.

It was mid day, suddenly a light from the sky flashed round the travelling group. All of them fell off from the animals back. Since the light focused on Saul, he couldnt get up when others did and stood astonished. All could hear some voice speaking. Only Saul could understand the voice as speaking to himself. He heard "Saul! Saul ! Why do you persecute me"? Saul asked, "Who are you God?"

The voice said : "I am Jesus whom you persecute". Saul realised that what he thought to be Zealous service to God was sheer harm to him.

In fact, his conscience had been revolutionised by the witness of Stephen. But he rebelled against it so far as he was unyielding against to the truth. Rebuking his persistence in rebellion, Jesus said, "It is hard for you to kick against the goads (Acts. 26:14)

The Lord's reply to Saul's question, 'Who are you Lord?' was very convincing. The following two things are to be noticed:

- 1) ***That Jesus is Lord.***
- 2) ***That persecuting His people is equal to persecuting the Lord Himself.***

Further notable is Saul's second question "Lord, what do you want me to do?"

When Saul heard from heaven that Jesus whom he mistook to be false messiah was God, he bade goodbye to all his prejudices. He confessed Jesus Christ as 'Lord'. This change that occurred in him by the Holy Spirit was his repentance. Saul was converted (Ro. 10:9, 10, I Cori. 12:3, Mtt. 16:16, 17). Saul put an end to all his plans and affairs. He determined to take further steps only in the will of Jesus. He asked "Lord what do you want me to do?" The Lord ordered him to go to Damascus. But how could he go? He was led by his companions to the city ! How amazing is the Lords work! Saul stayed in Damascus three days blind and starving.

The Lord spoke to a prominent believer named Ananias there through a vision regarding Saul's conversion. He reached Paul's residence according to the direction of God. When Ananias laid hand on him and

prayed, something like scales fell from his eyes and he received his sight at once. Immediately he witnessed the Lord in water baptism. He was also filled with the Holy Spirit. Afterwards, he stayed there for a while with other believers.

EXCERCISE -25

Answer the following questions.'

1. Why did Saul go to Jerusalem again from Tarsus?
2. What did Stephens life and death influence Saul?
3. Who gave leadership to the destructive measures against Christiandy ? Why did he do so?
4. Which two questions did Paul ask Jesus? What did Jesus say?
5. Who baptised Paul?
6. Describe briefly the conversion of Saul at the gate of ` Damaiscus?

