

The Conversion of the Apostle Paul

What happened and why the different accounts

The events which occurred on the day Paul met the Lord in his way to Damascus are described three times in the book of Acts, first a brief historical sketch by Luke (Acts 9), then the apostle Paul himself describes his experience twice, first to a group of angry Jews (Acts 22) and then to Festus and Agrippa (Acts 26). In some of his letters, the apostle Paul also makes a brief reference to his conversion.

Paul's conversion

By comparing the different conversion accounts (see Table 1) the events surrounding the apostle Paul's conversion can be reconstructed: Paul was on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians. About midday, he was suddenly surrounded by a very bright light. He fell to the ground. He saw the resurrected and ascended Lord Jesus. The Lord spoke to him, and Paul spoke back. This brief and extraordinary encounter marked Paul's conversion. Before his conversion, Paul persecuted Christians with a clear conscience. He thought these acts were pleasing to God (Acts 23:1). The Lord values a clear conscience, but a clean conscience and our best efforts are not enough.

Interestingly, neither the Lord nor Ananias asked Paul to "repeat after me a prayer of faith." He was not asked to raise his hand nor sign a card. And yet people can be born again through a "prayer of faith." Every conversion story is different, but all conversion stories have in common some form of meeting with the Lord Jesus. We become aware of our sin, we begin to understand why Jesus must die on that cross, we feel attracted to him, we regret and repent, we call out for mercy, for forgiveness, we invite him into our heart, we surrender, we submit to his Lordship. Have you had your encounter with the Lord Jesus? After his conversion, Paul was told to wait for further instructions. The Lord also has plans for our life and he prepares good works for us to engage in (Ephesians 2:8-10). The

following three days of darkness gave Paul time to think, fast and pray, a time to seek God and to consider the practical implications of his conversion.

The name change from Saul to Paul is not connected to his conversion. Saul is his Hebrew birth-name and Paul his Roman name (Latin: Paullus). Luke, the writer of Acts, begins to use the name Paul as from Acts 13:9, this name being more appropriate as the events he narrates move into a more Gentile environment.

Is there a contradiction?

Paul was not travelling alone. He travelled with a team who would help him locate and capture Christian men and women in Damascus and take them prisoners to Jerusalem. What exactly did these companions see and hear? At first reading the conversion accounts seem to present a contradiction. In Acts 9:7 we are told that they heard the voice but saw no one. In Acts 22:9 we read that his companions saw the light but did not hear the voice of the one speaking to Paul. And why do the words Jesus spoke to Paul differ between the three conversion narratives? Let's explore these concerns in order.

What did Paul's companions see?

Comparing the three narratives in Acts, it is evident that the companions noticed that something extraordinary was taking place. Paul and his companions saw a bright light and they all fell to the ground. Paul, however, also saw the Lord Jesus. His companions did not.

- Explanation 1: Some suggest that Paul looked into the bright light and saw the Lord Jesus there. His companions saw the light but hid from it. They did not look into it. This could explain why Paul, after the experience, discovered he was blind. His companions were not blind.
- Explanation 2: An encounter with the resurrected Lord requires an act of God. Only after Elisha's prayer did his servant "see" something of the spiritual world (2 Kings 6:17). Only after "their eyes were opened" did the two disciples recognize their resurrected Lord (Luke 24:31). Similarly, Paul and his companions saw the light, but the Lord chose to reveal himself only to Paul and not to his companions. Paul's subsequent blindness was the Lord's way of making a self-confident Paul temporarily weak and dependent on others.

What did Paul's companions hear?

Did Paul's companions hear a voice? If yes, whose voice? If not, what did they hear?

- Explanation 1: In all conversations there are at least two voices. In Acts 9:7 we are told that Paul's companions heard "the voice" but it does not say whose voice. Some suggest that as Paul conversed with the Lord, only Paul heard the voice of

the Lord, and his stunned companions only heard the voice of Paul. The companions heard the voice (Paul's voice) but did not see anyone. Acts 22:9 specifically states that the companions did not hear the voice of the one who was speaking to Paul. They heard the voice of Paul but not the voice of the Lord.

- Explanation 2: Perhaps a more natural interpretation surfaces as we notice that the Greek word which is translated "voice" is also used to refer to "sound" or "noise." For example, Paul says that different musical instruments have their distinct "voice," that is, a distinct "sound" (1 Corinthians 14:7-8). The wind has a "voice", meaning a "sound" (John 3:8). A moving millstone has a "voice," that is, it produces a "sound" or "noise" (Revelation 18:22). Bearing these alternative meanings in mind, the two texts fit naturally together. When the Lord spoke aloud to Paul, the companions heard the "sound" of the Lord's voice (Acts 9:7) but did not hear the "voice" of the Lord (Acts 22:9). This was an unexpected and confusing situation similar to that experienced when the Father spoke from heaven in John 12:29, "The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him." Taking into account these different meanings of the word, some English Bibles, such as the NIV, translate Acts 22:9 as "My companions saw the light but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me."

These details provide some interesting insights. God sees and responds to those who seek to please Him with a sincere heart. The Lord Jesus has an eye, an ear and time for individuals. He is interested and desires to work with you and me as unique persons. Although a message may be spoken to a crowd, the Lord may use it to speak directly to my heart. From Paul's companions I receive a warning: I can be close to where God is working, I may see and feel that something odd is happening near me, and yet not be conscious of the Lord's presence, not be aware that the Lord is doing something!

What words did Paul hear from the Lord?

In each of the three conversion narratives, the conversation between the Lord Jesus and Paul is somewhat different (see Table 2). Remember that the Lord spoke to Paul in Hebrew. The book of Acts was written in Greek. There are different ways of translating the same idea, which would explain some of the differences in wording between the accounts. But the main differences become clear as you consider the purpose of the narrative. They have to do with emphasis. What details are told and which are not, depends on the interests or needs of the audience. For example, when Paul uses his conversion story to explain his change and mission before an angry Jewish crowd (Acts 22), he uses Jewish terminology such as "the God of our ancestors," and he stresses the Jewish credentials of Ananias, an important figure in the apostle's conversion.

In sharing his conversion story to Governor Felix and King Agrippa, his purpose was more evangelistic and his presentation time was limited (Acts 26). Therefore the apostle focuses on the great mission entrusted to him by the Lord Jesus (he does not distinguish here between those words spoken directly to him and those spoken via Ananias). Paul stressed that the hope that he proclaimed was no new invention. Whatever Paul considered to be of

secondary importance in reaching the goal, he simply omits. Therefore he makes no reference to his blindness and the miracle of restored sight. In fact, the participation of Ananias is completely excluded. Our personal testimony is no basis for objective truth, but it can be a very powerful way to illustrate how the Lord works with us humans. Have you shared part of your conversion story with someone? Have you shared with a fellow believer what you think the Lord is doing in your life? Even our failures and mistakes can be used by God to encourage others... if we share them!

When did the apostle Paul receive the Holy Spirit?

The Lord Jesus explained the situation to Ananias and urged him to visit Paul, so that through him Paul may regain his sight, be filled with the Holy Spirit and receive an outline of God's calling for his life. Although fearful, Ananias acknowledges the reality of Paul's personal encounter with the Lord Jesus, that is, Paul's conversion, and addresses him warmly as "Brother Paul." Had Paul already received the Holy Spirit? Probably yes. In the transition period between Judaism and Christianity we find a couple of people who appear to receive the Spirit of God after conversion (Acts 19:2), but the apostle Paul explains that the Christian norm is that believers receive the Holy Spirit at conversion (Ephesians 1:13). In fact, he affirms quite categorically: "And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ" (Romans 8:9). There is no such thing as a Christian without the Holy Spirit. If you have trusted in the Lord Jesus, if you have been born again, you have the Holy Spirit. This is a fact, not an experience nor a feeling. But, given the task which the Lord Jesus was about to entrust Paul via Ananias, it was important that the apostle be "filled with the Holy Spirit." This is something every Christian needs for prayer, worship or mission (Ephesians 5: 18). I need it. You need it. Do you want the Spirit of God to guide you? Do you seek to be filled with the Holy Spirit? This is a practical experience available to every believer.

Why was the apostle Paul baptised?

After discharging on Paul the apostolic mission, Ananias adds, "And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptised and wash your sins away, calling on his name" (Acts 22:6). Is Ananias saying that Paul needed to be baptised in order to have his sins forgiven? A previous statement by Peter at Pentecost also gives this impression, "Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). Perhaps the special audience at Pentecost required a special message. But later the apostle Peter makes it very clear that forgiveness of sins comes by faith (and not through baptism), saying "Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out" (Acts 3:19). This is forgiveness without baptism. Later Peter explains the same to a group of Gentiles: "All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name" (Acts 10:43).

Some translations give the impression that in Acts 22:6 Ananias is giving Paul 4 same-level-commands in a row. But the grammatical construction suggests the commands come

in 2 pairs: “get up, be baptised,” and “wash your sins away, calling on his name.” This last clause has strong Scriptural support. Paul later taught the same himself: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Romans 10:13). After the inward reality of conversion, follows the external symbolic act of water baptism. After Paul’s eyes were opened, Paul got up and was baptised, presumably by Ananias (Acts 9:18). Are you a Christian but not yet baptized? Your current situation is Biblically abnormal. Like Paul you should also get up and be baptised!

Conclusion

A careful look at the Bible references to the apostle Paul’s conversion confirms that they are in happy harmony. Our Lord is very recursive in the various ways He uses to speak to our hearts. Sometimes, like in the story of Paul’s conversion, He chooses to break into our well intended, hectic and robotic life with supernatural and even painful force. Sometimes we also need to “stop” on the road, to be able to listen, to be helped by another, to receive new guidance for our life or ministry. Do you sense that the Lord is trying to speak to you through some event lately? The Lord Jesus desires not only to save but to change us and use us in a little corner of His macro-plan. Do we really want to listen?

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Table 1: References to the conversion of the apostle Paul

Bible reference	What happened to Paul	What happened to Paul's companions	Others observations
<p>Acts 9 Luke's historical narrative</p>	<p>v.3: He saw a light v.4: He fell v.4: He heard and understood a voice v.5: He spoke to the Lord v.27: He saw and spoke to the Lord</p>	<p>v.7: They heard a voice v.7: They did not see anybody</p>	<p>v.3: They were on the road near Damascus</p>
<p>Acts 22 Paul's account as addressed to a group of Jews</p>	<p>v.6: He saw a bright light v.7: He fell v.7: He heard a voice speaking to him</p>	<p>v.9: They saw a light v.9: They did not hear the voice</p>	<p>v.6: It was midday v.6: They were on the road near Damascus v.11: The light blinded Saul</p>
<p>Acts 26 Paul's account as addressed to Roman governor Festus and Jewish king Agrippa</p>	<p>v.13: He saw a bright light v.14: He fell v. 14: he heard a voice speaking to him</p>	<p>v.13: They also saw the bright light (?) v.14: They fell</p>	<p>v.13: It was midday v.13: The light was brighter than the sun v. 14: The voice spoke in Hebrew</p>
<p>1 Corinthians 9 Paul defending his apostleship</p>	<p>v.1 – "Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?"</p>		
<p>1 Corinthians 15 Paul writing about the resurrection of Christ</p>	<p>v.8: "Last of all, he appeared to me also"</p>		
<p>Galatians 1 Paul defending his calling</p>	<p>v.15: He was called by God v.16: He was commissioned by Christ to preach to the Gentiles</p>		
<p>1 Timothy 1 Paul explaining God's mercy and grace</p>	<p>v.12: He was appointed by Christ Jesus to his service</p>		

Table 2: The Lord's words to Paul at conversion

Acts 9	Acts 22	Acts 26
Outline of conversion story	Detailed conversion story	Abbreviated conversion story
Luke's historical narrative	Paul's account as addressed to a group of Jews	Paul's account as addressed to Festus and Agrippa
v.4: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"	v.7: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"	v.14: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It hurts you to kick against the goads"
v.5: "Who are you, Lord?"	v.8: "Who are you, Lord?"	v.15: "Who are you, Lord?"
v.5: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting"	v.8 "I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you are persecuting"	v.15: "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting"
	v.10: "What am I to do, Lord?"	
v.6: "But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do"	v.10: "Get up and go to Damascus; there you will be told everything that has been assigned to you to do"	
v.17: Ananias laid his hands on Saul	v.13: Ananias stood beside Saul	v.16-18: "But get up and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you. I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me"
v.17: "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"	v.13: "Brother Saul, regain your sight!"	===
v.18: Immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored	v.13: In that very hour Saul regained his sight and saw Ananias	[Note: There is no mention here of Saul being blind, the visit by Ananias, his healing and his baptism]
	v.14-16: "The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear his own voice; for you will be his witness to all the world of what you have seen and heard. And now why do you delay? Get up, be baptized, and have your sins washed away, calling on his name"	
v.18: Then he got up and was baptised		

NRSV translation used