

Place: Lurgan Baptist 27:3:2007

Reading: Acts 9:1 -31

THE CHURCH ABLAZE

18. “ALL THINGS NEW,”

At a young age, John Newton went to sea. Like most sailors of his day, he lived a life of rebellion and debauchery. For several years, he worked on slave ships, capturing slaves for sale to the plantations of the new world. So low did he sink at one point he became a slave himself, captive of another slave trader. Eventually, he became the captain of his own slave ship. The combination of a frightening storm at sea, coupled with the reading of Thomas a Kempis book “**Imitation of Christ,**” planted the seeds that resulted in his conversion. He went on to become a leader in the Evangelical movement in eighteenth century England, along with such men as John and Charles Wesley, George Whitefield, and William Wilberforce.

On his tombstone is inscribed the following epitaph, written by Newton himself, “*John Newton, clerk, once an infidel, and Libertine, a servant of slaves of Africa, was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the Faith he had long laboured to destroy.*”

It was Newton who penned the hymn, “*Amazing Grace.*” Mel Trotter was a barber by profession and a drunkard by perversion. So debauched had he become that when his young daughter died, he stole the shoes she was to be buried in and pawned them for money to buy more drinks. One night he staggered into the Pacific Garden Mission in Chicago and was marvellously saved. Burdened for the men of skid row, he opened a rescue mission in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He went on to establish more than sixty missions and became supervisor of a chain of them stretching from Boston to San Francisco.

One day in August 386 AD, a professor of rhetoric named Aurelius Augustine sat despondently in his garden. Although the son of a Christian mother, he had abandoned his mothers faith in favour of a Persian religion. He also took a mistress, with whom he lived for thirteen years. Abandoning this Persian religion as unsatisfactory, he continued a futile search for truth. Through the preaching of the church Father Ambrose, he became intellectually convinced of the truth of Christianity. Yet he held back, “*prevented from accepting the faith by weakness in dealing with sexual temptation.*” Then in the midst of his turmoil, he heard a child’s voice singing in Latin “*take and read.*” In his Confessions he describes what happened next,

“ I stemmed my flood of tears and stood up, telling myself that this could only be a divine command to open my book of Scripture and read the first passage on which my eyes should fall I read ' Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and

wantonness, not in strife and envying. But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof.' I had no wish to read more and no need to do so. For in an instant as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled." Delivered from a life of sin and confusion, Augustine went on to become one of the greatest theologians the church had known since the apostle Paul.

Now church history is replete with accounts such as these, which highlight the power of the gospel to transform sinners into saints. Indeed the Bible says, "*If any man be in Christ he is a new creature old things are passed away all things are become new.*" (2 Cor 5:17) Nature **Forms us**, sin **Deforms us**, schools **Inform us**, prisons **Reform us** but only Christ **Transforms us**. For in Christ we become New. And nowhere was that transformation more remarkable, or has had such far-reaching implications for history, as the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. So this I want to talk to you on the subject, "*All things new.*" I heard about a lady who was coming out of a beauty shop and she saw a lady there at the door and she said, "*Oh, Mary Jones. Mary what a joy to see you. Mary its been years since I have seen you. Mary you look so different. Why you have slimmed down, lost weight, fixed your hair differently, made up your face differently, why you even look taller than you used to do.*" "*Well,*" said the woman, "*I am not Mary Jones.*" "*Oh,*" she said "*you have even changed your name.*"

Saul of Tarsus, got saved, so saved, that he even changed his name, from Saul to Paul which means "*small.*" And how remarkable he was. By birth a Jew, by citizenship a Roman, by education a Greek. He was thus a representative man of his age. He understood and appreciated Jewish light, Greek learning and Roman law. The three worlds of his day, the worlds of religion, culture and government as represented, respectively by the Hebrew, the Greek, and the Roman was native to his soul. He was as much at home in Athens as he was in Jerusalem or Rome. And the conversion of Saul of Tarsus which is recorded three times in the book of Acts (9:1 22:1 26:9) was probably the greatest single event in the history of the church after Pentecost.

My this man moved the world, changed the whole course of history and under Christ remains the greatest single influence in the Christian church. I want this to give you four marks of a man made new. Saul had,

(1) A NEW LORD

Look at (9:17) Now had you met Saul on the road to Damascus, you would have met a very zealous man who actually thought he was doing God a service by persecuting the church. Had you stopped him and asked for his reasons, he might have said something like this.

" Jesus of Nazareth is dead. Do you expect me to believe that a crucified nobody is the promised Messiah ? According to our Law, anyone who is hung

on a tree is cursed. (Deut 21:23) Would God take a cursed false prophet and make Him the Messiah ? No !

His followers are preaching that Jesus is both alive and doing miracles through them. But their power comes from Satan not God. This is a dangerous sect, and I intend to eliminate it before it destroys our historic Jewish faith.” My Saul’s attitude was that of an angry animal whose very breath was dangerous. Saul was out to arrest others when the Risen Lord arrested him. Look at the stages in Saul’s conversion. First of all,

(a) THERE WAS CONTACT:

Look at (9:3) This encounter took place about noon. (22:6) There was a “ *light from heaven,*” this was not something from the material creation, since it transcended in brilliance the bright Middle Eastern sun.

(26:13) Saul actually saw the Lord Jesus in glorious brilliance as he repeatedly testifies. (9:17, 27, 22:14 26:16: 1 Cor 9:1 15:8) Do you know something ? Although He does not do it so dramatically, God always initiates the contact in salvation. (Jn 6:37, 44) Christ is always the initiator. That’s why we never can be sure in whom God is working, but we know that God always makes the first move. We search for Him only in response to His prior advance. My the Risen Lord orchestrated the Damascus confrontation, and He directs our encounters as well. (a) And then,

(b) THERE WAS CONVICTION:

(9:4-5) “ *the pricks,*” what were they ? Well, a goad or a prick was a stick with which one poked an ox to get him moving. Sometimes an ox would kick up his heels at the stick, a futile endeavour. Christ was saying, “ *Saul your kicking against the interior workings of the Spirit of God is pointless.*” Can you see him as he makes this week long journey from Jerusalem to Damascus ? You see as he walked he thought, he thought about Stephens blood stained body, he thought about that gracious prayer, he thought about the Saviour that Stephen died for. He must have wondered whether his attacks on the church were just. “ *How can people suffer and die like this if they are believing and preaching a lie ?*” There were heart-searchings, convictions, scruples but instead of coming to Christ, he sought to stifle the goads of God by increasing the intensity of his persecution. Is this a picture of you ?

Have you come to the conclusion that the Christian life is the only life, best life, proper life ? But instead of trusting the Saviour are you resisting Him ? (a) (b)

(c) THERE WAS CONVERSION:

As the voice from heaven asked, “ *Why persecutes thou Me ?*” it began to dawn on Paul that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah and Lord. And this life-changing truth was confirmed to him when the Lord said, “ *I am Jesus whom thou persecutest.*” In that moment when he recognised Jesus as his Messiah, and placed his faith in Him Paul became a new man in Christ. My have you ever been brought to the end of

your resources ? Have you ever given up and given in to Christ ? (a) (b) (c)

(d) THERE WAS CONSECRATION:

“ *Lord what wilt Thou have me to do ?* ” (9:6) You see, Saul settled the matter of life-service at the same time as he settled the question of the salvation of his soul. (1 Sam 3:9) Now up until his conversion Saul had been following his own will, the Devils will, (Eph 2:2) the will of the priests who commissioned him (9:1) but now he cries, “ *Lord what Thou have me. to do ?* ” Saul’s first question had the word “ *Lord,* ” at the end, this is what Christ had been to him previously. His second question put “ *Lord,* ” first and this is where Paul kept the Lord from this time onward. Here was unhesitating submission: unreserved willingness, unconditional service. “ *Lord what Thou have me to do ?* ” My are you living under His Lordship ? Are you willing to do whatever the Lord wills without thinking about the consequences ? “ *Lord my friends have their duty and calling but Lord what wilt Thou have me to do ? Others must follow the light they have but Lord what wilt Thou have me to do ?* ” Oh, (a) (b) (c) (d) and then notice in (9:9)

(e) THERE WAS COMMUNION:

You see although salvation is an instantaneous transformation from death to life, from darkness to light, it takes time to plumb the depths of its meaning and richness and Saul now began that process. A whole new world was opening up before him for he had a

new Lord. Is he your Lord ?

**“ *Lord of every thought and action
Lord to send and Lord to stay:
Lord in speaking, writing, giving,
Lord in all things to obey.* ”**

(2) A NEW LIGHT

For Saul was able to see things he had never seen before. The psalmist said, “ *The Lord is my light and salvation.* ” (Ps 27:1) and when you receive the Lord you receive with the Lord a new light. (Jn 3:3) We read in (9:18) “ *and immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales and he received sight.* ” Saul had got light in the physical realm, but more importantly Saul had got light in the spiritual realm. For:

(a) LOOK AT SAUL PERSONALLY:

Can you imagine Ananias listening to the Lord and responding affirmatively, then asking a question or two.

“ *Go to Straight Street Okay, Lord a man from Tarsus. Fine Saul ? **THE** Saul ? The man who has been tearing up the church ? Lord are you sure ?* ” My Ananias probably left his house with trepidation but to his credit he obeyed. “ *Lord how will I recognise him ?* ” “ *Behold he prayeth.* ” (9:11) Who ? The enemy, the Pharisee, the warrior, the persecutor. Look at his hands clasped in prayer, look at his countenance bathed in tears, hear his voice uttering petitions. My

that house of Judas might have been filled with mourning, but now its the scene of spiritual victory. “ *Behold he prayeth.*” C.H.Spurgeon said, “ *prayer is the autograph of the Holy Ghost upon the renewed heart.*” My our Damascus Roads are generally less dramatic than Saul’s but they are meant to produce the same result. **Prayer !** We profess to have been apprehended by the Risen Lord but does He see us upon our knees ? Does He say concerning you, “ *Behold he or she prayeth ?*” Or do those gracious lips say,
“ *Behold he prayeth not.*” (a)

(b) LOOK AT SAUL PUBLICLY:

“ *And he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptised.*” (9:18) Baptism, for a Jew was and is a major step. Relatives may tolerate a member of a Jewish family who professes to be a believer in Christ, but baptism often severs all Jewish family ties. It is often followed by ostracism from the family and by active persecution. My by this act he was openly uniting with the very people he had hated and persecuted. His hated enemies became his friends, while his former friends instantly became his enemies. (9:23) Saul made up his mind that *loyalty to the Heavenly Family*, was more important than *loyalty to a Human Family*. My has the Lord enlightened you about baptism ? Do you see that this is Gods way for every believer ? Have you publicly confessed your new found faith in Christ through believers baptism ? (a)
(b)

(c) LOOK AT SAUL PRACTICALLY:

(9:18) Now the Holy Spirit was already active in Saul’s life, convicting him of sin, (Jn 16:9) convincing him of the lordship of Christ (1 Cor 12:3) converting him, (Jn 3:5) placing him into Christ’s body, the church, and indwelling him permanently. (1 Cor 12:13) But beyond all that, Saul, was to be filled with the Spirit in a way that uniquely empowered him for service. (2:4, 14, 4:8 4:31, 6:5, 8,) It was this same man who wrote some time later, “ *And be not drunk with wine wherein is excess, but be filled with the Spirit.*” (Eph 5:18) And this Spirit-filled life is a day by day control of the believer by the Holy Spirit. My Saul of Tarsus was changed. Personally he was praying, Publicly he was obeying: Practically he was abiding, but,

(d) LOOK AT SAUL PRIVATELY:

For privately he was meditating ! Now most Bible scholars believe that Saul’s three year stint in Arabia took place around this time. In his letter to the Galatians Saul described this time. Have a look at (Gal 1:15-18)
Now come back to (9:23) In actual fact three years elapsed between (9:22-23) Arabia ? What did he do there ? Why did he go ? How long was he there ? Well, there are some things that we do know about this visit. For example look at,

(1) THE PLACE:

In (Gal 1: 17) Paul says, “ *But I went into Arabia.*” Now this place is not to be confused with the territory of modern Arabia. This place seems to have been the Sinai wilderness. At Sinai Moses received the Law. Now at Sinai Saul learns about grace. My the first step in Saul’s preparation for ministry took place at the backside of the desert. (1)

(2) THE PERIOD:

Again in (Gal 1:18) Paul says, “ *Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter*,” So Saul evidently spent approximately 3 years in Arabia before returning to Damascus. Maybe you’re enduring a difficult period in which you feel like Saul in Arabia isolated, unproductive, waiting, feeling lost and ineffective ! My are you spinning your wheels, anxious to move on but going nowhere ? This difficult time may last months or even years, but it will be invaluable. For in the desert, God teaches some of His best lessons. Was this not,

(3) THE PURPOSE:

Behind this visit ? That Saul might prepare for future service by spending time alone with God. Did you know that every Christian goes through three stages ? The first stage as new believers goes something like this. “ *The Christian life is EASY.*” Then troubles come and the clouds darken and we say, “ *The Christian life is DIFFICULT.*” Then doubt and despair assail us and we say, “ *The Christian life is IMPOSSIBLE.*” Now Saul was in the first stage. If we had been there in

Damascus, we would probably have told him, “ *Saul you are the greatest thing to hit Damascus since Alexander the Great. So get going. We will be praying for you.*” But Saul was not yet ready for front line ministry. Saul’s impressive abilities and background, even combined with a dramatic conversion experience, did not qualify him for ministry. God still had some work to do to get him ready for what lay ahead. And the first step in Saul’s preparation took place at the backside of the desert.

Now the usual approach today is to promote a famous converts testimony, not to send him for in-depth spiritual grounding. The natural plan for Saul would have been **promotion**. Gods plan was **seclusion**. For if we want to serve God, we must spend time with God ! Do you take time to be holy and speak oft with your Lord ? Do you retreat regularly, daily, to commune with God and be prepared by Him to accomplish His purposes through you ? My God may not ask us to seclude ourselves for years or even months of preparation, but we must spend time with God one to one ! You see Saul had now received his D.D. (Dr. of the Desert) and he was now moving toward effective service. (1) (2) but then again:

(3) A NEW LOVE

I’m reading now in (9:19) You see one sure mark of a transformed life is the desire to be with fellow believers. John says, “ *We know that we have passed from death unto life because we love the brethren.*” (1 Jn 3:14)

What a tremendous experience it must have been for this former predator of the wolf tribe of Benjamin to sit down with the sheep. And what an experience for them. (3) Indeed if you look at this passage closely, you will see the outworking of this love for:

(a) ANANIAS EMBRACED SAUL:

Look at (9:17) The first contact this saved terrorist had with the church was the kindly touch of a fellow-believers hand. The first words he heard from another believers lips was the lovely brother, “ *Brother Saul.*” Now don’t miss the contrast between the words of Ananias in (9:13) and (9:17) In (9:13) he referred to Saul as “ *this man.*” But now in (9:17) he refers to him as “ *Brother Saul.*” Oh, Saul was not as long saved as Ananias but he was as well saved. Vance Havner says, “ *Birthdays tell us how Long we have been on the road but they don’t tell us how Far we have travelled.*”

“ *Brother Saul.*” My you don’t have to be gushy to let a new babe in Christ know that you love him. That firm handshake, that kindly smile, that genuine care means so much and thank God, for those in this fellowship who at the door and in the building have the touch of tenderness ! (a) And,

(b) BARNABAS ENCOURAGED SAUL:

For when Saul came to Jerusalem, the church there were afraid of him. Saul “ *kept trying,*” to get into their fellowship, but they would not accept him. Now their attitude seems strange to us. Perhaps Saul’s

“ *disappearance,*” for almost three years gave an air of suspicion to his testimony. Where had he been ? What was he doing ? Why had he waited so long to contact the Jerusalem elders ? There were many unanswered questions that helped create an atmosphere of suspicion and fear. But Barnabas, big hearted Barnabas, took Saul by the hand and led him among the apostles. “ *Men he’s for real. Its all right Philip, you can come out from under the table.*” Barnabas was an encourager, an enabler, someone who refreshed others. My are you like Barnabas ? Bringing a word of encouragement here, confirming someone else’s gifts there ? Reconciling believers with believers ? promoting the ministry of others ? The Bible says, “ *If any man be in Christ he is a new creature, old things are passed away, behold, all things are become new.*” Saul had a
(1) (2) (3)

(4) A NEW LABOUR

(Acts 9:15) is good summary of Paul’s life and ministry. You see Saul had been,

(a) CHOSEN FOR SERVICE:

That’s what the Lord said to Ananias, “ *a chosen vessel unto me to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel.*” (9:15) Saul was a chosen vessel for God had determined the course of his life. In (Gal 1:1) he wrote, “ *Paul an apostle (not sent from men , nor through the agency of men, but through Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised*

Him from the dead.” My the call to the ministry is not based on the whims of men but on the sovereign choice of God. ***Saul was a chosen vessel.*** And though he often preached to the Jews first (13:14 14:1 17:1) his primary calling was to minister to the Gentiles. Moreover, he was privileged to bear witness to his Lord before kings, such as Agrippa (25:23) and most likely, Caesar. (2 Tim 4:16-17) *Saul was a chosen vessel.* Who else but Saul could have stormed Mars Hill ? Who else but Saul could have planted a church in Caesars house-hold ?

Nobody in the apostolic circle or in the church at large had such intellectual gifts, such educational background, such strength of purpose, such breadth of vision, such tireless zeal, such a cultural blending of Roman, Greek, and Hebrew. *Saul was a chosen vessel.* My so are we all. Each of us has special training, talents, temperament, special background and upbringing, special culture and characteristics and God fuses all those things together for one purpose that we might bear His name to the world. Are you doing that ? Do you recognise that the Lord chose you not that you should be ornamental but instrumental ? (Jn 15:16)
(a)

(b) CHOSEN FOR SUFFERING:

Look at (9:16) First and Second Corinthians catalog the suffering Saul endured for the sake of His Lord. (1 Cor 4:9-13 2 Cor 11:23-29 12:7-10) And his

suffering, which never stopped until an axe severed his devout head from his faithful body, didn't wait to long to begin, only a few days. (9:23) “ *It is hard to be a Christian,*” writes Brennan Manning. “ *But,*” he adds, “ *its to dull to be anything else.*” Isn't that true ? There is nothing more difficult yet more exciting than following the Saviour.

“***ALL THINGS NEW,***” (1) (2) (3) (4) Some years ago an evangelist was preaching in Hollywood, California and a cowboy actor named Stuart Hamylin came to hear this evangelist preach. He got saved and he found his good friend John Wayne and said, “ *John I want to tell you what happened to me.*” And he witnessed to John Wayne and said, “ *John you ought to get saved.*” He said, “ *Its no secret what God can do what He's done for others He can do for you.*” John Wayne said, “ *Stuart that's a beautiful phrase you ought to make it into a song.*” My isn't Gods grace marvellous ? It reached and saved Saul ! Can it reach and save your loved ones ? Will you write them off anymore ? “ ***Its no secret what God can do what He's done for others He can do for you.***” Trust Him.