**Saul’s Conversion**

Acts 9:1-31

Key verse 9:15-16

15But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. 16I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”

Good morning! Today we will talk about Saul’s conversion. In the Oxford dictionary, conversion is defined as “the process or experience of changing your religion or beliefs. We have heard of many stories of conversion, but Saul’s conversion was so drastic: from the persecutor to Paul, the preacher and missionary of the gospel. In his conversion, the risen Jesus visited him, forgave him, and called him up as an apostle for the gentiles.

Jesus’ grace and mercy changed Saul to Apostle Paul who evangelized Minor Asia (what we know today as Turkey) and Rome. Due to God’s work through Apostle Paul, the whole of Europe was changed. May God remind us of our first graceful, individual meeting with Jesus and his guidance to his ministry so far. I pray that we could love Jesus all the more with the help of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

**Part 1. Saul’s conversion (1-19a)**

The name ‘Saul’s meaning is “the greatest one”. Before meeting Christ, Saul wanted be the greatest as a Pharisee in serving God. As a Hellenistic Jew, he was full of energy and conviction in his way to serve God. However, even though he was trained under the good rabbi Gamaliel, but since he did not know Jesus, he could not but be spiritually blind. From following his earthly teacher, Saul only saw Christians as a strange blasphemous sect from Nazarene. As a servant of God, Saul misguidedly concluded that this sect must be eradicated.

Look at verses 1 and 2. “**1**Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest **2**and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.”

It is said that Saul fumed out murderous threats. In the past, Saul observed and even participated in the stoning of Stephen, who spoke out to the Sanhedrin and became Christianity’s first martyr. Saul thought that Stephen deserved to his death. Stephen was regarded as a fervent leader of Nazarene sect who opposed to the Judaism, along with his blasphemous remark to the Israelites. All Christians seemed to like huge threats to Saul’s understanding of God.

So, in the name of God, Saul believed that he must arrest all those who believed in Jesus and put them into jail. So he would expand his persecution territory from the city of Jerusalem to the surrounding cities.

Saul might have heard that in the city of Damascus there lived many Christians. And so he left Jerusalem to arrest the believers and to take them back to Jerusalem. But on his way to Damascus, something mysterious happened. Look at verse 3. Verse 3 reads, “**3**As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.” From Heaven, a light flashed around Saul and his company.

And in the light, Saul heard a voice. Look at verse 4. “**4**He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”” In the middle of the shock due to the light surrounding him, he fell to the ground. Even the more surprising thing was that he heard the voice. The voice knew the name of Saul and mentioned what he had been doing.

Then how did Saul respond to the voice? Look at verse 5a. “**5**“Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked.” He had never thought that he was persecuting anyone and thought he had been doing great thing for God. But suddenly, this mysterious voice called out to Saul to stop, and Saul wanted to know whose voice was because the voice knew Saul. In the end, Saul, despite his best earthly efforts, knew little about the true nature and will of God. In great confusion and fear, he asked who God was.

Look at verses 5b and 6. ““I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. **6**“Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”” Jesus suffered when his followers were persecuted by Saul since he knew every one of them. But Jesus did not appear to Saul with fierce anger like how Saul treated his Christian prisoners. Rather, Jesus forgave him out of his great mercy and love. Jesus understood that Saul did sin out of his ignorant motivation and wrong spiritual direction, and instead of throwing him into the fires of hell, Jesus reached out with unlimited compassion. Even a murderer like Saul was redeemable in Jesus’ eyes.

Later remembering Jesus grace and love, Saul testified, “**12**I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. **13**Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. **14**The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. **15**Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.**16**But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.” (1Timothy 1:12-16)

Jesus forgave Saul out of his abundant mercy. And Jesus chose Saul and called him as his “chosen instrument to proclaim his name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.” (verse 15).  Jesus changed his identity from persecutor to Apostle. Saul could not forget this grace of Jesus and so made every effort to follow and please this Jesus.

From Saul’s testimony, we could learn that God’s calling is based on His unconditional forgiveness. Terrible and undeserved sinners are being called according to His will. And God heals them and changes them to work for His precious work. His calling is full of grace and mercy. We have nothing to brag about because we are undeserving for God’s calling. So, we might despair or disheartened due to our situations. But we must remember there is ample reason that we must be thankful always due to the grace of Jesus who forgave us when we were in the sin of darkness and called us into his wonderful light to follow him.

According to verses 7~9, Saul’s company could not see anybody. Saul became blind. In the Damascus, for three days, he did not eat or drink. During this time, God prepared a disciple named Ananias in Damascus. God sent him to Saul to pray for him. Ananias could not understand God’s words in the beginning but in the end, went and obeyed God.

Ananias said, ““Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” After receiving Ananiah’s prayer, Saul was recovered. Verses 18 and 19 reads, “**18**Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, **19**and after taking some food, he regained his strength.”

Jesus came to us as the light. He knows us very personally and has a best plan for each one of us. I pray that all of us may accept this grace with full of trust and welcome his calling.

**Part 2. Saul in Damascus and Jerusalem (19b-31)**

“Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus.” And verse 20 says that “**20**At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.” Saul was a man of truth, which means that once he thought it is truth, he pursued it right away.

Upon his change, what were the people’s response? Look at verse 21. Verse 21 reads, “ **21**All those who heard him were astonished and asked, “Isn’t he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn’t he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?” They could not believe this. It was beyond their common sense. Even Jesus’ disciples could not believe Saul’s conversion. Verse 26 reads, “**26**When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple.”

After Saul met the risen Jesus and became Paul, the Messiah, persecutions and hardships arose against him but they could not make Paul silent. Rather Paul was so confident in that Jesus is the Christ. And God’s ministry grew more and more powerful and the believers were increased. Those miracles of gospel happened in Damascus and Jerusalem, and later whole Minor Asia, Greece, and Rome.

Preparing this message I thought about my life. My life is full of God’s grace and mercy. God has been so patient toward me. I was born and raised in a non-Christian family. I am thankful for my parents now, but when I was young I don’t think I liked my parents. I understood them, but I did not like their darkness, sadness, and limitations. Especially, I decided not to live like my father. But when I was 18 years old, I was very disappointed due to my pride and sense of failure coming from not being able to go to the college I wanted to enter. I thought that I could not overcome all the darkness and destinies I inherited from my parents, so I wandered a lot. However, God invited me to the bible study when I was a freshman. The passage I first studied was the second chapter of John, which was about Jesus changing water into wine. After the bible study, I was inwardly angry because the shepherd seemingly regarded me as water. But by the grace of God I had a spiritual experience during the winter conference I attended.

If I had poured my life into the gospel ministry, then my life might have been different. Instead I moved back and forth because I had my ambition to succeed in the world. With great mercy God sent me five shepherds to help me to remain in this ministry. However, my spiritual wandering did not end even after coming to US. Especially when I could not finish my PhD study at the first school I attended, my disappointment grew.

But during the 18 years in US, I think God has led me like he cared about Jacob or Paul in the Bible. God has been graceful and merciful to the stubborn-hearted. In the conference last week, I could meet people I have known. They were from Toledo and Chicago chapters, and Shinsoo chapter in Korea. Through the conversations with them, I sensed that God has raised me, healed me, and strengthened me, despite that I made lots of mistakes and sins.

God has visited me again with the same mercy and grace. He has invited me to the work of God. On our way to St. Louis, we had lots of snow. In the car, M. Luke and S. Kit tried to memorize 1 Corinthian 15:58. “Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, Stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.” I have continued to remember this verse since. I pray that I may obey this verse through my remaining life.

In conclusion, the risen Jesus called Saul. Saul’s life greatly changed from persecutor to preacher of Gospel. Jesus’ grace made Saul pioneer many churches. Above all, Saul lived his happy life because he could earn Jesus that he wanted much by participating in Jesus’ suffering. I pray that we also accept God’s individual calling newly and obey to it. So we may not be lost but follow God’s guidance to the work of God. Amen.