

Damascus Conversion

Can the leopard change his spots? For most of my life I believed it was no more possible for a person to change than for a leopard to change his spots. No doubt some people could change outward things – their appearance, their circumstances, their jobs, their homes and so on. But they couldn't change their characters. I agreed with what the prophet Jeremiah said next (or at least with what I understood Jeremiah to be saying): “Neither can you do good who are accustomed to doing evil”.

As far as I was concerned, the world was divided in two. There were those who lived right, according to God's law, and there were those who did not, and never the twain should meet.

Can the leopard change his spots? That's what they said about me after I *had* changed. At least to begin with. After many years they had to accept the evidence. But then they tried to explain it away.

Of course that's the thing: I *had* changed. Or to put it more accurately, I had been changed. It all happened in one moment when my whole world was turned upside down, or I should say, turned right way up.

It all hung on one question: the identity of God. Now, I thought I knew God. I had been studying him all my life, or I thought I had.

I was born of Jewish parents in Tarsus of Cilicia, no mean city. Standing on important trade routes near the north east corner of the Mediterranean Sea, Tarsus is inhabited by half a million people of almost every race under the sun – Greek, Persian, Roman, Syrian, Hebrew. But when I was born there, it had already been the capital of the Roman province of Cilicia for over 70 years, ever since Pompey had conquered the region in the time of my great grandparents, and the leading citizens (including my great grandparents) were made Roman citizens. It was also in Tarsus that Antony and Cleopatra famously met for the first time.

My family moved to Tarsus many generations ago during one of the many persecutions against the people of Israel. We are of the tribe of Benjamin, and the great city of Jerusalem is in the ancestral territory of our tribe. Benjamin was our forefather Jacob's beloved son. His mother Rachel died giving birth to him, and his father named him Benjamin, "the son of my right hand". Rather ironic that, as many of us are left-handed! That all happened one thousand eight hundred years ago, but amongst our people we were as familiar with those events as the events of yesterday, perhaps even more

familiar, as they are written in the Scriptures and from our mother's knee we learned these stories. And I was called after the most famous member of the tribe of Benjamin – Saul, the first King of Israel. Of course, I also have a Roman name, Paullus.

In my early years in Tarsus, both in the home and in the synagogue school I learned respect for God's law. God had blessed us Israelites above all other nations by revealing to us the teaching of the law – both the written law of the Scriptures and the oral law of Rabbis like Hillel. I also helped in the family business of fabric and leatherworking. Tarsus is famous for producing goats' hair for making tents and we specialised in that.

Of course, because we lived in a city far from the land of Israel, we mixed much more with our non-Jewish neighbours than our people do in Judea and Jerusalem. I even had some Greek boys who were my friends. They told me the things they learned in their school and I told them the things I learned in my school. Some of the things they learned seemed very strange to me – they believed in gods and goddesses, not in the one true God. Although they also told me about some of the Stoic philosophers and poets who did seem to believe in God. But I often argued with them and sometimes we fell out.

From an early age I could speak four different languages – Aramaic was spoken at home, the Scriptures were in Hebrew, most people spoke Greek and sometimes I spoke Latin to some Roman soldiers.

But when I was thirteen, because I did so well at school, it was decided that I should go to Jerusalem to do further studies with the greatest Rabbi of the day – Gamaliel. He was the grandson of Hillel and one of the leaders of the Pharisees who were most zealous for God’s law. These were exciting times! Going up to Jerusalem, the great city of King David! Seeing the great golden temple for the first time! Being with the thousands of people who came up for the Festival of Passover!

But it was studying under Gamaliel that was the greatest experience. I loved the Scriptures, the Law and the Prophets and the Psalms, and I excelled under his teaching. He was a very clear thinker. A philosopher once asked Rabbi Gamaliel, “Why is your God jealous of idol-worshippers rather than of the idol itself?” He answered, “I will tell you a parable. To what is the matter like? It is like a king who had a son, and his son raised a dog whom he named for his father. Whenever the son took an oath, he said, ‘By the life of this dog, my father!’ When the king heard of it, with whom was he angry, his son or the dog? Surely his son!”

The only thing I felt sometimes was that Rabbi Gamaliel was almost too reasonable. It angered me how the Sadducees, the priestly families, compromised our religion with the Greeks and Romans, and how the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate did not respect our laws. It also angered me that many of our own people in Jerusalem lived no better than Greeks and Romans. Cheating tax-collectors and prostitutes were almost as common in the holy city as in Tarsus! And many did not keep the segregation laws about contact with unclean foreigners. These things were important to me then. I knew the corruption of the Greeks and Romans and I wanted our people to be separate from all that. I felt Rabbi Gamaliel was too gentle, and made excuses for people. I felt we had to be much harder on people who stepped out of line.

There was one man in particular who I felt was leading the people astray. He was an unusual man in many ways. He was regarded as a Rabbi by many of the people, but he had lived most of his life until aged thirty in obscurity. He was a carpenter in the unprepossessing town of Nazareth in the border country of Galilee. As the proverb said, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Then suddenly at age thirty he burst on the scene, first in Galilee and later in Jerusalem. All kinds of wild stories (as I regarded them

then) started circulating about him – healing the sick, calming the storm, feeding thousands, even raising the dead! Soon people were regarding him as more than a Rabbi. Some were calling him a prophet; others were even asking if he was the Messiah, the Christ, God’s anointed King!

It seemed clear to me then that he certainly was not. He mixed with tax-collectors and sinners, with prostitutes and Romans. He taught people that the traditions of the fathers were wrong. He said all our laws about clean and unclean foods that distinguished us from the nations no longer applied. Even worse, he claimed to forgive people’s sins. Not a particular sin against him, but all sins! Only God can forgive sins! I didn’t see then what is now the obvious conclusion. I thought him a blasphemer. In any case sins could only be forgiven by the shedding of blood, the sacrifice of lambs and other animals in the Temple. But he made himself out to be equal with God. He claimed God was his own Father! He even said, “I and the Father are one” and “Before Abraham was, I am”!

This kind of thing could not go on. For some people like the Sadducees and priests, it was political. If this Jesus of Nazareth carried on like this, he would start a revolution against Rome and our nation would be crushed. For me that was not what mattered. If he

had been the true Messiah, he would have succeeded anyway, Rome or no Rome. No, what mattered to me was that he was misleading the people and he had to be stopped.

Rabbi Gamaliel told me about some of the discussions in the Sanhedrin, our ruling council. I was still too young to be a member of it then. There were two men, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, who always stood up for Jesus, but they were outvoted. Even Gamaliel himself believed something had to be done.

Eventually things came to a head. It was during the great Festival of Passover when we commemorated the time when God set our nation free from slavery in Egypt, and all the firstborn were redeemed by the sacrifice of a lamb and the sprinkling of its blood on the doorframe of the house. Jesus of Nazareth upset the Temple authorities greatly by overturning the tables of the moneychangers and driving out the people who sold animals in the Temple courts. Even then I thought that was one of the best things he ever did, but it did bring things to a head.

A lot of things were done that Rabbi Gamaliel was unhappy with. Someone was paid to betray Jesus, some members of the Council and the chief Priests met at night to examine him, the Council then found him

guilty of the religious charge of blasphemy, but when he has handed over to Pilate it was changed to the political charge of rebellion against Rome. But in the end he was condemned to death – death by crucifixion.

We all thought that was the end of that. Even the crowds had turned against him in the end and chose a terrorist to be set free instead of him when Pilate gave them the choice. Now no one would follow him because he died the cursed death on a cross. As it turned out, however, it was only the end of the beginning.

The first thing that went wrong was that the authorities bungled the security. There had been widespread rumours that Jesus had prophesied that he would rise from the dead on the third day, so the Council prudently took steps to ensure the grave was secure. However, on the third day the stone was rolled away from the tomb, the grave was empty and the guards said Jesus' friends must have stolen the body while they were asleep! It was ridiculous!

However, that would all have quietly been forgotten, were it not for what happened seven weeks later at Pentecost. Thousands of people from all over the world were in Jerusalem for another festival when something bizarre happened. Some of the followers of Jesus, who we thought had quietly melted away,

suddenly appeared in Jerusalem telling people about this Jesus of Nazareth – but this is the strange thing – they were speaking in different languages, so that people there from many different countries heard them in their own native tongues!

Then one of their number, Peter, a fisherman from Galilee, stood up and preached powerfully to the crowds, telling them they were guilty of crucifying Jesus, whom God had made both Lord and Christ! Instead of a riot developing, something unheard of happened. Hundreds of people started crying and wailing and asking what they should do. Peter told them to repent and be baptised in the name of Jesus the Christ. Thousands responded!

As a result of such preaching even in the Temple courts, many people were being led astray and the ringleaders, Peter and John, were hauled up before the council on at least two separate occasions, but by this stage Rabbi Gamaliel was having second thoughts. Instead of condemning them, he warned that they should be very careful. He advised the Council to leave them alone, to let them go, for if their movement was of human origin, it would fail, but if it was of God, they would not be able to stop them, and they would in fact be fighting against God! Rabbi Gamaliel was never the

same after the trial of Jesus. Something happened to him.

In fact things went from bad to worse. More and more people were following this new movement, until finally one of them went too far. He was one of their newly appointed leaders called Stephen. He started arguing with people in my synagogue, the Synagogue of the Freeman, which was composed of people from my own province of Cilicia, as well as Asia and North Africa. Some said he was speaking words of blasphemy against Moses and against God and that Jesus of Nazareth would destroy the Temple. He was dragged before the Council and he made a long speech, a speech I will never forget. He concluded by saying that the Most High God does not live in manmade temples, and that we had betrayed and murdered God's Righteous One, Jesus.

We were all furious, but he looked up to heaven, and I will never forget the look on his face as he said, "Look! I see heaven open and Jesus standing at the right hand of God!" I am ashamed to say that all order was lost and he was there and then dragged out of the city and stoned to death. I was there looking after the clothes of the witnesses who stoned him first. His words always stayed with me, even although I hated them at the time. He said, as he was being stoned,

“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” and “Lord, do not hold this sin against them”.

From that point on I became a leader in the move to crush this new sect. I saw that it was utterly incompatible with our religion, our worship in the Temple and our rules and regulations. If it wasn't stopped, our religion, our whole way of life, would be destroyed. I was given authority from the Council and went from house to house to arrest the ringleaders, both men and women and put them in prison. When they were brought to trial before the Council (of which I was now a member) I cast my vote against them and condemned them to death.

I went from town to town to root out this blasphemy. I even obtained letters of authority from the High Priest to go to Damascus and arrest those in the synagogue there who were followers of Jesus.

As we neared the City of Damascus about noon, suddenly a light far brighter than the midday sun flashed around us. I fell from the saddle and as I lay on the ground stunned, I heard the voice of God speaking to me in my own language, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads!”

Everything I held certain in my life up to that time, suddenly flowed through my hands like water. In utter

confusion I asked, “Who are you, Lord?” Many would have laughed to hear Saul of Tarsus, the dogmatic Pharisee admitting that he did not know who God was!

But I was answered. The voice of God said, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting”. In utter astonishment I looked up and I saw him. Yes, Jesus of Nazareth whom I had been persecuting! I had grown to hate the very name of Jesus. But here he was, the exalted risen Lord, concerned that I was hurting myself by kicking out at all his messages and providences like a beast kicking against the goads!

He then told me that he was appointing me his messenger to bear witness to what I had seen and heard, and to tell both Jews and Gentiles the message of forgiveness. In that moment, my world fell down - the world that I had carefully constructed – a world of prejudice and hatred and violence – and my heart was changed. I knew then what my conscience had been telling me all along, that Stephen had been right, that Peter had been right and that the Lord Jesus had been right – he forgave sins because he is the Son of God.

When Jesus left me, I found I could see nothing. I had been blinded by the burning brilliance of the light. I had come proudly riding to Damascus to destroy the Church of Christ, but now in utter darkness I was led by the hand into the city.

My heart was full of many questions. What was I to do now? How could I become a messenger if I was blind? But over all was a great peace. It was better to have seen Jesus and be physically blind than to be spiritually blind and never seen him. For three days, I couldn't eat a thing. I was praying fervently to the Lord Jesus to show me the way.

My prayers were answered in the most unlikely way. A man called Ananias, one of those very Christians I had come to arrest, came to the house of Judas on Straight Street where I was staying. He had been sent by Jesus. Understandably he had been reluctant to come. My reputation had gone before me! I will never forget his first words to me: "Brother Saul!" They broke my heart. But he laid his hands on my head and immediately I could see again. And the first face I saw was the face of my dear brother Ananias.

From then on I have devoted my life to the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. He did die on the cross bearing the curse of God, but it was my curse he bore, the curse I deserve.

Perhaps you may have never done the evil things I did, but if you are guilty of rejecting the Son of God, you are under a curse, one that cannot be removed except by believing in the cross of Christ.

Acts 9, 22, 26