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Confronted By The Risen One

EASTER

In the 1700's there were two young men in England whose names were Lord Lyttleton and Gilbert West. They weren't Christians and were strong in their unbelief. They were also both lawyers with sharp minds, and they thought they had good reasons for rejecting the Christian faith. One day they were talking and one of them said, "Christianity stands upon a very unstable foundation. There are only two things that actually support it: the alleged resurrection of Jesus Christ and the alleged conversion of Saul of Tarsus. If we can disprove those stories, which should be easy to do, Christianity will collapse like a house of cards."

Gilbert West said, "All right, then. I'll write a book on the resurrection of Jesus Christ and try to disprove it."

Lord Lyttleton said, "And I'll write on the appearance of Jesus to Saul of Tarsus. You show why Jesus couldn't possibly have been raised from the dead and I'll show that Saul couldn't have been converted by a voice from heaven on the road to Damascus."

So they went off to write their books. Sometime later they met again, and one of them said to the other, "I have a confession to make. I've been looking into the evidence for this story, and I think that maybe there is something to it after all." The other said, "The same thing has happened to me," and they kept on researching.

In the end, after they had done their investigations and written their books, each had come out on exactly the opposite side he'd been on when he started. West wrote *The Resurrection of Jesus Christ*, arguing that it is a fact of history. And Lord Lyttleton wrote the same in *The Conversion of St. Paul*.

Most of us can probably understand why the resurrection is so important to the Christian faith. If Christ wasn't raised, then everything really does collapse like a house of cards. If the Bible isn't true on that point, then nothing else it says can be trusted. If Christ wasn't raised, he himself was either a deluded maniac or a deceitful liar. If Christ wasn't raised, we have no assurance that there really is hope beyond death.

But why is the conversion of Saul of Tarsus who later came to be known as the Apostle Paul so important? I guess we could say that if Saul didn't really see Christ on the Damascus road, then everything he went on to do and write is discredited, and a great deal of the NT was written by him. But there is something even more important than that. Saul's conversion points us back to the resurrection of Jesus. You see, it was the risen and

living Jesus who appeared to Saul. And it's only that which can account for the remarkable transformation in Paul's life.

I. Saul himself: his pre-conversion state of mind was hostile.

Consider first the state of mind he was in before his conversion. When you consider who he was and what he was doing, it's clear that something happened to him, something he didn't invent, to turn him 180 degrees in the opposite direction. We know that Saul was part of a very strict religious group of Jews called the Pharisees. He had the best possible education under a famous rabbi named Gamaliel. He calls himself "a Hebrew of Hebrews." As far as the law of Moses was concerned, he crossed every "t" and dotted every "i." And it was because of his passion for the law that he persecuted Christians. In the book of Acts, Luke mentions him three times prior to his conversion, and each time he's seen as bitter opponent of Christ and the church. When Stephen became the first Christian to be martyred, Luke says that Saul was there "**giving approval to his death**" (8:1). After that, Luke says Saul began "**ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women**" to put them in prison" (8:3).

"Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem" (Acts 9:1-2).

Here in chapter 9 he's still "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord." He hasn't changed. He's still hostile to believers, so hostile that he's now going after believers who have fled from Jerusalem and gone 150 miles away to Damascus. He went to the high priest and got written authority to arrest any Christians he found there and haul them back to Jerusalem to stand trial. So now he is chasing down fugitive Christians in foreign cities. He's a man with a mission. Luke portrays him as a savage. When it says he was "breathing threats" that's an allusion to the panting and snorting of a wild beast! It's safe to say that this man was in no mood to consider the claims of Christ! His heart was filled with proud hatred and his mind was poisoned

by prejudice. If we had met Saul as he left Jerusalem to go to Damascus and told him that on the way he would become a follower of Christ, he would have spat in our face.

But when someone is so opposed to something, you have to wonder what's really driving that. The famous psychiatrist C.G. Jung wrote, "fanaticism is only found in those who are compensating for secret doubts." Maybe that's why when Saul describes his conversion experience in chapter 26, he includes the fact that Jesus asked him why he kept kicking "against the goads." Jesus likens Saul to a lively and stubborn young ox who is being prodded and poked by a sharp stick and fighting it all the way. What was Saul fighting? Most scholars believe that at some point Saul had encountered the earthly Jesus. It's not at all unlikely that Jesus and Saul had visited Jerusalem and the temple at the same time. As a Pharisee, Saul would have been curious to hear him teach and perhaps see him perform a miracle. You have to wonder what kind of impact that might have had on him. Another goad would have been Stephen. Saul was there when Stephen was about to die. Scripture says that Stephen looked up into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at God's right hand. I don't think Saul saw what Stephen saw, but he could see the look on Stephen's face, and that had to have an impact on Saul.

These goads must have been bothering Saul as he set off from Jerusalem to Damascus. But nothing besides God's grace could explain what would happen next.

II. Saul and Jesus: his conversion experience was real.

"As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?' And he said, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do.' The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one" (vv.3–7).

He and his escort are almost done with their week long journey. As they approach Damascus at about noon, a light brighter than the midday sun flashes around him. Saul falls to the ground and hears a voice addressing him personally, "Saul! Saul!" Saul should have known this formula. Back in the OT, when God called Abraham, he said "Abraham! Abraham!" (Gen.22:11). When he called Jacob, he said "Jacob! Jacob!" (Gen.46:2). When he called

Moses at the burning bush, he said, "Moses! Moses!" (Exod.3:4). Saul should have known who it was, especially when the question is posed, "Why are you persecuting ME?" But he still asks, "Who are you, Lord?" And the Lord tells him, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." Imagine Saul's shock that the ones he's persecuting are one with one he's speaking to! He thought he was serving God; instead he was fighting God. Then Jesus tells him what to do: "Get up and go into the city and wait for my instructions."

The thing that strikes me about this story is how matter of fact it is. It tells us very little about Saul's inner feelings. It's not a subjective story about what was going on within Saul, but it's about something that happened to him from the outside; something objective. In his later writings, he confirms this when he describes what happened to him. He says things like: **"God called me through his grace"** and **"was pleased to reveal his Son in me."** (Gal.1:15-16). In Philippians he says "God took hold of me" as if he himself was the one who was arrested (Phil.3:12). In 2 Corinthians he says that just like God said let there be light when he created the world, in the same way he made light shine out darkness in his heart so he could see who Jesus was (2Cor.4:6).

It's significant that as powerful and overwhelming of an experience as this was, it didn't violate or crush Saul's personality. Jesus appeals to his reason and conscience by asking him a question and trying to get him to see the folly of what he's doing. He appeals to his will when he tells him to go into the city and wait for his orders. God didn't trample on Saul's personality; he still has his mental faculties, but it did humble him. **"Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank."** In vv.8–9 Saul gets up and, having been blinded, he has to be led by the hand into Damascus where perhaps out of shock he goes three days without food and drink. The man of action can now do nothing. The one who was like a snorting wild beast is now a helpless, bleating lamb.

I don't know how you can explain that apart from the truth that Jesus Christ really did rise from the dead and he really did appear to Saul on the road to Damascus. Nor can you explain what happened later.

III. Saul and Ananias: his post conversion change was complete.

"Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, 'Ananias.' And he said, 'Here I am, Lord.' And the Lord said to him, 'Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying,'" (vv.10–11).

Not only was he humbled but he had a 180 degree

turn around. Notice he was praying. Not that he didn't pray before. The Pharisees were famous for their formal and elaborate prayers. But this prayer had to be different. He later wrote that when we pray "the Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God." No doubt Saul experienced a new intimacy in his prayers, like the difference between talking to an aloof ruler and a tender father. I imagine these were prayers for forgiveness and prayers of gratitude for what Christ had done for him on the cross. The very same mouth that had been "breathing threats" now breathed out praises and prayers to God.

Another transformation we see in Saul is that he had new friends. First, you have this guy named Ananias. We don't know much about him. We know he was a Christian. **"But Ananias answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name'"** (vv.13–14). We know that he had heard all about Saul of Tarsus and didn't want anything to do with him. But we also know that he was obedient. Ananias went to Judas' house just as God said. **"So Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized; and he took food and was strengthened"** (vv.17–19).

Imagine how Saul felt when he realized it was Ananias, of all people! It's like you go to the dentist because you have a killer toothache. You sit down in the chair and the dentist walks in. Surprise! He's a guy you went to Jr. High with, the one you used to mercilessly tease. So right when you are in the most pain and the most vulnerable, the one who is supposed to help you may be nursing an old grudge! But Ananias didn't hold any grudges. He found Saul praying and he healed him of his blindness just as God said. He went even further and baptized him as a Christian. That's what people do when they become Christians—they get baptized because that serves as a symbol of what God has done in their lives. He washes them. They go down into the water to symbolize that their old life is gone and they come back out clean and new. But even before that I want you to notice how Ananias addressed Saul. He calls him "Brother Saul." What a tender thing to say. How do you explain that? Can a bitter enemy become not just a friend but a brother overnight? This is true of many of us here this morning. In our natural selves, some of us would be bitter enemies, but now we call each other "brother."

A final transformation that we see in his life is that he had a new purpose. **"But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I**

will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake'" (vv.15-16). God told Ananias that Saul would be a chosen instrument and that just as he had inflicted much suffering upon Christians now he himself would suffer much as a Christian. The persecutor would become the persecuted. And right away Saul begins to live out his new purpose. He goes into the Jewish synagogues and starts proclaiming that Jesus is the Son of God. **"Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God'"** (vv.19b–20). Isn't it amazing that the last words we hear coming out of Saul's mouth before his conversion were, "Who are you, Lord" and the first words we hear coming out of his mouth after his conversion are, "Jesus is the Son of God." Explain that change!

IV. How can we explain the change of Saul of Tarsus?

Let me return to Lord Lyttleton. As he wrestled with the account of Saul's conversion, Lyttleton concluded that there are only certain ways a person can honestly think about this story. If it didn't happen the way it's described in Acts, then only one of three things is possible. Either Paul was an impostor, meaning that he pretended that all of this had happened to him, or he was insane, or he was deceived by others. In his very systematic legal way and with relentless logic, Lyttleton examined each of these options.

A. Was Saul an impostor? Luke, who wrote this account, was Paul's friend; he undoubtedly got the story from Paul directly. That should count for something. But maybe it was just a big put on. Perhaps Paul was pretending something happened, but it never really happened. Paul knew the truth, but he fooled his friend Luke and many others.

If that's the case, we have to ask what could have possibly been Paul's motive. If Paul had gone to such lengths as to invent this story and then try to persuade others of its truthfulness, why would he do it? What would he get out of it? You might do something like this to try to get ahead in life. It might be a way of impressing people and making a mark for oneself. People sometimes do that in religious circles today. They pretend a faith they don't have because they think it's a good thing to be a member of a church and be highly thought of. Others want to be popular as an evangelist or some kind of religious leader. So they invent impressive stories of how God spoke to them or called them to ministry.

But, said Lyttleton, that was hardly the case with Paul. Paul had a bright future, and that bright future wasn't with the persecuted Christians. He had been doing very well in Judaism. He was a bright

prospect for Pharisee of the Year. If anybody was going to make a name for himself in Judaism, it was Paul. Paul couldn't have invented the story to get ahead. In fact, the opposite happened. Humanly speaking, he got behind rather than ahead. He gave up everything and suffered many things as a result of having thrown in his lot with the Christians. It's like someone choosing to go from a Super Bowl team where he is making millions of dollars a year to playing semipro football for nothing!

B. Was Saul insane? Was he out of his mind? Did he just imagine all of this? Does that explain Saul? Did Saul have a mind or personality naturally given to fantasies? We have to remember that as a Pharisee Saul was educated in the best schools by the best scholars. His later writings reveal a man of immense intellect and careful logic. As a Pharisee, Saul would have believed in the idea that one day at the end of the age people would be resurrected, but not now. So when he heard stories of Jesus' resurrection he didn't regard them as valid. This isn't a picture of a madman. It's the picture of a man who says, "I know that the Bible teaches that there will be a resurrection at the end of time, and I believe the Bible. But I have lived a long time, and although there may be a resurrection someday, it's for the future. Right now dead people don't rise. If Christians are saying that Jesus rose from the dead, they must be trying to deceive people." This is exactly the opposite of a person who is unbalanced. On top of that, Littleton makes a very good point. He says that the power of imagination in unbalanced minds is great, "but it always acts in conformity to the opinions imprinted upon it at the time of its working, and can no more act against them than a rapid river can carry a boat against the current of its own stream." It's very clear that the current of Saul's mind flowed strongly against the idea that Jesus was alive, not with the idea.

C. Was Saul deceived by others? This is the third possibility. But we then have to ask, Who would have deceived him? It would have to be the Christians. Could they even have thought of inventing something to deceive their great enemy? No way! They were trying to stay as far away from him as they could. They weren't capable of such deception. Even if they were, how could they have carried it off? A bright light from heaven? A voice that Saul believed to be the voice of God? And how could they have made him blind for three days? It's all preposterous.

What's the conclusion? Obviously, if each of these other explanations has to be discarded, the only remaining possibility is that the story is true: that there was a genuine appearance of Jesus to Saul followed by a genuine conversion. Lyttleton's arguments are

still valid. He was converted by the truth, and so are people today.

CONCLUSION

That's something to consider as well. The same Jesus who sought out Saul of Tarsus—humbled him, revealed himself to him, and transformed him into one who was willing to die for him—still seeks people today. And today there are still stories of people who have had an encounter with the living Christ, not always in quite the same way as Saul did, but just as powerful and just as life changing. The best explanation for that is that Jesus Christ really does live.

I could give you so many examples of people whose lives have been transformed like Saul's was. Anne Rice, whom the media called the Queen of the Occult, has sold millions of novels about vampires and witches. Several of her books have also been made into movies, even starring Hollywood big-shots like Tom Cruise and Brad Pitt. But since a near-death experience in 1998, Anne has had a change of heart—she's turned to Christ. In 2005, she stunned her fans by declaring, "I promised from now on that I will only write for the Lord." Her November 2005 release, *Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt*, portrays Jesus as a 7-year-old, and the veteran author worked painstakingly to avoid contradicting Scripture in her interpretation of Jesus' life. The book remained on the *New York Times* bestsellers list for many months. In the after word, she summarizes what she found in Jesus, calling him "the ultimate supernatural hero" and "the ultimate immortal of them all." In an interview with *Christianity Today*, she said, "Christianity achieved what it did because Jesus rose from the dead." Her life bears witness of that.

I'm another example of that, as many of you are. For the first 17 years of my life I had no interest at all in God or the Christian faith. I went every so often to church on days like Easter and Christmas. Like Saul, I can even remember ridiculing some kids in my high school who were Christians. But when I was 17 I began to feel a sense of emptiness in my life. Many of my own aspirations in high school achievements had been met. I was headed off to college in the Fall. I had lots of friends. But somehow when I should have been the happiest, I was struggling with something inside of me that I couldn't shake. I began to feel a deep sense of my own sin and guilt, and with that a hunger to be right with God. This went on for several months and the burden became almost unbearable. Much like Saul, I was blind and I became rather helpless. Then one night I came home and I knelt beside my bedside and for the first time in my life I really prayed. I remembered something we used to say in church, "Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." I realized that was talking about Jesus Christ who died on the cross in my place so that I could be set free and forgiven. So I cried out to him to take away my sin and make me into the person he

wanted me to be. It was like an act of surrender after months of kicking against the goads. I went to sleep and the next day I woke and I began to do some chores around the house for my mother. I remember stopping dead in my tracks in our backyard and thinking, "I feel like a completely new person. I feel joy like I haven't ever felt before. The burden is gone." And then it hit me—what had happened the night before. At that moment I knew he was real and I knew that he loved me.

And like Saul of Tarsus my life has never been the same. Like Saul, when I prayed I knew that I was loved and that I was talking to my Father and I was his child. Like Saul, I had new friends. I found the one Christian I knew and I told her what had happened and she gave me a NT and before the first quarter of college was over I had read it cover to cover. Like Saul, he gave me a new purpose in life. From that moment, I never thought about doing much else with my life than serving him.

Conversion experiences come in all shapes and sizes. Some are dramatic, others are quiet and matter of fact. But those who have experienced it are living proof that Jesus Christ really did rise from the dead and he's still in the business of transforming lives by his grace.