

**Pastor Jim Lloyd**

**Date: May 31, 2015**

**Title: A Radical Conversion**

**Text: Acts 9:1-16**

Gary Habermas was a young doctoral student at Michigan State in the 1970s struggling with his faith. Like so many young people who grow up in a Christian family and eventually leave home and their faith as well, he was definitely rethinking what he really believed. It came to the point of announcing to his mother that he was leaning toward Buddhism. To settle the issue rationally, Gary decided to do his doctoral dissertation on the resurrection of Jesus. He felt that anchoring his faith in the truth of the resurrection would give him the peace and confidence he sought. The chairman of his doctoral committee said the topic was fine, but added, "Don't come back and tell us the resurrection happened because the Bible tells us so." Gary's challenge was to demonstrate the reality of the resurrection without exclusively using Scripture. He called his approach the "Minimal Facts Method." He presented twelve historical facts that validated the core events and people surrounding the most crucial event in the Christian faith: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The results of his research on the resurrection not only literally saved his Christian faith, but Gary Habermas is now considered one of the world's leading experts on the topic.

Out of these accepted historical facts that he put forth in his research, let me mention just five. Again, these are things that the majority of skeptical scholars believe to be true. **1. Jesus actually lived and was Jewish.** This claim is only challenged by skeptics who have determined to disbelieve any facts that would point to the validity of the Christian faith. It's important to remember, simply Googling something is not equivalent to actual historical research. In contrast, any serious student of history will concede that Jesus indeed really lived. Probably the most notable skeptic of the New Testament today is Dr. Bart Ehrman, a former Christian who rejects the inspiration of Scripture. Ehrman, as an historian, said the following: "Jesus existed, and those vocal persons who deny it do so not because they have considered the evidence with the dispassionate eye of the historian, but because they have some other agenda that this denial serves." **2. Jesus was executed by crucifixion by Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator.** Josephus, the first-century historian, as well as Tacitus, a Roman historian of the early second century, are both key witnesses of this fact beyond the testimony of Scripture. These historical references are why even skeptics believe Jesus was crucified. We can establish this as a fact of history, not just a statement of faith in Scripture. Remember, though we as Christians accept the testimony of Scripture as God's inspired Word, we are showing here that the basic facts of the Gospel are accessible to those who don't share this belief. If they are open to honestly looking at history, they can clearly see that these critical events really happened. **3. Jesus' tomb was found empty by a group of His female followers three days after His crucifixion.** The sudden expansion of the Christian faith just days after His death on the cross could not have happened if the body of Jesus was still in the tomb. His enemies would have simply produced the corpse, and the growing movement would have been over. Instead, Christianity started in Jerusalem, the very place where it would have been easiest to disprove. **4. His disciples believed Jesus appeared to them after His death.** Skeptics suggest these were merely hallucinations or visions instead of real bodily appearances. As some have suggested, visions of people who have died are usually interpreted as seeing the spirit or the "ghost" of that person – evidence that they indeed died, not that they're still living. Remember that the idea of a resurrection was just as shocking then as it would be now. Just like today, people at the time of Jesus believed that dead people tend to stay dead. Using accepted historical methods that look for the best explanation to determine what actually happened in the past, we're able to make decisions about what's historical fact and what's fiction. The conclusion that Jesus was raised from the dead best explains the data. Since the resurrection is the foundation of Christianity, our faith is not the product of blind acceptance but historical reality. However, one of the key *minimal facts* I've yet to mention here involves a biblical figure who is the primary focus of the recent *A.D.* episode: Saul of Tarsus. **5. Saul of Tarsus was transformed after claiming to see the risen Jesus.** Historians of all types acknowledge that Saul (also known later as the Apostle Paul) was indeed a real person – a highly educated and religiously influential leader. Critics concede that Saul did undergo a dramatic transformation and became a follower of Christ. He eventually wrote the major letters to young Christian churches, such as Romans, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians, and Galatians, which are included in the New Testament.

With this firmly in mind, we want to focus our attention on this man Saul – someone who history tells us was very real and deeply important to the advancement of the Gospel. As *A.D.* has dramatically shown, Saul was "no friend" of the Christian community. In today's context, he would've been seen as a radical terrorist who would stop at nothing to destroy this new religion. Because of his prominence in the New Testament, I'd like us to examine the impact of Saul's

pivotal encounter with the risen Christ – his Radical Conversion. Saul stands out as history’s most famous convert to the Christian faith. His encounter with Christ and its subsequent impact on his life deserve a much closer look as we search for parallels that apply to us today.

- 1. Saul’s encounter with Christ gave him a new life mission.** As I see it, this event has to be one of the most dramatic (if not THE MOST dramatic) encounters with God in all of Scripture. It could be considered the New Testament parallel to Moses encountering God at the burning bush in the Old Testament. Moses encountered God as a consuming fire. Saul experienced Him as a blinding light. Saul’s encounter is also the source of the expression “seeing the light” and thus changing one’s ways. The end result of both of these moments was these men being commissioned by God to accomplish His purposes. For Moses, the call was to lead people out of physical bondage and slavery. Paul’s mission was to proclaim Christ’s message of deliverance from spiritual bondage and oppression. A common theme runs through the stories of those who encounter Christ in any way: they find themselves divinely “redirected.” Paul’s belief that Christ had been raised from the dead led him to spark a mass movement that caused multitudes to accept the Gospel, putting their trust in Christ. The church is filled with people who found their God-given purpose and destiny when they came to Christ.
- 2. Saul’s encounter with Christ changed his character.** Meeting Christ on the road to Damascus not only changed the course of Saul’s life, but it changed his character. Before Damascus, Saul was indeed religiously zealous, yet his heart was filled with anger, resentment, and even murder. In our world today, we can see this trait in people who think they are doing God’s work by harassing and harming others in the name of God. However, after Saul’s encounter with Christ, he became the exact opposite – teaching that the Lord’s servant *“must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth”* (2 Timothy 2:24-25). Instead of resorting to torture and persecution to get others to change their beliefs, Paul would instead pray, preach, and persuade them by the force of his arguments – even to the point of being tortured and persecuted himself. There is no greater way to state this change of character than the statement Paul later wrote to the Corinthians: *“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!”* (2 Corinthians 5:17). One of the greatest evidences for the Christian faith is the collection of stories or accounts of people who were radically transformed and are now trophies of God’s grace.
- 3. Saul’s encounter with Christ affected his relationships.** Encountering Christ can cause relationships to dramatically shift. Saul’s companions were baffled by his sudden turnaround from being a Christ hater to a Christ follower. Some even sought to kill him to minimize the collateral damage of his defection. Yet, this encounter also gave Paul a new set of friends – those who were completely different in culture and ethnicity. Similarly, Christ gives us the power to love all people, regardless of color or culture. Saul would become an apostle to the Gentiles, destroying ethnic barriers that were centuries old and deeply ingrained. In a world still divided racially and ethnically, Christ offers the hope of true reconciliation and real relationships with people from every nation.
- 4. Saul’s encounter with Christ made him willing to suffer for the sake of his faith.** From the very start of his new Christian life, Saul was told the price he would have to pay to follow Jesus. The man sent to help him, Ananias, could have said something like “Saul, I’ve got good news and bad news for you. The GOOD news is that Jesus told me to tell you that you are a chosen instrument of His; the BAD news is that you are going to suffer a lot.” This message doesn’t sound like much of the popular preaching of our day that promises the blessings of following Jesus without mentioning the cost of being His disciple. In his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, considered to be one of the most authoritative sources on discipleship, the German evangelist Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” These words certainly mirror those of Jesus as He consistently told His disciples that they would have to pick up their own cross and follow Him (Luke 14:27). It has been said, “Christianity is a cross, not a crutch.”
- 5. Saul’s encounter with Christ caused him to ground his faith in the truth of Scripture, not just personal experience.** Three years after his encounter, Saul personally visited Peter and James and verified the message of the Gospel (Galatians 1:18-20). Eventually, he would talk to John and other apostles, as well as those who were eyewitnesses (Galatians 2:1-10). He would write to the Corinthians the great Gospel creed, which he received from the eyewitnesses he spoke to (1 Corinthians 15:3-8), and which historians say would have been constructed no more than three years after the resurrection. These statements contained in the passage emphasize that Christ died and rose again *“according to the Scriptures.”* There is no other encounter like Saul’s recorded in the New Testament. The impact of his preaching and his works sparked the explosive growth of the

Christian church. Ultimately, because they witnessed and believed these certain undeniable events, the believers were willing to lay down their lives. History tells us that a majority of the original disciples were actually put to death rather than denying Jesus had been raised from the dead. It's one thing to give your life for something you believe to be true; it's another to die for something you know is a lie. The original disciples would have known firsthand whether or not Jesus was really alive. To them, it was undeniable.

6. **Application.** We don't need the same dramatic experience with Christ that Saul had to make a dramatic impact for Christ. As you embrace these key truths and allow God to ground your faith as He established Saul's, you put yourself in the place to make a difference with your life. Saul was able to change the world because he not only knew that the historical facts regarding Jesus were true, but he also knew what they meant. This is where we turn to God's Word for the answers. **1. Jesus lived the life of perfect obedience to God's law.** He was indeed a man, not some legend or myth borrowed from the Greeks or Romans. He was Jewish. His life and works were rooted in historical Judaism, not Greek mythology or Egyptian legends. Jesus came to fulfill what the prophets had spoken. But it was His perfect life of obedience to God that pointed to Him being the Messiah, *"the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"* (John 1:29). Ultimately, He lived the life we should live by keeping God's commandments. Jesus became the holy sacrifice for our sins that justice required. **2. Jesus' death paid the penalty for the sin of the world.** Even though history tells us that He died, it can't really explain why. For that, we must look to Scripture. Beyond being a threat to Rome, His words were considered blasphemous by the religious establishment. By revealing Himself to be the Son of God, Jesus made a claim to be divine. God indeed came down to man in Jesus Christ. His death fulfilled the words of Isaiah the prophet spoken more than six hundred years before: *"But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed"* (Isaiah 53:5). That's why we can say that Christ died the death we should have died...in our place. **3. Jesus' resurrection proved He indeed is the Son of God.** The empty tomb and the appearances of Christ after His resurrection demonstrate that He was indeed raised from the dead. His resurrection demonstrates conclusively that: Jesus is who He says He is: the Son of God. His Words are indeed true. Our sins are forgiven. Someone explained His substitutionary work on the cross this way: "Christ wrote a check for our forgiveness in His blood at the cross. And at the resurrection, the check cleared." **Putting these truths together, they form the essence of the Gospel, which means "Good News."** It could be summarized this way: God became man in Jesus Christ. He lived the life we should have lived and died the death we should have died...in our place. Three days later, He rose from the dead, proving He was the Son of God, and now offers salvation to everyone who repents and believes in Him. I want to challenge you to memorize and master this message and be able to confidently communicate it to others. By believing this with all our hearts, we can be saved and delivered from the power of darkness. By communicating it clearly to others, they can be too!
7. **Conclusion.** The question is this: "If skeptics know these things are historically true, why don't they believe?" Obviously, this inquiry reveals one of the most mysterious and misunderstood aspects of our existence – doubt. In a court of law, the burden of proof is "beyond a *reasonable* doubt," not "*possible* doubt." Skeptics say things like "Isn't it *possible* that His disciples stole His body and then went out to preach He had been resurrected?" Yes, that's *possible*, but it's not *reasonable*. To make a rational, reasonable decision, we don't really need 100 percent certainty about anything. In the same way, God has given us enough evidence to believe. Because Gary Habermas struggled so much with doubt, he has deep compassion on those with similar struggles with doubt. He describes three kinds of doubt: factual doubt, emotional doubt, and volitional doubt. If your issue is factual doubt (doubting that these truths are facts of history), then this message should go a long way to helping you believe. Yet, many can know the correct facts but still not believe. The issue could be due to emotional doubt, which points to an experience that has left a person in a place where they can't overcome the emotional hurdles of a bad religious experience, a failed relationship with someone who claimed to be a Christian, or simply a fear of not being able to follow Christ and keep His commandments. Finally, it could come down to volitional doubt, which in essence is an act of your will. Every person has a choice. God gave the human race the privilege He gave no other creature – the power to make real choices. Moses spoke to the people of Israel and declared God's challenge: *"This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live"* (Deuteronomy 30:19). As Saul, who would later be known as the Apostle Paul, said, *"If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved"* (Romans 10:9). This very day, you have the awesome opportunity to take a step of faith – not a blind step, but rather one with spiritual

sight, given the evidence – that the tomb of Jesus is empty and that He indeed has been raised from the dead. Because Christ has been raised, you and I can be raised up into a new life and, just like Saul, possess a faith that is undeniable.