



## Lesson 22: Is Jesus the Son of God?

### The Conversion of Saul of Tarsus

#### THE CONVERSION THAT CONVERTED

George Lyttelton lived in England from 1709 to 1773. He was educated at Oxford and served a number of years in Parliament. Like many of the well-educated elites of his day, Lyttelton came to doubt that Christianity was true. In fact, he set out to prove that Christianity was false by exposing what he deemed to be the fraudulent account of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. Here is the entry from *Wikipedia* describing his efforts:

"In the 1740s, Lyttelton and Gilbert West... agreed to research two key points of Christianity, with the aim of proving them false. Lyttelton set out to prove that Saul of Tarsus was never really converted to Christianity, and West intended to demonstrate that Jesus never really rose from the dead. Each planned to do a painstaking job, taking a year to establish his case. But as they proceeded, they eventually concluded that Christianity was true..."

"West eventually wrote *Observations on the History and Evidences of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ*. Lyttelton wrote a lengthy text titled *Observations on the Conversion and Apostleship of St. Paul...* West became convinced of the truth of the Resurrection, and Lyttelton of the genuine conversion of Saint Paul on the basis of it."

Lyttelton wrote to West in 1761,

*"Sir, in a late conversation we had together upon the subject of the Christian religion, I told you that besides all the proofs of it which may be drawn from the prophecies of the Old Testament, from the necessary connection it has with the whole system of the Jewish religion, from the miracles of Christ, and from the evidence given of his reflection by all the other apostles, I thought the conversion and apostleship of Saint Paul alone, duly considered, was of itself a demonstration sufficient to prove Christianity a divine revelation."*

Saul's conversion not only convinced Lyttelton, but also many others before him, that Jesus is indeed the Christ, the Son of God. Saul's conversion account is used repeatedly by Saul (Paul) himself to defend his faith and point unbelievers to Christ (Acts 22:1-16; 26:1-23). In his excellent workbook entitled *Evidences to Strengthen Your Faith*, Ferrell Jenkins gives of an overview of Lyttelton's findings concerning Saul's conversion. Most of the information in the remainder of this lesson is drawn from Jenkins' synopsis.

#### WHAT COULD EXPLAIN SAUL'S CONVERSION?

If Saul's conversion was somehow fraudulent, what could explain the account of it given in the Scriptures? Here are the options:

1. **Perhaps Saul was an imposter who said what he did about his conversion with the intent to deceive people.** This possibility begs the question of motive. What reason would Paul have for deceiving people?
  - ***It wasn't for wealth or the promise of easy money!*** (1 Corinthians 4:11-12; 2 Corinthians 12:14-15; 2 Thessalonians 3:7-8)
  - ***It wasn't for glory or reputation.*** (1 Corinthians 4:13; 2 Timothy 1:8)
  - ***It wasn't for power.*** (1 Corinthians 1:13; 2 Corinthians 4:5; 1 Thessalonians 2:6)
  - ***It wasn't for gratification of some carnal passion.*** (1 Thessalonians 2:10; 2 Cor. 7:2)
  - ***He wasn't a pious fraud.*** Paul was not pretending to receive revelations merely to perpetuate a religious order, like Joseph Smith or some modern day televangelist. Paul's conversion resulted in the loss of all things, including his high position in mainline

Judaism (Philippians 3:4-8; Acts 22:3-5). Furthermore, his miracles attest to the reality of his God-given revelations (2 Corinthians 12:12).

2. **Perhaps Saul was moved by his own emotional and enthusiastic nature, causing him to fall prey to “an overheated imagination”.** While Paul was a passionate man, everything we know about him suggests that he was reasonable, matter-of-fact, and practical. At no time in his interactions with others does he appear to lose this self-control and level-headedness, even when all around him were doing so (Acts 21:30—22:3; 26:24-29).  
We have all known of people whose psychological make-up is so unstable that they get carried away with their own imaginations. They see what they expect to see, and their own fanciful thoughts become reality to them. Paul shows no signs of such inclinations. In fact, having been thoroughly grounded in Rabbinic Judaism, Saul was fully convinced that Christianity was a damnable heresy. He had devoted himself as a prime persecutor of Christians from the time of Stephen (Acts 26:9-11). Saul of Tarsus was the last person on earth one would expect to *imagine* his experience on the road to Damascus.
3. **Perhaps Saul was deceived by the fraud of others.** But who would have perpetrated such deceit on Saul? The disciples of Christ were scrupulously honest – even to the point of suffering great personal loss. Besides which, it would have been physically impossible for them to produce a light brighter than the midday sun, a voice from heaven, blindness that lasted for three days, etc. And if Paul had been the deceived, where did he get his miraculous powers?

#### PAUL RAN A HARD RACE AND KEPT THE FAITH

Few lives have ever been as singularly dedicated to a cause as the life of the apostle Paul. The description of his sufferings found in 2 Corinthians 11:23-31 leaves us in awe of his unwavering conviction. Later, he was willing to suffer further imprisonment, trials, and death because of His testimony concerning Jesus Christ (Acts 20:19-24; Philippians 1:12-14; 2 Timothy 2:8-10; 4:6-8, 16-17). Are these the actions of a man who was a fraud or had a fanciful imagination? Saul’s transformation from persecutor to apostle provides strong evidence that he had actually come in contact with the transforming power of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

#### QUESTIONS:

1. Can you think of anything not discussed in this lesson that might have motivated Saul to become an imposter and a deceiver? If so, be prepared to bring it up in class discussion.
2. Have you ever known someone who thought that things they had imagined were real? Does Paul fit the profile of such a person?
3. What would the disciples have had to do to trick Paul into believing he had encountered Christ on the road to Damascus if in fact he had not?
4. Do you agree with Lyttelton that the conversion of Saul is sufficient by itself to prove Christianity true? Why or why not?