

# THE YOKE OF CHRIST

by Ray C. Stedman

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The ninth chapter of Acts is the story of the conversion of Paul, of when Saul of Tarsus became the mighty Apostle Paul. It is a great mistake to think, as many people do, that what happened to Saul on the Damascus road is a complete explanation of everything which can account for the mighty influence of this man during the rest of his life. Paul became a Christian on the road to Damascus but he did not start living the Christian life in all its fullness and potential power for quite a number of years after that. He had many lessons to learn first.

When Jesus was here on earth in the flesh, he said to his disciples on one occasion words which many of you know by heart: "Come unto me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest," {cf, Matt 11:28}. Then he added: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am meek and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls," {Matt 11:29 RSV}. Those two verses mark two separate stages in Christian development:

1. "Come unto me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." That is how to become a Christian. The simplest possible statement of the gospel is the three words of Jesus: "Come unto me." He does not add any qualifications. If you want to become a Christian, come unto him and bring all your problems, all your troubles, your concerns, your cares. Don't try to clean yourself up, make yourself better; just come as you are. That is his invitation, and he promises, "I will give you rest." Millions through the centuries have come to Christ on those terms and found that he gives exactly what he says he will -- rest of heart.
2. But then he says something more: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; ... and you will find rest for your souls." You become a Christian by coming to Christ, but you learn how to live as a Christian, how to live the Christian life, by taking Christ's yoke upon you. You cannot really live the Christian life until you assume the yoke of Christ. A yoke is the bow of wood by which two draft animals are tied together to pull a load. To take on the yoke of Christ means to submit to him, to his leadership, his Lordship. To do that is to discover what it means to live as a Christian really is intended to live.

Paul had to learn that. He did not just suddenly begin to live the Christian life in all the fullness of its power when he was converted on the Damascus road, although it might appear so from some of Scripture. We need to understand that there was a period during which Paul was being taught how to take the yoke of Christ upon himself. That is what we will see in the account beginning at the middle of Verse 19, where a new paragraph begins in the Revised Standard Version:

**For several days he was with the disciples at Damascus. And in the synagogues immediately he proclaimed Jesus, saying, "He is the Son of God." And all who heard him were amazed, and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called on this name? And he has come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests." {Acts 9:19b-21 RSV}**

I want to stop there because there is a definite break in this account at that point. These verses describe the initial witness of the apostle after he became a Christian. He came into Damascus and was there, blind, for three days and nights. Then Ananias came and prayed for him. He received his sight, was filled with the Holy Spirit, and was baptized. Thus he had all the basic equipment necessary for living the Christian life.

He begins immediately to proclaim Jesus, saying, "He is the Son of God." In other words, he starts proclaiming the Lordship of Jesus Christ; that Jesus is Lord, that he is God; that he is the Lord of heaven and of earth. He owns all things. All things exist for him and are upheld by his power. He is the meaning behind all history, and the purpose behind all living. This is the great truth to which the apostle came on the Damascus

road. When he saw Jesus in that brilliant light which flashed around him as he lay in the dust of the road he learned this one, unforgettable truth: Jesus Christ is Lord.

In his letter to the Philippians Paul says there is coming a day when, in the whole universe, "every knee shall bow, ... and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father," {Phil 2:10-11 RSV}. That is the fundamental declaration of the Christian faith. Jesus of Nazareth, the man who walked the hills of Judea, who taught beside the lake of Galilee, who was born in Bethlehem, grew up in Nazareth, and lived in the little land of Palestine for thirty-three-and-one-half years -- that man is Lord of heaven and earth.

That is a very important truth to understand because it is fundamental to the new birth. You become a Christian when you understand and accept, in your own life, the authority of the Lordship of Jesus. You do not become a Christian when you accept him as your Savior; that idea is not in the New Testament. You can find no verses in the New Testament which offer the Lord Jesus as the Savior of the world. He is offered as Lord. When he is accepted as Lord, he becomes Savior. That is the way the Bible puts it.

We have twisted this around and, unfortunately, millions of people have tried to accept the Saviorhood of Jesus without his Lordship. As a result, there is no change in their lives. Nothing happens to them. They are not born again. It is understanding the fact that Jesus is the Son of God, that Jesus is Lord, which produces the change of heart that allows the Holy Spirit to bring a person fully into the family of God. Only then is he born again. All the offers of salvation in the New Testament are put in those terms.

Remember that this mighty apostle, in writing to the Romans, says, "if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead [i.e., that he is a risen Lord, a living Lord], you will be saved," {Rom 10:9 RSV}. That is when salvation occurs. And, to the Corinthians he says, "What we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake," {2 Cor 4:5 RSV}. Wherever Paul went he proclaimed the great fact that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. That is what is necessary.

It is not that the Apostle Paul, or any other person, understands all that is implied by the Lordship of Christ, all that it will mean in terms of his rule over their life. But to become a Christian you must understand that this man of Galilee is the Lord of heaven and earth, that he has the right to all things, and is the Lord of your life. When, by the Holy Spirit, you are able to say, "Jesus is my Lord," then you have become a Christian. That is what the apostle experienced.

The initial witness of any Christian, therefore, is to this fact: Jesus is Lord. Some come to this truth suddenly, as Paul did. Some have their eyes opened, seemingly, after only one hearing of the fact that Jesus is Lord. Others seem to grow into it more gradually. There is a variety of experience, but it all must come out at one place -- if you are going to become a Christian, it is on the understanding that Jesus is the Son of God.

Now the verse which follows immediately in Acts 9 marks a different sort of testimony by the apostle:

**But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ [i.e., the Messiah]. {Acts 9:22 RSV}**

Christ is the Greek word for the Hebrew term, Messiah. He proved from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah. But he did not do that at first. That came only after another experience which Luke does not tell us about but which Paul himself recounts for us. You see, Dr. Luke is giving us but a brief survey of what happened in the early church, and he leaves out certain events which we need to fill in from other Scriptures. He does not tell us the full story here. But, between Verses 21 and 22, we need to put a phrase like the opening one of Verse 23: "When many days had passed." We learn from the epistle to the Galatians that a period of many days, three years in fact, comes in between Verses 21 and 22. What happened during that time? Paul tells us himself in the first chapter of Galatians. In his own account of his conversion he says,

**But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the**

**Gentiles, I did not confer with flesh and blood [i.e., I did not talk this over with anyone], nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me [I did not compare notes with the twelve], but I went away into Arabia; and again I returned to Damascus. {Gal 1:15-17 RSV}**

Luke tells us that immediately after the apostle was converted he began to tell everybody that Jesus is the Son of God, Jesus is Lord, Jesus is the ruler over all things. But after a few days he found it necessary somehow to square this with all he had been taught in the Scriptures. And so, taking the Scriptures under his arm, he went away into the desert, into Arabia. We do not know how long he was there; he does not tell us. But he was there long enough to go through all the Scriptures and read them again in the light of the amazing thing that had happened to him on the Damascus road.

As he began to read through the Old Testament again, he saw Jesus Christ on every page. Everywhere he turned the Old Testament was speaking of Jesus. In the Prophets, in the Psalms, in Moses and the Law, everywhere it all pointed to Jesus. Paul began to discover what others have discovered since: that the Old Testament is as full of Christ as the New. The sacrifices and the offerings are all pictures of Jesus. The very configuration of the tabernacle is a picture of the life of Jesus. Jesus is everywhere throughout the Old Testament.

As he studied these Scriptures there was born in his heart a great yearning and conviction. He did what many of us have done. He tried to second-guess what God would do with him. He tried to fit himself into the pattern of what God was doing and what his part would be. He was still a young man. He had his whole life to live before him. So he tried to figure why it was that Christ had arrested him in such dramatic fashion on the Damascus road. He came up with this conviction: (The Bible does not say this explicitly, but it is clearly implied in many, many places) He was convinced that God had determined that he would be the one to reach the nation of Israel. This stubborn, obstinate nation of the Jews needed someone who would convince them, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Jesus was the Messiah.

You can see how Paul would reason. "Who is better equipped for this than I? Why, I am born a Hebrew of the Hebrews. I've got the background, the breeding, the ancestry to do this job right. I've got what it takes. I was circumcised on the eighth day. I've been raised as a Pharisee, the strictest sect in all Israel. I know the Old Testament from beginning to end, from Genesis to Malachi. I've been raised on it. I had considerable standing among the rulers of the Jews; they accepted me. I even persecuted the church. Who is better equipped than I to reach this nation of Israel?"

And, as he tells us himself in many places in the epistles, there was a great, eager hunger in his heart to reach his own people. Read the opening words of Romans 9 where he says, "I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, Israel," {cf, Rom 9:3 RSV}. He hungers to reach them, and he thinks he sees what God is doing. "God has called me to be the one. I've got all the equipment that it takes. I've got all the background, all the training, all the provision necessary to reach this stubborn people."

So he came back to Damascus from Arabia, confident, knowledgeable, eager, able in the Scriptures, increased all the more in strength, confounding the Jews, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ. Can you not see him? A seminary graduate with a D. D. degree, Doctor of the Desert, feeling called now to go into Damascus and, with the power of his intellectual might, just to wipe out all the opposition before him and to convince these stubborn Jews that Jesus is their Messiah. And he does. He is unbeatable in debate. He proves from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ.

He wins all the battles but he loses the war. He wins all the arguments but he never wins a soul. He thought that he had all that it took, but in spite of his tremendous dedication, in spite of the skilled and knowledgeable arguments that he employs, in spite of the untiring, sincere effort of this dedicated, zealous young man, the Jews remain locked in stubborn and obstinate unbelief. In fact, the situation gets much worse. We read,

**"... the Jews plotted to kill him, but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night to kill him; but his disciples took him by night and let**

**him down over the wall, lowering him in a basket." {Acts 9:23b-25 RSV}**

What humiliation! Here he was, he thought, equipped to win the day for Jesus Christ. He was going to show the world how much he could do for this new Master that he had found. But instead he finds himself humiliated, cast off, rejected, repudiated. His own friends finally have to take him at night and let him down over a wall. He walks away into the darkness in utter, abject failure and defeat.

The amazing thing is, and it really is amazing, that many years later, as he is writing to the Corinthians and looking back over his life, he recounts this episode. He says, "You ask me to boast about the most important event in my life? The greatest event in my life was when they took me at night and let me down over the wall of Damascus in a basket. That was the greatest thing that ever happened to me after I became a Christian. That was the most meaningful experience I have ever had since that day when I met Christ," {cf, 2 Cor 11:32-33}.

Is that not amazing? Why would this be so? Because then and there the apostle began to learn the truths which he records for us in the third chapter of Philippians, where he says, "Whatever gain I had, I learned to count as loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus," {cf, Phil 3:7-8 RSV}. That is, "All the things that I felt were so necessary to do what God wanted I had to learn were absolutely useless, worthless. I did not need them at all. Everything that I thought I had and needed in order to serve him I had to learn I didn't need at all. The beginning of that great lesson was the night they let me down over the wall in a basket."

There I began to learn something. It took me a long time to catch on, even then. But there I began to learn that God didn't need my *abilities*; he needed only my *avail ability*. He just needed me, as a person. He didn't need my background, he didn't need my ancestry. He didn't need my knowledge of Hebrew. He didn't need my knowledge of the Law. He didn't need these at all. In fact, he didn't have any particular intention of using them to reach the Jews, he was going to send me to the Gentiles." And though he did not understand it fully then, he began to assume the yoke of Christ and to learn that which Jesus Christ says every one of us must learn if we are going to be useful to him.

Jesus tells us what the curriculum is: "I am meek and lowly in heart," {Matt 11:29b KJV}. Ambition and pride must die. We learn that we do not live to aggrandize ourselves any longer. We do not live to be a big shot, either religiously or secularly. We live only to be an instrument of the working of Jesus Christ. And we must learn the truth which Jesus taught his own disciples when he was here in the flesh, "Without me you can do nothing," {cf, John 15:5b}. You can do what? "Nothing!" You may do a lot in the eyes of the world. What you do might be esteemed there. But in the eyes of God, without him it is nothing. If you are depending on yourself, God evaluates all you do as worth nothing.

This is what Paul began to learn. Through this experience his pride began to die. Yet it died hard, and we find him still struggling:

**And when he had come to Jerusalem he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus. So he went in and out among them in Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists; but they were seeking to kill him. {Acts 9:26-29 RSV}**

It is the same old story, is it not? He comes to Jerusalem still aflame, still determined to show the world how much he can do for Christ, still trying to argue men into salvation, still thinking he can convince them by the power of his intellect that the gospel is true, and that thus he will win them to Christ. Even the disciples will have nothing to do with him at first. That must have cut him to the quick. The apostles repudiated him until Barnabas, bless his encouraging heart, took Paul by the hand, led him in, and said, "I'll vouch for him."

So they listened to him after Barnabas swore that he was indeed a disciple and that he had been preaching in the name of Jesus. From Galatians we learn that his stay in Jerusalem was only fifteen days. But in that time this zealous young Christian bigot went into the synagogues and began to argue and dispute, again to prove

that Jesus was the Christ. It had the same effect as in Damascus: They sought to kill him. And another incident occurred which is not recorded in this part of Acts but is found later in Paul's account of this same period. In the twenty-second chapter of Acts, in one of his great defenses of his faith, he tells us what happened at this time. Beginning at Verse 17 he says,

**"When I had returned to Jerusalem [from Damascus] and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance and saw him [Jesus] saying to me, 'Make haste and get quickly out of Jerusalem, because they will not accept your testimony about me.'" {Acts 22:17-18 RSV}**

Here the Lord appears to him, and says, "Paul, you don't belong here in Jerusalem. I don't want you to be the apostle to Israel; I want you to be the apostle to the Gentiles. Get out of this city. Nobody is going to listen to you here." Notice how Paul argues with him:

**"And I said, 'Lord, they themselves know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believed in thee. And when the blood of Stephen thy witness was shed, I also was standing by and approving, and keeping the garments of those who killed him.'" {Acts 22:18-20 RSV}**

"Why, Lord," he is saying, "you don't understand anything. You don't seem to realize who I am. Why, I am the one who was persecuting the church with great eagerness and malice. I imprisoned people in the synagogues, and these Jews know how vigorously I opposed the church. And now that I am a Christian, now that I know that those whom I persecuted were right, the Jews will have to listen to me, Lord. You're throwing away your greatest opportunity here! I'm the one who will make a great impression upon them. They can't help but believe when they hear it from me!" But listen to what the Lord said:

**And he said to me, "Depart [that is a curt word -- 'Get out of town']; for I will send you far away to the Gentiles." {Acts 22:21 RSV}**

"I have a different program for you, Paul. You see, you're not running your life any longer. You're not doing the programming, I am; and I have something entirely different for you. And all that you think you must add in order to make it successful is of no value whatsoever in the program I have in mind. All you need is me. All you need is my life in you, working through you. Until you learn that, you will never be of any value to me at all. So I want you to leave town. You can't get the picture while you are here in Jerusalem; you get all confused by what you want to do, so I want you to get out."

Back in Acts 9 we read,

**And when the brethren knew it, they brought him down to Caesarea, and sent him off to Tarsus. {Acts 9:30 RSV}**

And then the last verse -- beautiful!

**So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up; and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit it was multiplied. {Acts 9:31 RSV}**

Now you can see that, from reading only the account in Acts 9, you would never understand these verses, would you? As you read through this chapter it sounds as though this man were being mightily used of God in Damascus and in Jerusalem. It seems to come as a strange twist that Luke should add here that the church would have peace as soon as they got rid of Paul. But now that we understand what is really happening here, from correlating these other Scriptures, it makes perfect sense.

Here is a young Christian, in all the eager zeal of the flesh, trying to do what he thinks God wants done and ruining the whole affair, causing people endless trouble and actually operating as a roadblock to the progress of the gospel in that place.

There are many Christians like that. A lot of us have never learned the essential lesson of the Christian life -- to take upon us the yoke of Christ, "and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls," {cf, Matt 11:29b KJV}. This is what Paul had to learn.

Many of us never seem to understand that God does not need our *abilities*; he needs our *avail ability*, that is all. A lot of us seem to have great difficulty in learning this same truth, so that we are actually a hindrance to what God is trying to do. In all the dedicated zeal of our sincere efforts to do what God wants we actually retard the process -- until we learn the essential lesson that God himself is our strength. Christ's life in us is all that it takes.

Paul had to learn this, so they brought him down to the coast and sent him off to Tarsus -- to the hardest place on earth to learn anything, and yet the best place -- at home! They sent him home, and for a period of from seven to ten years (it is difficult to know for sure, but it was at least seven years, and was possibly as long as ten) nothing is heard of the Apostle Paul. He is home, learning the essential lesson that God does not need his background, nor his effort.

He is learning what God is trying to teach all of us, that all God needs is us, you and me, the way we are, available to him to do whatever he wants to do -- not what we want, but what he wants. We have resigned from the direction of the program. We must be ready to say, "Lord, I'm not going to tell you what I want to do. I want you to tell me what you want me to do. And in dependence upon your life in me, I'm ready to do it." Whenever you come to that place you begin to live the Christian life. The life of an eager, zealous Christian, trying to serve God in the flesh, is not a Christian life at all. It is false Christianity and it turns people away from Christ.

Probably most of us have had the same experience as Paul: For many years of our Christian life, instead of winning people to Christ, we are driving them away out of mistaken, dedicated zeal. You can see this in the life of Peter. Do you remember what a consecrated blunderer he was? He was sure that he had what it took to please the Lord. "Lord, don't you worry, you can count on old Pete. I'll be with you right to the end, Lord. These other men, well, I'm not very sure of them. They'll leave you. But I'll be with you, Lord, right to the end." Do you remember what Jesus said? "Thank you, Peter, for your dedication and your zeal, but I know it for what it is. And before the morning dawns, you will have denied me three times. That's how much it is worth," {cf, John 13:30}.

Remember how Peter tried to put his zeal into action, how in the Garden he drew his sword and slashed away. All he did was chop off the ear of the high priest's servant. That is what all of us do when we try to serve God in the energy of the flesh -- we go around lopping off peoples' ears! And if it were not for the healing grace of the Lord Jesus, who picks up all those severed ears and puts them back in place, nobody would ever speak to us again. What a tremendous, necessary lesson is here!

Finally, after seven to ten years at home, during which Paul is thinking through all these things that Jesus has taught him, and meditating about them, there comes a spiritual awakening at Antioch. We can read about it a little farther on in Acts. And the Spirit of God leads Barnabas again, good old faithful Barnabas, to go down to Tarsus and find Paul and bring him to Antioch. Paul comes back chastened, broken, humiliated, at the end of himself, no longer boasting, no longer zealous with the wrong kind of zeal, no longer depending on his background and ancestry, no longer proud -- but chastened, humble, available. And then begins that mighty career in the power of the Holy Spirit, manifesting the life of Jesus Christ, that changed the whole Roman empire and, within a few short decades, had spread the gospel throughout that empire, had laid the foundation for its ultimate overthrow, had changed the course of history -- so that there is not a person alive on the face of the earth today who has not, in some way, been touched by the life of Saul of Tarsus. He learned the essential lesson: "Without me you can do nothing," so he says, "I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me," {cf, Phil 4:13}. "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in [by dependence upon] the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me," {Gal 2:20 RSV}.

On those terms, Paul shook the world.

## Prayer:

Our world needs shaking today, Father. It needs to be turned right side up again. It needs to see men and women of whom people will say, as they did of those early Christians, "Here are those who have turned the world upside down." And Lord, we pray that we will learn the lesson here, and that we will be willing to be men and women, boys and girls, who are no longer holding onto control of the program ourselves but are quite willing to follow where you lead, Lord, to do what you want, and to trust in your life in us to be all that it takes to do all that needs to be done. We ask in Jesus name, Amen.

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