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Swift Creek Baptist Church (swiftcreekbaptistchurch.com)
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Acts 9:1-20 (read vv.1-9) “A Transformed Life”

Intro. In Acts 9 we have the account of one of the most amazing conversions in all of Christians history. Luke considered Paul’s conversion to be so important that He gave three accounts of his conversion in Acts. After all, next to the Lord Jesus, no man has changed the course of human history like the apostle Paul. He dominates the rest of the book of Acts, and led the way in reaching the nations for Christ. But before Paul could change the world, he himself had to be changed first.

But some have questioned whether it is possible to have a true conversion experience. Can you actually change a bad man into a good man? Can man who has lived a certain way for 30 years or more be changed into a different man? Let me ask the wives a question. How many of you have been very successful at changing your husbands into the kind of man you want? That rarely works. Changing a person to any significant degree is very difficult. Who we are is largely determined at the time of our conception through genetics, and through our early childhood development. Once a person reaches adulthood, it is very difficult to change that person to any significant degree. This fact is expressed well in Jer. 13:23, “Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots?” The answer is obviously “no.” Then God goes on to point out that neither could the Israelites change into doing good when they were so accustomed to doing evil.

Oh, to be sure, psychologists and psychiatrists have tried to change people but have so often failed. We have tried to change people with education, but if education is the answer, why do we have white-collar crime? We’ve tried positive thinking, prison reform, economic reform and now genetic engineering is trying to produce a good human.

But is the task of changing a person into a godly, loving person a hopeless task? Well always remember that Jesus said with God all things are possible (Mt. 19:26). Just as He brought a complete change in the life of Saul of Tarsus, even so He can change your life. My next two messages in Acts will tell you how your life can be transformed, or how you can help bring about the transformation of others. Today we will look at some of the initial things that took place in Saul’s life to transform him into one of the greatest Christians that ever lived.

Now first of all, I want you to see that:

I. PEOPLE NEED A CONVERSION

Saul of Tarsus needed a conversion, and so does everyone else. Jesus said in Mt. 18:3, “Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” Jesus Himself said you must be converted, and He also said you must be born again (John 3:7). Based on our text today, we see that:

A. The Self-Righteous Need a Conversion - Saul was a Pharisee. He was good in his own eyes, but on the other hand he was self-righteous. He did not sense any need for repentance or conversion. In his mind, he didn’t need to change. He considered himself blameless as far as keeping God’s law (Php. 3:6).

Is anyone here like Saul? You consider yourself a good, morally acceptable person, and that you really don't need anyone to save you? Yet God will never accept self-righteousness. Isa. 64:6 says, "all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags...."

B. Those Who Reject Christ Need a Conversion – Saul of Tarsus was certainly an extreme example of this problem. Back in 6:9-10 we read that Saul had heard Stephen preach the full implications of what Jesus being the Messiah meant. Jesus did not come to save the Jews from political oppression, but to save *all* people from sin. The purpose of the temple and the rituals of Judaism had been fulfilled, and a new covenant had been ushered in. But Paul could not accept a crucified Messiah. It just didn't fit into his theology. Saul was an extreme traditionalist that could not accept such a radical change. So now Christianity could no longer be regarded by Saul as merely a Jewish, Messianic sect, but a downright heresy. So he utterly and completely rejected both Jesus Christ and the faith of His followers.

In his mind Christianity was a serious threat to the Jewish religion, and it must be fought with deadly force. He had already agreed with putting Stephen to death (7:58; 8:1). He did not stop there. V.1 says that Saul was "still breathing threats...."¹ It was as if he lived in the atmosphere of hatred, and he breathed in and out the stench of hatred and murderous intent. He became consumed by a desire to put Christians to death. He reminds me of Muslim extremists.

V.2 indicates the extent of his murderous intent. He was not content with driving Christians out of Jerusalem; they must be pursued and rooted out wherever they fled. He was even willing to take the time and the energy to travel to Damascus, which was about 160 miles away, a 6-day journey in that day. Notice "synagogues" is plural. With 20,000 Jews living in Damascus, there must have been a good number of synagogues, and he was willing to search out each one of them. Also, even women were not safe from Saul, according to the same verse. He was planning to bind them and carry them off to Jerusalem, just the same as the men. Saul was so determined to crush the Christian movement that he was willing to do anything, even if that meant putting hundreds of Christians to death. So here was a man who really needed a conversion.

Do you know of someone who *really* needs a conversion? I'm talking about people who are hostile and antagonistic to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I'm talking about atheists and people who are very open about their unbelief. Well, they certainly need a conversion. We need to pray for such people by name. And don't avoid witnessing to such people, thinking they could never be saved. By God's grace and power they can be!

We have seen that self-righteous religious people need a conversion. We have seen that those hostile to Christianity need a conversion. But you know:

C. All Need a Conversion - Paul was not one of only a few that needed to be converted. Conversion is necessary for all. Peter said in Acts 3:19, "Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out...." To be converted means to change direction in life. Most are going the wrong way. Jesus said in Mt. 7:13, "...broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it." It is clear that we must be converted.

I ask you this morning, do you still need to be converted? Do you have a testimony that there was a time in your life that you repented of your sin, and turned to Jesus Christ to be your Savior? If not, you especially need to:

¹ That is literally translated, "breathing in threats...."

II. UNDERSTAND THE STEPS TO CONVERSION

Through Paul conversion we can discern several steps that must take place before a person will be converted.

A. God Confronts Us - The Bible says, "Salvation is of the Lord" and we will not seek God on our own (Rom. 3:11). So God always initiates the contact in salvation, and Jesus initiated the encounter that resulted in Paul's conversion. Before a person is saved, God must call them to salvation. He must confront them. 1 Cor. 2:14 says that the natural man does not understand or receive the things of God. We all need divine intervention.

Now I believe that God began to confront Saul through the testimony and witness of Stephen. They would debate in the synagogue. Then, as Stephen was being stoned to death, he even prayed for his persecutors and forgave them (Acts 7:60). That included Saul. I used to be a doubting Presbyterian. I would debate religion with some Baptist friends. Guess who won out? God did through those Baptist young people. People have wrong beliefs and wrong behaviors, and God is looking for someone to confront such people with the Word of God, and with a testimony of a changed life.

Then God confronted Saul in an unusual way. We read in vv.3-4, "As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul,² why are you persecuting Me?'" Here we see that Christ revealed His glory on the Damascus road. He stopped Saul in his tracks as he was on his way to carry out harm against God's people. The light from heaven was the glory of Jesus as He appeared to Saul. Actually, this confrontation took place around noon time (22:6) and so the light of the glory of Jesus was even brighter than the sun. It does not say in this passage, but Paul himself says that he saw Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:8; 9:1). The experience was so dramatic and clear Saul soon preached that Jesus is the Son of God (v.20), for he saw Jesus manifesting the very glory of God. Paul did not have any trouble believing in the deity of Jesus Christ after this event (Phil. 2:6-8; Col. 1:15-18, 2:9).

Don't wait around on God to do something similar to get you to believe on Him. Don't expect a heavenly vision or a ball of fire from heaven. God will probably confront you with little more than the gospel spoken to you in some way. Or perhaps you will read of His glory in the Bible. But on the other hand, God just might do something dramatic to get your attention.

As a young man pastor John MacArthur was rebelling against the Lord until his car flipped going 75 mph and threw him onto the pavement. He slid for a 100 yards! With most people, God does not need to be so dramatic.

By the way, you cannot avoid confrontation with Jesus Christ. If you avoid churches and religious programming and everything else that reminds you of Jesus Christ, you will still face Jesus Christ at the Judgment day, and then it will be too late.

So one way or another, God must confront us with the gospel and the truth of Jesus. Another vital step that leads to conversion is this:

B. God Convicts Us of Sin – People will not be saved until they sense a *need* to be saved. We have already discussed Saul's sin. He was hateful and he was self-righteous. He was a proud

² The double vocative, "Saul, Saul" (v.4), is reminiscent of the way God's voice was heard often in the Old Testament. See Gen. 22:11; 46:2; Ex. 3:4; 1 Sam. 3:4 LXX (Fernando).

Pharisee that thought he could earn his way to heaven by strict obedience to the law of Moses and the religious traditions of his fathers (Gal. 1:14).

In his autobiography, Col. Harland Sanders of KY Fried Chicken fame says that he was always a God-fearing man. In every venture he gave God a tenth of the profits. Yet he knew that if he died, God probably wouldn't take him to heaven. Worried, he traveled to Australia to a special church convention for the answer. He didn't find it. One day, Sanders was walking down a street in Louisville, KY, where Rev. Waymon Rodgers of Louisville's Evangel Tabernacle invited him to some evangelistic services. Several days later, Sanders went. At age 79 he claimed the promises of Rom. 10:9, "that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." He said, "When I walked out of that church that night, I knew I was a different man. All my tithing and good deeds had never given me the sense of God's presence that I knew then." Even so, Saul had to be convicted of the fact that all of his law keeping and good deeds could not save him.³

But in Jn. 16:9 we see that the greatest sin is not believing in Jesus Christ. The main issue that God wants to convict you of is not that lying you may have done, or that stealing, or something else. The most serious sin that the Holy Spirit wants to convict you of is rejecting Christ, or not believing in Christ. Notice in v.2 that Christians were known as "the Way." We believe that Jesus Christ is the only way to heaven. We are not saved by good works or religious rituals, but by repentance of sin and faith in Jesus Christ. But Saul had to be convicted of his sin of rejecting Christ. He had to be convicted of the sin of self-righteousness, and self-reliance.

Saul also needed to be convicted of the sin of persecuting Jesus and His followers. Notice in v.4 that Jesus accuses Saul of persecuting Him, not just the Christians he was after. But in what sense could Paul be persecuting someone in heaven? This is true because of the union between Christ and His Church. When you persecute the Christian, you persecute Jesus. No blow struck on earth goes unfelt in heaven. Jesus is a sympathetic High Priest who is touched with the feelings of our infirmities (Heb. 4:15; cf. also I Cor. 6:17; Eph. 1:22-23).

Now let's see how God brought about this conviction. In the last of v.5 Jesus said to Saul, "...It is hard for you to kick against the goads." Even though that is not found in our best and oldest Greek texts of *this* Scripture passage, it is found in the account of Saul's conversion in Acts 26:14. The ox goad was like a long spear which the ploughman used to prod the ox along. A gentle prick should be enough to keep the ox working.

Even so, the Holy Spirit kept pricking the conscience of Saul like an ox goad. He had seen Christians like Stephen full of grace and love and unusual power (7:60). He had heard his persuasive arguments from Scripture. And all of this no doubt bothered him. Deep in his heart he probably thought that there was something to Christianity, but he refused to believe it. I'm sure that Stephen and others were praying for Saul's conversion; after all, Jesus taught us to pray for those who persecute us. So through the prayers of certain Christians, and the personal witness of certain Christians, God was beginning a work of conviction in Saul's heart to bring about a conversion.

Now getting back to the ox analogy, a dumb stubborn ox might kick against the goad, and only hurt himself, not the ploughman. Even so, it was as if Saul had been kicking against the goads. In all this persecution that Saul was doing, the only one really getting hurt was Saul himself.

Even so, if you kick against God's conviction, you will get hurt. The Bible says that Jesus Christ is like a stone, and whosoever stumbles upon that stone will be hurt, not the stone.

³ Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations*, #859 (Rockville, Maryland: Assurance Publishers, 1979), p.279.

Now this dramatic confrontation that Saul had with Christ just added significantly to his conviction of sin. Saul thought himself to be very righteous. But in the brightness of the holiness and purity of God, he could realize his own sin. The bright light of God's holiness and purity no doubt exposed Saul's sin. At that point he became convinced of his sinfulness and his need of a Savior. So after the Damascus road experience, Saul was convinced of the seriousness of his sin. For once in his life he realized without a doubt that he was a sinner and guilty before God. God took away his self-righteousness. All he could do was plead the mercy of God, not his self-righteousness.

What about you? Has God so worked in your life recently that you have been convicted of your sin and need for a relationship with Christ? Sometimes God allows people to go through weeks, sometimes months of soul searching and then He lets the light break into their soul.

C. We Must Repent of our Sin - We can see that Saul's response to the conviction of his sin was repentance. He turned from his sin immediately. On his knees or flat on his face, Saul is contrite and repentant. On his knees he is seeking mercy from the One he had rejected and sinned against. All of the bloodshed drowned Paul in the sorrow of his sin. His heart was broken by repentance. Furthermore, the fact that he spent the next 3 days in an intense fast was indicative of repentance.

But I believe in that moment his sorrow was healed by faith. He no longer rejected Jesus Christ. Now he believes in Christ as the Son of God. He spent no time debating the matter. I think it is significant that Jesus identified Himself by His human, earthly name "Jesus" (v.5). By doing so He convinced Saul that Jesus of Nazareth was alive. His disciples had been right after all in proclaiming His resurrection from the dead. The evidence was too compelling to reject any longer. He has to accept "the Way."

Then he took the next step:

D. Surrender to the Lordship of Christ – We read in v.6, "So he, trembling and astonished, said, 'Lord, what do You want me to do?'" Though this part of v.6 does not appear in our oldest Greek manuscripts, it does appear in Acts 22:10. So we will discuss it as part of the narrative. Notice that he addressed Jesus as "Lord." He knew he was face to face with the Son of God, and so Jesus is to be acknowledged as Lord of our lives. Paul would later write in Rom. 10:9, "that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." If you acknowledge Jesus as Lord, then you will say with Paul, "What do You want me to do?" A real change of life comes through obedience to the will of God. I really question whether a person can accept Jesus as Savior without also accepting Him as Lord. Conversion is not just a decision, or even a commitment, but a surrender to the supreme authority of Jesus.

In the last of v.6 we see what Jesus told him to do, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." Then in v.8 we see that Saul did exactly what Jesus told him to do. He did not return to Jerusalem. And so he carried out his obedience. Furthermore, he followed Christ in baptism. Then in the Acts 22 account we read Ananias saying, "And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized..." (v.16). So we read in the last of v.18, "and he arose and was baptized." The first step of obedience is baptism.

While I do not believe that baptism is required for salvation, I do believe that you should question your salvation if you are not willing to follow the Lord in baptism. Have you followed the Lord in baptism?

III. THE RESULTS OF SUCH A CONVERSION

A true conversion will not be just a temporary emotional experience. A true conversion will produce results in a person's life. In Mt. 3:8 John the Baptist told the people who were responding to his message, "Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance." Real conversion is followed by a change of life. 2 Cor. 5:17 says, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new." From Paul's example we learn of some of the changes that should take place in a true believer:

A. God Will Make Us Humble – In v.8 we read, "Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus." Instead of going in as the great conquering hero, he went in as a blind man, being led by the hand, dependent upon others. God had crushed him into submission. But it was like crushing a rose—it releases a fragrance when you do so. And if that's what it takes, God, then crush me if crushing me means I can be something like Paul.

B. God Will Make Us Loving – Now he comes into Damascus, not to murder, but to love and obey. He became the apostle who so often spoke of love. And the kind of love that God will produce in the life of a Christian is seen in Ananias. Note how in v.17 Ananias comes to lovingly restore Saul's sight and to help him get started in his Christian life, and he addresses his former enemy as "Brother." The archenemy of the church was welcomed as a brother!

C. God Will Make Us Prayerful - Another result of the transformation Paul had experienced was that prayer became a natural part of his life. Notice in v.9 that Saul spent three days in which he "neither ate nor drank." What was he doing? Why was he fasting? We find the answer in v.11. The Lord said to Ananias, "Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying." Prayer is not something you should have to beg Christians to do.

Have you been converted to the point that you pray not only when you are in trouble, but on a consistent basis? On the other hand, you may pray like Saul used to, relying on his own self-righteousness; now he prays like a broken, contrite sinner depending on the mercy of God. His prayers were like the cries of a baby, calling out for the aid of his parents. Paul's prayers were a heart-cry for God.

Conclusion: Have you been truly converted to Christ? Have you been born again? Have you repented of your sins and surrendered to the Lordship of Jesus? Have you placed your trust in Him as your Savior? This passage of Scripture contains great evidence of the fact that God can take the worst of the worst and make them the best. Nobody is ever too low to be unredeemable. There is hope for everyone. If a fanatical enemy of Christ and His Church could be converted, anyone can be saved.

If you confess that you are a Christian, I must ask if you have obeyed the Lord in reference to baptism. Again, we see in the last of v.18 that Saul was baptized. He demonstrated that Jesus was now Lord of his life. Have you demonstrated that Jesus is Lord of your life through baptism? If not, do so today!

Sources: F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954); Ajith Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998); Oliver B. Greene, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Vol. 1 (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour, Inc., 1968); H. Leo Eddleman, *An Exegetical and Practical Commentary on Acts* (Dallas: Books of Life Publishers, 1974); Everett F. Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975); H.A. Ironside, *Acts* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers 1943); John MacArthur Jr., *The Transformed Life: Study Notes on Acts 9:1-31* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1984); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); Curtis Vaughan, *Acts: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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