



16 | ACTS 9:1-19

PAUL'S CONVERSION

God can save the most difficult of people and bring them into his Kingdom.

Outline

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Call to Worship

Give glory to the Lord, you heavenly beings, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. ²Give to the Lord the glory due his name; worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness. —Psalm 29:1-2

Songs

Amazing Grace My Chains are Gone
Turn Your Eyes
Holy, Holy, Holy
Just as I am (I Come Broken)

Introduction

We continue our series in the book of Acts called “Life on Life Discipleship.” Our title this morning is: “Paul’s Conversion”.

Do you remember when God saved you? Salvation is a miracle, isn’t it? One of the most dramatic conversions was John Newton. He was raised by a godly Christian mother and knew the truth well. Sadly, his mother died when he was seven years old, and he went learned the art of seafaring from his ungodly father. Like most sailors of his day, he lived a life of sin and rebellion. For several years, he worked on slave ships, capturing slaves for sale to the plantations of the New World. So low did he sink that at one point he became a slave himself, captive of another slave trader. Eventually, he became the captain of his own slave ship. He would later record that he had kidnapped twenty thousand African people into slavery, about half of which died on the way over because of sickness and malnutrition. John Newton was one of the vilest persons on the planet. But there was mercy even for such a filthy sinner. God was calling John Newton to salvation.

One night there was a frightening storm at sea, and John Newton picked up Thomas á Kempis’s classic book *Imitation of Christ*. He called that moment his “day of great awakening” because it was in that storm that God planted the seeds that resulted in his conversion. He went on to become a leader in the evangelical movement in England. Along with William Wilberforce, this slave ship captain helped to end the slave trade in Britain. When he penned the beloved hymn “Amazing Grace,” he knew firsthand the truths it proclaimed.¹

Church history is abounding with glorious accounts such as these, which demonstrate the marvelous power of the gospel to transform sinners. But perhaps no transformation is as remarkable, or has had such far-reaching implications for church history, as the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. So significant an event was his conversion that Scripture records it no less than three times (*cf* Acts 22:1–16; 26:4–18).²

The great Reformer from Geneva, John Calvin says:

Luke records the story of Paul’s conversion. He tells how the Lord not only brought him under his control when he was like a wild animal but also made him a new person. —*John Calvin*³

There is no one that is too far off from God’s grace. There is no one who is too great a sinner for God to save. Truly we say with Jonah:

Salvation belongs to the Lord. —*Jonah 2:9*

Key thought: God can save the most difficult of people and bring them into his Kingdom. No one is too far too be saved.

1. THE MIRACLE OF SAUL’S CONVERSION (9:1-3)

Saul, even as a lost Pharisee, was an intellectual giant. He knew that there could be no peaceful coexistence between militant Judaism and on-fire Christianity. Revival was spreading from

¹ Kenneth W. Osbeck, *101 Hymn Stories* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1982), 28

² John F. MacArthur Jr., *Acts*, vol. 1, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 264.

³ John Calvin, *Acts* (Downers Grove, IL: Crossway, 1995), 149.

Jerusalem to Judea and now to Samaria. Saul was determined to stop it. Everything in Saul drove him into a head-on battle royal with the Christians.⁴ Saul is so furious about Christianity, he is described like a wild animal looking for prey.

HIS DISGUST

Acts 9:1 | But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest.

Paul (his Greek name), or Saul (his Hebrew name) is described in some translations as “one breathing out fire,” taking on the attributes of Satan who is like a dragon and a lion that seeks whom he may devour (cf Rev 12:9; 1 Pet 5:8). Breathing in threats of murder and destruction may sound strange, but the idea is that Saul was so passionately determined to carry on his persecution against the growing Christian community that he was **like a wild beast that snorts** before it attacks. Saul was unhinged in his disgust for Jesus Christ. He fiercely and viciously persecuted any followers of Christ he could find. And he had a mission in Damascus.

HIS DESTINATION

Acts 9:1b-2a | But Saul... went to the high priest ²and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

Damascus is one of the oldest cities in the history of the world. Damascus was known even to Abraham. The Damascus road from Jerusalem stretched for about two hundred miles. Saul was a frightening, violent enemy. **He must have heard of the great revivals in Samaria and saw that it was now reaching Damascus, where tens of thousands of Jews lived.** He violently opposed them converting to Jesus. Saul was determined to snuff out Christianity. It's a miracle that it is at this moment he retires from persecuting the church. He travels to Damascus to hurt Christians, but he will leave Damascus a transformed man.

HIS DETERMINATION

Acts 9:2b | ...if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

Saul of Tarsus was determined to stop whatever revival had begun over there. Little did he know, he was going to be one of the main people that not only carries the revival through Samaria, but to the uttermost parts of the world.

Saul didn't believe Jesus was the way to eternal life, but that's what Christianity was called back then: “**The Way.**” The description of Christianity as the Way appears several times in Acts (19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). It apparently derives from Jesus' description of himself as “**the way, and the truth, and the life**” (Jn 14:6).

Saul, hearing of the revivals in Samaria and realizing the next frontier for Christianity was the large population of Jews in Damascus wanted to head off these followers of Jesus. He got the necessary papers to go to each synagogue and place any Christians under arrest and bring them back to Jerusalem for further punishment, perhaps even execution.⁵ Saul was doing all he could

⁴ John Phillips, *Exploring Acts: An Expository Commentary*, The John Phillips Commentary Series (Kregel Publications; WORDsearch Corp., 2009), Ac 9:1a.

⁵ R. C. Sproul, *Acts*, St. Andrew's Expository Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 156.

to stop this revival from spreading. The city of Dan, on the northern most edge of Israel stands high, elevated above the Damascus road in the valley there, just outside of Israel. Little did he know the Son of God would be standing in his way on that road.

HIS DELIVERANCE

Acts 9:3 | Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him.

Saul is near Damascus when a strange and glorious *light from heaven* blazes forth, and he falls to the ground (9:3). **God could have destroyed this persecutor of the church**, but instead the heavenly light is a light of grace. Jesus came to call this great enemy to join his team and called this hater of Jesus to become a lover of Jesus. God loves to transform the most stubborn, tough customers.

Salvation and sanctification are all of God's grace. We cannot save ourselves and we cannot fix ourselves. The reason Saul of Tarsus was radically changed was he got his eyes off of himself and onto Christ. That's the only way to truly repent is not to over-focus on our sin, but to focus on Christ, the one who "while we were still sinners died for us" (Rom 5:

2. THE MANNER OF SAUL'S CONVERSION (9:4-9)

THE LIGHT

Acts 9:3b | Suddenly a light from heaven shone around him.

The light was not just a flash but a sustained flood of light, terrifying and inexplicable.⁶ The light demonstrates God's divine power. **The light that Jesus displays is the shekinah glory of God, as was seen in the Glory Cloud from the Old Testament.** God displayed himself as a glory cloud: a **pillar of cloud** by day and **pillar of fire** by night. This also reminds us of the glory that Isaiah witnessed, which was so bright that the seraphim covered their eyes, and Isaiah called out, "**Woe is me!**" When the shepherds saw this glory, the "glory of the Lord" shone all around the shepherds, and they too were struck down with fear (Lk 2:9).

Christ's glory was usually veiled during his earthly ministry, but during the transfiguration we see his glory for a few brief moments (Mt 17:1-8).⁷ As Saul looked at Christ, it was as if he were looking at God face to face. As a result, we find out later that he becomes blinded!

THE LORD

Suddenly, Saul hears a voice from the Lord, and he clearly recognizes him as divine. In conversion, a person comes to understand the person and work of Jesus Christ. **Christ is the Messiah from Psalm 2**, the one God promised and that everyone would need to bow before in total allegiance. Jesus is God's king, and he is extending his mercy to this great persecutor of the church.

THE LORD'S MAJESTY

Acts 9:4a | And falling to the ground, he heard a voice.

⁶ Pollock. *The Apostle*, 33.

⁷ William H. Baker, "Acts," in *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*, vol. 3, Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1995), 897.

We do not know whether Paul had ever met Jesus when he lived on earth. It's possible, but if so Paul never mentions it. Paul's first encounter with Jesus seems to have been here and now on the Damascus road.⁸

This is not a revelation of Christ incarnate on earth in a merely human body, but something infinitely more majestic. Think of the revelation of Christ in the first chapter of Revelation. Here is Jesus being revealed after he's ascended to heaven. He's being revealed to Saul of Tarsus as a glorious figure. His voice and appearance is so great that he falls to the ground. I am reminded of what Paul later says in Philippians 2.

At the name of Jesus every knee should bow... ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. —Philippians 2:10-11

Saul of Tarsus is now on his knees in a meeting with the King of kings and Lord of lords. He meets the Messiah. **An interesting dialogue ensues.** He hears a voice, at once calm and authoritative, speak in Aramaic.

THE LORD'S FAMILY

Acts 9:4-5 | And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" ⁵ And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."

Suddenly, Paul knew. In a second that seemed an eternity he saw the wounds in Jesus' hands and feet, saw the face, and knew he had seen the Lord, that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah, and he was alive.⁹

Saul now realizes that he's on the wrong team. What a shock to hear the exalted Messiah in all his glory tell Saul that when he persecuted Christians, **he was actually persecuting Jesus himself.** Saul has been messing with Jesus' very family.

Now, instantaneously, Saul of Tarsus was shatteringly aware that he had been fighting Jesus—and fighting himself, his conscience, his powerlessness, the darkness and chaos in his own soul. **God hovered over this chaos** and brought him to the moment of **new creation.**¹⁰

Anytime you suffer for Christ, the Lord's got a purpose for it. It may be that **the way God gets your loved ones to stop rejecting you and persecuting you is to convert them** and saved them and bring them to love Jesus. **When any Christian suffers for Christ, Jesus takes it personally.** He will vindicate you. He may do it in judgment, but he'd rather do it in salvation.

THE LORD'S MERCY

Acts 9:6 | "But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."

Jesus commands Saul to go to a certain city, and Saul humbly obeys. He's a changed man. Acts 9:6 has a textual variant. It's insightful. Look at how the New King James translates it.

So he, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" Then the Lord said to him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." —Acts 9:6, NKJV

⁸ John Phillips, *Exploring Acts: An Expository Commentary*, The John Phillips Commentary Series (Kregel Publications; WORDsearch Corp., 2009), Ac 9:4-5.

⁹ Pollock. *The Apostle*, 34.

¹⁰ Pollock. *The Apostle*, 34.

There is a tenderness in Saul. He realizes he's a recipient of the Lord's mercy. He calls Jesus Lord. That's a title in this context that means Yahweh. He understands this is the Messiah. His eyes are opened. He's trembling. He should be dead. He deserves death, but strangely he's alive. He's bowing under the authority and mercy of Jesus.

THE LEVELING

Acts 9:7-9 | The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. ⁸Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Saul does not realize the full effect of the bright light until he gets up and tries to walk. Then he discovers that he is totally blind and must have someone lead him by the hand (9:8). Luke paints a dramatic picture of this fiery persecutor **now rendered so helpless that he must depend on others like a child!**

When we come to Christ, he humbles us to the dust. Not many wise and not many strong are called (1 Cor 1:26). But some wise and strong are called, though they be few. And when they are called, they must be humbled, often in dramatic and overwhelming ways.

It is a short distance into Damascus, and Saul's companions take him to a place only revealed later (9:11), the house of Ananias. He is so in awe of what has happened that for three days he can neither eat nor drink (9:9). ¹¹

3. THE MARKS OF SAUL'S CONVERSION (9:10-19)

The marks we are about to witness demonstrate a radical change in Paul. We see several marks of conversion.

A MAN OF PRAYER

The first mark of conversion shows Saul's immediate fellowship with God. He is **praying**. Saul's been blinded by the light of Christ's glory, and now God has to send a man to restore Saul's sight. We are introduced to a humble believer named Ananias who receives a vision from the Lord about Saul, the great persecutor. He's told Saul has been blinded by Christ's glory, and Ananias is to lay hands on him so that he might see again.

Acts 9:10-12 | Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." ¹¹And the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, ¹²and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight."

Note a very **important detail** in verse 11, "**Behold, he is praying.**" Fellowship with God is the first sign of conversion. Luther said when a person is born again, prayer flows out of the believer like breath and cries flow out of a newborn baby. He said,

¹¹ Chalmer Ernest Faw, *Acts*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993), 111.

To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing. —*Martin Luther*

Our tears in prayer are the diamonds of heaven; sighs are a part of the music of Jehovah's court, and are numbered with "the sublimest strains that reach the majesty on high." Think not that your prayer, however weak or trembling, will be unregarded. Jacob's ladder is lofty, but our prayers shall lean upon the Angel of the covenant and so climb its starry rounds. Our God not only hears prayer but also loves to hear it.¹² —*Charles Haddon Spurgeon*

Saul had been intrinsically changed. That's what conversion does. The old heart of stone is replaced by a tender heart of flesh (Eze 36:26). Everybody has a nature change when they meet the Lord Jesus.

Repentant faith means we have repudiated trust in all idols, and we have now put our entire trust in Christ.

We are changed forever: radically, dramatically, eternally, visibly, spiritually, emotionally changed, when we are born again. There is an intrinsic change. We're not talking about a tadpole becoming a frog. We're talking about a frog becoming a prince by the kiss of grace. We're talking about a **miracle**—a change that is supernatural, radical. Paul began to pray because he had been united with the living God. He was forever transformed.

A MAN OF POWER

Another mark of conversion is the divine **power** of conversion. Saul of Tarsus was at one moment killing Christian, but the next moment he is worshipping Christ. Every Christian has that same divine power.

Ananias is told in the vision to go to a certain house of a man named Judas. The Lord tells him exactly where to go. Go to the street called Straight, and you'll find Saul of Tarsus. You can imagine Ananias' thoughts. "What? Wait! *The* Saul of Tarsus? The persecutor? Ananias has an objection.

Acts 9:13-14 | But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name."

You see Saul of Tarsus was a man of position and authority. He had permission to bring great suffering and even death to the saints at Jerusalem and throughout Israel.

Given Saul's **recent ravaging of the church**, the first Christians **would not trust** Saul's call to a position of church leadership. His reputation preceded him. No one trusted the newly converted Saul. R.C. Sproul said it well.

Saul's conversion would have seemed to the fledgling New Testament church much as it would seem to us if **Osama Bin Laden were to come to America claiming to be a convert to U.S. patriotism.**¹³

Saul had the power to destroy more Christians, but the Lord took the most infamous persecutor and made him a promoter of Christianity. No matter how great a man's power and position is, it's nothing compared to God's position.

¹² C. H. Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening* (Fearn, Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 1994), reading for November 3.

¹³ Sproul, *ibid*, 156–157.

From his infinite and exalted position God loves to call the hardest, most impossible, hard-hearted people, and melt them.

God can save anyone, anywhere in the very worst of circumstances. He doesn't have to ask our permission. **God sometimes calls people we don't want to be saved.** God's heart is infinitely more compassionate than our heart. We are all so much like the Prophet Jonah who ran away from God when he was called to preach repentance to the dreaded and vile Ninevites of ancient Assyria. God loves to save those most unlikely candidates, like Saul of Tarsus. **"Is there anything too hard for the Lord?"** (Gen 18:14). I love the words of Jeremiah.

'Ah, Lord God! It is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you. —
Jeremiah 32:17

What is impossible for man is possible for God (Lk 18:27). God can save anyone! Remember whatever power and position Paul had when he was lost is really nothing. Paul later concludes that all his earthly attainments were like **"dung"** compared to the "excellency of knowing Christ" (Phil 3:8).

Now that Paul was in Christ, he had true power and authority, seated in the highest place, united with the King of all the earth. Through Christ, all Christians have an exalted position.

God raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. —*Ephesians 2:6*

Whatever Saul's greatness and position was before he knew Christ, it was limited and earthly. In coming to know Christ, he would have that limitless and eternal position in Christ.

What could change a man of such position and power to reverse course and go the opposite direction? What could change such a man? Only the power of God.

A MAN OF PURPOSE

Another mark of conversion is **purpose**. Everyone in the Body of Christ is given a place to serve Christ. For Paul, he is here called to be an apostle. Now we see that this man of great power and authority is called by God to be an apostle. Saul the persecutor becomes Paul the great apostle. He becomes **God's "chosen instrument"** for bringing the Gospel to the Gentiles.

Acts 9:15 | But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel."

Christ had gotten hold of Saul of Tarsus and would make of him the greatest apostle, a **writer of thirteen books in our New Testament**. God chose Saul, and because of the choosing, he would gladly proclaim Christ for the rest of his life. He marveled at the splendors of God's grace, and so do we. Paul knew that not only he, but all Christians are chosen.

He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons. —*Ephesians 1:4-5*

Paul testifies: God "set me apart before I was born" (Gal 1:15). And in time, God grabbed hold of Paul. Paul would later say he wanted to **take hold of Christ the way Christ took hold of him.**

I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.

—*Philippians 3:12*

Saul of Tarsus had been hunting down Christians until he met Jesus. Now his purpose has changed. Jesus told him he was now “to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel” (9:15).

Saul was a chosen vessel. God had determined the course of his life. **All Saul's previous life had been a preparation for this moment:** his birth into a family enjoying **Roman citizenship** and his city noted for its seafaring **commerce** and its world-famous university. Saul's **Hellenistic culture** made him familiar with the **Greek language**, learning, and logic. His birth into a **Hebrew home** where he was brought up in the synagogue, gave him an **intimate knowledge of the Scriptures**. He was acquainted from childhood days with the knowledge of God and the Hebrew Bible. Even **his hatred of Christ and the church** and his savage **persecutions** would be turned to good, showing God is willing and able to save the most impossible people.

Saul was a chosen vessel. So are we all. Each of us has special training, talents, temperament, a unique background and upbringing, and a specific culture and characteristics that he wants to use to expand his Kingdom. God makes no two people alike.¹⁴

A MAN OF PAIN

Another mark of conversion is **pain** and suffering. This world is a warzone for the Christian. Every Christian will experience a measure of suffering of some sort if they live a godly life.

Paul is told how very much he must suffer now that he is a follower of the Messiah. The man who inflicted so much pain to believers would now be on the receiving end for his newfound faith. This might have been a shock to him, and it is often a shock to most new believers.

Acts 9:16 | For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”

Years later Paul gave the Corinthians a partial catalog of his sufferings.

“... imprisonments, countless beatings, and often near death. ²⁴ Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; ²⁶ on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; ²⁷ in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. ²⁸ And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. —2 *Corinthians 11:23b–28*

Ananias had no need to worry about Saul's making the saints to suffer. From now on Saul would do the suffering. The Christian is called to be bold and courageous and Saul who was now appointed to be an apostle, would be an amazing example in suffering.

A MAN OF PERCEPTION

Acts 9:17-18a | So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your

¹⁴ John Phillips, *Exploring Acts: An Expository Commentary*, The John Phillips Commentary Series (Kregel Publications; WORDsearch Corp., 2009), Ac 9:15.

sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight.

Spiritual **perception** is another mark of conversion. Saul was granted his sight through the touch of Ananias. What a joy to see Ananias willingness to be used of the Lord. God used this unknown man Ananias to encourage Saul of Tarsus to follow Christ. We never hear of him again, though he did a great work. Who remembers who led D. L. Moody to Christ? Who knows the name of the person who pointed Jim Elliot to the Way? How many know the name of the one who led Charles Spurgeon to the Lord?¹⁵

The fact that “Brother Saul” received the Holy Spirit and his sight at the same time indicates the beautiful order of salvation. Paul was “drawn by the Father” and he began praying. He was likely praying to God about his newfound faith in Christ. Having done so, Ananias lays hands on him, and he receives the Holy Spirit, and suddenly he can see! God here emphasizes how faith gives Saul new eyes to see by literally giving him physical sight! And there was a real physical aspect to this, since scales fell from Saul’s eyes.

Saul used to have power from the authorities to put Christians to death, but now he has the true and glorious power of the Holy Spirit to repair broken men and women and to bring them to spiritual life again. That’s the power we need!

A MAN OF PROCLAMATION

Acts 9:18b-19 | Then he rose and was baptized;¹⁹ and taking food, he was strengthened.

Proclamation of Christ is a major mark of conversion. Those who are truly saved first begin proclaiming Christ through baptism. The Ethiopian eunuch wanted baptism in the previous chapter. Now Saul the persecutor turned pastor is baptized. Saul is so weak at this moment, having gone without food for three days, but **he wants to be baptized even before he eats**.

Baptism is the first step of obedience in the life of a Christian. When a person professes faith in Christ, but their life doesn’t change, I doubt that profession. A person who is truly born again wants to obey the Lord. Jesus said, “If you love me, keep my commandments” (Jn 14:15). But God’s commands are a delight to every child of God. When the inner life is changed and empowered, the outer life will change as well!

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. —2 Corinthians 5:17

CONCLUSION

What a transformation that took place in Saul of Tarsus. Who could have imagined he would become the Apostle Paul? We must never underestimate the **value of one person brought to Christ**. The great apostle Peter was ministering to thousands in Jerusalem, and Philip the evangelist had seen a great harvest among the Samaritan people, but obscure **Ananias** was sent to only one man.

Who are you reaching for Christ? Are you praying for the hard cases? Are you praying for those impossible conversions? Remember what is impossible with man is possible with God!

¹⁵ R. Kent Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1996), 131.