

Acts

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8 ESV)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)

Saul of Tarsus

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Acts 9:1-25

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Acts 9.

This is, in my estimation, the most remarkable, faith-inspiring story in all of Acts!

In our passage this morning, we find the conversion of Saul of Tarsus.

Now, if you've been tracking with us over the last few weeks, then that name should sound familiar. Before Stephen was murdered, the crowd laid their garments down at the feet of a young man named Saul. As one commentator notes:

The fact that the witnesses laid their clothes at Saul's feet suggests that he was already the acknowledged leader in the opposition to the early church¹

Saul watched as jagged stones were hurled at Stephen until his body lay lifeless on the ground. I can't even imagine what it would be like to watch as a human being is stoned to death. But not only did Saul watch, the text says:

And Saul **approved** of his execution. (Acts 8:1a ESV)

¹ David Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 268.

He approved of the horror. And then, he set off to find the rest of the Christian heretics in the city so that he could bring them to justice as well. In verse 3 we read:

Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. (Acts 8:3 ESV)

That was Saul.

Families fled for their lives because of this man. Mothers moaned over the death of their sons. Children grieved that mommy and daddy had been dragged away to prison. It would have been hard to find a Christian in those days whose life had not been soured in some way by Saul of Tarsus. He was infamous. He was wicked. He was a lost cause.

With that picture fresh in your memory, look with me to Acts 9. We will be reading verses 1-25. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and 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. ³ Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. ⁴ 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. ⁶ But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." ⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. ⁸ Saul 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. ⁹ And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

¹⁰ 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." ¹¹ And 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, ¹² and 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." ¹³ 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." 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. ¹⁶ For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." ¹⁷ 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 sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; ¹⁹ and taking food, he was strengthened.

For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus. ²⁰ And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.” ²¹ And all who heard him were amazed and said, “Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?” ²² But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.

²³ When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, ²⁴ but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him, ²⁵ but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket. (Acts 9:1-25 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

In this story, we find a powerful portrait of conversion.

A Powerful Portrait Of Conversion

Before we go any further, I want us to stop and consider that word for a moment: Conversion.

What is it?

Perhaps it would be worthwhile to identify what it is NOT.

I have often had the sad experience of talking to a person who has recently experienced “conversion”, but very quickly in the conversation it becomes evident that what they mean is that they attended a church in a particularly troubling season of life, they had an emotional experience, they raised their hand, and then they went on with their life having *added* some Jesus to the mix.

But Jesus is not an additive. He is not a hobby or an accessory. If that was your experience, then you did not experience true conversion.

Similarly, conversion is not self-help. Perhaps there are some people here this morning, and you sense that there are some areas of weakness in your life – you are not the parent that you want to be, or you feel emotionally unstable – and you are here this morning hoping that you will find something to make those final adjustments that you need to get your house in order. I’m really

glad that you're here, and the gospel does have a remedy for all of those problems, but you need to know that Jesus is not in the business of minor renovations. As one old preacher explains:

Conversion is no repairing of the old building; but it takes all down and erects a new structure.²

This is why baptism is the initiatory sign of conversion. It visibly illustrates the FACTS of what has happened. The old me did not undergo a renovation – he did not receive some modifications and upgrades. No, the old me DIED! The old me was BURIED with Christ. And now, I am a new creation, raised with Jesus to walk in newness of life! And that brings us to the heart of the matter. Conversion is the transformation of one thing into another ENTIRELY NEW THING!

Saul of Tarsus did not need addition. And he did not need repair. He needed conversion! He needed a comprehensive, head-to-toe-to-mind-to-heart TRANSFORMATION!

And that is exactly what God did. Consider this powerful portrait of conversion with me. First, we see:

1. A self-righteous man

This is an important detail: Saul did not see himself as the villain – he saw himself as the HERO!

He understood the Christians to be heretics and he assumed that it was pleasing to God that he was hunting them down like vermin.

Now, I don't suspect that there is anyone in this room who has a history of imprisoning and stoning Christians. That was Saul's story.

And yet, while the EXPRESSION of Saul's sin was unique to him, the ROOT of Saul's sin can be found in each and every one of us.

² Joseph Alleine as quoted by John Blanchard, eds. *The Complete Gathered Gold: a Treasury of Quotations for Christians*. Accordance electronic ed. (New York: Evangelical Press, 2006), paragraph 2438.

Saul was a self-righteous man.

What does that mean? It means that, in his self-assessment, he did not see a need for Jesus.

He saw himself as good. Moral. Intelligent. He certainly did not see himself as a sinner in need of a saviour.

And in this way, many of us have more in common with Saul than we'd like to admit.

Are you ready to stand before the holy God? The God who made you? The God Whose world this is and Whose law is written into the very fabric of creation?

Are you ready to give an account? For the things that you've said and done? For the things that you have *not* said and have *not* done? As He searches your heart, and exposes your thoughts, and reveals the details of your life that you thought you had concealed from every eye, will you be able to stand?

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. (1 John 1:8 ESV)

The self-righteous man finds a way to stack the evidence in his mind such that he can believe the delusion that he is ready. But he is not. Saul, for all his moralism, and for all his intelligence, was living in rebellion to God and was falling headlong into hell. With confidence!

I was that man. Many of us were! Perhaps some of us still are...

But God knows how to save to the uttermost, and we see that powerfully in this story! In this portrait of conversion, we find:

2. A Jesus encounter

If a person does not encounter Jesus, there can be no conversion! Now, to be clear, we will not all encounter Jesus in the same way – that's why the overarching heading here is **A** portrait of conversion and not **THE** portrait of conversion. The Samaritans encountered Jesus in the

preaching of Philip. The Ethiopian eunuch encountered Jesus in his study of Isaiah. And here, Saul encounters Jesus in a miraculous theophany! We read in verses 3-4:

Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. ⁴ And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (Acts 9:3-4 ESV)

This encounter changed Saul’s life completely. Notice, however, that this is NOT the first time that Saul had encountered Jesus. Look ahead at verse 5:

And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I am Jesus, **whom you are persecuting.** (Acts 9:5 ESV)

Pause and consider that for a moment. Saul was on his way to persecute Christians, and Jesus says to him, “Saul, you are persecuting ME.” Meaning what? Meaning – what you do to Christians, you do to Jesus. Jesus *identifies with* and *is present in* the lives of his people.

Saul HAD encountered Jesus before. He saw Jesus as Stephen was stoned to death. He saw Jesus as he tore fathers and mothers from their children and carried them to prison. I can’t help but wonder if these words weren’t ringing in Paul’s ears as he wrote to the church in Corinth and said:

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. (1 Corinthians 12:27 ESV)

Saul HAD encountered Jesus – but he was too blind to see what was right in front of him. However, Jesus had a plan to open Saul’s eyes!

Rest assured, brothers and sisters, God always gets His man.

Can we pause here, and soak up the comfort in this reminder? After reading about the response of the Samaritans to Philip’s preaching and the response of the Ethiopian to the Bible study, I imagine that some of you were simultaneously inspired... and yet discouraged. Because your loved one has heard the sermons, and your loved one has sat through the Bible study, but the response that you see in Acts 8 is not the response that you see in real life.

But look here. Saul had heard the sermons. Saul had studied the word. And yet, Saul was as far from Jesus as a person could possibly be in this life. Was anyone praying for Saul? I doubt it. Was anyone pursuing opportunities to share the gospel with him? Christians were FLEEING from him! He was as much a lost cause as has ever walked this earth.

But, in an instant, EVERYTHING CHANGED!

Do you believe that God can do that? O God, help our unbelief! You can do all things!

The self-righteousness; the spiritual blindness; the arrogance; the ten-thousand objections; every seemingly-insurmountable-obstacle that had kept Saul away was overcome in an INSTANT!

Why?

Because he encountered Jesus!

He encountered Jesus, and that changed everything. Miraculously, in this portrait of conversion we see:

3. A humbled heart

Look with me at verses 8-9:

Saul 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. ⁹ And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. (Acts 9:8-9 ESV)

Saul – the student of Gamaliel – the top of his class – the brilliant theologian who had left Jerusalem as a prideful opponent of Jesus – entered Damascus humble and blind. His friends held his hand as they led him to a safe place where he could rest. But Saul would not eat. And he would not drink. He sat in the darkness and waited for instruction from the Lord. Here we are reminded:

“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” (James 4:6b ESV)

This experience must have been terribly humiliating for Saul. Yet, it was what he needed. The old man and his old way of thinking needed to die a humiliating death so that the spiritual rebirth could take place.

Up until this point, Saul was so self-assured that he didn't recognize the danger of his position. This is true, by the way, of every person in their sin. We don't see our sin, we don't recognize God's holiness and, subsequently, we don't agree with God's assessment of our great problem. And if we do not agree with God's assessment of the problem, then we will never lay hold of God's solution to the problem.

Saul thought that he was a good man, and so do many of you. But Jesus disagrees. He said:

No one is good except God alone. (Mark 10:18b ESV)

Saul thought that he was righteous. He thought that he could do enough by his own strength to please God. But it was only after his encounter with Jesus that he could agree with the Psalmist:

“None is righteous, no, not one;

¹¹ no one understands;
no one seeks for God.

¹² All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;
no one does good,
not even one.” (Romans 3:10-12 ESV)

Saul had rejected Jesus. He thought that the gospel was a sham! He didn't recognize it as the solution because, in his pride, he didn't even see the problem! He was speaking from personal experience when he later wrote:

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (1 Corinthians 1:18 ESV)

Ironically, it was only when Saul lost his vision that he was finally able to see. C.S. Lewis is exactly right when he says that:

Every conversion is the story of a blessed defeat.³

There can be no conversion unless the knee has bowed. The heart that does not bow is the heart that has not yet SEEN THE KING! When Saul truly encountered Jesus, everything that he had ever trusted in fell to floor, and he was left waiting for God to do what only He could do. He saw that he was a sinner. He saw that he needed a Saviour. And, until a person sees that, they will not lay hold of the glorious hope of the gospel. As Augustine explains:

When anyone knows that he is nothing in himself, and has no help from himself, the weapons within himself are broken, and the war is ended.⁴

As Saul sat in the darkness, he understood that there was powerless in and of himself. He understood that he needed a Saviour. And that leads us to the next thing that we see in this portrait of conversion. We find:

4. A faithful witness

As Saul sat in the darkness, Jesus spoke to a seemingly unknown man named Ananias and said:

“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, ¹² and 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.” (Acts 9:11b-12 ESV)

Ananias responded as any of us would likely have responded:

“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.” (Acts 9:13b-15 ESV)

That’s a valid concern! There was literally a note in Saul’s pocket giving him permission to drag Ananias to Jerusalem for sentencing!

³ C. S. Lewis as quoted by John Blanchard, eds. *The Complete Gathered Gold: a Treasury of Quotations for Christians*. Accordance electronic ed. (New York: Evangelical Press, 2006), paragraph 2459.

⁴ Augustine as quoted by John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 164.

But God had done a work in Saul, and He had ordained that Ananias would be the one to pray for Saul's restoration. So, Ananias walked to what should have been his certain doom, and he knocked on the door, and he asked to see Saul, and he laid his hands on him, and he prayed in the name of Jesus for the most notorious persecutor of the church.

And Saul was restored! The text says that scales fell from his eyes. Suddenly, Saul could see – not only with his physical eyes, but with the eyes of faith! He was a new man! As his first response of faith, Luke reports:

Then he rose and was baptized (Acts 9:19b ESV)

The old Saul – the persecutor of the church – had died with Christ! A new man came out of that water! And in that moment, Ananias must have been so overwhelmingly grateful that he had been allowed to witness that scene. Can you even imagine? How exciting must it have been to see Saul – this formerly self-righteous man – as he humbled himself to receive baptism? How many tears of joy must Ananias have cried as Saul recounted what had taken place?

And Ananias nearly missed it!

In his fear, he said “no.” Thankfully, the Lord was gracious to ask him again, but He didn't have to do that! God could have used anyone! Ananias arrives in this story simply as a faithful witness chosen to witness the completion of what God had already started. Ananias is not an Apostle. He's not one of the seven who were set apart to care for the widows. He was just a guy. Saul was the brightest young man in Jerusalem who is studying under the greatest Jewish teacher of his day, and God used Ananias to open his eyes. As G. Campbell Morgan notes:

When this man Saul was to be dealt with, and his face set toward the line of his life-work, and when he was to be brought into the reception of all those spiritual forces which were necessary thereto, the instrument employed by God was an obscure man.⁵

As an obscure man myself, I feel emboldened by this story. I look out this morning, and I see a room full of obscure men and women. It was an obscure man that filled the pulpit on the day that

⁵ G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 230.

Charles Spurgeon was converted. It was an obscure woman who prayed diligently for the conversion of her son, Augustine. It was an obscure youth leader who saw me lying on the floor in despair and who prayed for me on the day that God opened my eyes.

God delights to use obscure men and women! Philip was prompted by the Spirit to approach the Ethiopian eunuch, and Ananias was prompted to go and pray for Saul – brothers and sisters, let us not miss the prompting of the Lord! How many times have we felt the nudge, “Go and talk to him”? How many times have we heard the still, small voice, “You should pray for her”? Let’s follow the example of Ananias, but let’s go a step further! O that our answer to the prompting of God would always and only be “Yes, Lord! I will go!”

Finally, in this powerful portrait of conversion, we see:

5. A transformed life

The persecutor became the evangelist! The man who set out to squash the Jesus movement became the foremost ambassador for Christ! And this transformation was instant! Look with me at verse 20:

And **immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues**, saying, “He is the Son of God.” (Acts 9:20 ESV)

When Saul’s eyes were opened, so too was his MOUTH! There was a holy gossip that he could not keep to himself! Like a beggar who had found bread, Saul immediately went into the synagogues to proclaim that Jesus IS the Son of God! And he was relentless with his message! In verse 22 we read:

Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by **proving that Jesus was the Christ**. (Acts 9:22 ESV)

The title “Christ” is another word for “Messiah”. The Jews had long been waiting for a King would set them free. If you were with us this December, then you should remember that we followed that line of promise from the Genesis 3 all the way to the birth of Jesus. Saul stood in the synagogues and explained that the child of promise – the Son of God – the CHRIST – had arrived!

This was the message that he came to Damascus to suppress! This was the sermon that Stephen preached that filled Saul with so much rage! But here we find him picking up where Stephen had left off! His listeners were perplexed. As they listened to him preach, they asked:

“Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name?
And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?”
(Acts 9:21b ESV)

Who is this man?

When a person has been converted, that is the question that should follow them as they go out into the world.

Who is she? Who is he?

What happened to the guy who used to drink with us? What happened to the girl who always had the latest gossip? Wasn't he an atheist? Wasn't she an addict? Who is this person standing in front of us?

If there is no transformed life, then there is no conversion.

The Saul of Acts 9 bears the same name as the Saul of Acts 8 but make no mistake – he is altogether a new man! He has a new heart. He has a new mind. He has a new purpose. The world saw this change in Saul.

Here's a question: Has the world seen this change in you? Let me ask it more directly: Have you been converted?

I have heard it argued – and I believe it to be true – that the most dangerous threat to the church today is not the media, or Islam, or the sexual revolution. No, the most dangerous threat to the church today is false conversion⁶.

There are people across North America right now who have convinced themselves that they are Christians because they raised their hand after an emotional sermon. Yet, they went home that day and NOTHING changed! The sin stayed. The pride stayed. The idolatry stayed. Now, they sit in the same spot Sunday after Sunday, and they mumble their way through the same songs, and they trudge through the same Bible reading plan – they’ve ADDED some Jesus – but they never died to sin.

Can I tell you something? I WAS that guy! I sang on the worship team. I helped with the youth group. But I was still dead in my sin because I had never had a true encounter with Jesus. I had never surrendered my life to him. There was no transformation.

I worked at faith trying to be righteous in my own strength, but faith had never done its work in me. It was exhausting. It was unrewarding. It wasn’t conversion.

But Jesus found me. And Jesus found Saul. And I believe that, for some of you this morning, Jesus is opening up your eyes right now. He’s exposing the sin that you have been blind to. You’re seeing the true problem for the first time. God is holy. You are not. You need a Saviour.

If that’s you, then it’s time to stop playing games and to get on your knees. It’s time to surrender to the Son of God – the Messiah – King Jesus. Repent. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Receive the Spirit of God. Proclaim Him in baptism. And watch what He does as you offer Him your life.

Let’s pray together.

⁶ Unfortunately, I don’t remember where I heard this. I suspect it was in a Paul Washer sermon or a Nine Marks “Pastor Talk” podcast.