

The Conversion of Saul

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 23 June 2024

Preacher: Jonathan Dieter

[0:00] Sorry, guys. Just want to make sure you can actually hear me because I have a very quiet voice. We Deeders are famous for our quiet voices. Good morning, everyone.

So yeah, we're going to be doing Acts 9, 1 through 19, but before we read, we're going to do things a little bit differently. I'm going to do the intro, and then we're going to actually go through it piece by piece.

So yeah, who loves a good villain? Who loves to hate a good villain? Nobody's, nobody's, okay. I don't know about you guys, but if I'm listening to a story, reading a story, watching a movie, I love a good villain in the story.

And if you think of any good story, nine times out of ten, you've got a really impressive villain. So I don't know how many of you guys have read *The Hobbit*, but you have Smaug the dragon. Cinderella has the evil stepmother. And the princess bride has Prince Humperdinck. Each of these villains is introduced in the story in such a way to make you know that they are bad.

[1:15] In *The Hobbit*, you have Smaug introduced invading the dwarves' kingdom and killing everyone that he can. In Cinderella, after Cinderella's father died, the stepmother essentially makes her into a slave.

It's in the first few chapters of the story. And all it takes, and when you're watching *The Princess Bride*, all it takes is one minute of watching Prince Humperdinck talk. And you know that the smug idiot has to be a villain.

He's just so, ugh. So when we're reading in Acts 9, we are being introduced to someone who even the very first readers of Luke's letter would have recognized immediately was a villain.

Now, a few weeks ago, when we were hearing about Stephen's martyrdom, there was a brief mention of a young man named Saul who watched over the coats of those stoning Stephen.

And honestly, even that, you're like, why did they feel like they needed somebody to watch their coats? You know, is stoning one of those situations where we're going to go stone this guy, but, you know, people might come and steal our coats?

[2:22] I mean, is that really something that's happening when there's capital punishment going on? Anyhow, we were in, you know, Saul was mentioned there, and now a couple of chapters later, we're getting a full introduction to who Saul is.

Now, like I said, normally we just read the whole passage and then kind of go through it, but what I want to do, I want to go for something a little bit different. I want you to imagine for a moment that this is the very first time that you have ever heard this story.

I want you to picture this as if this is the very first time that you have ever, you know, you're hearing this story, you've never heard it before, and I want you to just try and picture what it would have felt like to hear this for the first time.

So starting in verse 1.

So let's stop right there. Here's our introduction to our villain, and we've got just a couple of verses, but it is really clear who he is.

[3:57] First off, we, and previously, we were introduced to him applauding Stephen's death, and now he's going to travel all the way to Damascus. From Jerusalem to Damascus is over 200 kilometers.

And it's not like he had a Tesla to do this in, okay? He is walking, maybe riding a donkey or something, but most likely walking this distance. It would have taken seven to eight days to walk 200 kilometers to arrest a bunch of people to hunt down the followers of Jesus.

So I want you to just picture, here's a man who so deeply hates Christians that he's going to go and walk for seven or eight days, drop whatever he's working on, and walk to go and arrest these

people.

And when we talk about arresting, I mean, we have this really sanitized view of what an arrest looks like. The, you know, the guards show up at your house, they knock on the door, politely tell you you're under arrest, they read you your rights, put you in the back of the car, take you to jail, right? No. Later on, Saul talks about what he was doing, and he says, I persecuted the followers of this way to their death.

[5 : 15] He talks, in another place, he talks about beating them as he's taking them to prison. There's nothing in the Bible that says that Saul actually was the one who held the sword and killed anyone, but the implication is that those who were being brought to prison in Jerusalem would often end up dead.

And Saul was very aware of this. He was, he may not have been the executioner, but he was the one signing the death warrant. So remember, this is the first time that you've heard this story.

So you've now had this villain, this introduction to this villainous rogue. And what do you expect to come next? For me, I'd be rooting for a lightning bolt from heaven.

But honestly, I'd settle for him following on his own sword, just as his namesake King Saul did a few hundred years before. Either way, I'm looking for divine justice.

I want Saul to suffer. And I'm expecting it because, hey, it's in Acts. There's no reason that this story wouldn't be in Acts if there wasn't a good reason for it. And while this is, if I was writing the story, if I was the one making the decisions as to what was going to happen, this is what would have happened.

[6 : 36] God had a very different plan. So continuing in verse 3. As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.

He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? Who are you, Lord? Saul asked.

I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting, he replied. Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do. The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless.

They heard the sound, but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes, he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus.

For three days he was blind and did not eat or drink anything. Okay, so now this is gone. It's taken a slight twist. This is not quite what I was expecting.

[7 : 33] But hey, Saul is still suffering. He's blind. He's not eating or drinking. Maybe this is actually better than an instant death. He gets to suffer a little bit, right?

Right? He's the villain. We want to see bad things happen to him. But as you read this, especially when you're seeing what Jesus says there, now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do, you get a feeling that this isn't the end of the story.

For those hearing this for the first time, they're like, okay, this is good, but it feels like there's more coming. So continuing in verse 10.

In Damascus, there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision. Ananias.

Yes, Lord, he answered. The Lord told him, go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying.

In a vision, he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight. So here's the plot twist. God is telling Ananias to go to Saul and heal him.

[8 : 54] Where's the suffering? Where's the revenge for all that Saul has done? God's telling Ananias to go and heal him.

Lord, Ananias answered, I've heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. And he's come here with authority from the chief priest to arrest all who call on your name.

Now, I love Ananias' response here because it's really clear. He doesn't want to go to Saul. As far as he's concerned, Saul can just stay blind forever.

It's a bonus. We're getting where we want to get here. This guy's been hunting us down. Let's get rid of him. So you can hear that tone in his voice. I don't know if any of you guys have ever had to explain something to your boss.

You've had to explain to your boss that he's about to make a big mistake. This is what Ananias is doing to God. Okay? It's trying to sound really reasonable, but underneath you can hear this tone, God, you're making a huge mistake.

[10:03] What are you thinking? And God, in his infinite grace, replies to Ananias and explains himself.

But the Lord said to Ananias, Go, this man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.

I will show him how much he has to suffer for my name. And this is where we start to see the heart of God in this whole situation, where we start to see what the heart of Jesus is.

God's not looking for revenge. You and I, if we're in this situation, we might be looking for revenge. But God is not looking for revenge.

His goal isn't punishment. What he's looking to do is take this enemy and turn him into a friend. And then it goes a step beyond that.

[11:07] It's not just turning Saul into a friend, but he says he was going to make him his chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and the people of Israel.

God is looking to take Saul and turn him into an ambassador. He is looking to redeem Saul. He's looking to free him from the lies that have chained him down.

Saul has a passion and a drive that up to this point has been used to drive people to their deaths.

But God wants to use that same passion and that same drive to spread the good news to the entire world.

Now, I find verse 16 very interesting. If we look at it again, it says, I will show him how much he must suffer for my name. And you could look at that and say, well, at least God is going to make sure that Saul suffers.

At least there's some vengeance going on here. At least there, you know, he's not going to get away scot-free. But I think that view is missing the essence of who God is.

[12:25] Remember, at this time, all the Christians were suffering. They were all being persecuted. And I don't think God was looking at this and saying, I'm going to be extra punitive on Saul.

I don't think it's a case of this is revenge or we're going to get him back. Rather, I think what God was doing was explaining to Ananias that Saul isn't going to just be sitting on the sidelines.

When we go back to the story of Nicodemus talking to Jesus, Nicodemus does it in the dark of night.

He kind of is on the sidelines. He's interested. He's a sympathizer. But you don't see him standing up during Jesus' trial and saying, this is a farce.

He kind of is sitting quietly on the sidelines. And I think maybe Ananias might have thought, okay, we're going to get this all on our side, but he's just going to be sitting there on the sidelines, avoiding the trouble.

[13:27] He's not really going to be part of the team. And I think what God is explaining here to Ananias is that Saul isn't going to be sitting on the sidelines.

He's going to be joining the team. He's going to be right in the middle of it. He's going to be running the race with the rest of them. And Ananias, to his credit, hears that, stops arguing, and in verse 17, then Ananias went to the house and entered it.

Placing his hands on Saul, he said, Brother Saul, the Lord, Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here, has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Now, I have no idea what was going through Ananias' head as he's sitting in there. He's meeting the guy who was sent to persecute him, who was sent to drag him to jail.

And he's gone willingly to go to this guy and tell him that Jesus has sent him and you will be healed. Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes and he could see again.

[14:43] He got up and was baptized. And after taking some food, he regained his strength. And here's where we see a different side to Saul.

The same man who was breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples, who was hunting down the followers of Jesus, was now being baptized as a follower himself. And I think one of the things that I find really clear in this story is that Saul, despite everything that we see about him as a villain, he was a true believer.

He wasn't going against the Christians because it would benefit him somehow. He wasn't doing it because it was what everybody else was doing. He truly believed.

He genuinely believed in his heart of hearts that Christianity was a lie and that everything he was doing in hunting down the followers of Christ was good.

it was the right thing to do. And I think there has to be at least some credit given to him there. But you can imagine then his state of mind as he's sitting in Damascus for three days.

[15 : 54] Notice he fasts from both food and water for those three days. His worldview has just been massively changed. and here's where I think we have to give Saul a huge amount of credit.

He realizes that he's been following a lie and he reassesses his beliefs. And this is not common. This is not common today. It's not common in the world at all. Lots of us when we hear that when we it's proven to us that we've been following a lie it's way easier to just continue to follow it. People don't like having their core beliefs changed. And yet Saul is willing to sit here and look at it and say you know what unlike Pharaoh from the Old Testament who heard from Moses that he was wrong needed to let the Israelites go and then had ten count them ten plagues.

Saul all it took was one God speaking to him once and he his heart responded. By the time Ananias shows up here Saul has had time to get his head sorted out and there's no hesitation.

[17 : 21] Ananias prays for him and the symbolism is blinding. Okay actually it's the opposite of blinding. Something like skills fell from Saul's eyes and he could see again.

And I love this symbolism because Saul had been spiritually blind for a lot longer than three days. But God has opened his eyes and he can finally see.

And I think the next bit is rather telling. Saul has not remember eaten or drunk anything for the last three days. What does he do next?

If it was me I'd be going getting hamburger. But Saul goes and says I want to be baptized first. See Saul hasn't really in some ways he hasn't really changed at all.

He is still the passionate driven man that he always was. He is still single minded in his pursuit of what he believes is right. But in the ways that matter Saul has been made new.

[18 : 35] He still has the same personality honestly I think having read what Saul has written as he was going by Paul later on in the New Testament as I read what he's been written I think honestly if I were to meet him I'd probably find him one of those people that's really difficult to get along with.

I don't know that we'd be best bosom buddies or anything. But he is someone who has been made new. He may still be difficult at times but who he is is different.

He's alive and he has been set free. The chains of sin are no longer binding him. He's no longer caught up in the service of judgment but instead he's an ambassador of God's amazing grace.

So what can we take from this? I know that there are people in my life that in the depths of my heart I'm like they're never going to come to Jesus. I know in my head that they can be saved.

It's not a case of in my head I think they can't but it's in my heart I just don't see any way for it to happen. Maybe it's something they've done to others.

[19 : 54] Maybe it's something they've done to us but we just can't see how somebody, this person, whoever it is, can be saved. And maybe it's us. Maybe we're looking at what we've done and saying there's no possible way that I can be forgiven for the things that I've done.

And that's what this story shows us. It shows us that if God can forgive Saul for almost strangling the church in its infancy. Remember, the church was brand new.

At this point, it wasn't just a case of killing a few people. It could have actually killed Christianity. God looked at Saul and forgave him and called him to something bigger and better than he could have ever imagined.

When we look at what Saul moved on to do, it's something beyond what he would have ever even thought was possible before he started following Jesus.

And that same God who redeemed Saul wants to redeem each one of us. That same God who saved Saul wants to save each one of us.

[21 : 08] Let's pray. Lord, I just pray that as we're introduced to Saul, as we see the things that he did, the ways that he hurt others, the way that he hurt you, and we see the mercy and grace that you showed him, I pray that we would be quick to show that same mercy and grace, that we would recognize that there's nothing that we can do, that you will not forgive.

There's nothing that we can do to push you away so that you've given up on us, that you never give up, that you always come back to us, and you're always calling us to come to you.

And Lord, I just pray that if there is anyone here who feels like they are beyond redemption, that you would show them that they are not. And if there's anyone who's holding that against someone else, if there's anyone who believes that somebody else is irredeemable, that you would soften their hearts and show them in the same way that you softened Ananias' heart and showed him that Saul

was someone that could be redeemed, that you would be showing them that this person can be redeemed.

You are the God who loves each one of us. In the name of Jesus, Amen. Amen.