

The Conversion of Saul

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Date: 06 October 2024

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[0 : 00] So I have bad news. If you are super pumped about the Acts sermon series, you're going to be bummed next week because I'm pausing and you can blame the pastor's wife.

I said I was going to talk about Thanksgiving at the beginning and she said, or, which is always dangerous, and I said, or what, dear? And she said, or you could give us a Thanksgiving sermon. And I said, all right, I'll do that, dear. And she's not even here to hear me bowing and scraping either, but you can please feel free to tell her that I did so.

That's true. She will hear it then. She will indeed, wise lad. What a lovely boy. If you ever watch the Alistair Simm Christmas Carol, which is my favorite movie adaptation of that story, Scrooge looks out his window on Christmas morning and says, oh, lovely boy, little boy.

What the giant goose in the window, sir? Yes, that one. Oh, what a lovely boy. Yeah, I should watch it now. Maybe I'll watch it now. Don't judge.

[1 : 10] Yeah, lovely boy. All right, well, this morning, so next week we'll pause. So I know many people will be away next week, but you'll be able to hear that Thanksgiving sermon on the website for sure, or the phone line.

So welcome here for this Sunday, October 6th. My name is Kent Dixon, and it's my joy to be the pastor here. We're continuing in this ongoing sermon series this week, Acts to All the World.

And through this series, we've been exploring the New Testament book of Acts. So our focus passage this morning is found in Acts 9, verses 1 to 19. So you can grab a Bible from the pew in front of you or open your Bible, and I will read it for us as well.

Let's hear that now. Acts 9, verses 1 to 19. Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

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?

[2 : 30] 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. In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias.

The Lord called to him in a vision, Ananias. Yes, Lord, he answered. The Lord said to 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. Lord, Ananias said, I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem.

[3 : 36] And he has come here with the authority from the chief priest to arrest all who call on your name. 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 must suffer for my name. 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.

Immediately something like scales fell from Saul's eyes and he could see again. He got up and was baptized and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. Our sermon on September 8th was titled Saul the Persecutor. And you can check that out on our website to hear it either for the first time or as a refresher because that sets the stage for what we're talking about today.

And in that message, we learned that a well-educated and zealous religious leader named Saul made it his personal crusade to eradicate the church.

[4 : 58] Do you remember that? He wanted to wipe Christianity from the face of the earth. He wanted to punish every follower of Jesus he could find, even as far as having them tortured or executed.

So we previously recognized in Acts 8 and 9 that Saul of Tarsus was the chief persecutor of the early church. And this is the same man that would later be known, we know this, as Paul the Apostle.

And ironically, he would come to suffer, personally suffer, a great deal of persecution for the case of Christ. So just a quick note, if you're wondering now or have ever wondered in the past, oh, oh, here it is, is this the part where God changes Saul's name to Paul?

Did that happen now? Did that happen at his conversion? Well, good news, bad news. If that's maybe what you always believed, I have some news for you. Jesus didn't ever change his name to Paul, ever.

Simon became Peter. That was Jesus' choice, Jesus' direction, Jesus' plan. So it certainly would have been God's plan for Saul to become known as Paul, but his name was not changed in the same way.

[6 : 19] Does that surprise you? Maybe it does, maybe it doesn't. So where did this name Paul come from then? Right? We've gotten to know this man as Saul, so why the change all of a sudden?

Why do we call him Paul more commonly? Why don't we say the apostle Saul? Good question. It's because Saul was his Jewish name. And then Paul would have been the Roman equivalent.

Does that make sense? So remember that Paul, we talked about this, Paul was a Jew, but he was also a Roman citizen. So he had that dual, not dual allegiance, but dual identity of sorts.

So Paul would have been a name that would have been more familiar to and resonated more with Romans, with other Gentile listeners who Paul would focus on later in his ministry.

He was preaching to a specific audience, and that name, Paul versus Saul, would have been more familiar, would have helped him connect. So his name was never formally changed in any way.

[7 : 28] He just adapted to this variation that would then have been more familiar to his audience, to his intended audience. Does that make sense? Hopefully it does. So, moving from the conversion of the Ethiopian that we looked at last week, we're going to turn to what is most arguably the most famous conversion in the entire New Testament.

Our sermon is titled, The Conversion of Saul. So this is a personal, like last week was, this is a personal conversion account. And it's a witness that stands as a powerful testimony to the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

So there are actually three accounts of Saul's conversion in the book of Acts. So we're going to look at those now, so stay with me. Luke describes Saul's conversion as it happened in Acts 9, 1-19, and we just heard that this morning.

Then in Acts 22, verses 6-16, Paul recounts his conversion when he's speaking to a large crowd. It's a little bit shorter section. About noon, as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me.

I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? Who are you, Lord, I asked. I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting, he replied.

[8 : 51] My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me. What shall I do, Lord, I asked. Get up, the Lord said, and go into Damascus.

There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do. My companions led me by the hand into Damascus because the brilliance of the light had blinded me. A man named Ananias came to see me.

He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. He stood beside me and said, Brother Saul, receive your sight.

And at that very moment, I was able to see him. Then he said, Very contemporary language almost there.

What are you waiting for? Then we hear a different account in Acts 26, verses 12 to 18. Acts 26, 12 to 18. And now this is Paul defending himself before King Agrippa.

[10:11] So he's been brought up on charges before the king. On one of these journeys, Paul says, I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests.

About noon, King Agrippa, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. We all fell to the ground and I heard a voice saying to me, note this, in Aramaic, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?

It is hard for you to kick against the goads. Then I asked, Who are you, Lord? I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, the Lord replied. Now get up and stand on your feet.

I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles.

I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.

[11:18] Three different accounts. So Saul's conversion isn't just a powerful testimony to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It also gives us more evidence on the nature of conversions as they are revealed in the book of Acts.

It gives us more understanding, more background. For example, when was Saul saved? Did it happen on the road to Damascus?

Did it happen right then, when the Lord appeared to him? Did it happen then, or did it happen in Damascus, at some point after he arrived there? What about the how?

How was Paul saved? How was Saul saved? Did he say a sinner's prayer that many of us said at one time? Or was he saved by being baptized?

When did that happen? Well, we can find answers to some or all of these questions by considering the biblical evidence. Let's look at the events. So let's start by reviewing the evidence that we see in these three conversion accounts.

[12:26] We can harmonize these accounts, which is take them all together and look at them as a synthesis, or we can compare them as we consider. So in all three accounts, in Acts chapters 9, 22, and 26, they tell us that, they all tell us the same thing, Saul was on his way to Damascus to persecute more Christians.

Saul was on his personal crusade, on his mission. A light from heaven shone around him, and a voice began to speak in Hebrew, Scripture says. Now that one account, remember, says in Aramaic specifically, which is the main language who would have spoken.

Come on, Jesus. So if this voice spoke to him, saying he was Jesus, in the language Jesus spoke, those dots connect. The voice identified itself as being Jesus.

And then, he tells Saul, in the Acts 26 account, why he has appeared to him. Jesus says, why?

Excuse me. Saul is given direction to carry on to Damascus, where Acts 9, verse 6 tells us, Jesus says to him, go to Damascus, and there you will be told what you must do.

[13:47] In Acts 22, verse 10, it says he will be told all the things that are appointed to you to do. So there's two different versions. But he's going to be given specific instructions when?

When he gets to Damascus. So then, in these accounts, Saul arrives in Damascus. In Acts 9, verse 8, and then 22, verse 11, they tell us that he is led by the hand.

Because he is blind. He's been blinded by that light from heaven. And then Acts 9, verse 9 tells us he doesn't eat or drink for three days.

That's a long time. Excuse me. The Lord sends Ananias then, in Acts 9, verses 10 to 16. We learn that, appearing to Ananias in a vision, the Lord tells Ananias to go to Saul.

Ananias wisely obeys. He goes. Then in Acts 9, 17 and 18, Acts 22, 12 and 13, we learn that Ananias restores Saul's sight.

[14:57] Then he tells Saul why the Lord appeared to him, and that God intends for him to be a witness to all that he has seen. Remember the importance of witness in the early church.

In Acts 22, verse 16, Ananias, this is the note that I pulled out. Ananias essentially tells Saul to get moving, right?

This part is done. What are you waiting for? Then we learn in Acts 9, verses 18 and 19, that Saul breaks his fast at this point.

Why do we call it breakfast? That's why. He breaks his fast at this point, and he spends some time with the disciples. So there's a moment of turning there where he breaks his fast, where he spends time in fellowship with the other believers.

So those are the events that form the conversion of Saul. I'm sure we agree it's a powerful testimony to the resurrection of Jesus. So what other possible explanation could there be but the amazing power of God to create such a drastic change in Saul, this man who was the chief persecutor of the church, to become the chief proclaimer of the Christian faith?

[16:25] Quite a change. We all probably have our attitudes changed at times in our lives. We learn something new and say, oh, aha, I didn't know that.

But this kind of complete 180, how often does it happen? Almost never. So Saul's conversion gives us some important insights and observations into the process of conversion.

And so we touched on them a bit when we began this morning. So let's circle back now. So when was Saul saved, right?

We talked about that. Well, let's dig into it more. Some say he was saved on the road to Damascus. But when the Lord appeared to him, that's when people often say his conversion took place, boom, right then, right at that precise moment.

But Saul actually wasn't saved then. He wasn't saved until later when he arrived in Damascus. So remember that in Acts 9, verse 6, when he was on the road, the Lord said it would be in Damascus when he would be told what you must do.

[17:37] And it wasn't until Saul was in Damascus that we learned from Acts 22, 16 that Ananias told him to wash away your sins. He's very specific about that.

So up to that point, Saul would have still been in his sins, as we often refer to it. In other words, he still was not saved at that point. So while to some extent Saul would have been converted during his trip, his view of Jesus certainly would have changed.

A full conversion in the sense of salvation didn't happen until he arrived in Damascus. So knowing the when, how was Paul saved?

What did it, per se? Well, after Ananias has restored Saul's sight and given him the rundown of God's plans for him, in Acts 22, 16, he urges Saul to get moving and have his sins washed away by baptism.

This is consistent with what Peter says in Acts 2, verse 38. Peter said, repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for what?

[18:50] For the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive, at that point, the gift of the Holy Spirit. Baptism and calling on the name of the Lord.

So you may remember in Acts 2, verse 21, after he quotes the prophet Joel, who wrote of calling upon the name of the Lord to be saved, Joel says that, at Pentecost, Peter tells the crowd to be what?

Baptized. In Acts 22, verse 16, Ananias commanded the same thing of Saul, to be baptized, calling upon the name of the Lord. So through the act of baptism, in fact, we are calling upon the name of the Lord.

That's a big part of what baptism is. By being baptized and calling upon the name of the Lord, we are appealing to God to forgive us our sins by the authority of his son, Jesus Christ.

That's the transaction that occurs. And only Jesus made it possible for us to even approach the Father in the first place to receive that forgiveness.

[20:06] So, what can we learn from the conversion of Saul? Well, a person, despite what some people might think, a person is not saved by visions from the Lord.

And certainly, I don't know about you, I've never personally had a vision, anything even remotely like this. Certainly not even remotely as impressive as the one Saul had.

So Paul had also been fasting and praying for three days. Did that do it? Nope. See, that alone also was not enough. Paul later wrote in Romans 6 that baptism is effective.

Because through baptism, we are baptized or buried into Christ's death. We are united with Christ in the likeness of his death.

We are crucified with Christ. And our sin records are wiped clean. And we die to sin.

[21:10] And only in dying to sin are we truly freed from it. The effectiveness of baptism is dependent on two things. Our faith in it and in God.

And in God's power at work. As church theologian Martin Luther once wrote, Baptism has been instituted that it should lead us to the blessings of this death, Christ's death. And through such death to eternal life. Therefore, it is necessary, Luther says, that we should be baptized into Jesus Christ and his death. And so, to anyone who has yet to be baptized for their remission of sins, we say, just like Ananias said to Saul, And now, why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized. And wash away your sins. Calling on the name of the Lord. Amen.