

The Conversion of Paul

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[0 : 00] All right, if you'd please take your Bibles and open up to Acts chapter 9. Acts chapter 9, we are making our way through the book of Acts, I would like to say on a pretty quick pace.

Some of you may disagree with that statement, but I'll let that go. But yes, in the book of Acts chapter 9, we're going to look today at the conversion of Paul.

Acts has not just been a book about revealing the beginning of the church and how the early church met and did their stuff, that the focus of the apostles being on showing the love of God through the gospel message.

I mean, we've seen all that. But it's revealed time and again as I reflect back on, and every week I do a reflection on the book of Acts and what we've covered. And I find time and again the one sobering and fundamental truth that all who come to God must never forget.

And that is that He is in control. God is sovereign control over all matters on this earth.

[1 : 23] In Psalm 115 verse 3 says, Our God is in the heavens. He does all that He pleases. In Isaiah 40 verses 13 and 14, the question is asked, Obviously, all these are rhetorical questions.

Nobody has taught God. Nobody has informed Him. He hasn't consulted with man on anything He does or has determined. He is in control.

Ever since the ascension of Jesus in Acts 1, we've seen God work His perfect will for His glory and our good. Through the preaching of the Word, He saw fit to save 3,000 people on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2.

In Acts 3, through Peter, a man was healed and the gospel was further proclaimed. In Acts 4, the apostles were emboldened to preach the Word after Peter and John's first arrest.

In Acts 5, the apostles were beaten for continuing to preach in the name of Jesus, and they considered themselves worthy to suffer shame for Jesus' sake.

[2 : 52] In Acts 7, Stephen was killed for his witness, sparking a persecution led by Saul, the guy we're going to be looking at particularly this morning. And in spite of the persecution, people continued to be saved through the preaching of the gospel in Acts 8.

So that persecution, it took the gospel from Jerusalem and just shoved it out a little bit, and it's spreading. Now coming to chapter 9, we see one of the most amazing events that has taken place in the history of the church, and that is the conversion of Saul.

And the importance of his conversion is conveyed by the fact that we read about it here in Acts 9, and then he talks about it again in Acts 22.

And 26. So there is a significant portion of the book of Acts that is given to Saul's conversion. And I will do my best to try to be consistent if I say Saul or Paul.

If I make a mistake, I'm sure you can follow along on why I do that. But the fact that Saul is a very accomplished individual among his peers, obviously a persecutor of the church.

[4 : 07] In Philippians chapter 3, he considers that to be a... What's the word I'm looking for? A mark that considers a good thing that he's doing, persecuting the church.

In Philippians 3 verses 4 through 6, he says, That's Saul's testimony.

That's the life that he's living in Acts 7, 8, and now 9, that he is an upstanding Jewish citizen and is highly regarded by the Jewish council and leaders.

He was a good Jew and respected by the leadership. But even still, this man was in need of salvation that could only come through Jesus.

He had heard the truth preached from Stephen because he was there at Stephen's martyrdom. Undoubtedly, he had heard the truth also preached by the other apostles and disciples as he is engaged in persecuting and ultimately murdering those of the way.

[5 : 40] So he was very well aware of the gospel message. And his need for salvation in Jesus. But what we see here in Acts 9 is an interesting story.

An interesting conversion experience that shows once again that God is in control. First in verses 1 and 2, we see that Saul sought to snuff out the church.

His intention was to eliminate it completely. Let's read it. Verse 1. So great was Saul's hatred for the church that he went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogue, or synagogues in Damascus.

Depending on which commentator you read, it's estimated that in Damascus there were somewhere between 10 and 40 synagogues.

So he wasn't just going to one building to do his work. He was going to go to all of them. And he was going to completely wipe out those who belonged to the way.

[7 : 14] And with Damascus being about 150 miles from Jerusalem, this request from Saul shows that the gospel was spreading rapidly.

And subsequently, the church was expanding 150 miles from Jerusalem. This would take him about two weeks on foot to travel.

Probably wasn't traveling on foot the whole time. Probably had a chariot and whatnot. So at least a week to get there. That's a substantial journey for anybody at this time.

And this was a journey that shows the dedication that Saul had in eliminating the followers of Jesus. His zeal is very thorough and quite impressive.

And I believe it's that passion that he had, the passion to do what he felt was right by the Jewish leadership and in his tradition. And it is that passion that God redirects and channels into his three missionary journeys and the establishment of the church, ultimately.

[8 : 30] So the letters from the high priest, they may have outlined the Jewish objections to Christianity as well as given Saul authority to make prisoners of Christians.

And we know that Saul had murderous intentions against these disciples. It says here in verse 1 that he was breathing threats and murder against the disciples. In Acts 22 verse 4, when he's giving his testimony, he said, I persecuted this way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women.

In Acts 26 verse 10, he says, I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Saul. So not only was he the law enforcement, if you will, going out and arresting the people, he was also on the jury that determined whether somebody would be put to death.

And he makes no bones about it. If they belong to the way, he cast his vote against that person. Saul believed that he was doing a good thing by rooting out these dangerous apostates.

[9 : 45] Those who once were followers in Judaism and followers of the law of Moses now have turned from that seemingly towards Jesus. And he considers these guys dangerous.

The night that Jesus was betrayed, he warned his disciples that there would be people like Saul that they would encounter. In John 16 verses 1 through 4, Jesus says, I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away.

They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he's offering service to God. And they will do these things because they have not known the Father nor me.

But I have said these things to you that when their hour comes, you may remember that I told them to you. So Jesus warns his disciples that there are going to be people like Saul coming along seeking to kill you and think they're doing God a service.

Think that they're serving God. They have a false view or a wrong view as to what it is God desires and who Jesus is.

[10 : 58] And he says here that they are doing these things because they have not known the Father nor me. That means that they are following their own traditions, their own teachings, the teachings of the Jewish leadership and so on.

And every time I read that in John 16, I wonder, was Jesus thinking of Saul at that time? I mean, it's speculation, all right?

I can't prove one way or the other. But it just fits who this individual was in the early church. Saul ultimately is, as Stephen accused many of the Jewish influencers and leaders, he was a stiff-necked resistor of the Holy Spirit who was in no mood to consider the claims of Christ.

He sought to snuff out the church. But in verses 3 through 9, we see that Jesus introduces himself to Saul. Let's continue. Now, as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him.

And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? And he said, who are you, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

[12:23] But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do. The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one.

Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by his hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

This light that shone around Saul was not a spotlight effect from heaven. That's what I used to think. Like, on the road to Damascus, he's kind of going along, and then all of a sudden this light just shines down on Saul, and, you know, so it's like a spotlight effect.

That's not what's taking place. Based on later testimony, Jesus actually appears to him. It's not like Jesus in the heavens speaking down to Saul, and shining his spotlight on him, and asking him or talking to him.

Later on in this chapter, we're going to read that Ananias mentions that the Lord Jesus appeared to Saul. In Acts 9.27, Barnabas, when he brings Saul to the apostles, he declares that he had seen the Lord.

[13:48] In 1 Corinthians 9 and 15, Paul asserts to the Corinthian church on two occasions that, in that first letter, that he had seen the risen Christ.

Then Acts 26. You want to turn there real quick? A few pages to the right. More than a few, apparently.

Acts 26, verses 14 through 18. Acts 26. Acts 26. Acts 26. Paul saying, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

It is hard for you to kick against the goads. And I said, who are you, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles to whom I am sending you, to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.

So it's interesting that Paul, in his giving of his testimony, exposed there's a little more that was said and took place. He had a conversation, basically, with Jesus, although it was more one-sided.

[15:39] Saul was just wondering, what in the world is happening and who are you? So amazingly, the Damascus Road experience, it was not just Saul being engulfed in light and spoken to from heaven, rather he was in the very glorious presence of Jesus.

And that is what that light was that shone around him. He was in the presence of Jesus and thus the glory of God. In asking Saul the question, why are you persecuting me, the Lord was identifying the profound union that he has with his church?

He does not ask, why do you persecute my church? Why are you going to Damascus to my church to bring them in chains to Jerusalem? But rather he said, why are you persecuting me?

Now we understand that those who come to faith in Jesus are also united with him. When we take our time of communion, that is an emphasis is our union with Jesus, our oneness with Christ.

And so when he says, why do you persecute me? It's basically, it's that profound truth that still is not fully understood by us.

[16:59] Because the phrase in Christ, you know, we find that coming up multiple times, many times in the New Testament, over 80 times, you see the phrase in Christ.

And it gives nuance to this tremendous reality for the believer that we are in Christ, that we are one with him. So I took time to, you know, just write down a few.

The ones that I'm going to give you right now come from Rome, between Romans and, from the start of Romans to the end of Galatians. I didn't do the whole New Testament. But think about this.

When you think about us being in Christ, what does that mean?

What does that, what does that mean for us? Or him? Well, Romans 3, 24, we are redeemed in Christ. Romans 6, 11, that we are alive in Christ.

Because we once were spiritually dead. Romans 8, we are free in Christ. Romans 12, we are one body in Christ. 1 Corinthians 1, we are sanctified in Christ.

[18:00] 1 Corinthians 4, we are wise in Christ. 2 Corinthians 5, we are a new creation in Christ. Also, 2 Corinthians 5, we're reconciled to God in Christ.

Galatians 2, we have freedom in Christ. Galatians 2, again, we are justified in Christ. Galatians 3, we are sons of God in Christ. And then finally, Galatians 3, 28, we are made one in Christ.

This profound truth about us being in Christ, which has tremendous depth and so much that comes out of that is found in just that one statement.

Saul, why are you persecuting me? Because when there's persecution and hostility against the church, it's not just persecution and hostility against the people who are meeting and gathering and identifying with that local assembly.

It is persecution and hostility against Jesus himself. Because we are in Christ. Those who are united to Christ by faith suffer as he did.

[19:16] And he identifies with them in their struggle. Namely here, in their persecution. Namely here, in their persecution. Namely here, in their persecution. So we see that when Saul has this experience, this conversation with Jesus, afterwards, he gets up off the ground and he saw nothing.

His eyes were open, but he could see nothing. That is a scary prospect. To not be able to see a thing, even though you know your eyes are open.

So we're going to see something like this happen again in Acts 13 with a guy by the name of Elimus. And in that case, Elimus is a magician.

And he is struck with blindness as an act of divine judgment. So to some degree, I would say that that is the case here with Saul.

That there's a divine judgment or punishment on him. He is obviously going to be used by God. But here he's being broken by God.

[20:23] Saul has been in opposition to Jesus and his people from the very beginning, since Stephen. And he is struck with blindness. He is humbled until he realizes his need to be delivered from physical and spiritual darkness by the Lord's gracious intervention.

Jesus is using this to deeply humble Saul. So he can greatly use him for the gospel ministry. He makes that known to Ananias. We're not there yet.

No, but he tells him, This guy is going to be a representative. He is going to be a preacher of the gospel. He's going to do it before the Gentiles. He's going to be before other Jews.

Before kings. And I must show him how much he must suffer for my name's sake. And it starts with this being struck with blindness.

And he's blind for three days. I would imagine after three days of not being able to see anything, he must have resigned himself to, Well, I guess this is it.

[21:25] This is, we're done here. A.W. Tozer says, It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly until he has hurt him deeply.

I'm going to share that again. It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly until he has hurt him deeply. We see that here with Saul. He is hurt deeply.

He is humbled on the road to Damascus. He is riding his high horse, so to speak. And that he has such a high regard from the Jewish leadership. And he's going to persecute the church.

And this is, you know, one of the things that he is most proud of. Showing his zeal for the law by going to arrest and ultimately put to death those who are in the church.

Those who are followers of the way. And then he has an encounter with Jesus and is left blinded from it. And he doesn't eat, he doesn't drink anything for three days.

[22:30] And he can't see anything for three days. That's a deep, humbling moment for Saul. Deep moment of humility.

And it's amazing to see in the course of church history where that statement by Tozer that, you know, it's doubtful that, you know, God will greatly bless a man until he's first greatly hurt him.

And there are two that stuck out to me as I was preparing this. One is the Puritan John Owen. John Owen and his wife Mary had 11 children.

Ten of them died in infancy. And the one daughter who survived to adulthood and married shortly after being married died of consumption.

And not long, either before or after that, his wife died. So, tremendous loss in his life. But a man that God used tremendously in written form because at that time he couldn't be a preacher.

[23 : 35] Puritans were banned from the pulpit. And so, but he was used to write and encourage others in Christ in their walk.

Another individual I thought of was Horatio Spafford. I mentioned this during Sunday school. Horatio Spafford penned It Is Well With My Soul. One of the, a tremendous, great hymn. Very well-known hymn. Very relatable hymn. And before he penned that in 1871, he lost a fortune in the Great Chicago Fire.

Lost a lot of money. Whatever stability he had was now, wasn't there anymore. And in 1873, he had four daughters die in a shipwreck in the Atlantic.

And as the account goes, he was on his way. So, his daughters died. His wife survived. And, you know, got a message back to him that she was alone in London and didn't really know what to do.

[24 : 36] So, he boarded the next ship to go. And as they were, as they were going over the waters where his daughters had gone down and lost their lives, the captain came and told him about that.

Because he knew his story. Came and told him that they were entering the waters just right where that shipwreck had happened. And it was because of that experience in his life that he started penning those words, you know, it is well with my soul.

No, but these guys greatly hurt in their life. God brought them through tremendous pain and hardship but has used them in a mighty way for his glory.

God works uniquely in the lives of his children. And ultimately, it's for our good and his glory. And we even know, I mean, modern day examples of people that we know personally that God has, you know, allowed.

And, you know, we have seen hardships and disease and loss and pain and whatever. And ultimately, God is using those people also for his glory and our good.

[25 : 52] And we know Romans 8.28 says that we know for those who love God, all things work together for good for those who are called according to his purpose. God blinded Saul for three days in preparation for what he was going to use him for for the rest of his life.

And there's indication in the book of Galatians that this experience had a lifelong effect on Saul's eyesight. Galatians 4.15 and 6.11, you know, talking about, you know, in 4.15, he's saying, you know, you guys would have gladly given me your eyes.

You know, to, you know, in reference to his sight being so bad that, you know, people would have, you know, who care about him would have given them their eyes if they could.

That's how much they had concern for him. And, you know, the fact that he wrote with such large letters indicating that he couldn't read his own, you know, writing unless it was a certain size.

So this, you know, this event on the Damascus Road, it wasn't like, oh, he's blinded for three days and that's it. This is something that followed him the rest of his life. And there are some people who believe that that was even the thorn in the flesh that he had was his terrible eyesight.

[27 : 03] But God broke him right there on the road to Damascus. As he was zealously going to persecute and kill those who followed Jesus. And then in verses 10 through 19, we see a new commission for Saul.

Let's read that. Now, there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. This is not the same Ananias as chapter 5. He's dead. Ananias said to him in a vision. Ananias.

He said, Here I am, Lord. 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. 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. But Ananias answered, Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem.

And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name. 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.

[28 : 13] For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name. 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.

And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized. And taking food, he was strengthened.

As Saul sat for three days in his blindness, not eating or drinking anything, he was preparing himself for the next step from the Lord. God had told him what was going to happen, who was going to come.

And that next step was delivered by a follower of Christ named Ananias, who was told by Jesus to go and restore sight to Saul. Now naturally, Ananias is a little apprehensive.

Saul has a reputation and it's not one that is good. It's one that is hostile and dangerous. But Jesus insisted. And when Jesus insists on something, you do it.

[29 : 28] He intended for, Jesus intended for Saul to be a witness for him before all people and to suffer greatly for his name's sake. I want to take a second and say, folks, you never know who God is going to use to give direction to your life.

Or whether or not you may be used by God to give direction to someone else. God used an evangelist by the name of William Farrell to draw John Calvin to stay in Geneva and to be their pastor.

Calvin was passing through to Geneva on his way to Strasbourg, Germany to study. He was recognized at the inn that he was staying at. And William Farrell engaged him in conversation. And Farrell did all he could to convince him to stay in Geneva as their pastor. Yet Calvin persisted that he simply wanted to continue on his way and keep learning and writing for the Lord. In response, Farrell boldly declared, I wouldn't take too kindly to somebody speaking to me like that. Especially basically saying the curse of God be upon you. So Calvin, trembling at those words, was convinced to stay in Geneva and served as the pastor of the people. He was there for two years before he got booted out.

[31 : 00] Then he was called back by the same people who booted him out. Then he served for more than 14 years. But the next 14 years he served as pastor and was greatly opposed by his own people.

Wow, that's interesting. So here, William Farrell, of all people. I don't know him. Calvin didn't know him. But he was scared. And he worked and he did.

God directed him from this man. So the point is that we must remain faithful to God and to be sensitive to his leading. No matter who he may be directing you to engage on his behalf.

Ananias wanted nothing to do with Saul. Who did? Ananias was nervous, but he went. And after receiving back his sight and being filled with the Holy Spirit, Saul was baptized as a new follower of Jesus and stayed in Damascus for some time.

With the believers there. I like Warren Wearsby's summary of this. He says, I thought that was a good summary of what took place here.

[32 : 29] And to close, I'd like to read 1 Timothy 1, verses 12 through 17. As this, yet again, another testimony from Paul about his own life.

He says, The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance.

That Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason. That in me, as the foremost, Jesus might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.

To the king of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. Amen.

Ladies and gentlemen, we must take away a very important reality based on all this information. Based on these 19 verses and acts and everything else that I've had to share.

[34 : 01] And it's that no one, no one is too far removed from God to still be saved by him. No soul is too far gone for God to bring back.

No heart is too hard for God to soften. No son or daughter is too lost for God to rescue. So keep praying for God to do what only he can do.

There was no hope, humanly speaking, for Saul in coming to Jesus. But salvation is God's work. And he did a mighty work there. And if you're the person who thinks you've done too much bad in your life to be forgiven, or that there's no way God could still love a despicable sinner like you, he does.

God can do for you what he did for the murderer Saul. He can use you for his glory in ways that even I can't think of. Romans 10.13 says, Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Father, thank you for your word. Thank you for this testimony of Paul, of Saul, how you brought him to know you, to commit to you.

[35 : 27] And Lord, our hearts are pricked. For those, Lord, who don't know you, who seem so far away, Lord, who seem to be lost causes.

Lord, it's easy to give up. It's easy to just wipe our hands and shake the dirt off our feet, Lord, and walk away. Father, the truth is there is no one too far gone.

There's no heart too hard that you can't soften it. Lord, I pray that you would help us to be faithful followers who are sensitive to your leading, who are sensitive to your commands, that we would live in obedience for your glory and for the good of the people that you put in our lives.

Help us to learn from this testimony of Saul, Lord, that you are the one who does the work of bringing people to the point of salvation.

We are your messengers. We are the tools you use to do the work. Help us to faithfully follow and do as you please.

[36 : 44] In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. I encourage you to pay attention to the words of this song. It's completely new to me.