

The Conversion of Saul Acts 9:1-19a

Introduction

[Steven Baldwin Testimony Video – Stop at 3:19]

Isn't that a neat story?

The video goes for another two minutes and I encourage you to look it up on YouTube if you're interested in hearing the rest

In fact, there are a good number of testimonies from "famous" folks online and a number of historical ones too I love to hear people share their testimonies

Every one of them is a bit different in the details but they really all come down to the same basic elements

Every believer has a conversion story and we would do well to ask each other to share them

And we need to share ours even if we don't think it has any spectacular elements in it

Because through our conversion stories we share a common bond of what it means to be a Christian

The conversion of Saul – soon to be known as the apostle Paul – is an important, pivotal event in church history

Apparently Luke thought so anyway because he includes three different reports on it in the book of Acts

We have the third person account we are looking at today and then two more in Paul's own words in Acts 22 and Acts 26

We would do well to consider what might have happened to the fledgling church had Jesus not met with Saul on the road to Damascus

But, we need to consider not only what might have happened to the church had his zeal for destroying the church gone unabated but also how much poorer the church would have been had his passion not been transformed for the good of the church

As an apostle, Paul wrote 13 of the 27 New Testament books and we would have to wonder what Christianity might look like without his contributions

When we first met Saul in **Acts 8:1** we saw how he gave whole-hearted approval to the stoning of Stephen

And how after applauding Stephen's death Saul, filled with bloodlust went on a rampage through the church

Acts 8:3 tells us that Saul went from house to house as he ravaged the church like a wild animal or a marauding invader

Saul meant to destroy the church and all who called on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ – he wanted to wipe them out

But his persecution of the followers of Christ served to spread the gospel message as we saw in **Acts 8:4**

So, Saul was unwittingly the cause of Philip going to Samaria and the subsequent opening of the gospel to the Samaritans

Because of Saul, the persecuted and fleeing believers led to the fulfillment of the second part of Jesus' promise to his disciples in **Acts 1:8** as they became Christ's witnesses not only in Jerusalem but in all Judea and Samaria

As we begin to look at our passage this morning we will see that Saul hasn't softened any

Not content to clear the Christ-followers out of Jerusalem, he demonstrates that he is eager to chase them down wherever they might flee to and bring them back to Jerusalem for punishment

He an eager hunter who will go to great lengths to bag his quarry

There is a scene in the movie Jurassic Park where a big-game hunter is stalking a velociraptor that has escaped its pen

What he, and the movie watching audience, is unaware of is that he is also being stalked by a second raptor

It's quite a startling reveal in the movie to realize that the hunter has become the hunted and is about to become a dinosaur's dinner

Luke sets up this account in much the same way – Saul is breathing fire and on the hunt not realizing that he too is being pursued by Jesus and that things are not going to go the way he has planned

And while many of the details of Saul's conversion are atypical and not likely to be repeated, there are also many elements in it that are common to all believers that we would do well to make note of

First, let's look at Saul's Condition in verses 1-2

I. Saul's Condition (1-2)

1But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, 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.

A. Relentless Persecutor

In **Acts 26:11** Paul tells Agrippa how he was “persecuting [Christ-followers] even to foreign cities”

In these verses we see the details of Paul's relentless persecution as he takes his show on the road having sought and gotten what amounted to letters of extradition from Caiaphas the high priest

Paul's persecution had caused the Hellenistic believers to flee Jerusalem and had, contrary to his intention, led to the rapid spread of the gospel even beyond the usual reach of the high priest onto foreign soil

His targets would have been those same men and women who had fled because natives of Damascus, even if they were Christ-followers, would not have been under the authority of the high priest

Again, Paul's targets were most likely Hellenistic Jews who had become Christ-followers since they would have been seen as complicit in Stephen's alleged blasphemy against the temple

So, armed with his extradition orders, he headed north to Damascus

Damascus

Damascus is a city in Syria that was already ancient in Paul's day

Still in existence today its goes back to the time of Abraham and it is first mentioned in **Genesis 14:15**

Damascus lies about 135 miles as the crow flies to the north of Jerusalem

I looked up the walking route using Google Maps and it shows the distance to be 179 miles – which would have made for a very long hike for Saul and his company – it would have taken them at least a week to get there

But in Saul's day it was home to a very large Jewish population and, consequently, many synagogues for Paul to go hunting in – it was what military folks would call a “target rich environment” for Saul

So Saul, armed with his letters of extradition, headed toward Damascus “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord”

He was relentless and it seems he would go to any lengths to destroy the fledgling church

B. Misguided Zealot

As we look at this account we need to understand that Paul thought he was doing well

He was a **misguided zealot** who truly thought he was doing God's work in protecting Judaism from what he saw as an upstart sect of heretics

Remember, Saul was not an uneducated rube – he wasn't just some thug who was getting his jollies being a bully –

Saul was a devout religious scholar who was well respected enough to be a member of the Sanhedrin at a relatively young age

Saul describes himself in his first relating of this account found in **Acts 22:3-5**

“I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. I persecuted this Way

to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.”

Saul was theologically educated and considered himself a fierce defender of God

He not only breathed threats of murder; he brought about actual executions – Saul meant business

Saul was a misguided zealot who was passionate about his cause and who would do whatever he thought was necessary to defend his God

C. Needy Sinner

But Saul was also a **needy sinner**

Saul was just like any other unbeliever and if he differed at all it was only by a matter of degree

Saul was content with his spiritual life before he met Christ

He thought he was right – in fact he was so certain of it he was willing to kill over it

He had no fear of God for what he was doing because he sincerely thought God approved of his actions and surely thought he was even earning God’s favor by hunting down these men and women

One can’t help but think of those who are likewise deceived today

I shudder when I hear the reports and see the images of those who are zealous adherents of Islam who will do anything at all in their pursuit of defending it and growing its influence

But one can also be a devoted follower of the religion of self or of wealth or of academia or of science or of any number of things – multitudes today worship at the altar of self-fulfillment and happiness

Being deceived and satisfied is a universal problem and multitudes are humming merrily as they stride confidently into an eternity apart from God

Just like every other person who ever walked this earth, Saul was a needy sinner who was blissfully unaware of his need until God intervened in his life

II. Saul's Confrontation (3-9)

Look with me at verses 3-9 where we see **Saul's Confrontation**

3Now 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.

The Way

Now before we jump into Saul's confrontation, I want to take just a few moments and talk about the name Luke uses to describe the believers in **verse 2**

This is the first time we have seen the name "**the Way**" but it is used repeatedly in the book of Acts after this

It's unknown why exactly the early believers began to refer to themselves by this designation

Perhaps it's because Jesus said in **John 14:6** –

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Or it could come from **Matthew 7:13-14** which contain Jesus' teaching about the wide and narrow gates and the easy and hard ways

Or even from John the Baptist's cry in the wilderness to "Prepare the way of the Lord" in **Mark 1:3**

We will learn later that the label, "Christian" was first used of the believers in Antioch and was meant to be a derogatory terms so perhaps calling themselves "followers of the Way" was just a neutral way of describing how they saw themselves

But the reality is every person is travelling on on a road or a "way"

Perhaps not the Road to Damascus like Saul but a road that leads somewhere

In the case of Saul, he was on the road that led to Damascus but he was also on a road that he wasn't yet aware of

He was on the road from darkness to light, from sin and condemnation to righteousness and reward, from an eternity in hell to eternal life with God in heaven

A. Sovereignly Initiated

The first thing I want to point out about Saul's confrontation is that it was **Sovereignly Initiated**

Saul was not seeking Jesus Christ for the purpose of a relationship

He wasn't even aware he was in need of a relationship with Christ – he was content and satisfied with his Judaism – in fact as we've seen he was a zealot who saw himself as righteous

And since Saul didn't accept the idea that Jesus had risen from the grave the idea of a relationship with a dead man would have been ridiculous on its face

As he neared the city of Damascus the only thing that was likely on his mind was the havoc that he was going to unleash on those followers of the Way that he was going to find there

Romans 3:11 tells us that “no one seeks for God”

But in the account of Zacchaeus in **Luke 19:10** we learn that “the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost”

And that’s precisely what happened to Saul – Jesus showed up and initiated a confrontation

B. Suddenly Undertaken

Next we see that the confrontation was **Suddenly Undertaken**

Saul was going along on his way and “suddenly a light from heaven shone around him”

In later passages we learn that this confrontation occurred around noon at which time the sun would have been very bright and hot

But a light brighter than the sun suddenly surrounded Saul and drove him and his companions to the ground

A few years ago I attended a rock concert at the Overture Center in Madison

It began with a lone oboe player who was playing under a direct spotlight in an otherwise dark theatre

Then all of a sudden they hit the audience with a huge wall of lights from behind the band that was so intense I swear you could feel the light hit your body even in the balcony seats where I was sitting

I can see how a person could stumble and fall in trying to get away from that kind of light

And the light Saul encountered was even more intense than that at the concert because his light was brighter than the ambient light at midday and it caused at least temporary damage to his eyes

Many commentators have tried to describe the light as being like a flash of lightning and that may be accurate as the Greek word can have that meaning

What we can know for sure is that the light was quite sudden, unexpected, and so bright that Saul found himself on the ground

C. Seeking Surrender

I can only imagine that Saul must have felt a great deal of fear because of the light

And that that fear would have been doubled when he heard the voice and the question it asked

“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”

Saul must have believed he was in great danger but Jesus had confronted him not to punish but **seeking surrender**

Jesus confronted Saul not simply to show him how wrong he was before wiping him off the face of the earth but to give him the opportunity to be saved and to give him a commission

Obviously and understandably confused, Saul asked for the identity of the one confronting him

In calling him “lord” I believe he was simply showing respect – kind of like calling him “sir”

We have no indication that he knew at that moment that he was speaking to the risen Lord in spite of the capital “L” in our English translations

And when Jesus answered, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” Saul’s entire world was turned upside down

He thought he was zealously defending God only to find out that he was actually persecuting him

Saul was proud of his zeal and his efforts but now what he thought was a badge of honor was revealed to be a stain that he would carry with a measure of regret for the rest of his life

Jesus reveals four (4) things to Saul in this confrontation

First, he reveals that he is alive in the fact that he is standing before him and speaking to him directly

Saul knew Jesus had been crucified, was dead and buried but here he was obviously alive showing that he had indeed risen just as his followers had said

Second, he reveals that he has been glorified by the Father by appearing in bright light

Saul knew that because of his crucifixion, Jesus should have been cursed by God but here he was in all his glory

Third, he reveals the intimate relationship he has with his church – to persecute a follower of Christ is to persecute Christ

Saul likely recognized that Gamaliel's prediction of this new movement possibly being of God had been realized

By the way, this is a further affirmation that Jesus is continuing his earthly ministry through his church today as we saw hinted at in **Acts 1:1**

Fourth, he reveals that he has expectations for Saul to fulfill in telling him he would be told what he was to do

Saul realized that when he accepted the gift of salvation he would be serving the living Christ

These four revelations were personal and meant for Saul alone as his travelling companions heard the sound of a voice but did not understand it as intelligible speech

Saul was profoundly affected by the encounter and would never be the same again

He rises from the ground blind and helpless and is led by the hand the rest of the way to Damascus

And for three days all he could do was sit in the darkness of his blindness and pray

He didn't even want to eat or drink anything during those three days

Can you imagine what Saul must have been thinking during those three days as he was waiting to be told what he was to do?

While Saul's confrontation is unique and dramatic the truth is that every believer had to, at some point, personally encounter Christ and surrender to him

Every person who has ever been saved had to come through repentance and faith

And every believer must determine to know and accept the role of service for which he or she was saved

Every believer has good works that God has prepared in advance for him or her to do (**Ephesians 2:10**) and there is no such thing as retirement from Christian service

We aren't told exactly when Saul was saved

Many believe it was on the road but I don't think so – I think it was more likely at some point during those three days of deprivation – Saul likely had a great many things to sort out as the reality of the situation hit home

We will turn our attention to Saul's conversion in **verses 10-19a**

III. Saul's Conversion (10-19a)

10Now 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.

A. Unexpected

Saul's conversion was first of all **unexpected**

He certainly wasn't anticipating it and neither were the believers in Damascus

Like he did with Saul, the Lord came to Ananias although not face to face but in a vision

We don't know anything further about Ananias, except that his name means "God is gracious" and he isn't mentioned again within the pages of Scripture after this account

But the Lord appeared to him and called him by name and we see that Ananias stood ready to obey in his reply, "Here I am Lord" – unlike Saul, it appears Ananias knew who was addressing him

So the Lord tells Ananias to go to Straight Street which was one of two main East-West thoroughfares in Damascus to the home of a man named Judas so that he can lay hands on Saul and restore his sight

Apparently, Saul's reputation and his purpose for being in Damascus had preceded him because Ananias reacts with a measure of **reluctance** – which is perfectly understandable

But it's also instructive for us because we are told to love our enemies and often told to reach out to those who oppose and would seek to harm us

It's at those times when we will find out if we really trust in God's power to protect us and in the power of the gospel to bring about change in those enemies

Notice in **verse 15** that the Lord doesn't answer Ananias' objection

He simply says, "Go" and he reveals that Saul has been saved for a purpose

God chose Paul to be his instrument in spite of his past to be his chosen instrument of carrying the Lord's name to "the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel"

Notice that the name of the Lord is very important in this passage as it's mentioned three times in verses 14, 15, and 16

In the end, we see that Ananias was obedient as **verse 17** reveals

It's okay to have reservations and even to express those reservations to God as long as we stand willing to obey

I take great comfort in the fact that Jesus prayed three times in the Garden of Gethsemane to have the cup of the cross removed from him – but in the end he said to the Father "Not my will, but yours, be done"

Saul's conversion was certainly unexpected and Ananias was understandably reluctant at first but in the end he was obedient to what the Lord told him to do

B. Cooperative

In this we see that Saul's conversion was also somewhat of a **cooperative** effort between God and man

I'm not saying Ananias saved Saul in any sense but that God desires to use his followers in the conversion process of others

God could have definitely handled this entire episode with Saul without using Ananias to do so – just as he could have saved you and me without those who ministered to us

But God chooses to use us in a cooperative way for the conversion of others for his own reasons

C. Adoptive

And I believe at least part of why God does this is shown in the next aspect of Saul's conversion and that is that it was **adoptive**

What I mean by that is when Saul was saved he became a part of God's family, the church and that was demonstrated in some tangible ways to him

First we see in **verse 17** that Ananias entered the home of Judas and **laid his hands on** Saul

Saul had made the long journey to Damascus breathing fire and with murder on his mind

Saul might well have expected to be struck for all the harm that he had caused and was seeking to cause

But Ananias reached out in love and in touching Saul he identified with him and showed him friendship

And he also called him "Brother" showing that he accepted him as a fellow part of God's family

Ananias' apprehension had turned to acceptance

And God put his seal of confirmation on Saul's conversion by restoring his sight and filling him with the Holy Spirit

We can't be sure what exactly fell from Saul's eyes – whether it was scar tissue or something else – people like to speculate about it – but the important thing is that he could see once more

There is also some amount of controversy over what is meant by Saul's being filled with the Holy Spirit

I believe that Saul was filled as we are filled for empowerment at this time; not that he was baptized with the Holy Spirit in a delayed fashion as we have seen happen with others

That would be the normal usage of the term during this time period and I can see no reason to think otherwise

My best interpretation then is that Saul was given divine strength that was both restorative after his trauma and empowering for what was in front of him

To be converted means that a person must turn from their old ways and beliefs and from any sense of self-centered independence and become dependent on the Lord

So we see that he rose and demonstrated obedience to Christ in baptism

And after that he was finally able to eat and regain his strength

Saul experienced both physical and spiritual restoration through the “hands on” ministry of Ananias

For Saul, becoming a Christ-follower or a “follower of the Way” had to be a shock to his system

Just as he was now **dependent on Jesus Christ** he was going to need to be **interdependent with the church**

Having set out to destroy the church Saul was now going to need the support and encouragement of the church

And the same is true for every person who comes to a saving knowledge of Christ

Every believer becomes a member of the Body of Christ and we all need the support of a local church to aid us in our walk

Christianity is meant to be lived within the community of the church and Scripture knows nothing of believers living in isolation from one another

Conclusion

While many things about Saul's conversion are unique his story contains elements common to all who are saved

First, everyone who comes to Christ is a sinner in need of God's grace

When we look at someone like Saul and the fact that God was willing to save him we should be instructed to **never count anyone out**

We cannot write any person off as being "too far gone" as long as they are breathing – even if they are breathing out blasphemy and **no one can ever say "I cannot be forgiven"**

No one is so bad as to be beyond the reach of God

Second, we see that God must initiate the conversion

That should give us comfort and encouragement as we witness

We can't be responsible for God calling an individual – that's his area of responsibility – ours is to witness

And it tells us that we must pray for God to reach out to save those whom we are witnessing to

There is another thing I want to point out just by way of clarification

Earlier, we saw that Saul's confrontation was sudden –

But that doesn't mean that his conversion was also sudden

What I mean by that is that we will see later on when we get to chapter 26 that God had been working on Saul prior to confronting him on the road to Damascus

The reason that this is important to understand is that we may never know when we are operating as one of the instruments that God uses to bring someone to a saving knowledge of his Son

We must be witnessing all the time both with our lives and with our words

Steven Baldwin's housekeeper witnessed through singing as she worked

Third, we see that we are saved to be a part of the Body of Christ

When we accept Christ we also accept a position in his family and it's normative for every believer to be part of a local church

Christianity is largely a community effort and we are not meant to live out our lives in isolation

Fourth, we see that God saves us to serve him

This is one we have the tendency to forget – or perhaps we have the tendency to *want* to forget anyway

Saul was saved in part because God had work for him to do

And part of that work was suffering as we see in **verse 16** which always strikes me as a less than compelling sales pitch

To be saved is to accept Jesus as Savior which is a huge step because it means giving up our own efforts

But it also means accepting him as Lord which means we give up our autonomy and self-direction

God chose Saul to take his gospel to the Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel

And he has chosen every believer for some purpose that he will reveal when we are ready to be obedient

Next week we will see how Saul's salvation resulted in an immediately changed life – Let's pray