

ACTS | Saul's Conversion | Story 13

Acts 9: 1-19

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Introduction

God has a wonderful sense of humor. 18 years ago, I wrote a college paper for my Philosophy of Religion class articulating why God's existence could not be proven. 17 years ago, I surrendered my life to Jesus Christ.

We live in a world where there is no lack of opinion on any given issue — religion, politics, current events, Covid, the church, God... and more specifically about Jesus. I had my opinions about Jesus — and those opinions were in large part informed by people who claimed to be followers of Christ.

My objections, skepticism and opinions have obviously changed some since then...

- One of the primary reasons my objections changed is — I stopped looking at the peripheral issues *around* Christianity. I stopped judging Christ *by the actions of his followers*, and I actually began to *look at Christ Himself* — and it changed my life forever.

My hope for you today — is that whatever your experience in life has been, whatever level of skepticism you have toward God, whatever doubts, or disillusionment you might be walking with God, or even with His church — my hope for you is *that today you would be willing to take a risk, and despite your wrestlings with God, that you'd be willing to trust God again — or maybe trust Him for the first time.*

At the end of the message, I'm going to extend an invitation for you to respond to Jesus Christ, that you would trust Him with your life. And, even though you may have given up on God long ago, that today, you'd come back to the One Who has never given up on you.

Today, we're looking at one of the most famous stories in the book of Acts. What we see is that Christianity isn't about a set of rules to obey — *it's about a person you must encounter.* It's not about a religion to adhere to — *but a person to know.*

We see this so clearly in the conversion of the Saul.

Acts 9:1-19

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.

Saul—a violent religious zealot— is seeking to destroy anyone who was a follower of the Way. He pursued them into Judea and Samaria, to arrest them, drag them back to Jerusalem, have them tried, and executed for their faith.

A RADICAL CONFRONTATION
A RADICAL COURAGE
A RADICAL CONVERSION

A Radical Confrontation

Saul thought he knew what God was like! He had a rigid and clear view of who God is and what God does.

In Stephen’s speech in Acts 7 before he was executed under Saul’s approval, Stephen talked about the Jewish Temple becoming obsolete — that the priesthood, and the sacrificial system weren’t necessary anymore. Saul is saying to Stephen, *“God would never do that! He would never abolish the sacrificial system or the Temple, and therefore these people are heretics and must be dealt with!”*

Saul doesn’t approach God with any humility or openness — but rather he approaches God having already determined what God must be like. Saul believed in a God *that he wanted to believe in* — in a God *that was in submission to him and his views*.

Application:

- This is what many people in our culture today are looking for — this is in large part a reason for the rise of progressive Christianity in some liberal evangelical churches
- It’s this idea that God needs to fit into *my* view, *my* perspective, *my* outlook, *my* politics, *my* agenda — rather than for me to fit into His.
- Maybe some of you believe this — it’s because that god, the one you believe in, is the one that you WANT to believe in — the god who does not offend or confront.

If I edit the scripture to fit my view, or my comfort level, then I’ve immediately made myself the sole Authority over my life. Which means, in the moments where I’m beaten up, and cast down, despondent — the voice of God, the encouragement of Scripture holds no weight in my life, because I have a god that I’ve made up!

The question for us is the same question that Saul had to face, “Am I going to change God to fit what I want... (in which case, he’s no longer God), or am I going to submit to *who God has revealed Himself to be and what God wants?*”

And this is where God confronts Saul with the reality of who He is...

Acts 9:3-5

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.”

Saul was faced the same exact question — the same exact problem. Different time, different circumstance, same issue.

And rather than Saul saying, “Wait a minute Lord, you’re not supposed to be like this! Instead, he says “Who are You, Lord?”

Maybe today, instead of predetermining what God must or must not be like, the question God is inviting you to ask today is, “Lord, who are You? What are you like? Reveal yourself to me.”

A Radical Courage

There are two people who exemplify radical courage in this passage — Ananias and Saul.

The first is Ananias...

Acts 9:10-14

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.”

Ananias’ reluctance is completely understandable... this man has the means, motivation, and authority to murder him! Look how God responds.

Acts 9:15

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.”

God knew what reassurance Ananias needed in order to risk his life, to pray for Saul. The courage that God infused into Ananias was exactly what Saul was going to need in every ounce of suffering he was about to face, as he began following the risen Christ.

2 Corinthians 11:24-28

Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; ²⁶ on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; ²⁷ in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. ²⁸ And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

To see a map of Paul’s Missionary Journeys, view the sermon online.

Look at Paul's missionary journeys. He immediately begins traveling all around the first century world planting churches, supporting young pastors like Timothy and Titus. He brought the gospel to Cyprus, Lycia, Galatia, Macedonia, Achaia, and Jerusalem.

At least 13 of the 27 New Testament letters were penned by Paul!

- Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon; and 14, if you count the book of Hebrews

Many of the most influential religious leaders in the history of Christianity were brought to Christ through Saul/Paul's writings.

- St. Augustine was converted to Christianity by reading Romans
- John Wesley was converted by reading Paul's writings
- Martin Luther came to understand that Faith in Christ alone justifies a person before God. He then launched the Protestant Reformation — in response to his understanding of Paul's writings!!!

What if Ananias had never gone? What if Ananias had said "no"?

There may be times when God calls you to do things that by any worldly standard, don't make sense at all — but what might you miss, what might the world miss, if you say "no"?

A Radical Conversion

When Jesus first appears to Saul, He says, "*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?*"

What He *doesn't* say is, "Why are you persecuting *them*?" He doesn't say that. He says, "*Why are you persecuting Me?*"

I'm sure that's probably the reason Saul said, "Who are you, Lord?" I think this is what's really happening. This bright figure knocks him off of his feet with His radiance and glory, and then He asks Saul, "Why are you persecuting me?"

What is Saul saying? He's saying, "*I wasn't persecuting you! I was on my way to persecute them.*" In other words, basically Saul is saying, "Who are you and what are you talking about? I'm persecuting *them*. How could I be persecuting anyone like you, whoever you are?"

Jesus Christ is saying something that seared itself into Saul's heart and mind. Once he grabbed hold of it, it changed him. In fact, he spent the rest of his life being changed by this reality.

Jesus Christ is saying, "*I have such an intimate, radical union with my people; I have a such a deep connection and relationship with them to the degree that whatever is true of them is true of me; and whatever is true of me is true of them. They are in me. I am in them. I am not just their example. They are in me. We are united, we are one.*"

It's this radical conversion that gave Paul the ability to write in 1 Corinthians 4...

1 Corinthians 4:3-5

But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. ⁴ For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. ⁵ Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart...

In other words, because of this radical union Christ has with His followers... Paul says, “I don’t care what you think about me... I don’t even care what I think about myself! I only care about what God thinks of me!”

- Can you imagine the freedom you would have in life if you had a conversion like that! Imagine, knowing that you are radically accepted, loved, chosen, adored, welcomed, cherished, and treasured by the God who created all things and by whom all things exist.
 - What would that do to your fears? Your insecurities? Your addictions? Your anxieties? Your pain? Your feelings of abandonment, or rejection?
 - Your need for affirmation or approval? Your need to prove yourself? Your demand for autonomy, or self-justification?

Saul was driven by something — and yet Saul’s encounter with God caused him literally to do an about-face and start marching in the exact opposite direction! He went from being an abusive, violent zealot, threatening, arresting, and murdering Christians — to gladly suffering for the sake of the gospel, the Kingdom of God, and the churches across the first century world.

The same man that suffered greatly for the gospel, wrote this...

Philippians 4:11-13

...for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. ¹² I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. ¹³ I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

- He went from someone who was clearly, deeply enraged — to someone who was completely poised in every circumstance, absolutely content.
- How did that happen? Conversion. A radical, deep conversion.

And it’s easy to overlook in this passage... but there’s a sentence here...

Acts 9:9

And for three days he was without sight

- three days without sight
- three days in darkness...

- Jesus Christ spent three days in darkness for us
- God Himself spent three days in the Tomb — before He was raised to New Life

Conclusion

Some of you have spent three days in darkness...

Some of you have spent three months in darkness...

Some of you have been wandering in darkness for the last three years...

Feeling utterly lost... alone... not able to find your way...

- Some of you have followed God at one point... and have wandered so far from Him no matter how hard you've tried or fought you haven't been able to find your way back...
- Some of you, like Saul... have a predetermined set of ideas that you've demanded God fit into for you in order for you to accept Him...

Just as Jesus revealed Himself to Saul in His glory and light... rescued Him from the darkness of His own heart... maybe you're the one that Jesus is calling today...

PERSONAL: As a heroin junkie that was delivered in an instant, 17 years ago, let me just tell you — there's no greater gift than the gift of Salvation — of being taken out of darkness into God's glorious light!

- Of God nailing your old life to the cross with Jesus — and raising a BRAND NEW YOU in the resurrection of Jesus — of making all things NEW in your life.
- ◇ Maybe today, you're the one that needs God to pull you out of the darkness that you've been living in...
- ◇ Maybe you're the one that needs *forgiveness for your past...*
- ◇ Maybe you need to be *delivered from addiction, from depression, from hopelessness, from grief, sorrow, and despair...*
- ◇ Maybe today you need power to overcome an impossible situation...
- ◇ Maybe you need that *unshakeable hope for your future...*

Jesus is offering you a radically new life today — if you'll just say "Yes" to Him.

John 3:16-17

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him.

- ◇ Jesus came because He loves you.
- ◇ He died because He loves you.
- ◇ He rose because He loves you.
- ◇ And today, right now, He wants you to know — He didn't come to condemn you to a life of wandering in the darkness

- ◇ He came, not so that you'd blindly wander through life, hoping to stumble into meaning and significance...
- ◇ He came so that you wouldn't perish — but have everlasting life.
- ◇ So that you would walk in the newness of life. Resurrection life.

***From blindness to sight
from darkness to light
from death to life***

Sometimes in life the first step is the hardest one, but if Jesus is who He says HE is, He'll be with you every step of the way. So right now, is your moment of decision, if you're ready to trust God maybe for the first time, or trust God again, to give your life to the One who gave everything for you... I want to invite you... take your first step into a brand-new life.

It takes courage, you might be scared, but God is with you. He's inviting you into the family today. He's inviting you into a new beginning, a brand-new start. To be made new, today.

Pray with me.

“Heavenly Father : thank you for your great love for me: that you gave your life, so I could live: I confess my sin : the things I've done: and the things I've failed to do: I turn away: from my old life: and I receive your cleansing: your forgiveness : your love : and your salvation : that you've won for me: I believe in my heart, and confess with my mouth, that Jesus is Lord : Fill me with Your Holy Spirit : Make me a new Creation : And give me a brand new start : in Jesus name: Amen.”

Let's thank God this morning for New Resurrection Life!

Discussion Questions

1. Has there been a time in your life when you judged Christianity by its followers, instead of by Christ himself? What conclusions did you come to... before and after?
2. Why did Jesus say, “Why are you persecuting ME?” instead of, “Why are you persecuting the followers of the Way?”
3. As Christians, we often “judge” non-Christians because of their actions. What does it say to us that Saul was chosen as an instrument of God — BEFORE he “became a Christian”?
4. Paul's conversion from Saul to Paul was so personally radical, that his life was transformed into a freedom of only caring what God thought of him. How does that compare to your caring about what others think of you, and of your relationship with God?
5. Discuss Philippians 4:11... “for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.”

NOTES