



AN UNLIKELY CONVERT ACTS 9:1-19

Acts 9—New Testament. If you ask church historians who was the single most influential follower of Jesus, some will say Constantine. Most will say the apostle Paul. The most influential figure in Christian history other than Jesus. His 13 letters contained in the NT and his journeys around the Mediterranean in the first century would shape the world in ways that he could have never imagined. And so we're going to look at how God saved Paul today but before we do I want to make one clarification up front. I'll use Saul and Paul—Paul was his roman name. God did not rename him (Acts 13:9)

I'm going to narrate and read us through this story and make a some observations along the way—Paul tells his own version of this story in acts 22 and 26 and gives us some details we don't get here in 9. So I'll be bringing those in as we look at his conversion story. And then we're going to close by asking and answering 5 questions that I think this text leads to us consider. Pray.

Who Is Saul?

Saul was a super Jew. He had been mentored by one of the most respected teachers of the law like a Jewish sensai named Gamaliel—like Skywalker learning from Yoda. He was an expert in the Scriptures and he had incredible zeal and passion. In fact he gives us his impressive Jewish resume on Phil. 3 **“If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”** (Phil 3:4-6) When it came to being a Jew, this guy was a franchise player. Not only was he good but he wanted to kill the competition.

Saul was passionate about snuffing out Christianity. Even if it meant brutality. Here's Paul in Acts 26 years after his conversion describing how he hated Jesus and the church **“9 I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I did so in Jerusalem. 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. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.”**

So this is who we're talking about here. Literally the least likely person to ever trust, love, and follow Jesus. It would be like Adolf Hitler becoming a Jew. Saul had theological reasons not to. Cultural reasons. Social reasons. And on top of that he just hated Jesus. And so what we see here in Acts 9 is just another day at the office for Saul.

Who Is Jesus?

“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.” (Acts 9:3-6)

Right in the middle of his plan to conquer Jesus, Jesus conquers him. And when this blinding light shines from heaven and a voice speaks, the divine voice is none other than Jesus of Nazareth.

I tried to make it clear that Saul hated Jesus but we need to ask the question, why? Why did Saul hate Jesus? Didn't Jesus just feed people, heal people, and love outcasts? How could you hate someone like that? Saul didn't hate Jesus because of his lifestyle and his love for others. Saul hated Jesus for the same reasons our culture hates Jesus and it's not that he did humanitarian work. It's that he claimed to be God. He claimed to be the King who had all authority in heaven and on earth and that he should be the object of our worship and Lord over our lives. This is the moment that convinced Saul that that was true. That Jesus was exactly who he had claimed to be—the king of the universe.

And if you're here today and you're just checking out Christianity let me be so clear we don't follow Jesus because we think he had helpful teachings, but because we believe he's God. We're not Christians because we think Christianity is good lifestyle choice. We've become convinced with Saul—that Jesus Christ is the glorious, powerful, sovereign, reigning king of creation. And as such he is not simply deserving of our admiration, he is deserving of our allegiance.

And so Jesus meets Saul here on the road in what is admittedly a pretty dramatic experience. In ch22, you learn that they saw a light but not a person and they heard a voice but didn't understand it. And the whole experience left Saul temporarily blinded—not sure what exactly it was but he couldn't see. And they have to lead him by the hand to Damascus where verse 9 says didn't eat or drink for three days.

And it's at this point that we meet a guy named Ananias. We've never heard of him. Don't know anything about him other than the fact that he was a disciple—a follower of Jesus. And God appeared to him in a vision and says, there's a guy named Judas who lives in a house down the road on Straight Street. Ask for Saul of Tarsus. He's seen you coming in a vision and lay your hands on him so he can see again.”

And he's a little reticent to go because he's heard of Saul and knows that he's come to persecute Christians, “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.” (Acts 9:15-16) And so he goes. Vs 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.’ 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.”

Two things to notice here. One is incredible impact ordinary people can make through obedience to Christ. Raise your hand if you've ever heard of Albert McMakin? 24 yo farm boy in 1934 who had just gotten saved. There was an evangelist in town and Albert loaded up a truck...one he let drive who got saved—Billy Graham. We won't all be Billy Graham we can all be Albert McMakin. We can all be an Ananias. We tend to want to be a Paul—a spiritual super hero. I think we need more Ananias—people who are faithful in the small moments that aren't seen by many—to show and share Christ's love. And through his faithfulness in this moment, this guy would write 13 books in the NT (we know them as the letters of Paul) and become the greatest missionary who ever lived.

Another thing to notice is the way Ananias treats someone who was his enemy. This guy is hunting Christians. There's a real possibility that Saul has imprisoned or killed one of his friends or relatives. Ananias had every reason to hate this guy. And yet the first words out of his mouth are, "Brother Saul." I don't think this meant they were buddies. I don't think they sent him a Christmas card every year. But he realizes in this moment, that regardless of how he feels about Saul, by God's word, this guy is now in the family. Ananias ministers to him not because he's deserving, but because they both have the same Father. This is how we treat people in God's family. Doesn't matter if they've been there for 30 seconds or 30 years. I hope that we'd never preach the Gospel of grace only to relegate a new believer to a second class because they have a questionable past. Saul isn't accepted into the family on probation—he gets Spirit, baptism, eyesight—all the privileges of being in the family that he's been born again into.

That language of being born is the language the Scripture uses to describe conversion or getting saved. Quite a bit about it by looking at this story of conversion. Specifically I want us to ask and answer 4 questions:

Who Does God Save?

And the one word answer we learn from this story is "anyone"—anyone without exception who turns from their sin and trusts Christ. In fact years later Paul is going to write that God saved him for express the purpose of demonstrating that his saving reach is limitless (1 Tim. 1:15-16) "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. 16 But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life." "I thought I was the best, and I was the worst." God saved me to show he could save anyone. You say I'm pretty sure there's not a chance that God would want me. You have no idea what I've done—things I've said. So far out of line that you'd be ashamed for the person next to you to know. Have you systematically killed Christians? Because if you have, there's hope for you this morning. Jesus died for people just like you. Jesus didn't come for good people. He came for people who know how bad they are and realize they can't fix themselves and trust in the only one who can—Jesus. Ted Bundy documentary. Says he repented and believed on Christ—I'm going to be honest I don't think he did. But if he did, did his actions place him outside the scope of salvation or could he be saved? And I want to say as clearly as I can that if he truly trusted in Christ he will be in eternity. And if that bothers us we need to ask the second question...

On What Basis Does God Save?

Grace. Let's talk about grace first and go back to Bundy. When we ask the question can someone who's done everything he's done be saved, there's a part of us that says, "I dunno...maybe not." Maybe for some it's "absolutely not". But if we answer that way then what it reveals is that we think we're saved by living a good life. Not by being perfect. But living in a way that measures up to some standard. But the problem is, that's what Saul was trying to do before he got saved! We've talked about how bad he was but there's sense in which he was really good. We read it earlier—Kept all the rules. Did all the right things. (Phil 3:8-9) "his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—"

That's what Paul is saying in Phil. 3. I've tried the live a good life thing. I was never good enough for God. I need a right standing before God that doesn't depend on how good I am. I need forgiveness that isn't conditional based on how well I live. I need the perfect life of Christ credited to my account. That's the

grace we get in the Gospel! We receive credit not for our work, but for the works that Someone Else did on our behalf. The conversion of Saul isn't a story about how Saul started to living right when God confronted him. It's his realization that no amount of right living could ever be good enough; that the person running from God being bad AND the person trying to get to God by being good are both equally lost and both spiritually dead—that's what Eph 2 says. Spiritually dead.

There's a tendency for us to glorify a conversion like Saul's or someone who was living a life of crime and violence and got saved and down play boring testimonies of people who were raised in church their whole life and maybe cussed in high school. But from God's perspective both require the same amount of grace because both are equally dead.

If you go out on a battlefield the day after a battle, and examine some of the dead soldiers, one may look pretty mangled and another would look pretty intact pretty good—both are equally dead (John MacArthur). One is not any closer to being alive than the other simply because he has less blood on him. And it's the same with us spiritually. Apart from Christ it doesn't matter if you give to charity or steal from charity—you're both dead. And our only hope is for God to bring us to life...which brings us to our third question...

When Does God Save?

Whenever He decides to. Dead people don't come to life, they have to be made alive. And whether it's the moment before someone kills Christians or the thief on the cross is dying, God sovereignly brings rescue. This may show God's sovereign will in saving someone more than any other conversion story. This isn't a conversation about whether Saul is going to invite Jesus into his heart. Shows up in glorious light, speaks from heaven commanding Saul, Blinds him, appoints someone to lay hands on him, give him the Holy Spirit and his sight. This is absolute sovereign grace saving conquering a rebel heart. Saul wasn't searching for Jesus, Jesus was searching for Him. For Saul this was an interruption but for Jesus it was an appointment. And according to Paul it was made before the creation the world his own words (Gal 1:14-15) "14 And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. 15 But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, 16 was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone" So thankful for loving muscular grace that calls out of our darkness into the light. I wonder if Paul had this experience in mind when he wrote "For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ." (2 Cor. 4:6) God saves according to his sovereign will...

How Does God Save?

By uniting us to Christ. Union with Christ is central to salvation—we are in Christ and Christ is in us. Notice in vs. 17 Ananias tells Paul that he's there among other things so that Saul can receive the Holy Spirit—and it's the Spirit that connects us to Christ. **Branch.** The life of the branch is just participation in the life of the vine. We're like dead branches with no life in ourselves. And the Spirit plugs us into Christ so that the life we experience is simply a participation in His. All the benefits of the Gospel all the glory of his love all the riches of his grace flowing to us through our union with him via the Spirit. He's not far away raining down blessing from up there, he's closer than we even have a category for.

Vs 4 He says, "Saul Saul, why are you persecuting—not my people—but 'me'?"

Groundhog problem! Rebecca never says “Stop destroying me.” He so identifies with you and has so united us to himself through the Holy Spirit that when someone hurts you they hurt Him. Years later Saul will write that we are the body and Christ is the head of the body. And as the head, when his body is hurt, Jesus says “Ouch” why are you hurting me? The God who dwells in inapproachable light, the God who is a consuming fire has united himself to you so closely that in Mt. 25 he says that anyone who clothes, feeds, you clothes and feeds him. Why? Because he’s united us to himself through the Spirit...which not only gives us great assurance and but incredible power...which leads to our last question.

Why Does God Save?

For His glory. In ch 26 when Paul is retelling his story, he gives us some more insight into what God said to him on the road that day, “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, 17 delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you 18 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 a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.” (Acts 26:16-18) God hasn’t just saved Paul so he can “go to heaven” when he dies. God saved Paul, and gave him the Holy Spirit so he could spend his life showcasing the glory of God and advancing the gospel of Jesus. God has repurposed Saul! Don’t miss the irony here, the Gospel he was trying to destroy is the Gospel he’s going to die advancing. And he starts immediately. Vss19-23 he’s telling the Jews about Jesus.

This is why God saves us. Not so that we can live a comfortable life but meaningful life. We’re rescued so that we can extend rescue to others. In fact God even tells Paul he’s going to suffer. Each person who’s trusted in Christ is, to use the language in chapter 9 a chosen instrument to carry the name of God before the world—and we do that in suits, or in scrubs, or a uniform or gym clothes—but we move into all the environments we interact with in order to see God’s glory shine into the hearts and lives of those around us.

And we don’t do this out of guilt in order make something up to God or pay him back. (Phil 3:7-8) “But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ” We’re not fueled by the guilt of a conscience but the glory of a king. And so we live and if necessary give our lives for this king as the we tell the world that it is finished!

“Fight for us, O God, that we not drift numb and blind and foolish into vain and empty excitements. Life is too short, too precious, too painful to waste on worldly bubbles that burst. Heaven is too great, hell is too horrible, eternity is too long that we should putter around on the porch of eternity.” (Piper)