



Saul/Paul, the Conversion
Acts 9

The Church at Canyon Creek, Austin, Texas
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SAUL/PAUL, THE CONVERSION

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[VIDEO!] What a story of one man coming to faith in Jesus Christ. Sam Nadler grew up in a Jewish family in New York City. Like every Jewish child, he grew up hearing about the horrors of the Holocaust. And like many other young men of his day, he experienced the horrors of Vietnam. Somehow through all of that, through drugs and through being Jewish, he met his Messiah. He met Jesus.

In the first century, there were hundreds, even thousands, of Jews who were convinced that Jesus was the Messiah. And the resurrection convinced them. And this morning, I want to tell you the story of one of them – a young man named Saul. Take your Bibles and go to Acts 9.

The book of Acts records the birth of the Church and the thirty-year period following the resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection sparked a movement. They believed Jesus was the Son of God and that everything He said was true. They were convinced it was true, they were compelled to talk about it, and they were courageous to a take stand at great risk. These first Christians are our mentors, and our prayer this fall is their passion would revive our passion. The book of Acts continues to be written. We are writing our chapter every day. So the story continues, and it's still about Jesus.

And here's the story of a reluctant Jew named Saul who met Jesus and was dramatically changed.

SAUL'S ZEAL FOR GOD

A young follower of Jesus named Stephen was convinced, compelled, and courageous too. So much so, that he stood before the Jewish Council and dared to declare Jesus as the Son of God. This was such an insult and such a threat that all who heard him pounced on Stephen. They dragged him outside the city and stoned him to death. And the Bible says that those who stoned Stephen “laid their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul” (Acts 7:58).

Saul was his Hebrew name, and Paul was his Roman name. He was born into a Jewish family which lived in Cilicia, thus making him also a Roman citizen. We usually call him Paul. But it was not until Acts 13:9 where the New Testament begins to refer to him solely as Paul. When he began preaching in Gentile territory, he used his Gentile, Roman name.

As a young man, we read about his zeal for God, and his zeal for protecting the Jewish system. “Saul was in hearty agreement with putting Stephen to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria ... And Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison” (Acts 8:1, 3, NAS).

And Acts 9, “Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to

Jerusalem” (Acts 9:1-2, NAS). Saul was granted letters of permission from the high priest to hunt down Christians as far away as Damascus.

Later in life, after he became a Christian, Saul/Paul never hid his past. He admitted, “You know what I was like when I followed the Jewish religion – how I violently persecuted God’s church. I did my best to destroy it” (Galatians 1:13, NLT). “I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy ... Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all” (1 Timothy 1:13-15, NAS).

Saul was zealous for God, and that meant protecting the Jewish system. Jesus was an insult and a threat to that system. So Paul was on his way to Damascus to hunt down Christians and drag them back to Jerusalem to be punished.

SAUL’S ENCOUNTER WITH JESUS

But something dramatic happened on the road to Damascus.

“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?’ ‘Who are you, Lord?’ Saul asked. ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting ... 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” (Acts 9:3-7, NIV).

“Suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.” Saul “fell to the ground.” He heard a voice. “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Saul said, “Who are you, Lord?” because it was obviously a voice from heaven. He believed in the God of heaven. But how shocked he was when the voice said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”²

A light. A voice. An encounter with Jesus! “It can’t be true. Jesus can’t be the Messiah.”

“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” (Acts 9:8-9, NIV).

Jesus spoke to another man in this story as well. “In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, ‘Ananias!’ ‘Yes, Lord,’ he answered. The Lord told 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.’” (Acts 9:10-12, NIV). The leading of God could not be more specific. Go to this street. Go to this house. Look for this man.

But Ananias objected. “Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name” (Acts 9:13-14, NIV). Saul was a Jewish terrorist; arresting, beating, and in some cases, killing Christians.

But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel” (Acts 9:15, NIV). God had a plan for Saul’s life, and God wanted Ananias to play a part in that plan.

“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” (Acts 9:17-18, NIV).

And then proof of a changed life. Saul “began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, ‘He is the Son of God!’” (Acts 9:20, NAS).

The most unlikely candidate to become a Christian was Saul. He hated the church and he hated Jesus, because Jesus was a threat to the Jewish system to which Saul had devoted his life. Saul was an enemy of the church. He was an enemy of Jesus. But when he encountered Jesus, he fell on his backside. And he was shocked, afraid, humbled, convicted, convinced, and transformed.

For years, Saul thought he was pleasing God, until he met Jesus. Saul is a fulfillment of a prophecy Jesus made. “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’” (Matthew 7:21-23, NIV). If you don’t know Jesus, you don’t get into heaven.

Again, when Saul encountered Jesus, he was shocked, afraid, humbled, convicted, convinced, and transformed.

In later years, after he became a Christian, when Saul became Paul, he wrote most of the New Testament, most of the Christian story. And he wrote things like this:

- “Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God” (Romans 1:1, NIV).
- “My life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus, the work of telling others the good news about the wonderful grace of God” (Acts 20:24, NLT).
- “For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21, NAS). For Paul, life was about faithfully serving Jesus, and death was about finally seeing Jesus. So whether he lived or died, it was all about Jesus.
- “For the love of Christ compels me, because I am convinced that Jesus died for me, and He died for everyone. Therefore, those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again” (2 Corinthians 5:14-15, paraphrase).
- “I know whom I have believed and I am convinced” (2 Timothy 1:12, NAS).

THE GOSPEL

What did Paul believe? What was he convinced of? The Gospel.

And here it is. “That Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared ...” (1 Corinthians 15:3-5, NAS). The Gospel is based upon two events involving Jesus, the crucifixion and the resurrection. And what we do with those events determines our eternal destiny.

The Gospel is about the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. “*Christ died for our sins.*” Jesus did not merely carry our sin and nail it to the cross. He became our sin. He absorbed our sin and nailed Himself to the cross. And by doing so, He became our substitute and died in our place. The Bible says that Jesus “gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us.”³ And it was all an act of love. The Bible says, “God demonstrates His own love toward us ... while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

Jesus “died for our sins,” and “*He was raised on the third day.*” The Gospel rests on the miraculous, many say foolish, resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Gospel demands that we believe in the miracle of a dead man coming back to life.

But resurrection is impossible. Paul realized it was hard to believe. And he conceded that without the resurrection, the Gospel crumbles. He admitted that we would be fools to believe, follow, and preach Jesus, if the resurrection never happened. Paul said, “If there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised” (1 Corinthians 15:13). If there is no resurrection, then Jesus is dead and He is no one’s Savior. Without the resurrection, Jesus was just a good man who taught people to love, who taught the Golden Rule, “treat people the way you want to be treated,” and that’s all. Without the resurrection, Jesus is dead and He is no one’s Savior.

Here’s why I believe in the resurrection. When I look at the majesty and the complexity of the universe, it all points to a creator. The Bible says, “What may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that we are without excuse” (Romans 1:19-20). I’m willing to believe in the miracle of the resurrection, because of the miracle of creation, of the grander miracle. If God could create the universe with a word, then He can raise the dead to life. And for me, the resurrection proves that Jesus is the Son of God and proves that everything He said is true.

Another reason I believe in the resurrection is because the Bible records the eyewitness testimony of those who were there. Hundreds of people saw Jesus alive again. I believe the Bible is true. I believe it is God’s word to us. It makes sense to me. It explains the world I see. I buy the story.

And the story touches my heart. My heart tells me it’s true. The cross of Jesus convicts me of my sin. It stirs a craving for God. I want to know this God who loves me so much that He would sacrifice His son for me. “God demonstrates his own love for us ... while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8, NIV). The story of Jesus, the love of Jesus, comforts me and gives me a sense of peace.

SO WHAT ABOUT YOU?

So what about you? If you have yet to buy the story, what keeps you from believing it?

For some people, the obstacle is all the chaos in the world. How can we believe in a God who allows all the evil and suffering we see in the world? Another obstacle is skepticism and unbelief. There's just not enough evidence to believe there is a God. Besides, science and rationalism prove miracles are impossible. It's foolish to base your life on something as impossible as resurrection. For others, pride keeps them from considering God. I'm doing just fine on my own, and I don't need God's help. Others just want to have fun, and don't want God spoiling it. Others want to be in control of their lives and don't want God telling them what to do.

I've heard people say all of that. You may think that. But I urge to really listen.

- There is someone greater than you, much greater. Jesus, the one who rose from the dead, proving to be the Son of God and proving that everything He said is true.
- And He is telling you something about yourself. That your sin and your choices have separated you from God. And without His help, you will be eternally separated from God.
- But, Jesus did something for you. Jesus sacrificed his life on the cross to pay the penalty of your sin. He died for you. He died in your place. But that's not the end of the story.
- He also did something spectacular and supernatural. He rose from the dead, proving to be the Son of God and proving that everything He said is true.
- And now, right now, He is offering you grace and forgiveness and peace.

All you have to do to become a Christian is “confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, and you shall be saved” (Romans 10:9). And the moment you do, you will be forgiven of everything you've ever done wrong. You will experience peace within and peace with God. And one day you will see Jesus face to face and live with Him forever in heaven, in a place He called Paradise.

NOTES

¹ Video of Sam Nadler, One for Israel, I Met Messiah, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IIn8g2oF7a4>.

² “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads” (Acts 26:14, NIV). “Goads” were cattle prods. Long poles with a sharp end used to poke at the cattle to make them move. Jesus had been goaded Saul all along. Poking him with evidence and with truth. And Saul had been fighting back, trying to silence it all by persecuting the church.

³ See Galatians 1:4.