

The Transformation of Saul

Acts 9:1-20

POSSIBLE INTRO:

After the incredible Resurrection of Jesus, that we just celebrated two weeks ago, the bible tells us that there were hundreds of post-resurrection sightings of Jesus before His ascension into heaven. Those encounters with Risen Jesus transformed the disciples and early church into a viral movement. However, there was one more sighting of the resurrected Jesus that came several years later to one man, and He might have saved his very best one for last.

Biblical Commentator William Larkin wrote: “the most important event in human history apart from the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is the conversion to Christianity of Saul of Tarsus.”

We’re going to dig into this story, where Saul of Tarsus is transformed by an encounter with Jesus, and becomes who we know better as the Apostle Paul. But, why revisit this story from Sunday School? Because when we remember and look again at what God can do, it changes how we pray. It changes how we worship! And my prayer is that we’ll read and see this miracle in Saul and the early disciples, and we’ll be strengthened and encouraged in our own salvation and calling...and also in God’s plans for us, even today.

Sound ambitious enough? Well, let’s pray:

[READ the Scripture Passage Acts 9:1-20 (NIV)]

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest ²and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. ³As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

⁵“Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked.

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. ⁶“Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

⁷The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. ⁸Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. ⁹For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

¹⁰In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, “Ananias!”

“Yes, Lord,” he answered.

¹¹The 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. ¹²In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.”

¹³“Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. ¹⁴And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.”

¹⁵But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. ¹⁶I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”

¹⁷Then 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.” ¹⁸Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, ¹⁹and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. ²⁰At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God

This incredible story begins with a very interesting phrase. “Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples.” What a chilling word picture! This is a present tense verb telling us that Saul is CONTINUALLY obsessed with persecuting the church, a fanatic in his pursuit of believers.

Listen to Saul in his own words later in Acts (Acts 26:9-11) (ESV). He says, “I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰And 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. ¹¹And 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 where did this raging fury come from? How did Saul get here?

Many of you know Saul’s backstory. He was born to Hebrew parents but also grew up in the city of Tarsus, which was a center of Greek culture and learning that was only rivaled by Athens and Alexandria. He was invited to study under Gamaliel, the most honored Hebrew scholar of the time.

And Saul was raised and trained in a monotheistic theology, a belief in one God. He had grown up reciting the Shema (Deut. 6:4): “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” The idea that Jesus too was God, would have been impossible and incompatible. As a Pharisee, he would have believed that the Messiah would be blessed and honored by God. This Jesus, who died on a cross, was clearly cursed. It was silly to imagine that God would abandon His son in such a way.

And you can imagine how that disdain only grew. These insufferable Christians kept insisting their Jesus was raised from the dead. But their lies were spreading, even in the city where the alleged ‘empty’ tomb was located. And why was there no body? Matthew’s Gospel reports that a viral accusation was being spread that the disciples *stole* the body. And that would have suited Saul just fine. This Jesus business was a dangerous and deceptive conspiracy that dishonored Saul’s God.

But’s Saul’s hatred burned hotter than the other Pharisees. How did he justify his violence?

Perhaps he looked to the zeal of Phineas, considered a hero in the Old Testament (Numbers 25)...who violently kills an immoral man and woman with his spear, to halt a plague. Maybe Saul told himself he was stopping a plague of false religion and heresy. But, whatever was in his head and heart, Saul had created a false picture of God, who approved of his actions and sanctioned his hatred.

Saul had become a feared religious bounty hunter and was pursuing believers that had slipped away from Jerusalem to the city of Damascus. And it was on that road to Damascus that everything would change.

Let me ask you: Have you ever run square into the Lord Jesus?

I was blessed to hear about Jesus from a very young age, and I gave my heart to Him when I was just a boy at my kitchen counter. But, some of the most memorable spiritual moments of my life were those where I was boldly marching down a road that was leading me away from Him, and IN HIS GRACE, Jesus stood straight in my path.

And you know...we typically think of this Damascus road encounter as a flash in the pan event...a sudden "Come to Jesus" moment...but, like so many of our own grace stories, God had almost certainly been at work long before.

When Paul tells this story again later in Acts, he recounts the Lord's words "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" and then adds the Lord saying, "It is hard for you to kick against the goads." This would have brought to mind a picture of a beast of burden being forced to plow, and being goaded by a rod or a whip. The animal, resenting his position, kicks against it in opposition. And that's essentially what Jesus says Saul has been doing. (Jesus knew Saul's heart, just like He knows yours and mine.) He says, 'You've been kicking against me...and it's not going well for you' **But why does He say that?** (Saul's actions don't seem conflicted)

Well, there may be important clues in two stories we read about earlier in Acts: (FIX!)

#1 - In Chapter 5 of Acts, the Sadducees arrest Peter and the apostles for preaching Jesus and put them in jail. They call together the Sanhedrin, the full assembly of elders in Israel, and summon the prisoners to them, only to find that they have vanished from a locked prison, and are back in the temple courts preaching. The Jewish leaders are enraged, and want to put them to death, but then, it's Saul's mentor and teacher, Gamaliel who urges caution and restraint, saying "*Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.*" (Acts 5:38-39) Saul had been orchestrating these arrests. Imagine hearing those words of caution from his honored mentor...it may have planted a seed of conflict and doubt in Saul.

#2 - Just two chapters earlier in Acts, we're introduced to Saul at the stoning of Stephen. For likely the first time, Saul is confronted with a powerful Christian testimony from a believer of equal standing with Saul. You see, Stephen too is highly educated and shows an understanding of the scriptures that would have required Saul to take note. Stephen makes his points clearly, winsomely, and it seems genuine. But perhaps most convincingly, Stephen, as he is dying, full of the Holy Spirit, with his face looking like that of an angel...He looks up to heaven and sees Jesus, declaring "Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." As the stones pelt the remaining life from Stephen, he, in the model of His Savior, commits His Spirit to God and prays, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And then he dies.

Again, imagine the impact that might have on Saul. The splinter of doubt in his soul.

Encountering Jesus Christ IS the central moment of every human life...it is the climax of every story. So, every other part of our lives is either preparing us for it, or is a response to it.

As Saul approaches Damascus, that's when this miraculous intervention takes place. At midday, a light that outshines the Sun flashes around him, he falls to his knees, I imagine him closing his eyes as tight as he could, trying to block out this piercing light, and despite his best efforts, the imagine of Jesus pierces through his closed eyes (and his resolve).

Jesus speaks to him "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Doesn't that tell us everything about how Jesus thinks of His church? About you and I? An attack on His beloved is an attack on HIM.

Saul replies, "Who are you, Lord" and the reply is: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." At this word, everything changes. A RISEN Jesus changes everything. Saul's beliefs and understanding of God, of the world, everything he thought so highly of in his life and wanted his life to be about, collapses like a house of cards. The stubborn will of this religious persecutor is broken in an instant by the light of the resurrected and victorious King Jesus.

It inspired Paul to later write this verses..."For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor 4:4,6)

Saul arises blinded by the light, needing assistance to find his way – what a reversal ...the arrogant, resolute, vigorous Saul of Tarsus who had come with papers and authority and an entourage...now feeble, being helped into the very city he had intended to purge of Christians. He goes from shaking his fists at God, to now being led by the hand.

We need to spend a moment on Ananias. God could have accomplished this conversion completely on the Damascus road. In that moment. But, God has plans to NOT just release Saul from his old life, but to release this young church from its fear of him. And it involves an inspiring act of faith by Ananias:

Do you remember Ananias from his other appearances in Scripture? NO? Well, that's cause he's not in there. This is his only appearance. And do you know what does that

mean? It means, like YOU and like ME, he's an ordinary believer and Christ follower. But, how encouraging it is to see his faithful role in the story God is writing.

God gives some very specific instructions to Ananias ... "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 9:11-12)

It's SO specific...it's almost like God knew it'd be tempting to get lost on the way...just ring the bell and no one seems home..."I'll try again later." No, God says, it's this house, this street, this is the guy, this is what he's up to, this is what to say...

Ananias' still gives some understandable pushback:

"Lord, I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people 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)

Ananias undoubtedly thinks..."yeah, that's me he's coming to arrest and drag away"

But God offers NO coddling of his hesitation. Go...and why? Because I have plans and purposes. Because I am who I am. Because I do not fail.

Friends, this is why you and I should be courageous too!

Ananias chose to believe that God could change this man. He believed God when he said, "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)

Do those words grab YOUR heart the way they pull at mine? Look at the INCREDIBLE grace of God, choosing the self-described "Chief of Sinners," the LEAST likely to be an apostle, to be "His Chosen instrument"...The resounding takeaway then and now - there's NO ONE beyond hope and no one that God cannot use.

Keep in mind...that these bold words come while Saul is still in time out...blind and humbled, and they come as Ananias pauses with understandable doubt...but God is pointing to deep centerfield and says "watch what I can do." Watch what my grace and power will accomplish in even the most hardened of hearts. He'll speak before Kings. He'll carry my name to the gentiles who have always been on the outside looking in. He'll move the hard hearts of my own people, who rejected my son and put him to death on a cross.

God, also, in those words, reveals just enough for Ananias and Saul. Not everything that the Apostle would accomplish or soon face, but just what's needed to know that God has big things in store.

And friends, God's plans for Saul, just like His plans for you and me, went back to His mother's womb. God had created a masterpiece of leadership, intellect, and zeal in Saul that He could use to advance the Gospel like no one before or since.

God would use Saul's unique fluency in Jewish and Greek culture, nevermind his master of their languages. He'd use Saul's training under the finest minds of Judaism and his growing up years in Tarsus. Saul's Roman citizenship would prove critical when he was repeatedly arrested, beaten and threatened with death. Saul was capable in a secular trade, able to support himself. And of course, his dogged personality, his unmatched zeal and drive.

But that brings up one other consideration...God knew that all those gifts would be used as weapons AGAINST God's people. And yet, in His perfect timing, He would redeem them to ADVANCE the church.

Imagine how this touched Paul when he wrote in Ephesians that "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." (Eph. 2:10)

Or when he wrote, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28)

Later, Saul would remember the stoning of Stephen, he'd remember the believers he had imprisoned or helped execute, and yet he could write that in ALL *those* things God had worked for good too.

Think for a moment about the unique parts of your story and life, the qualities that God, by His grace, has redeemed and is using in YOU. The uniqueness of your story. You know, on our own, the beauty of our lives would be spent in selfish gain, or haunted by past mistakes...but when we belong to Jesus, He redeems all of it somehow for our good and His glory. I can't imagine where I'd be if it weren't for the grace of God.

OH, and what might God be longing to do in the life of our unsaved friends and family that we're praying for? Have you dared dream what might be possible for them when God is alive and inside of them? When what is under the 'dominion of darkness' is brought into the kingdom of the Son he loves?

Well, Ananias does follow through in such a sweet example of God's grace. He greets him "Brother Saul" and gently lays his hands on him. Imagine laying hands on someone who you know had been on their way to arrest you?! To be counted as a brother in Christ, after his attempts to ruin the church?! What a beautiful picture of grace and forgiveness.

As he does, something like scales fall from Saul's eyes, and God restores his sight. I have to imagine that the hurt and fear in Ananias, from what this man had done against the church, I think it fell away too. His obedience to God and faith in Him replaced that fear with love.

The text says that, "Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus." (Acts 9:19) This too is significant. Imagine the encouragement they provided each other. The disciples hearing a mortal enemy profess Christ. Saul being disciplined and accepted by those he came to persecute. Even for us today, there is a lot of Jesus that we will only see in the faces and lives of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Paul would later write in 1 Timothy 1:16, "I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life."

That word example is also translated as "a pattern" It's as though he's saying, all of our stories will be different, but the beautiful work that God did in my life, can serve as a way to understand the beautiful work that God has done in yours, and will do in others.

If God can save and use me, Saul, then He can save and redeem anyone. Even someone far, far from Him? Without a doubt. Even someone with years of baggage and a past of horrible mistakes? Without a doubt.

Like Ananias, we find our confidence and courage in God. Think of it this way: No one you and I will share the Gospel with will be as scary as Saul. And remember: the rescuing of our loved ones is not on our shoulders. It's on His. That frees us to courageously and confidently pray. To love generously and speak honestly as there are opportunities.

If we believe God can change even the hardest hearts, it'll change how we live. It'll also change how we do church. When I pray for Shell Point, I long for every resident who chooses this community to have a spirit-filled friend. I pray that the body at the Village Church would be in the lives of every resident .. And would eagerly receive and disciple new brothers and sisters as graciously as the believers in Damascus.

I want to conclude by bringing us back to that beautiful phrase, "a chosen instrument to carry His name." I love that. The sum of God's purpose for us on this earth is to carry His name. Some in here have spent large portions of their lives carrying the name of Jesus into foreign lands. We bless you. Some have spent their working years carrying Jesus name to men and women and children in their church or their school or their community.

But, what about now? What about today?

As you know, I've never retired before.

Can you imagine what it's like to work at a retirement community, when you're in the middle of your working years? Twenty-some years in and twenty-some to go? It feels a little like attending all your friend's weddings, but you're hopelessly single thinking... "it must be nice."

I say that to say...I don't know what it'd be like to be retired. But, I could IMAGINE that it'd be pretty easy to say, "I've worked hard, I've served, I volunteered when my kids were growing up, I ministered at my church, I gave sacrificially...my health and my energy are not the same, my life circumstances have changed, there's a million reasons why this season can't be like the season before..."

And yet, for so many dear ones in this church, you have not stopped giving sacrificially to the church and to missions...in your finances and prayers, you hold the ropes for the next generation of Kingdom workers! Here at Shell Point, many of you continue to volunteer and minister in Jesus' name, you look in on friends and neighbors, you lead an Alpha group, or you serve the dear ones who have needs at Assisted Living or Larsen. Some reach out beyond our community, carrying His name to prisoners, or disabled adults, or pregnant mothers. He's using you to Carry His name before your grandchildren and children. You pray daily for them, for their salvation or spiritual strengthening.

But what about when your strength or health truly fails you? Our culture champions the productive and it can leave the infirmed feeling without purpose and value. Why am I even here, when I can only depend on others? Brother or sister in Christ...God can use you even when your body is failing you. You have the Spirit of Jesus in your heart. You minister to others with a smile. Just a kind word of encouragement or a prayer for a staff member can be a precious gift.

How about this for a vision for Shell Point? God, would you use this precious and special community, that men and women who don't know you, would come to work here and serve the physical needs of aging saints of God. And as these employees experience being Your hands and feet, in the healing ministry of Christ, caring for the sick and serving in humblest of ways, we pray they'd see Your loving face in the faces of our dear ones, those who carry Your name and who humbly receive that physical care, even while they care for the spirit of their caregiver.

That's a purpose and a calling that can hold up as long as we have breath.

(Bill story)