

He Saw (and Loved!) the Light: the Conversion of Saul of Tarsus
Acts 9:1-9

Main Point:

An encounter with Jesus not only reveals our need for God's forgiveness but transforms the desires of our hearts.

Introduction:

Good morning! Please open your bibles to Acts 8. If you are new to the Bible, you can find Acts 8 following the gospel accounts (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John).

When books on history are being written, historians look at specific events and dates that they believe shape world history. In school, most of us were taught the importance of these dates and events. Here are just a few from the last couple of centuries:

1776 – the signing of the declaration of the independence

1861 – the beginning of the civil war

1914 – the start of WW I

1939 – the start of WW II

1948 – the birth of the modern state of Israel

1949 – communist revolution in China

1963 – the assassination of JFK

1968 – the assassination of MLK, RFK

1989 – the fall of the Berlin Wall

2001 – the 9/11 terrorist attacks

According to modern historians, events such as these and countless others are the pivotal moments in human history whose ripple effects determine the shape and direction of the future, even up to the present day. From a Christian perspective, we would say that the most important event in history is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Interestingly enough, world events are dated in accordance with Christ's birth, between what was formerly known BC (BCE), and AD (CE). However, there is another event that also happened roughly 2,000 years ago that is arguably the second most significant in world history next to the LJC, and that is the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. However, you will be hard pressed to find this event in any secular history books, other than perhaps a footnote about religious or Christian history.

But make no mistake about it, my friends, the event that we are going to be reading from today in Acts has indeed shaped the history of not only the church, but entire civilizations (including ours) and is still shaping them even today. Every single one of us in this room who does not have a Jewish ancestry – if you do, your history goes back a bit deeper into the biblical story to Abraham, to Moses, to Jesus, to Peter and John. But if you are a Gentile (non-Jewish person) like me, then you can trace your spiritual ancestry back to this one day and owe your spiritual history to an unknown day in AD 34 when a group of travelers were moving along a dusty road outside of Jerusalem towards the city of Damascus. This morning, friends, we are going to take a journey back to our spiritual roots, where it all began, when a man named Saul “saw the light” of Jesus and had his life changed.

Orienting the Text: Where we are in the story

Let's take a moment to catch up where we are in the story so far. The last two weeks, we have learned about Stephen, the first martyr – the first person to die for their faith – who was killed by the Jewish temple-authorities for proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah. After Stephen's death, Luke then tells us that a great wave of persecution breaks out and the disciples are scattered across

Judea. However, they did not scatter in fear! Instead, they began to preach Jesus everywhere they went.

Acts 8:4 - Over the last couple of weeks, we learned about a friend and co-worker of Stephen's, whom we refer to as Philip the Evangelist, who, inspired by Stephen's example, fulfills the prophecy of Jesus by taking the gospel beyond the borders of Israel into new areas: Samaria, the Ethiopian Eunuch, and others. What we see happening here is the gospel breaking into new territory, reaching new people – non-Jewish people! – in the fulfillment of what the Lord Jesus said would happen when the Holy Spirit would come upon the people: “you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Now, if you recall, when Stephen was being stoned to death by the mob, an influential Pharisee named Saul was watching with great delight. Acts 8:1-3 - What do we know about this man Saul? Well, from his own testimony, we learn this from Philippians 3:

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ 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; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

So Paul is a brilliant man, knows scripture and Jewish traditions, an influential Pharisee, and dead-set on stomping out this little movement of Jesus-followers. For him, Jesus was a false-Messiah worthy of death. And now, this band of his merry disciples are claiming he was raised from the dead – blasphemy! – and they are spreading lies throughout Israel, false-teaching that is leading people astray. False prophets, essentially. And they are worthy of death.

Lets start here and see what happens with Saul. **Acts 9:1-9**

Meet Saul of Tarsus, a man among “beasts”

Acts 9:1-2 - Under the authority of the High Priest (religious leaders in Jerusalem), Saul is given authority to pursue the scattered Christians all the way up to Damascus. Damascus is located roughly 135 miles from Jerusalem, and part of what was known then as the Decapolis in the Roman province of Syria (still exists today). There were many Jewish synagogues in the city, and apparently the scattered Christians were there and, as we saw in 8:4, already actively worshipping and evangelizing. The fact that their presence got the attention of Saul and him making this long journey says something about the vibrancy and witness of this church!

But what I want you to notice here is how Luke describes Saul's state of mind:

“Breathing out” murderous threats. Some scholars argue that this translation is too tame. It should be rendered as a progression: “breath threats and murder.” Again, some say the translation of the word “murder” is too tame – “slaughter” might be a more appropriate term. Back in the passage we just read in chapter 8, Luke describes Saul as “ravaging” the church. Now this word for “ravaging” appears only here in the New Testament. However, in the Greek translation of the Old Testament that Jews were using at this time called the Septuagint (Greek bible), this word is used in Psalm 80:13 to describe wild boars devastating a vineyard. Outside the bible, this term is used in secular literature to describe the ravaging of a human body by wild beasts. Later in verse 21 of this chapter, the Damascus Christians describe Saul as “making havoc” for Christians. Again, some commentators say this translation is too tame. They say “mauling” Christians is more appropriate, again, similar to how a wild beast mauls its prey. In our context, we describe bear attacks this way: a large bear mauls a human being – literally overtaking it with fury and force. So in keeping with the illustration of wild beasts, the “breathing out” that Luke describes here is like an enraged animal crying out in fury as it attacks its prey.

The closest contemporary example I can think of what Saul was like would be someone like an Osama Bin Laden – a religious zealot, hell-bent (literally) on eliminating both Jews and Christians for the sake of his belief in God’s honor. For these early Christians, Saul was a frightening figure.

So why all this detail on the meaning of these words? Well, Luke is trying to help us understand the state of mind that Saul of Tarsus was in when he encounters the Lord Jesus. He was as far away from Jesus, spiritually speaking, as you could possibly imagine. Which makes what happens next all the more dramatic and incredible!

Saul meets Jesus Acts 9:3 - Some details to notice here. First, Jesus appears before Paul with *power*; He literally knocks Paul off his high horse. Jesus comes with a sense of force. Second, Jesus appears with *light*. “Light” in Luke, as well as other New Testament writers, is often associated with the saving presence of God. Jesus here embodies God’s presence. Look at what happens:

Acts 9:4-5 - Have you ever been so convinced of something in your mind, only to find out you were wrong? It’s humbling, isn’t it? When something works you up to the point of anger – maybe even rage – and then you find out, “Oops – I didn’t have all the information. I didn’t have the full story. Oops, I was misinformed.” Now, imagine what it was like for Saul in this very moment. He dedicates his entire life to his ancestral faith, to his traditions, to his people, and then in one sweeping moment – he realizes that all this energy, all this devotion, all this self-righteous rage, has been completely and totally misguided. He has not only been wrong about Jesus and Christians like Stephen, but he has innocent blood on his hands.

In this moment, probably for the first time in his life, Saul of Tarsus, experiences the full depth of his own sin. Surely, as a Jew, he would have understood his own fallibility, but it was a fallibility that was cushioned by the fact that he observed the law, had the temple sacrifices, was zealous for the law, and was always in the right. Sin, real sin, was for back-slidden Jews and for those Gentile sinners out there. But now, in this moment, he comes to the full realization of what it means to be on the wrong side of God. He knows the bible – the Old Testament – and what happens when you are an enemy of God and persecute (wrongly) God’s people! Throughout the Bible God comes to the rescue of His people and puts His enemies to flight and promises over and over the destruction of those who oppose Him! Now, Paul realizes he’s one of them, in the flash of a moment, Paul’s entire world comes crumbling down, and he is left completely humbled and devastated.

But notice something else here: the presence of Jesus before Saul is not a menacing presence, but a merciful one. He begins with a question – almost an innocent one: “Saul, Saul – why are you persecuting me?” Of course, Saul has no answer.

But look what happens next: Acts 9:6-9 - Rather than being obliterated by the wrath of God, Saul is simply told wait for further instructions. But the further instructions aren’t given as if he is awaiting his sentencing from the court of God’s angels. Instead, we find Saul rising up in amazement and wonder that he is somehow being shown mercy and being given a new life purpose – a second chance. Now, we won’t get to the details of what that second chance will be – we’ll cover that next week – but for, in the moment, Saul waits in silence, in the darkness, for His God, His Savior, the Lord Jesus, to show Him what to do.

But I want to suggest to you that over these 3 days in darkness and silence, Saul begins to experience the wonder and mercy of God at a level he has never known before. And it changes everything about him. The hostile, ravaging, beast of a man becomes changed, transformed, into a passionate and devoted follower of the Lord Jesus. His zeal for God, and his ancestral faith becomes love and affection for the Lord Jesus. MAYBE?

I don't have any exact proof of this, but I wonder if one of the Psalms (which he surely would have known) he might have been meditating was Psalm 62:

*For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence,
for my hope is from him.*

⁶ *He only is my rock and my salvation,
my fortress; I shall not be shaken.*

⁷ *On God rests my salvation and my glory;
my mighty rock, my refuge is God.*

⁸ *Trust in him at all times, O people;
pour out your heart before him;
God is a refuge for us. Selah*

⁹ *Those of low estate are but a breath;
those of high estate are a delusion;
in the balances they go up;
they are together lighter than a breath.*

¹⁰ *Put no trust in extortion;
set no vain hopes on robbery;
if riches increase, set not your heart on them.*

¹¹ *Once God has spoken;
twice have I heard this:*

that power belongs to God,

¹² *and that to you, O Lord, belongs steadfast love.*

*For you will render to a man
according to his work.*

Saul's work had been zeal for the law, and persecution of the church; now his work would be to live and die for the Messiah, His savior, His Lord. The enemy of God had become a friend of God. The hater of Christ had become a worshipper and lover of Christ. Once again, we find that the gospel of Jesus has the power to overcome the hardest of hearts; what Satan tries to use for evil, God overrules for good. The gates of hell cannot and will not prevail against the ongoing advancement of the church and the assault of God's love in Jesus Christ.

So here is the main point... **Main Point:** *An encounter with Jesus not only reveals our need for God's forgiveness, but transforms the desires of our hearts.*

Application:

What might Saul's conversion help us understand about the gospel of Jesus Christ for today?

For believers:

Saul's conversion reminds us to keep coming back to our "first love" – the Lord Jesus Christ (Rev. 2:4)

For those not yet believing:

Saul's conversion reveals how we are more sinful than we could possibly imagine before Jesus

(human beings need to be forgiven and transformed from the inside out by the Lord Jesus)

Saul's conversion reveals that we are more loved than we could possibly hope for by Jesus

(human beings can be forgiven and transformed from the inside out through the Lord Jesus)

Saul's conversion reveals that we should respond to Jesus by gladly submitting to Him as our King, Savior, and Treasure

(human beings, once forgiven/transformed, receive a new purpose in life from the Lord Jesus)

Main Point:

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