

08/12/18

**No Way! Way! The Conversion of Saul**  
**Pastor Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church**

**Acts 9:1-31**

Sometimes people of a certain age upon hearing something incredible or hard to believe will say, “No way!” and their companion will reply, “Way!” I think that’s how the earliest members of The Way, which is how the first Christians were known, would have responded to the news that a man named Saul, who had been threatening and persecuting the disciples of Jesus, had become a follower of The Way of Christ. As hard as it was to believe, it happened. The conversion of Saul is described for the first time in *Acts 9*.

“Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to The Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ He asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The reply came, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.’ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, ‘Ananias.’ He answered, ‘**Here I am, Lord.**’ The Lord said to him, ‘**Get up and go** to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. **At this moment he is praying**, 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.’ But Ananias answered, ‘Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.’ But the Lord said to him, ‘Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.’ So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, ‘**Brother Saul**, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, 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 his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, ‘He is the Son of God.’ All who heard him were amazed and said, ‘Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who

invoked this name? And has he not come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?' Saul became increasingly more powerful and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah.

After some time had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night so that they might kill him; but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.

When he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. **But Barnabas** took him, brought him to the apostles, and described for them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had **spoken boldly** in the name of Jesus. So he went in and out among them in Jerusalem, **speaking boldly** in the name of the Lord. He spoke and argued with the Hellenists; but they were attempting to kill him. When the believers learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers."

We first met Saul as a minor player at Stephen's execution (*Acts 7:58*). Much has happened since that brief introduction. Saul persecuted the church in Jerusalem, which drove Philip's evangelistic ministry out of Jerusalem and north toward Syria. So Saul was partly responsible for the existence of the very disciples in Damascus whom he wished to persecute. That *Acts* recounts Saul's conversion three times (it's also re-told in *Acts 22:6–16; 26:12–18*) underscores how transformational the conversion and call experience was to Saul and those he encountered

Saul is such an important character in the *New Testament* and in church history that we wish we knew more about him. Still, there's a significant amount of information we can glean from a close reading of *Acts* and the letters attributed to him. Saul was born in the city of Tarsus to a Jewish family that likely spoke Aramaic at home and attended a synagogue where the service was spoken in Hebrew. In *Romans 11:1*, he declares, "I myself am an Israelite, a descendent of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin." In *Philippians 3:5-6*, he describes his Jewish background and upbringing, "circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law blameless."

We learn in *Acts 22:3* and *26:4* that as a young man he received at least some of his education in Jerusalem under Rabbi Gamaliel and that Saul was "educated strictly according to our ancestral law, being zealous for God." Gamaliel was a well-known Rabbi who advised the

ruling Jewish council in Jerusalem regarding Peter and the other apostles in *Acts 5:34-39*. He advocated not executing or imprisoning the followers of Jesus but letting them go and leaving them alone because if what they were up to was of human origin it would certainly fail. If it was of God, then, he said, “you will not be able to overthrow them – in that case you may even be found fighting against God!” Unfortunately, Saul was a young, strong-willed individual and he failed to follow the advice of his teacher and mentor. Rather than keeping away from Peter and other followers of Jesus and letting them alone as Gamaliel advised (*Acts 5:38*), Saul aggressively went after them.

So when Christianity, which was known as The Way, was in its infancy, Saul took personal responsibility to exterminate it. In *Acts 7:58*, when the murderous crowd dragged Stephen outside of Jerusalem and began to stone him to death, they “laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.” “And Saul approved of their killing him. That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.” (*Acts 8:1, 3*) Saul was such an enemy of the church he was willing to travel 150 miles to Damascus in order to expand what began as a local persecution against believers in Jerusalem. So before he meets Jesus, Saul is a zealous, obsessed, persecutor of the church willing to do whatever was necessary to stop the advance of Jesus’ followers including imprisoning men and women or even approving of murder by a mob.

Then in *Acts 9*, Saul has a life-changing encounter with the risen Christ. Many of us who have come to believe in and follow Jesus have not had an experience like that of Saul who saw a light flash and heard a voice. However, Saul was not only far from God’s will, he was actively seeking to persecute the church, which is the body of Christ. So it isn’t surprising that he has a dramatic experience of being confronted by and coming to faith in Jesus. *Acts 9* is one of many key passages in the Bible in which God asks a person a question. We often think of the questions we’d like to ask God. But in the Bible there are more than a few times when God asks a person a question. A few examples: “Adam, where are you?” “Cain, where is your brother?” “Hagar, where have you come from and where are you going?” To Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry?” “Peter, do you love me?” In this passage, God asks, **“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”** **When God asks a question, it’s not to begin an interrogation. It’s because God is staging an intervention.** The risen Christ speaks to Saul and sends him for a three day retreat. Given his previous activities against followers of The Way, what do you think Saul was reflecting about during his three days of blindness and fasting after his dramatic experience on the road to Damascus (*Acts 9:9*)? Can you picture the depths of reflection and self-examination Saul was going through thinking that in being zealous for God he had been doing the exact opposite of what God wanted him to do?

At the same time, how would you feel if you were in the place of Ananias? Can you imagine how you'd feel if there was a well-known person on Cape Cod who was going from town to town looking for believers and throwing them in prison; and then the Lord told you to go meet that person at a certain location in order to pray for him, lay hands on him, and give him a message? We can appreciate Ananias's hesitation and reluctance to reach out to Saul, much less to pray for him. Look at the steps that Ananias took to make it possible for Saul to fulfill his calling: he dared to believe in transformation. The old Saul sought to kill him; the new Saul was chosen by God to bring the gospel to the Gentiles. He overcame his personal fears and prejudices. Who wanted Saul around, converted or not? He had a terrible reputation. Yet, in *verse 17*, Ananias was able to call him Brother Saul, a Christian greeting.

Ananias is asked to go to someone who he thinks is beyond God's reach. Are there types of people you assume are beyond God's reach so that, if God spoke to you about speaking or sharing with them, you would question the instruction? The story of Saul is one of an enemy who became a brother, of a persecutor of the church who became an incredible promoter of the gospel and planter of churches. Saul's story is also a reminder that no one is beyond God's reach and no matter what any of us have in our past there is still hope we can change the story of our life.

When Saul was commissioned, he was told he was to be an instrument to carry the name of Christ before gentiles and kings, and he will be shown how much he must suffer for the sake of Christ. The rest of *Acts* describes how this happens. For example in *Acts 13:6-12*, Saul, now a true prophet of God, squares off with a false prophet, giving a stinging verbal rebuke and then praying for the hand of the Lord to take away his sight for a time, which leaves the poor false prophet stumbling around looking for someone to help him. It can't be a coincidence that the description of the temporarily blinded false prophet who was trying to turn Sergius away from the faith is eerily similar to Saul's condition in *Acts 9:8* when he was a false prophet trying to turn people away from the faith. Blindness is a spiritual and physical reality for several people in *Acts* who are working against the Lord until they "see the light" and come to faith.

After that confrontation in *Acts 13*, Saul is known as Paul and with only a couple of exceptions, his name will appear first when used with his mentor and ministry partner Barnabas (I believe only *Acts 14:14*, *15:12*, & *15:25* are still "Barnabas & Paul."). In *Acts 14:19-22*, we learn that in Lystra, "they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. But when the disciples surrounded him, he got up and went into the city." Ironically, Paul was the recipient of a stoning like the one he witnessed Stephen receive in *Acts 8*, and Paul was also supposed to be dead (*Acts 14:19-20*), yet he survived only to endure more suffering and incredible hardships in living out his faith (see *2 Corinthians 6:3-10*). Paul would say after this experience, **"It is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God."**

These are remarkable words for Paul to speak and they reflect how far he has come in his spiritual journey from persecutor to persecuted. In *Acts 9:4*, the risen Christ said to Saul, as he was then called, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Later Paul was able to write the church in Rome (***Romans 12:14***), “**Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.**” And to the church in Corinth (***1 Cor. 4:12-13***), “When reviled, we bless; **when persecuted, we endure**; when slandered, we speak kindly.” Paul learned that experiencing persecution doesn’t mean God has forsaken us, through our trials and tests our faith may be forged, shaped, and even strengthened. Thomas a Kempis wrote in ***The Imitation of Christ***, “Christ was despised on earth by men, and in his greatest need, amidst insults, was abandoned by those who knew him and by friends; and you dare to complain of anyone? Christ had his adversaries and slanderers; and you wish to have everyone as friends and benefactors? Whence will your patience win its crown if it has encountered nothing of adversity?”

Paul, who stood by while Stephen was stoned, received a stoning more than once himself and yet he couldn’t be intimidated or turned back. The one who dragged off men and women to prison because of their faith, became quite familiar with the inside of Roman jails and even in those dark and dreary places he proclaimed the gospel, helped folks spiritually to see the light and led them to faith. Paul wrote in ***2 Timothy 3:10-12***, “Now you have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, **my persecutions** and suffering the things that happened to me in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. **What persecutions I endured! Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.**”

Author Flannery O’Connor once said of Paul, “I reckon the Lord knew that the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse.” Perhaps the story of Saul is helpful for those of us who need to be knocked off our horse – those of us who are so sure of our selves we don’t think we need any help or guidance from anyone else and we’re confident we’re going in the right direction. Perhaps Paul’s story is also helpful for those who feel like the way they’ve lived their life to this point has put them beyond the reach of God’s love. The story of Saul is that of a man who saw the light and was blinded in order that he might truly see. It just might be that whatever your issue, problem, past, or the way you messed up your life, or were hurt, may become the way God uses you.

As you can see, the sanctuary is decorated for VBS with the theme Shipwrecked: Rescued by Jesus. In *Acts 27*, we hear about Paul’s experience of being on a ship that is driven by a nor’easter and in grave danger. Paul’s faith, calm presence, clear thinking, and positive attitude helped everyone around him. Those who are fearful or lacking in confidence may yet be swayed by the power of a courageous faithful example, whether that is Paul or you. After 14 days without eating during the storm at sea, Paul urges his fellow passengers and the crew to eat, to strengthen themselves, and speaks words of hope. Then reminiscent of Jesus, “he took

bread; and giving thanks to God in the presence of them all, he broke it and began to eat.” Paul’s dependence on God must have been obvious to everyone. The witness of a person of faith in the midst of a storm, how we handle ourselves will impact whether others want to share our faith. The result was that “All of them were encouraged.” (v. 36) by Paul’s words and example. Storms come in all of our lives. Some are the result of our own behavior and choices. Some are not and are due to causes beyond our control. Storms are difficult, unpleasant, and some of them can’t be outrun or hidden from. However, faith, courage, thanksgiving, and hope are still trustworthy “planks” to grab hold of if our ship is wrecked by a storm, and we can emerge safely on shore with our faith intact and even matured and strengthened.

Saul who is also known by the Latin name Paul, is a Hebrew who grew up in a Greek city, educated in the faith of his ancestors yet also a Roman citizen able to speak Greek. Paul was uniquely positioned to lead the expansion of the church beyond the Jews to the Gentiles and ultimately to all people.

In Acts 9, there were two men designated as instruments of God: Saul, who had a Divine intervention on the Damascus road, and Ananias, whom God used to restore Saul's sight and to give him his new purpose in life. Without Ananias's ministry, it's possible that Saul's ministry could have taken a different turn. We're all potential instruments of God. Each of us, through our own particular gifts, experiences, backgrounds, and abilities, also has a mission to fulfill in our time. I pray the Lord will help us to see what it is we are to do just as the Lord helped Saul and Ananias.

### **Let's pray.**

O Lord, who orders all things for our eternal good, mercifully enlighten our minds, and give us a firm and abiding trust in your love and care in the midst of the challenges and opportunities of our life. Silence our murmurings, quiet our fears, and dispel our doubts, that, rising above our afflictions and our anxieties, we may rest in you, the one of everlasting strength. Amen.

### **Questions for Discussion or Reflection**

1. Saul traveled 150 miles to Damascus in order to expand what started as a local persecution against followers of The Way in Jerusalem (*Acts 8:1*). What does that tell you about him?
2. Recall what Saul's former teacher Gamaliel (*Acts 22:3*) had advised the Sanhedrin, the ruling council, regarding Christ followers in *Acts 5:34-39*. How is Saul responding to that advice? What does this reveal about Saul?
3. How do you think Saul felt when confronted by the Risen Christ (*Acts 9:4-6*)? Given his previous attitude and actions, what do you think he was thinking about during the three days when he couldn't see and he was fasting from both food and water?

4. Have you ever fasted for a meal or two, or for a day or longer? What was the experience like for you? What was revealed to you? What did you learn about yourself?
5. How would you feel if you were in the place of Ananias? Since the Risen Christ had confronted Saul directly, why do you think after three days the Spirit asked Ananias to go to Saul and do what he did?
6. How did the Lord first get your attention? Was it in a dramatic way like Saul, or in a quieter less jarring fashion?
7. What types of people do you assume are beyond God's reach so that if God spoke to you about going to them you would question the Spirit's instructions as Ananias did? How does this story challenge our assumptions? Like Ananias, have you ever obeyed the Lord even when you had doubts? What happened?