

Sunday AM Sermon: The Conversion of a Christian Killer

Series: Acts: The Holy Spirit and His Unstoppable Church, Part 10

Scripture: Acts 9

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This week, as we continue our Acts series, we see how the Holy Spirit worked to further his mission of expanding the church through one of the most dramatic and important conversion stories we see in the Bible: Saul of Tarsus. The “Hebrew of Hebrews”, was so zealous for God that he would not tolerate this new sect of Messianic heretics, followers of “The Way”.

They claimed that Jesus, the one who suffered the horrific shame of crucifixion, proving that he was cursed by God and couldn’t possibly be the Messiah, was, in fact, the long awaited deliverer.

On his way to stamp out this sect, Saul encounters Jesus, and his life is changed forever. The impact on Paul’s life was so vast, that it reverberates through the centuries and impacts us today. Let’s read.

Acts 9:1–31 (ESV)

1 But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

3 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.” 7 The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. 8 Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. 9 And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

10 Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” And he said, “Here I am, Lord.” 11 And the Lord said to him, “Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, 12 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.” 13 But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. 14 And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.” 15 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.”

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.” 18 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. For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus. 20 **And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.”** 21 And all who heard him were amazed and said, “Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?” 22 But Saul increased all the more in strength, and **confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.**

23 When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, 24 but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him, 25 but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.

26 And 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. 27 But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus. 28 So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, **preaching boldly in the name of the Lord.**

29 And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him. 30 And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

31 **So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.**

First, some observations about Saul.

1. Saul was a man who was zealous for God

I’ve heard it said that one of the problems with understanding Saul’s story is that he is so familiar to us. Saul (or Paul, the apostle, as he is known later), wrote half the books in the new testament. His writings are the “water we swim in” when trying to understand the faith. It’s hard to pause and think about this story clearly.

Saul was, in his words: A Hebrew of Hebrews. A Pharisee, an expert in the law. He knew his bible (at that time just the scriptures we know now as the "Old Testament") forward and backward. In fact surprisingly, this is an identity he doesn't lay down even after his conversion (see Acts 23:6, Philippians 3:5).

In chapter 9 we find Saul "breathing out threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord" - a horrible thing, but he thought he was serving the Lord! In his mind, this aberrant sect was following and proclaiming a false prophet, an imposter Messiah. After all, how could anyone who was hung on a tree, be a man of God? Moses said, speaking for God, that "everyone who hangs on a tree is cursed by God." (Deuteronomy 21:23). And here this new "Jesus cult" was leading many astray. They had to be stopped.

Saul was zealous for God. Zealous for truth. He knew the scriptures inside and out.

He knew that there is only one God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

He knew that this Most High God created the whole universe out of nothing.

He knew that mankind was created to love and serve and follow God and to steward the creation to God's glory.

He knew that mankind had fallen into sin and now lives under a curse for our rebellion, and are in need of rescue and redemption.

He knew that Israel was chosen, out of all the nations, to be the people of God. Who were given the Torah: God's law, in order to faithfully follow and serve Him, and be a light to the nations, to show God's glory to them, so that the nations might know who the one true God is.

He knew that redemption was coming for those who faithfully followed God's commands.

He was missing one thing.

Jesus. He didn't believe Jesus's message.

And this made him wrong. Damnably wrong. To the point where he was persecuting God's people. Opposing God himself.

2. Saul was miraculously converted by the Holy Spirit.

The story we're reading today is about Saul's conversion. Question for you: How does Saul get converted? This is a weird story.

Last week we looked at chapter 8, which contains a conversion story that is much more familiar to us: The Ethiopian eunuch is reading a bit of scripture, Philip, the deacon & evangelist shows up, explains the gospel to him, and bam!, the eunuch believes and is baptized.

That story is amazing and miraculous, but the basics of it are somewhat familiar to us. In fact, some of us might have a story similar to the eunuch's story. We were wrestling with the truth about God. God sends someone into our life who tells us about Jesus, we believe, and here we are!

None of us has a story like Paul's.

This story highlights for us the key ingredient in anyone's conversion story. It is present in the story of the Ethiopian, but is easier to miss. That ingredient: the miraculous intervention of the Holy Spirit, who reveals the truth about Jesus to us, and wakes us up to its reality. That is the thing I pray for for all of us here. For my unbelieving friends and relatives, is that the Holy Spirit does his miraculous work of conversion.

Like Phillip, (and as we'll see in a minute, Saul) I do have a job to do in proclaiming the truth about Christ as well, but the effective agent is the Holy Spirit. We are ambassadors for Christ: God making his appeal through us, *and* he is the one that makes our work effective in his timing and according to his plan. Its why we have any hope as we preach the gospel.

The main thing I'd like to focus on here though is this: (and here's another question for you to think about for a second:) what is it that was revealed to Saul that makes everything click?

That Jesus is the son of God. The missing ingredient in Saul's theology.

All of his old testament expertise was damnably wrong without Jesus. And now seeing that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the fulfillment of the Old Covenant promises, changes everything. Saul admits he was damnably wrong, and changes course 180 degrees, immediately. Now that's repentance.

Think about this for a minute. How "all-in" on an idea do you have to be, psychologically & emotionally, to feel like killing in the name of that cause is justifiable? That's putting it all out there. Nothing held back at that point. Imagine yourself in those shoes for a minute. How impossible would it be to change your mind if you are bought in? How impossible would it be for you to publicly change direction and say "that thing I was ready to kill for? I was 100% wrong about it and they were 100% right. I'm with them now."

This might be a poorly timed analogy. But my guess is that at this point many of us have our mind made up about the upcoming election. I don't know about "kill for it" level made-up, maybe more "die for it" level, but many of us are vocal proponents one way or another.

What would it take for someone who has been an ardent democrat or an anti-Trump-ist, to at this point say "you know what? I was wrong. Trump really is the right way to go." What would it take for an ardent

Trump supporter, at this point, to say, you know what? I've been wrong. I'm voting for Biden. (Or third party, or whatever.) What would it take for a third-party voter to switch and vote democrat or republican, this close to the election? In the words of Miracle Max, "It would take a miracle."

It was even more impossible for Saul. We're witnessing a miraculous intervention here. The astounding revelation and realization and belief in the truth that Jesus is the son of God *is that powerful intervention*.

And that intervention changed everything.

One of Paul's final writings has always amazed me. Something like 30 years after this event today, Paul writes his first letter to Timothy, his young protege. In that letter he reflects, not on 30 years of successful church planting, evangelism, and powerful writing of letters that were already being called "scripture" by the apostles, he reflects on this day. That he received mercy from God. That is the way he begins his letter to Timothy. Amazement that God chose him, had mercy on him, and called on him to be part of God's mission to preach the good news to the world. This should amaze those of us whom God has saved as well.

3. Saul became a powerful proclaimer of the gospel

This is what repentance looks like. Owning your error. Making a 180% about-face and owning your error, and proclaiming the right, in a way that is as public as your error was. For Saul, this meant turning from persecutor to proclaimer. From Murderer to minister. God took this antagonist and made him an apostle. What a miracle. Paul immediately began proclaiming Christ among those with whom he had credibility. And it cost him. The persecutor became the persecuted.

Saul had no thought for comfort, popularity, or personal reputation and honor. His zeal for God remained. He proclaimed the truth about God's character, promises, and plan, and now he saw clearly that Jesus was all of those. Paul tells us that we see God's character, God's promises, and God's plan, in Jesus.

We'll see in coming chapters in Acts that Saul goes on missionary journeys all around the mediterranean region, proclaiming Christ. He would most often show up at a synagogue, and in some cases would only be there a very short time before he had to move on, usually due to persecution. I've often wondered how he was able to be there such a short time and leave behind something he called a church. How could he possibly have started a church in that short of time?

When you're starting with a group of people in a Jewish synagogue who are already very familiar with the old covenant, the old testament scriptures, you need only one thing more: to understand that Jesus is the one the old testament speaks of. Just the same thing that Philip clarified for the Ethiopian Eunuch.

The Result of Saul's conversion and ministry: Peace for the church

I love the way our section ends today:

Acts 9:31 ESV

So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.

This book we're studying, Acts, is about The Holy Spirit and his unstoppable church. And every now and then you see a statement like this. Acts shows us the The Holy Spirit is building his church. Jesus is building his church. And nothing can stop it.

It shows us that believers can walk confidently in the fear of the Lord, in faith and obedience to the way of life Jesus showed us.

It shows us that as we do this, we can have comfort from the Holy Spirit. Confidence that we are God's children. And that no matter what happens to us in this life, we are secure in him for eternity. We will experience an eternal life of joy and fellowship with God and with fellow believers in Christ. This is our greatest hope.

It shows us that persecution will come, threats and murder might be breathed out against us, but that God is sovereign even over our worst persecutors. He doesn't always promise to stop the pain immediately, but he does promise great reward, and that his promises will be kept, and that his plan will prevail.

It's sometimes hard to know how to apply a narrative like this to our everyday life. What good does knowing this story do me tomorrow when I have to go out and deal with a world that has gone crazy. What good does this story about something that happened 2000 years ago do for me today when I'm struggling with all the upheaval in our world because of masks and politics and money and stress and online school and all the crazy?!

I think the significance and relevance of today's chapter is in God's miraculous work on the murderous Saul's heart. It gives us confidence that God can work in our heart. It gives us confidence that God can work in the hearts of those who oppose us. It points us toward humility and prayer. It reminds us that God keeps his promises, and that, even if the present moment doesn't seem like it, or the result isn't exactly what we thought it would be, that he has a plan for the good of his people, so that they are able to walk in the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit.

Let's go with that today. Pray with me.