

The Book of Acts

Lesson 14: The Conversion of Saul -- Acts 9:1-31

He is the last man on earth you would expect God to save. Saul of Tarsus is breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. He stood and approved while Stephen was stoned. He has gone house to house, dragging Christians off to prison. Now he has secured letters from the high priest authorizing him to hunt down believers in Damascus and haul them back to Jerusalem in chains. He is a man on a mission, and his mission is to destroy the church of Jesus Christ.

And then, on the road to Damascus, the risen Christ stops him in his tracks. A light from heaven flashes around him, brighter than the noonday sun, and Saul falls to the ground. A voice says, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? Trembling, Saul asks, who are you, Lord? And the answer changes everything: I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. The One Saul thought was dead is alive, and the believers Saul has been hunting are so united to their Lord that to touch them is to touch Him.

Saul rises from the ground blind, and for three days he neither sees nor eats nor drinks. He simply prays. The proud persecutor is broken, waiting in the dark. Then God sends a reluctant disciple named Ananias, who must overcome his very reasonable fear to go and lay hands on the man who came to arrest him. Brother Saul, he says, and with that one word the enemy becomes family. Saul's sight returns, and Luke records the turning point in a single line: he rose and was baptized.

The transformation is immediate and total. The man who came to destroy the name of Jesus begins at once to proclaim it in the synagogues: He is the Son of God. The hunter becomes the hunted; plots are laid against his life, and he escapes Damascus lowered in a basket through a hole in the wall. When he comes to Jerusalem, the disciples are afraid of him until Barnabas vouches for him. And the church, which once trembled at his name, is left in peace, built up, and multiplying. If God can save Saul, God can save anyone.

Group Discussion: The risen Jesus told Saul, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting, identifying Himself with the believers Saul was attacking (vv. 4-5). What does it mean that Christ takes the treatment of His people personally, and how should that shape the way we regard and treat fellow Christians?

Personal Reflection: Saul seemed like the last person who would ever follow Christ, yet God's grace reached him (vv. 1-19). Is there someone you have written off as beyond saving, or do you ever feel your own past puts you beyond grace? How does Saul's conversion speak to that?

Read Acts 9:1-31

Study Questions

1. When Saul was struck down, the risen Jesus spoke to him directly, saying, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting (vv. 3-5). What does this encounter reveal about the reality of the resurrection and the identity of Jesus, and what does it mean that Christ identifies Himself with His persecuted people?
2. Jesus took Saul's treatment of believers as treatment of Himself (v. 5). How does it change things to realize that the way you treat fellow Christians, in your words, attitudes, and actions, is the way you are treating Christ? Where do you need to change how you regard or treat someone in the body?
3. Saul, the church's most violent enemy, was transformed by grace into Christ's chosen instrument (vv. 1, 15). What does Saul's conversion teach about the reach and power of God's grace, and about whether anyone is ever truly beyond saving?
4. Before his conversion, Saul must have seemed hopelessly opposed to Christ, yet God saved him (vv. 1-19). Is there a person in your life you have stopped praying for or given up on? How might God be calling you to renewed hope and prayer for them?
5. The Lord said that Saul was a chosen instrument to carry His name before the Gentiles and kings and the people of Israel (v. 15). What does this teach about God's sovereign purpose in calling people, and how is being chosen for God's service different from the idea that some are unconditionally predestined to be saved and others lost?
6. God had a specific purpose for Saul's life and gifts (v. 15). Do you believe God has a purpose for you in His kingdom? Where might He be calling you to be His instrument, and what holds you back from offering yourself fully?
7. Ananias overcame his fear to go to Saul and call him brother, and Barnabas later vouched for Saul when the disciples were afraid of him (vv. 10-19, 26-27). What do these believers teach us about welcoming and trusting those whom God has changed, even when their past is troubling?
8. The disciples were slow to trust Saul because of his past, until Barnabas welcomed him (vv. 26-27). Do you tend to give people the grace to change, or do you hold their past against them? Is there someone you need to forgive, trust, or welcome more fully?
9. Saul saw the risen Lord, believed, and prayed for three days, yet he was still not cleansed of his sins until Ananias came and told him, rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name (v. 18; Acts 22:16). What does Saul's conversion teach about the necessity of baptism, and how does it correct the idea that we are saved by faith only or by praying a prayer?
10. Immediately after his baptism, Saul began proclaiming Jesus as the Son of God, and his whole life took a new direction (vv. 20-22). Looking back over his conversion, name one specific way the Lord is calling you to a more thoroughly changed life or a bolder witness, and what is one step you will take this week.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Acts 22:6-16, Paul's own account, including the command to rise and be baptized and wash away his sins; 1 Timothy 1:12-16, Paul as the foremost of sinners and an example of Christ's mercy; Galatians 1:13-24, the testimony of Saul the persecutor turned preacher; 1 Corinthians 15:8-10, the risen Christ appearing to Saul and the grace that transformed him; 2 Corinthians 5:17, anyone in Christ as a new creation