

Church 2.0

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”
(Acts 1:8 ESV)*

“Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” (Acts 28:28 ESV)

The Conversion of Saul

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Acts 9:1-25

Dr. Matthew Stanton

Introduction:

This week in our walk through the book of Acts we come to a turning point with the conversion of Saul. And let me tell you, this is a dramatic episode. In a word, Saul’s conversion is ‘miraculous’, because of who he was and what he was doing to the church. Saul has got himself a good testimony. Not one of those boring ones where they grow up in a Christian home, converted at 2, baptized at 4 and now they’re an elder in their church at 12. No, this is a good one. A dramatic one- an eye catching one. The type you want to share at youth group because everyone is going to be like, “wow, that’s a testimony, God, why did you have to save me so early on?” We often gauge our excitement towards a testimony by how DRASTIC the conversion was: what they were saved from. But in reality, we are all saved FROM something and TO someone. Our testimonies are all about the power of the Gospel being put on display in and through us thanks be to God. And so, this morning we are going to see that powerful display in the life of Saul.

Saul’s testimony comes to us in Acts 9 and if you can remember back with me, just a chapter early he is the same Saul who APPROVED of Stephen’s death and continued to RAVAGE the church – house by house. Saul is the VILLAIN in this story. In fact, Saul is the nemesis of the early church. Well, up until Acts 9 that is. Because here in this chapter God is going to do something amazing! We saw the conversion of Simon and the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8 as the

Gospel begins to spread as Jesus said it would – in Jerusalem first, then Judea and now Samaria – even to the likes of this man- Saul of Tarsus.

We read now starting in verse 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. (Acts 9:1-25 ESV)

In this chapter we get a template for conversion, be it from an extreme example in Saul, but a template of how God breaks new ground and hard hearts. After all, Saul's experience provides for us:

A Radical Template for Conversion

As I said, although Saul has an incredible and even miraculous conversion story, his story is much the same as all of those who call themselves Christ followers. His conversion is certainly unique, but in it we see a normative template for true and saving faith. And I would argue that it has three distinct parts (in fact all our testimonies have these three parts to them): Our Life Before Christ – when we were opposed to him, Our Encountering Christ, and Our Life After Christ – when we are transformed by him.

That's the template for any true and saving conversion. Conversion requires whole life transformation. As the Puritan Joseph Alleine wrote:

Conversion is no repairing of the old building; but it takes all down and erects a new structure.¹

Conversion doesn't simply fix what is wrong in your life; it fixes you. It changes all of you. That's the transformation that Saul experienced: being transformed from one thing into an entirely new thing: from sinner to saint.

Let's look more closely at this story as a template for understanding true and saving faith.

1. A Heart Opposed to Christ

This snapshot comes to us in the first two verses of our text:

¹ Joseph Alleine as quoted by John Blanchard, eds. *The Complete Gathered Gold: a Treasury of Quotations for Christians*. Accordance electronic ed. (New York: Evangelical Press, 2006), paragraph 2438.

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. (Acts 9:1-2 ESV)

We just heard the good news in chapter 8 that the Gospel has reached into Samaria – praise God. By way of total contrast to the Gospels spread, Luke turns to Saul. “But Saul”, as he begins this chapter shows that Saul is off on his own mission- a counter-Gospel mission.

And this is the part that makes for a good testimony. Right? Saul is a bad guy who needs to get saved ASAP if the early church is going to thrive. Saul persecuted the church: he sought out the persecution of Christians because he hated them so much. It was his duty.

And he was good at it. He was dedicated to his calling of harming the church. He even figured out that after Stephen’s martyrdom, Christians sought refuge by moving north. Saul tracked some of them down to Damascus in Syria, 150 miles north of Jerusalem. In his mind he was pursuing heretics. He went to the Jewish leaders asking them to cooperate with his plan. And they did! He was given the mandate by the High Priest to seek out and arrest followers of Jesus, with the intention of returning them to Jerusalem as prisoners for questioning and possible execution.

Saul’s life BEFORE Christ was a life AGAINST Christ and the people of God.

He was in active pursuit of their demise. I’m calling this a RADICAL template for conversion because it’s already obvious that Saul’s story is turned up to 11. But in it we see the template for true conversion. Saul’s conversion is unique but contains in it a pattern for all of us. I’ll tell you, his testimony looks nothing like mine. For example, I was blessed to have been born and raised in a Christian home - on the mission field no less. **So, Saul and I, Saul and you, look totally different.** But therein lies the point. Maybe it’s not that there are good and bad testimonies, but rather all true and authentic testimonies MUST reveal the gracious display of God’s salvation freely given. I needed salvation just as much as Saul needed it and Saul’s conversion was just as much an act of grace as mine was.

Because not everyone gets a road to Damascus conversion. Saul's conversion is a contrast to the Ethiopian Eunuch's last week which providentially reveals two beautiful **paradigms of salvation**. On the one hand, the eunuch's conversion was like a light switch with a dimmer that was slowly turned on as the Gospel was explained, and here with Saul, it's more like a light switch, as Saul's eyes are immediately opened as he encounters Christ.

And it's clear that Saul needed saving too, but do you know that to be true of yourself? Friends, I hope you know that you needed saving too. All have fallen short of the glory of God, that's me and that's you. We may not be as bad as Saul – which I know because Saul was a serial killer – but we are as lost in darkness as Saul. We ALL need to encounter Christ. And that's what God does to Saul as he is on his way to persecute the early church in Damascus.

2. **A Heart Encountered by Christ**

Saul's encountering of Christ was miraculous. In fact the definition of the word 'encounter' carries with it the connotation of a brief or unexpected meeting. And boy was Saul not expecting this encounter! We just saw 2 weeks ago how the Samaritans were miraculously converted through Philip's preaching, and last week how the Ethiopian Eunuch miraculously encountered Christ through his studies in the book of Isaiah. And here, as if in a 3-part conversion series- we see Saul's climatic conversion story and the miraculous way in which Christ met Saul through Theophany -that is, **a personal encounter with God manifested in a physical way**. He met God.

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. (Acts 9:3-5 ESV)

We can only come to faith when we encounter Christ. Period. It is there that we are changed. When we are confronted by Christ we are confronted by our sin. Saul was confronted here in a

powerful way – a Theophany. He beheld Jesus. **To be saved we must behold Christ.** (By definition- from something and to someone!)

His conversion story begins with a **great light**: “a light from heaven.” God came to him in a way in which even the Jews would have understood. God’s presence was often revealed as a great light. Remember back in Isaiah 9:

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” (Isaiah 9:2a ESV)

The symbolism here is obvious: light always covers darkness; darkness is the ABSENCE of light. When you’re in a dark room, the moment the lights are turned on unexpectedly, we shield our eyes - not just because the light is bright - but because the darkness we were living in is removed in an INSTANT. That’s how God encountered his servant, Saul.

And as this light is shining on Saul, he hears an audible voice saying, “why are you persecuting ME?” **Jesus identifies himself as the persecuted one.** Christ identifies himself with his people – his bride. What Saul was doing to the church, he was doing to the head of the church, Christ himself. This moment would define much of Paul’s understanding of the body of Christ, that we read of later in his epistles, such as in Philippians, Colossians, and Galatians. But look at this, as he’s confronted with Jesus, Saul replies, by already knowing the one to whom he has encountered. Saul replies by immediately recognizing this voice as the Lord.

There is no question whom this light is, and whom this voice belongs to. Saul knows that it is the Lord, the same Lord that he is persecuting. But in his darkness, he was blind. When the light of Christ came Saul’s eyes were INSTANTLY opened. Specifically, his eyes were spiritually and eternally opened; but incidentally notice the Lord shut his eyes physically.

Verse 8 reads, “although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing.” For 3 days, Saul was blind. Just as Jonah was in the whale and Christ in the tomb, for 3 days Saul would be left alone, blind. And if you can picture it, the folks in Damascus are expecting Saul to come with the sword (verse 14),

but he shows up holding onto the arms of his men stumbling into the city: defeated, broken and humbled.

C.S. Lewis is exactly right when he says that:

Every conversion is the story of a blessed defeat.²

There can be no conversion unless the knee has bowed. The heart that has SEEN THE KING bows before him!

When Saul encountered Jesus, everything that he had ever trusted in fell away, and he was left waiting for God to do what only He could do. As St. Augustine wrote in the 4th century:

When anyone knows that he is nothing in himself, and has no help from himself, the weapons within himself are broken, and the war is ended.³

Saul knew that his war was over. His home in Jerusalem was gone -after this transformation he couldn't go back- and the road ahead led to a people who knew he was coming to arrest them. They were fleeing from him; they weren't going to welcome him. He had nowhere to go, only the voice of Jesus to follow. **And isn't that always the best place to be in?** If you are here and you haven't bent your knee to Jesus, do you believe that the war in you has ended this morning? That your fight against God is over in Jesus' name. Saul knew that and look with me at what happened next.

Saul's conversion, as does ours, involved the working of another Christian- one whom he'd never met or known. God was preparing for Saul another servant called Ananias. Let's not pass over Ananias' role in Saul's conversion. The Lord tells Ananias to go to the Straight and find a man praying there, verse 11. Now Straight Street was the main road running east to west across Damascus; and it still is visible today. It was the longest, busiest and most crowded road in town,

² C. S. Lewis as quoted by John Blanchard, eds. *The Complete Gathered Gold: a Treasury of Quotations for Christians*. Accordance electronic ed. (New York: Evangelical Press, 2006), paragraph 2459.

³ Augustine as quoted by John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 164.

most likely where Saul would have gone to make his proclamation that he had come for the Christians. Here he sits and waits, praying for rescue. But God did not leave him in his darkness!

Enter Ananias, a seemingly unimportant and unknown early Christian. Upon hearing that he is the one who must go to Saul, he gently REMINDS God who Saul was. In case God forgot. “Excuse me, God, just want to make sure you haven’t forgotten that little detail – you know that Saul wants to kill me.” Perhaps Ananias just wanted to make sure that he heard God correctly. Either way, God says, “Yes, you, go; Saul is going to be my instrument. And you get to be the one who strings that instrument so that I can use it mightily.” What a beautiful role that God gifted to Ananias even though he didn’t recognise it at first.

If you were Ananias, you may have responded the same way writing Saul off, but **God being rich in mercy** knew the end game. He used Ananias in the conversion story of Saul and he continues to use us today not just to tell our friends about Jesus - but even our enemies. What would the world look like if we allowed God to use us that way? Ananias wasn’t an Apostle; he was simply a faithful witness of the Apostolic Gospel which was breaking new ground and softening hard hearts.⁴ I would ask the Lord to use me in such a way as well.

Before Saul became Paul and wrote ½ of the New Testament and travelled over 10,000 miles spreading the Gospel and planting numerous churches, God asked a Christian to go to his enemy and call him brother. He used a seemingly unimportant Christian for this task. As I look out this morning, I see such a potential. I’m not calling you unimportant but rather tasked with unlimited potential. Let us be such a people: faithful despite the unknown, consistent despite life’s inconsistencies, and ready to be used despite our limitations!

The final part of this conversion template is seeing how Saul’s life changed after coming to Christ. I like to say, “If the fruit doesn’t change, then the root didn’t either.” But here, we see what true and genuine fruit looks like.

⁴ G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 230.

3. A Heart Transformed by Christ

Turn with me to verses 20-25 and we'll see just how drastically and immediately Saul's life was transformed after his conversion. What's the first thing he does?

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. (Acts 9:20-25 ESV)

Immediately, the light came on and Saul's life is transformed. Like a double agent, the people he was working for were now coming for him. **The persecutor became the preacher.** Saul tells everyone about Jesus and his new life- a life marked by joy, witness and a love for the Gospel. And just like the lame man at the temple gate in Acts 3, everyone noticed this miracle because they all knew who this man was.

What a transformation! The very people he went to kill, he now called his brothers- that's the power of the Gospel. That's the life changing - life altering - transformational Gospel we have in Christ Jesus! Saul proclaimed that **Jesus was indeed the Son of God** – a total 180 from his former beliefs. He was raised a student of the Jewish Rabbi Gamaliel⁵, who was a master of the Jewish Oral Law in the first century, and a leader in the Sanhedrin, and here Saul is preaching grace!

Saul's life after Christ, juxtaposed his life before Christ, reveals the true and genuine saving faith he experienced on the road to Damascus. What a beautiful template of conversion! Conversion is a CALL given to every Christian - **to know Christ- and make him known.** Saul didn't just take his newfound faith and keep it to himself. No, he was baptised and began telling everyone.

⁵ Acts 22:3 Saul says that he was a Jew brought up "at the feet of Gamaliel".

Church, make your conversion known. Especially those closest to you should know that you are SAVED BY GRACE. So, RESPOND to your own conversion by living your life in such a way that this world can't help but take notice. I love this Spurgeon quote:

“I believe that one reason why the church of God at this present moment has so little influence over the world is because the world has so much influence over the church.”⁶

Church, we are being prepared for such a time as this!

Don't be defeated if you didn't have Saul's conversion experience, that's not the point of this story. That's not why Luke included it. It is here in Acts to show us that our God is merciful AND completely in control. If you are here already saved, then Saul's conversion doesn't encourage you. You probably didn't have this magic moment. In fact, I might ask who here can remember the exact moment they were saved? Maybe 40%. But follow up, how many of you were saved through the process of coming to know Christ gradually? Right, like 60%.

Light switch vs dimmers. So saved people don't love Saul's conversion because it is foreign to them. It's just a really cool point in the history of the early church.

You know who should be encouraged by Saul's conversion this morning? Parents. If you are a parent with a rebel child that you've been presenting the Gospel to for years, be encouraged because God can still flip the light switch on for your child. Maybe your child won't have a conversion story like the Ethiopian Eunuch, maybe they will be saved like Saul. Or if you're here and you've been praying for a lost friend for years, be encouraged. Be encouraged God can do this. No one is beyond his saving grace. You know, George Muller – the famous German Christian and orphanage founder of the 1840/50s - prayed for an unsaved friend every day for 60 years. That friend did finally come to Christ in a Saul-like instantaneous manner, but it was at

⁶ Charles Spurgeon (1989). “The Soul Winner”, p.278, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing

George's funeral. Keep praying. Folks, keep being open to the work of God in and THROUGH you. Be encouraged this morning that though this isn't perhaps your story, it may be for a loved one.

And if you are here and you aren't saved then Saul's conversion here changes everything. Because it means for you that you are not too far gone for God to save. If Saul wasn't, then you certainly are within his reach this morning. He loves and cares for you. He knows you by name. It's not an accident that you came this morning just in time to hear a sermon about Saul – a truly lost soul – because you are him. You've been fighting with God for years and the dimmer switch never turned on for you, but the light switch did this morning. Each Sunday now we've been getting between 15-20 new people, so while I don't know who you are I do know that God does, and he is waiting for you to respond to his free gift of grace in Christ Jesus. Call on him as your Lord and Saviour today.

There is only one way to God: through faith in Jesus, but praise be to God that there are many ways to Jesus. We all have a different story. Whether it's a light switch that transformed Saul to Paul, or a dimmer enlightening your heart this morning, come to Jesus. In his arms you will find peace, rest, and eternal hope.