

## Gospel Triumph: Remade for the Name – Acts 9:1-31

One of the surprising truths for those who go to war and return home to peace is the great struggle to find purpose and meaning in “normal” life. One army officer in WW2 described the experience for those who fought and survived as “the one great lyric passage of their lives.” As horrific as the fighting was during the war, there was a profound sense of purpose for the soldiers. Another author said this about the battle to overcome the Nazi’s, “The times were full of certainty, and I have seldom been sure I was right since.”

This response gets to the heart of something deeply profound about human beings. We are made to live for something bigger than self. We are designed for a higher purpose and cause. The culture around us shrinks our humanity by telling us life is all about self-centered fun and comfort. A full and rich life comes from giving up yourself to a more significant cause and there’s one cause that outshines all others. It may lead to some difficulty, but the joy and satisfaction far outweigh the struggles.

The Apostle Paul was a man who understood life’s great purpose. Listen to what he wrote in Philippians 3:12-14. But he didn’t always have this laser focus to his life. To say he was quite different would be a dramatic understatement. So what happened to bring about this change in purpose and intention? Our passage for today details the exact moment when everything turned for him.

And while this passage tells Saul’s story of change, it’s also a paradigm for all of us. It shows us what change looks like and it sets our eyes on the great purpose we should all be caught up in. So, in Acts 9:1-31 we are going to see **3 Phases in the Remaking of a Life for the Glory of God’s Name.**

### **1. Before the Name (vv. 1-9)**

The last time we encountered Saul was in 8:1-3 where he was spearheading the persecution of Christians in Jerusalem. Now he’s going to expand that persecution out to areas well beyond the Capital city. Look at verses 1-2.

He’s pursuing the disciples of the Lord who are also those who belong to the Way. Luke is the only author in the NT who uses this designation for Christians, but it focuses on the all-encompassing way of life of followers of Christ. Damascus was

over 100 miles from Jerusalem, so this was quite a journey for Saul and those with him.

At this point we know a couple of things about Saul. First, he's passionate about persecuting Christians. Second, the reason he's avid about persecuting Christians is that he views Jesus of Nazareth as a deceiver and imposter and his disciples as a dangerous threat to the true worship of God. Listen to what he says about himself in Phil. 3:5-6. He was a Pharisee and was zealous for their beliefs to the point where he persecuted the church. Pharisees believed Jesus was cursed by God because he was crucified on a cross. So, Saul carries this belief with him, and it emboldens him to seek to find and arrest any Christians he can.

But of course, he doesn't make it to Damascus. Look at verses 3-5. Saul was a good Jew and would have immediately understood this heavenly light to be God. Which is why he responds the way he does at the beginning of verse 5. He rightly identifies the voice as the Lord, but this question in verse 4 must have been completely unnerving and disorienting to him. He was persecuting God?! Saul was passionate about God! How could he be persecuting him?

So, he asks this question, and he gets a response that fundamentally changes the course of his life in verse 5. God identifies Himself as Jesus and claims the church, the disciples of Jesus, the very one's Saul was persecuting as His own. This meant that Jesus truly had risen from the dead! This meant that Saul was actively opposing God's work. This meant that his understanding of the OT Scriptures was wrong. This meant a complete upheaval of everything in his belief system. One author put it like this, *"When Jesus appears to Saul on the road to Damascus, all of the structures and values he has lived for and based his existence upon are demolished, not simply to be rebuilt from the rubble but to be built anew, with Jesus of Nazareth as the foundation."* – Brian Vickers

God tells him what to do in his disoriented state. Verse 6. But now he's blind and humbled and must rely on the Lord for sight. Look at verses 7-9.

What were those three days like for Saul? His whole life has been turned upside down, he's blind, and he no doubt spent a lot of time crying out to God in repentance. But I imagine the beginning of the recognition of grace starts to seep into his mind during those three days. He understands that God has been so gracious to him to stop him on his very wrong path and reveal Himself to Him.

God's grace becomes one of the major themes of Saul's life and ministry. He begins every single letter with the words "grace to you" and I have no doubt gratitude wells up in his heart every time in thanks for what God did for him on the road to Damascus. And in light of this grace, God will now give Saul the great purpose of his life that is both a burden and a joy.

## **2. Bearing the Name (vv. 10-19a)**

God told Saul to proceed to Damascus and he would be told what to do. God enlists another follower of the Way to help with this. Look at verses 10-12. Ananias was probably a resident of Damascus who had come to faith in Christ through the spreading of the Gospel because of the persecution brought about by Saul. God gives him instructions to go and find Saul and be a part of a miracle so that Saul can regain his sight. This is probably a little hard to swallow. Look at verses 13-14.

This is an understandable concern from Ananias. Notice the language he uses in verse 14. "to bind all who call on your name." At this point in the story the name of Christ takes central stage because it's going to become the defining feature of Saul's life. He's been opposed to Christ's name before but now he will carry that name with him wherever he goes and whatever he does. Look at verses 15-16.

These two verses play a massive role in the story of the book of Acts and the early church. Saul is going to become the Apostle to the Gentiles, but he will also preach the gospel before Jews and Kings. The language of "chosen instrument" here is commissioning language. God has chosen Saul and set him apart for ministry. But this ministry comes because of the change that has been brought to Saul and because he will do something that every other Christian will do, bear the name of Christ.

The picture given in verse 15 is of a clay pot or vessel that holds something inside it for transport. Notice that God doesn't say here that Saul will only proclaim the name. He will carry the name. This indicates that when you bear the name of Christ you cannot separate your preaching and words from your daily living, attitudes, and actions. Saul would not go another moment without bearing the name. He would always represent Christ and His life was given over to this great purpose of bringing glory and honor to Christ.

This would come through preaching and through suffering. Look again at verse 16. He will suffer for the sake of Christ's name. Here's the higher purpose and goal of life. Here's the ultimate cause that defines every second of life. Paul expresses this multiple other places in his letters. 2 Corinthians 4:7-11. Phil. 3:7-8. Colossians 3:17.

Saul's life doesn't belong to him. It's not about him. He's now given into the service of another and for the glory of the name of another. And he will do everything, including eating and drinking, in order to make that name look glorious.

Now, with these instructions in mind, Ananias does exactly what God tells him to. Look at verses 17-19a. I think verse 19 is meant to communicate to Saul and to us that he was blind and can now see both physically and spiritually. And this new sight brings a change immediately. And this brings us to our last phase.

### **3. Because of the Name (vv. 19b-31)**

The reality of bearing the name causes a real change to work itself out in daily life. We now act because of the name. Look at the rest of verse 19 through verse 22.

Saul had originally gone to Damascus to go into the synagogues and arrest any Christians he may find there. Now he goes to the synagogues and preaches two things, Jesus is the Son of God and Jesus is the Christ.

This is the only time in Acts that Jesus is called the Son of God, but Paul uses this language many times in His letters. The language points back to the OT and also to the deity of Jesus. After his Damascus Road encounter there's no doubt in Saul's mind that Jesus is Yahweh, the Lord.

He also picks up the preaching methodology of the Apostles without yet encountering them. He proclaims Jesus as the Christ, which means the Messiah. This would have meant going back into the OT and showing, just like Peter, and Stephen, and Philip did, that Jesus was the perfect fulfillment of God's promises and plans.

Now, it's easy for us to read this section and imagine that all of it took place in just a few days or maybe a few weeks. But, there's actually a significant time break in between verses 22 and 23. Verse 23 says "when many days had passed" and we

can tend to read over that quickly. Well, listen to Paul's own timeline of what happened after his conversion to Christ. Galatians 1:11-21.

The trip to Arabia probably happens between verses 22-23 and then Saul's return to Damascus leads to his trip to Jerusalem. Look at verses 23-25.

But nothing has changed for Saul, in fact, he's only grown more bold and been strengthened to carry the name. Look at verses 26-30. In verse 29 it says that he spoke and disputed with the Hellenists. If you remember back in Acts 7:9 Stephen had disputed with Greek speaking Jews about Jesus. Another name for Greek speaking Jews was Hellenists.

It's most likely the case that Saul went right back to the Greek speaking Jews he knew before and now began to dispute with them over the person and work of Jesus. It's also likely that some of these Hellenists had not seen Saul since he had held their coats while they stoned Stephen. The disciples ship Saul off to Tarsus and we don't see him again in the story of Acts until Acts 11 and he won't take center stage until Acts 13 as the mission to the Gentiles really begins to unfold.

But in the meantime, Saul's conversion has brought a sustained period of growth and peace to the early church. Look at verse 31.

I'd like to circle back around to the profound change of direction and purpose that God brought about in Saul's life. The commitment to and focus on bearing the name of Christ in all of life became the defining feature of His life. And I think it became this because he was floored by grace. He recognized that he was rescued from a life of rebellion against God and saved simply because of God's sovereign grace. His response to this was to live full tilt for the glory and honor of the name.

I'd like to end this morning by asking you to consider a few questions.

- Is the glory of the name of Jesus the defining purpose and aim of your life?
- If you say yes, how is this demonstrated daily in attitudes, actions, and decisions?
- What goal or purpose most often competes with the glory of the name for first place in your life?
- Have you paused today to thank God for the transforming grace given to you in Christ?



### Sermon Reflection Questions – 2/16/25

- Have you had a moment in your life when you were devoted to a particular goal or purpose that was deeply satisfying? What was it?
- What are the most common “purposes” of life that our culture shapes us to pursue?
- Describe the movement of the story in Acts from 6:8 – 9:31.
- What does it tell us about Christianity that Luke calls it “the Way” in verse 2?
- Why was Saul so passionate about persecuting Christians?
- How would the words of God to Saul in verses 4-5 been able to completely upend his belief system?
- How would this experience in 9:1-9 form Saul’s (Paul’s) understanding of grace?
- How does the name of Christ take center stage in this story? Where do you see “the name” mentioned in chapter 9?
- What are some practical ways that you and I bear the name of Christ in our daily lives?

- How does Saul's life immediately demonstrate that he now bears the name and acts because of the name?
- What goal or purpose most often competes with the glory of the name for first place in your life?
- How does grace motivate a life that desires to faithfully represent Christ?