

Acts: Seeing the Spirit at Work
Sunday Morning Bible Study
Lesson Seven – Acts 9:1-31
The Conversion of Saul

In the two thousand years since his death and resurrection, millions have turned to Jesus. Lives have been transformed. Directions changed. But no conversion is more dramatic than that of Saul of Tarsus. His is the most famous in church history. This is the young man who approved of Stephen's brutal death and then set out to single-handedly destroy the church. He went from house to house to drag men and women off to prison because of their faith in Jesus. Then Saul met Jesus.

Yes, Saul's conversion was dramatic. He became the apostle to the Gentiles, and we today continue to reap the benefits of his life. However, thought it will probably not be on a Damascus Road, we too must experience a personal encounter with Jesus Christ in order to be converted. We too must turn to him in faith and repentance and receive a call to serve Christ and his church.

Open

- It is good to reflect on the work of God in our lives. What was it like when you became a follower of Jesus?

Study

1. *Read Acts 9:1-19.* Describe Saul according to verses 1 and 2.

He was breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, and he was arresting Christians and taking them bound to Jerusalem.

Luke has already mentioned Saul three times in Acts, each time as a bitter opponent of Christ and his church. He had not changed. He was still in the same mental condition of hatred and hostility. Some of the language that Luke uses to describe Saul in his preconversion state seems deliberately to portray him as "a wild and ferocious beast."

2. Describe Saul's experience on the Damascus road.

As he was going down the road, he suddenly saw a great light (and maybe even the face of Jesus) and heard the voice of Jesus. Saul didn't know who it was, but Jesus identified himself as the one whom Saul was persecuting. Then, Saul was blind after the experience. The other Jews with him heard the voice too, but they could not see anything.

3. If you were Saul, what do you think it would be like to meet Jesus in this way?

It must have been incredibly shocking, because Saul did not believe that Jesus was resurrected. So, all of a sudden, he is talking to the risen Christ. It must also have been traumatic simply because he realized that he had been entirely wrong about this "new religion."

4. In what ways does Saul's conversion demonstrate the marvelous grace of God?

The primary lesson here is that, by worldly standards, some people are just "too bad" for God to save them. However, by God's standards, no one is beyond the reach of His marvelous grace. God can change anyone.

If we ask what caused Saul's conversion, only one answer is possible. What stands out from the narrative is the sovereign grace of God through Jesus Christ. Saul did not "decide for Christ," as we might say. On the contrary, he was persecuting Christ. It was rather Christ who decided for him and intervened in his life.

To ascribe Saul's conversion to God's initiative can easily be misunderstood, however; the sovereign grace which captured Saul was neither sudden (in the sense that there had been no previous preparation) nor compulsive (in the sense that he needed to make no response). This was not the first time Jesus Christ had spoken to him. According to Paul's own words, Jesus said to him, "It is hard for you to kick against the goads" (Acts 26:14), a Greek proverb describing the useless resistance of an oxen who is being broken in.

Sovereign grace is gradual grace and gentle grace. Gradually and without violence, Jesus pricked Saul's mind and conscience. Then he revealed himself to him in a way as to enable him to make a free response. Divine grace does not trample human responsibility, but rather it enables human beings to be truly human. It is sin that imprisons. It is grace that liberates.

5. What immediate evidence of transformation do you see in Saul after his encounter with Jesus?

Immediately, he began proclaiming Christ in the synagogues. He increased in strength and confounded the Jews.

6. William Barclay calls Ananias “one of the forgotten heroes of the Christ church” (*The Acts of the Apostles in The Daily Study Bible* [St. Andrew Press, 1953], p. 74). What is the significance of Ananias’s ministry to Saul?

Ananias was the first Christian to minister to Saul. It must have been a scary experience for Ananias because he knew the type of man Saul had been. It also gives us an example to follow when someone converts to Christianity and we are frightened by his or her former life.

7. *Read Acts 9:19-31.* Just as in Damascus, the believers in Jerusalem were afraid of Saul. What does Barnabas teach us about relating to new Christians?

First, we should champion their conversion experience, supporting them in front of other Christians. Second, we should encourage new Christians, not shirk away from them because of fear or skepticism.

8. By Paul’s own testimony later in the book of Acts (26:16), on the Damascus road Jesus appointed him “as a servant and as a witness” and as the apostle to the Gentiles. How does Paul live out his responsibility to the world in this passage of Scripture?

We see Saul witnessing to the Jews in the synagogues, especially the Greek-speaking Jews. This is the beginning of his ministry to Gentiles throughout the Greek-speaking Roman Empire.

9. What connection do you see between Saul’s conversion and the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoying a time of peace?

The peace they experienced was as a result of Saul no longer hunting and persecuting Christians. Before his conversion experience, Christians were living in fear and unrest.

Summary: Thus the story of Saul’s conversion in Acts 9 begins with him leaving Jerusalem with an official mandate from the high priest to arrest fugitive Christians, and ends with him leave Jerusalem as a persecuted Christian himself. Witness to Christ involves suffering for Christ. It is not an accident that the Greek word for witness (martyrs) came to be associated with martyrdom.

Apply

- How did your conversion compare or contrast with Saul's?

How are you continuing to experience the grace of God in your life?

How do you need to be more like Ananias and Barnabas in your church or Christian community?

How do you expect to see God working in the lives of those around you who are not Christians?

Pray

- In silence, reflect on the miracle of your relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Thank him.

All material taken from:

John Stott, *Acts: Seeing the Spirit at Work*. Downers Grove, IL: IV Press, USA, 1998.