

The Most Unlikely Convert

Acts 9:1-31

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Terry Teykl, writing about praying through the book of Acts, says that Acts encourages us to pray specifically for people who aren't Christians to have Damascus Road conversions, dramatic and decisive experiences of the living Lord Jesus. The Holy Spirit might confront them in times of crisis or in times of loneliness. The Spirit might even challenge them during times of celebration or success. Someone could have a Damascus Road conversion while overhauling an engine or shopping at the mall. God's not restricted by our setting or location. Sometimes people who seem the most determined to reject God are the best candidates for Damascus Road conversions. Terry says he knows a man who had such an encounter while being arrested for drunk driving. With his hands cuffed behind him, he was face down on the hood of his car. Then he looked up into the night sky and saw Jesus. He was instantly sobered and converted. His life was changed forever (*Acts 29: Fifty Days of Prayer to Invite the Holy Spirit* 72).

Were you one of those unlikely converts? Do you know someone, or know of someone, that you'd think of as most unlikely to become a Christian? Maybe it's someone who's an outspoken opponent of the faith. Or someone who shows no interest in Christian faith and life. Or perhaps someone who's been burned, hurt, by the church and they don't want anything to do with it.

C. S. Lewis says that when he finally came to believe in God, after several years of atheism, he was "the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England" (*Surprised by Joy* 228-29). I wonder if Saul of Tarsus was, in his time, the most surprising and unlikely convert. This story's so familiar that it's not shocking to us. But how likely would it have seemed that Saul the persecutor would become a follower of Jesus and a proclaimer and defender of "the Way" of Jesus?

All we know about Saul so far in Acts is that he was present when Stephen was stoned to death following his testimony to the ruling Council. The witnesses laid their cloaks at Saul's feet and he approved their murder

of Stephen. Though he wouldn't have called it murder, but a legitimate execution. Soon after that, Saul began to destroy the church. He went around, dragging both men and women who believed in Jesus off to prison.

Now, after telling about Philip's ministry in Samaria and along the coast of Judea, Luke tells us again about Saul. He's still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He wants to go to other cities to root out followers of Jesus. So he gets letters from the high priest authorizing him to go to Damascus and find those who belong to the Way so he can bring them back and imprison them in Jerusalem.

"Followers of the Way" was how the early church described themselves. They were devoted to Jesus, who is "the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6). They believed that God's way of salvation was shown in Jesus Christ. This was how they talked about their way of life in Christ.

And Saul wants to stop them. We learn some of Saul's background later in Acts and in some of the letters he would write to various churches. He was devoted to the Lord God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Saul was a Pharisee, part of a lay movement that sought to know and live by the Scriptures. He was zealous for the glory of God and he believed that these Jesus followers were taking away from God's glory. How could a crucified pretender be the Messiah? The Jesus people were either deluded or they were active enemies of true faith in God. Either way, their teaching was dangerous blasphemy in Paul's understanding. So he needed to stop them, to silence them in order to protect God's honor and glory.

So Saul's on his way to round up some of these "followers of the Way." One writer says that a caravan took six days to travel from Jerusalem to Damascus (Lloyd John Ogilvie, *Drumbeat of Love* 129). We don't know how many people were traveling with Saul. We often imagine him on horseback for this journey, but Acts doesn't say whether he was riding or walking. Whatever was the case, he had time to think and reflect and pray as he made his way to Damascus. Maybe he was remembering Stephen and the divine radiance in his face when he was before the Council and his words of glory and forgiveness as he died. Maybe Saul was meditating on the glory of God that he was seeking and trying to protect.

As Saul and his entourage approached Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed all around him. He literally saw the glory of God. This vision was overwhelming and he fell to the ground. Then he heard a voice saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Saul knew the Hebrew Bible well enough to remember that God often addressed people by repeating their names like that.

Saul asks, "Who are you, Lord?" "Lord" here probably means, "Sir." But there's kind of a play on words here. Saul may have a hint that the Lord God is speaking to him.

When he asks, "Who are you?" the answer comes, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." Saul was longing, maybe praying, to see God's glory, to see God's face. Now he does—and he sees the face of Jesus. He hears the voice of Jesus. The risen and living Lord Jesus Christ appears from the heavenly dimension of reality and reveals himself to Saul. Jesus is not a dead and buried false messiah. He's really alive! This reality shatters Saul. N. T. Wright captures some of what it must have meant for Saul to see Jesus:

It confirmed everything Saul had been taught; it overturned everything he had been taught. The law and the prophets had come true; the law and the prophets had been torn to pieces and put back together in a totally new way. It was a new world; it was the old world made explicit. It showed him that the God he had loved from childhood, the God for whose glory he had been so righteously indignant, the God in whose name and for whose honour he was busy rounding up those who were declaring that Jesus of Nazareth was Israel's Messiah, that he was risen from the dead, that he was the Lord of the world...—it showed him that the God he had been right to serve, right to study, right to seek in prayer, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, had done what he always said he would, but done it in a shocking, scandalous, horrifying way. The God who had always promised to come and rescue his people had done so in person. *In the person of Jesus.*

Everything that Saul of Tarsus said and did from that moment on, and particularly everything that he wrote, flowed from that sudden, shocking seeing of Jesus. (*Acts for Everyone*, Part 1)

And notice that Saul wasn't just persecuting followers of Jesus; he was persecuting Jesus himself. Jesus identifies with his people so closely that he says, "You are persecuting *me*. I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." Jesus had told his disciples, "Whoever listens to you listens to me; whoever rejects you rejects me..." (Lk 10:16). Jesus is so close to us that he's affected by what touches us, what hurts us, what troubles or blesses us.

The living Lord Jesus instructs Saul to go into the city where he would find out what to do. The men traveling with Saul heard something, maybe the Lord's words, but they didn't see the Lord like Saul did. Conversion is real. It's an act of God that comes from outside us. But it's also a very personal and inward work that may confuse the people around us. They wonder where the change in our attitude and behavior comes from.

And Saul is being changed. He thought he saw everything clearly. Now he can't see anything. He was ready to charge into Damascus and start rounding up followers of Jesus. Now he stumbles into Damascus being led by the hand. For three days he's blind and he doesn't eat or drink. God has his attention. Saul's getting ready for what God will do next.

There's a disciple in Damascus whose name is Ananias. We met an Ananias earlier in Acts (5:1-11). This Ananias has a different character than the earlier one. Ananias of Damascus has a vision where the Lord calls him by name. And he responds, "Here I am, Lord." What a great way to answer when God calls. What a great prayer any time: "Here I am, Lord."

The Lord tells Ananias to go to a certain house—the house of Judas on Straight Street—and ask for a man named Saul from Tarsus. Saul is praying. While he's praying, he has a vision of a man named Ananias coming to place his hands on him to restore his sight. Saul is physically blind, but God is giving him spiritual vision.

Understandably, Ananias hesitates. He's heard about Saul. He knows what harm Saul has done to the Lord's people in Jerusalem and that he's in Damascus to arrest all who call on the name of Jesus.

But the Lord repeats his command to Ananias: "Go!" And he explains to Ananias that he's chosen Saul to be his instrument to proclaim the name of Jesus to Gentiles and rulers and the people of Israel. Most of the rest of Acts tells about Saul doing this. The Lord will also show Saul that suffering for the name of Jesus will be a result of his calling as well. Following Jesus doesn't mean that everything becomes easy and pleasant. There's struggle involved in living the Lord's way.

So Ananias goes where Saul is staying. He greets him by name. He's no longer "this man" but "Brother Saul." Saul's part of the family now—the family of followers of the Way. The enemy has become a brother.

Don't you love Ananias? His readiness to hear the Lord, his willingness to obey, his trust in the Lord, his Spirit-empowered ability to welcome a new believer into the family of faith. Is there someone the Lord is calling you to go to and welcome into the faith?

Ananias tells Brother Saul that the Lord Jesus who appeared to Saul on the way as he was going to Damascus has now sent Ananias to Saul so he could see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Ananias lays his hands on Saul. Saul's blindness is healed. He gets up, is baptized, eats and regains his strength.

Ananias fades from the story and we don't hear of him again. But Saul immediately starts preaching in the Damascus synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah, the fulfillment of God's promises. This confuses people. They ask, "Isn't this Saul the one who raised havoc in Jerusalem among the people who call on this name? Didn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" The change in Saul is sudden and dramatic. The persecutor of Jesus is now a proclaimer of Jesus.

He grows more powerful. His witness gains strength. The Jews in Damascus are baffled and confounded as he proves that Jesus is the Messiah. Saul knew the Scriptures inside and out. Now he's seen Jesus alive for himself and been filled with the Holy Spirit. All of that comes together in a powerful message and teaching that opponents are unable to refute.

A pattern of reaction to Saul's preaching and teaching begins that will follow him the rest of his life. There's a conspiracy to kill him since they can't shut him up. But Saul gets wind of this plan and with the help of some

disciples, he escapes as they lower him in a basket through an opening in the city wall.

Luke condenses what happens next. We don't know how much time was involved. Saul goes back to Jerusalem and tries to join the disciples. But they're afraid of him. They think he's just pretending to be a disciple so he can capture more of them.

Then we meet Barnabas again. He was one of the generous believers (4:36-37). He has the nickname "The Encourager." Somehow he meets Saul, hears his story, and believes him. He brings Saul to the apostles and vouches for him. He tells them how Saul saw the Lord and how the Lord spoke to him and how in Damascus he preached boldly in the name of Jesus. Barnabas's influence persuades the apostles to accept Saul and welcome him. We need to be part of the community of faith to sustain the change that comes with conversion.

Saul moves about freely in Jerusalem and speaks boldly in the name of the Lord. He also debates with some of the Greek-speaking Jews, his own people. But like with Stephen earlier, they try to kill him. So the believers take Saul to the seaport of Caesarea and send him off to Tarsus, his hometown. And Saul stays there for some time. Again, we don't know how long. But some years later, Barnabas will again go find Saul and bring him to Antioch to work in the church there. The Antioch church will follow the Holy Spirit's lead and send Barnabas and Saul on a preaching mission. Along the way, as they move out beyond Judea and Syria, he'll stop using his Hebrew name, Saul, and start using his Greek name, Paul.

Saul of Tarsus is Paul the apostle. The one who was seeking God's glory finally saw the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (see 2 Corinthians 4:6). The persecutor of the church becomes the proclaimer of the church's faith. Through all his experience on the way to and in Damascus, Saul was truly converted and commissioned by the Lord. His passion and dedication were redirected in the right direction.

Conversion is a change, a turning from going one way to going another. Conversion happens when we respond to the living Lord Jesus and put our faith in him. It's not something we do on our own, but something God does with us and for us. The power to change isn't inherent in us, but it

comes from outside, from the Spirit of God. And then it is within us when we receive him through faith. Conversion may be sudden and dramatic like it was with Saul. Or it may involve a gradual and gentle process like it did with one of Paul's protégés, Timothy. But at some point, we realize that we need to change, that we need God to forgive us and restore our vision, fill us with the Holy Spirit and set us on the right way. Conversion doesn't just make us feel better about ourselves but it moves us into ministry. We become followers of Jesus who is the Way. We begin to walk with him daily, becoming more like him, serving with him, and sharing his good news so others can know him.

Have you experienced the kind of conversion God wants to give you? Is there someone you're praying for that they'll experience it? God who changed Saul can change us and the people we pray for.