

Part 17: Conversion and the Christian

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We have been working through the book of Acts which is a book in the New Testament that describes the origin story of the Christian church. And as we see the origin story of the church—what we are actually looking at is the origin story of the Christian. The church is nothing but the collection of Christians whom Jesus purchased with his blood. And local churches are nothing more than those who are saved by faith in Jesus' life, death, burial and resurrection who gather together.

It is Jesus who saves and creates the church. There's no other secret to it. But as Acts 8 began we see that the church—though saved by Jesus—is under drastic threat. There, in Acts 8:1 we were introduced to a man named Saul who began to lead an organized persecution of the church. He's ravaging the church, dragging disciples, men and women, off to prison.

But, as we kept reading in Acts 8 we saw that despite the threats of Saul—the gospel went forward through the very Christians he scattered. Like dandelion seeds blown by the wind—Christians went out with the gospel of life. We saw the gospel go north and was received with great joy in Samaria. Last week the gospel went south and met an Ethiopian on a desert road who carried the gospel to the continent of Africa while Philip took the gospel up the eastern coast of the Mediterranean.

It seemed the church had endured! But then we return to our passage today and we see this ominous reminder: **Acts 9:1**, "But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord." Despite the success—the problem remained. So what's going to happen? Last time we saw Saul—it ended with the gospel flourishing in the area. This time Saul returns with the same murderous intent—but by the time we reach the end of this narrative next week, Luke tells us this in Acts 9:31, "So the church throughout all Judea, and Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Spirit—it multiplied."

So what happened? How do we go from the murder of the church to the multiplication of it? The small, leaderless and persecuted church is delivered from the organized and powerful leaders of the day. How? Well—God saved the church. But how. The same way he always saves the church—by saving Christians.

That's how the church multiplies isn't it? The church doesn't multiply because more people come to services. The church doesn't multiply because people give more money. The church multiplies because the preached message of the gospel of Jesus Christ saves souls. And so the church multiplies because the church is saved.

But this particular story in Acts 9 shows the power of the salvation. It's one of the best illustrations of why we often call salvation "conversion." Everything is different when we are saved. And while we will see the conversion and salvation of the broader church—today we hear the amazing story of conversion on the Damascus Road. Not only is the church saved from Saul—but Saul is saved himself! Saul the murderer becomes Saul the Apostle.

My wife was sharing a story with my daughter. She was talking about how Paul—the Apostle Paul—the guy who wrote two-thirds in the New Testament, who preached the gospel across the Middle East, and

Asia and Europe, the guy who sold out aspiring to bring the gospel to where no man had preached it. That Paul was once a persecutor of the church named Saul.

My daughter's eyes got wide and she said, "Saul is Paul!" Yes! Saul is Paul! And while his name isn't yet switched over—what we see today is that conversion is far more than a name change. It's a life change.

And the level of amazement my daughter had to Saul's conversion should be the same level of amazement we have with our own salvation—and the salvation of anyone else we see come to faith in Jesus. Because while Saul is unique in many ways—he's ordinary in all the most important ways. Saul's story of salvation is an intense snap shot of our own salvation. And that's why our main point this morning is this: **Saul's conversion is a spectacular case of ordinary grace.**

If you want to know how God saves the church you need to know how God saves the Christian. And the story of how God saves the Christian is the story of how God saved you if your faith is in Jesus. And it's the story of how God might save you if your faith is not yet in Jesus. We will see this in three ways today: **Conversion and Sinful Hearts, Conversion and the Savior's Heart, and Conversion and New Life.**

To begin, let's look at Saul's heart. What do we learn about Saul in these verses? **Acts 9:1-2**, "But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 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."

So, what's wrong in Saul's life here? It's here where we begin to see why we need Jesus, and how he alone reveals our true problem. This is our first point this morning: **Conversion and Sinful Hearts.**

John Bunyan once said this: Bunyan: "And I tell you, it is an easier thing to persuade a healthy man to go to the physician for cure, or a man without hurt to seek for a plaster to cure him, that it is to persuade a man that sees not his soul diseased, to come to Jesus Christ."

In other words we will only come to Jesus when we see our problem as Jesus, and the Bible, reveal it. Otherwise we have no need for Jesus.

Notice how Saul had no problem when it came to worldly standing and from a religious standpoint his problem was not Bible understanding. From a worldly acceptance place—Saul was every Jewish mom's dream. In fact Saul was everything they would have hoped for Jesus to have been. He was trained at the finest school, he was given powerful access to the high priests, he was a powerful lawyer, able to defend and proclaim the Old Testament law. His twitter would have been fire, his phylacteries were large, his tassels long—and he tells us in Philippians that in regards to obedience to the law he was—perfect.

He had power, he had influence, he had acceptance and he had religious knowledge and morality. But there's a problem. I heard one motivational speaker tell a group of students to hold out for the job that takes your breath away. Saul has that. But that's the problem isn't it? His breath is spent breathing out murder against the church! Saul's heart was broken, evil and wicked. And it's only when you see that Saul's heart is your heart that we begin to see why we need Jesus and Jesus alone for salvation.

If all you need to be a Christian is a better understanding of the Bible—you don't need Jesus. You need to read the Bible more and maybe take some seminary classes. If all you need is to gain worldly standing and acceptance—you don't need Jesus. You need to get into upper management, grow your leadership

skills, get your art published, or maybe find a spouse or buy that big house. But here's why we need conversion—we need conversion because our hearts are the source of what is wrong.

You might say—I've never murdered anyone. But if we take Jesus at his word, he says that if you have hated anyone you've committed murder in your heart. Maybe you've never slept with anyone outside of marriage. But Jesus says that if you look at someone lustfully, you've committed adultery in your heart.

Notice how Paul, who we know is Saul, speaks to Christians in the Ephesian church: **Ephesians 2:1-3**, "And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air that is now at work in the sons of disobedience-- among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind."

I wonder how these verses affect you? If you find it shocking and maybe offensive—that's normal. We don't naturally think of ourselves in this lens. But I want to ask you—have you ever heard your own voice played back to you? When that happens most of us respond the same way, "Is that what I sound like?" We are not good judges of our own voice—which we can hear! But how much more do we need help to see our true heart—which we cannot hear or see. This is why no culture has ever been able to shake the problems of anger, envy, pride, hatred and violence. Our problem is in our hearts.

Kids in here, my hope is that so many of you begin your testimony with: "I was always in a Christian home." What a beautiful and wonderful grace. But notice how none of us can say, "I was always a Christian." That might be true for as far as you remember! But God tells us that at one point we were enemies of God. No one was "always a Christian." And yet, if you are a Christian—your dead heart has been changed.

How? Not simply by reading your Bible, but by believing it. Not by having some worldly authority grant you the ability to live out your dreams—but by Jesus granting you access to the authority of the Father! And how did you get all of that? By faith. You need to have faith in Jesus. As Peter reminds us in Acts 2, "Repent and be baptized (including belief) and you will receive the Holy Spirit."

The solution is that simple. But that's a big problem if you're someone like Saul, isn't it? It's a really big problem if we deny God his sovereign power. If we think our will or our world is the ultimate force in life—it's a big problem. Saul has heard the message of Jesus. He heard Stephen preach a clear, Jesus-centered message, he heard Stephen pray that God might forgive these sinners. But Saul didn't respond in faith—he responded by holding the cloaks of the men who murdered Stephen.

I wonder if that's how you view the gospel. Maybe, you've heard it before and it hasn't worked and you think: well—that's it I guess—I better find something else. Or maybe, that's how you view evangelism. You shared the gospel—they didn't respond—now we move on to someone else.

The problem the Bible paints about our sinful hearts is that we will never choose to not be sinful. Blind men can't choose to see. Deaf men can't choose to hear. Dead men can't choose to live. But there are Christians. So what happens? Conversion must be dependent not only upon our response of faith and repentance—but on the movement which causes the response. That movement is Jesus—the one who always makes the first move.

This is our second point this morning: **Conversion and the Savior's Heart.**

Saul's heart was not at all interested in Jesus. But Jesus was interested in Saul. Look at what happens: **Acts 9:3-9**, "Now, as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. 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. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank."

I wonder if you've ever had to stand before someone who you had wronged. What did that feel like? Or, I wonder what you would do if the person who wronged you stood before you and you had all the power? I just heard of a man who had his brother murdered. When the murderer was put in prison the brother said he dreamt about committing a crime so that he could go into prison and strangle the murderer.

Maybe you are hosting the first meeting at work and at the table is the guy who once passed you over for a promotion—but now you're in charge. Or maybe you're playing against a team that cut you, or didn't want you and now you're in a position to humiliate them.

But notice the context here. Saul—who has been persecuting Jesus—is now blinded, disabled, and struck down by the very God who he has been ravaging. What would you expect a God to do to a man in a situation like that? But notice how Jesus gives Saul grace. And he gives him two experiences that show the nature of his grace—and he gives those same two experiences to anyone who sees Jesus clearly for the first time.

Those experiences are: *clear conviction* and *clear hope*.

Here's the *conviction*, **Acts 9:4**, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

The conviction comes when he hears those words. He's fully aware that something divine is happening and yet he's confused. "Why are you persecuting me?" What do you mean? Everything Saul's doing is for God. He thought he was pleasing him—he thought he was doing well. But here everything he thought was grounds for confidence in his life was grounds for condemnation. The last answer he wanted to hear was the answer he got: **Acts 9:5**, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting."

He knows this is a big deal. Saul knows how seriously God takes sin. It's deadly serious. That's why Saul has felt justified pursuing these Christians to the death! But we also see how Saul's sin is bigger than he thought. He probably didn't put Jesus on the cross—but sin against Jesus' church is sin against Jesus. Everything he did to the church—he did to the one who died for the church. Every sin we commit in this world is ultimately against the one who made the world.

Do you realize that one day you will have a similar realization? Proverbs tells us that every man seems right in his own way. But when we look at our own efforts—when we stand before Jesus everything we did that we thought brought us comfort will be shown to bring us eternal discomfort in hell. Everything we thought we did to please God by our own efforts—service, morality, generosity—all of it will show that it was an insufficient and offensive act to God. You can't earn your standing before God and any

attempt to do so will have the opposite effect in the long run. That's why we need a new heart. We need a heart that does things differently.

And that's why Jesus not only brings us a conviction of sin, but **clear hope**. Look again at what Jesus says to him, "But rise and enter the city and you will be told what you are to do."

All of us will stand before Jesus on that terrible day of judgement and if that's the first time we hear him clearly he will say to us, "Away from me, for I never knew you." But there is another time where we can hear Jesus. For Saul it was on this Damascus road, for all of you it's hear now in Jesus' word in Acts 9. But here we receive not only the conviction of sin—but the words of life that lead us out of it.

Jesus tells sinners where to go to find healing. We listen to him. Jesus is sending Saul onward to a place where he will be healed not by his own work, nor by his own merit, but by the very men he sought to kill. This is an example of what faith and repentance looks like for the Christian. We don't do anything but approach with humble confidence the very one we sinned against.

He heals us. What stunning love! For the Christian, the very blood we spilled in our sin is the very blood which washes away our sin! In that moment the whole world of theology Saul knew in the Old Testament made sense—Jesus was his sacrifice—he was his atonement. Nothing in all Christianity will make sense until Jesus becomes the center of it all. He saves us, faith in him sets us free.

I was just talking with one of you on Tuesday night and we talked about the beautiful line in the hymn: "I woke, the dungeon flames with light; my chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose and went forth and followed thee. Amazing love, how can it be that though my God should's't die for me."

And when Jesus love for us so profoundly changes us—everything changes. This is our last point: **Conversion and New Life**. Notice the changes Saul experiences in this text. I want you to see how he is, **recomissioned, reacclimated and renewed**.

Read with me what happens next: **Acts 9:10-19**, "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." 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, 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." But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name." 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. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." 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." And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized, and taking food he was strengthened."

So, next week we will spend time talking about Saul's conversion in the context of the broader community of the church. I can't think of a more powerful witness of God's grace through the church when Ananias calls Saul the savage, "Brother." We will talk more about this next week.

But for today I want us to notice what all is included in Saul's conversion. What happens when we are saved? Well what we can see here is that Saul was

Uniquely, Saul was **recommissioned** by God. Ananias was rightfully skeptical when he says, "Saul is commissioned under authority!" But Jesus says, "You're right, but now it's my authority!"

He calls Saul a chosen instrument, an apostle, to the Gentile world. Can you imagine the scandal of that?! Imagine a Bobcat being a messenger of the gospel to the Griz! Imagine Hitler being the messenger of good news to the Jews! But here, the Judaizer zealot Saul is called by God to be the messenger of grace to pagan Gentiles.

Nothing can explain this origin story except the grace of God. Do you realize that when you come to faith in Jesus—you come under new authority? New authority that not only helps you fight sin—but one which frames everything you are doing. Everything we do in life we do under his authority—living for his kingdom.

Obedience, is now the daily task--and the mission of Jesus is our overarching goal. "Go forth," Jesus says in Matthew 28, "and make disciples of all nations."

Conversion is more than adding a bumper sticker to your car! Our conversion is too big for a bumper sticker. People will know our conversion by the whole of our lives as we live as joyful servants of the King who saved us.

Saul is not only recommissioned, but he is **re-acclimated**.

Jesus and Ananias express to Saul that this new life of his will include suffering. What we don't realize is that our lives are acclimated to what we think brings us peace. Whenever my wife comes back from a place with humidity--her skin has to reacclimate itself to the dry air in Montana.

The gospel helps us understand the reacclimation process of our lives. George Barna conducted a survey on Christianity among Baby Boomers. He concluded saying this: **"For a 'one time admission of imperfection and weakness,' they received in return 'permanent peace with God.' The result was that 'millions of Boomers who said the prayer, asked for forgiveness and went on with their lives, with virtually nothing changed...' They saw it as a deal in which they could exploit God and get what they wanted without giving up anything of consequence."**

It's all too easy to think that we suffer that uncomfortable moment of conviction of sin, and then we turn to Jesus--and he sends us right back to life as we knew it. We expect Jesus to adjust himself to our own goals and desires. But conversion isn't a step toward worldly comfort. Conversion isn't climate control!

When Saul got saved, did his life get better or worse? In almost every way we can think of it got worse. He was well respected, and he lost it all. He was afflicting others and now he would be afflicted. He was comfortable and now he would be uncomfortable. He was popular and now he would be persecuted. He was tight with the worldly authorities and now he wasn't.

When you come to Jesus, when he converts you, he isn't telling you that life is back to normal! He says that you might have to break up with your boyfriend. You might have to confess your porn addiction. You might need to quit your job. You might feel the wrath of your parents.

But Paul tells us in Philippians that he counts, **“everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.”**

But this wonderful hope—can't be properly believed or experienced alone. It was hard—he would suffer. But look at where he was **renewed**. **Acts 9:18**, "And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; and taking food, he was strengthened."

Saul just lost everything by worldly standards--and yet here in the home of his former enemy--he was strengthened. Here he saw most clearly. We will talk more about this next week, but it's important to note that Saul was not only won to faith in Jesus—but he was won into fellowship with Jesus' people.

He was baptized into their church and they strengthened him. They encouraged and refreshed him. Sometimes the re-acclamation process of the world is hard. Sometimes the responsibility of our recommissioned life is heavy. But the same conversion which wins us to the welcome and encouragement of Christ—wins us to the broader community of faith. Here, with his brothers and sisters in Christ—was his refuge from what would now be a scary and totally different world.

This is our story—this is the story of the Christian. And as we begin to celebrate with baptisms I pray that you might worship Jesus in light of what he's done for you.