

Part 18: Conversion and the Church

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Have you ever seen a video of people releasing a crocodile?

A croc really only has three primary weapons, its massive jaws, the failing of its head, and the death roll. So the primary way of capturing one is basic math: you have to add more mass to its back, head and jaws than it has force in its whole body. This is normally done by dog piling as many people on top of it as you can.

But when it comes to releasing the croc—there's always that one guy who has to be last man off. One by one people jump off until it's just one guy, with a blanket over the eyes of the croc, and he has to jump off and out of the way of this now fully mobile 1,000 pound animal before it takes a bite out of him.

You have to imagine if that's the way Ananias felt as Saul was nursed to health in his home. Last week we saw the conversion of Saul—the notorious enemy of the church. We saw how the standards for acceptance before God is conversion by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ. And on the Damascus road Saul had that kind of encounter. He was struck down and blinded by the glory and voice of the resurrected Jesus and was rescued out of his slavery to sin and converted into a chosen instrument of Jesus.

But Saul, who was once struck down, blinded, and without food for three days didn't stay weak and blinded for long. Remember where our passage left off last week: **Acts 9:17-19a**, "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."

Everyone loves the story of a murderer coming to faith in Jesus. But we can become uncomfortable pretty quick when the murderer shows up in your church. But when Jesus shows up in the lives of sinners, saved sinners show up in the fellowship of the local church. Last week we saw how Saul's conversion was the story of our own conversion and this week we see how Saul's acceptance into the church is the story of our own life in the church.

Some of us may identify with Saul—we've got a track record and we are still getting used to our new identity in light of our former patterns of living. Some of us are side eyeing others like Ananias did Saul—wondering if we are going to be harmed, duped or inconvenienced by these new Christians in our midst.

But if our only standing before God is on the merit of God's grace by faith in Jesus Christ—then the standards of fellowship within the church are based on those same standards of grace by faith in Jesus Christ.

Conversion is the greatest gift a person can ever receive—but today we will see that conversion is the greatest gift the church can receive—even when it can make us feel uncomfortable and anxious at times. Our main point to day is this: For the Christian and the church, **Conversion challenges our false**

comforts and comforts our real challenges. I've heard it said before that the genuine marks of conversion are a changed relationship with God, with the world, and with the church and we will see all of those in this passage as we examine it in three parts: **Conversion as a gift to the church**, then we will see **Conversion and the gift of the church**, and lastly **Conversion and the growth of the church**.

So Saul, the murdering marauder had been strengthened, and supposedly converted. But what happens next?

Let's read **Acts 9:19b-22**, "For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus. And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God.' And all who heard him were amazed and said, 'Is this not the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called up on his name? And has he not come here for this purpose to bring them bound before the chief priests?' But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ."

And here is our first point this morning: **Conversion as a gift to the church**.

In one of the Marvel movies it seems that the bad guy and his invading army had finally won. But the rouge group of superheroes had finally learned how to work together. The leader of the invading forces tried to intimidate them by saying, "I have an army." But, with renewed hope, Iron Man replies with: "We have a Hulk." At one point the Hulk was just a massively strong, but uncontrollable wrecking ball—but now he had a clear direction.

Without the superhero fanfare, this is what the conversion of Saul was like in the early church. He was the biggest and baddest opponent. He was taught at the finest schools, gifted in rhetoric, clear in communication, fearless in stature, and incredibly steeped in the Old Testament scriptures. But what did we just see? All of the skills he had as a non-believer have now been weaponized for the sake of Jesus and his church!

Notice how the Jews were caught off guard: "Is this not the man who made havoc in Jerusalem?" (vs. 21). Earlier we saw that Saul was said to be "ravaging" the church. This is the only time that word is used in the NT and it is a word used to describe the way a wild boar would maim and toss a dead body in the wild. But now the grace of Jesus had tamed and redirected all of Saul's boar-ishness.

Here is where it's important to remember that conversion is not concession. Concession is when we concede and surrender to a kind of passivity. Concession is defeat. But conversion is not passive, while our sin is defeated, our cause is not. It's converted. When you come to faith in Jesus you have passions, skills and gifts—salvation doesn't mean you need to find new ones. It means that you need to find how your old skills and passions serve your new purpose of glorifying Jesus and serving the church!

Notice how Saul shows us three quick things here: **the who**, **the what**, and **the when** of our gifts.

First, **who**? Who is intended to be a gift to the church? You are! You might say, "Well, if I was Saul and Jesus appeared to me on the road and told me that he was going to use me as his vessel then I'd probably have a lot more clarity." But Paul himself encourages the church in Ephesus when he says, **Ephesians 4:7-8**, "But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says, 'When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.'" These gifts are given by Jesus to everyone who is saved so that they might do the work of ministry.

You are saved so that you might contribute to the glory of Jesus and the growth of the church! Your passions, your skills, your personality, your relationships, your income, your job, your education are all meant to be repurposed in your conversion.

Second, **what?** In what ways and to what end do we use our gifts? In whatever way we can to proclaim Jesus Christ. Saul, the educated influencer who once taught against Jesus now proclaimed "Jesus is the Son of God," and confounded others by "proving that Jesus was the Christ."

When Jesus redeems us—he redeems our passions and our gifts. Remember, he created us. Ephesians 2:10 says that we have been created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

This means that we now get to look at our skills and our gifts, our communities and our careers and say, "How can I use these to make much of Jesus by my worship and by my witness?" I know one sister who was saved during a PhD and realized her dissertation was based on a completely pagan worldview—she dropped out and used all of her knowledge to teach at a small Christian school. I know another brother who wanted to learn languages to climb the government ladder—but after his conversion he wanted to use his language skills to bring the gospel to other countries.

Third, **when?** Now! You might say, "I'm young...I'm busy with parenting...I'm still looking for a spouse...once I get through this—then I'll have time to do this stuff." But notice how Saul did this immediately. He certainly would get better, and he was certainly particularly gifted. But what qualifies us for ministry is not our own capacity, or the conferral of any degree—but our conversion itself. The gospel calls us all to gospel ministry when it saves us.

Remember Saul was told by Jesus that he would be a chosen instrument to the Gentiles—but Saul didn't wait to be with the Gentiles did he? Look at verse 11 and verse 22. Where did he start working immediately? Among the Jews.

Now so far, this is good news—but it gets more complicated. This is our second point: **Conversion and the gift of the church.**

Read with me, **Acts 9:23-30**, "When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him, but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket. And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus. So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him. And when the brothers learned of this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus."

Now, look at this text again and put yourself in Saul's shoes. Saul really only has two communities at this point. First, there is the community of the Jews—where he used to be a hero. Second, is the new community of the church, where he is now a new disciple.

But in this passage, both communities are compromised. The Jewish community who once loved him—is now trying to kill him. The Christian community had run to Damascus to escape violence caused by Saul. And now the very Saul who caused them violence has brought violence into the Damascus church. But this time it's not because he's persecuting the church—but because he's part of it.

These Christians probably had loved ones who were imprisoned or harmed by Saul. But in Damascus they found a safe haven—but now it is the Christian ministry of Saul who has brought unwanted attention back to them.

Saul is hated by the community he left—and now he's endangering the community he found. Where would you turn for hope here? Maybe, you'd take the Jonah route and say, "Throw me overboard, turn me in and maybe you'll be safe."

But here's the gift of the church. The new community we are joined to is different than the community we leave behind. Though it was Saul who found out about the threat—who are the ones who did something about it? (vs. 25) The disciples. They made a plan to save him. The one's he came to kill are the ones who risked their own lives to save him. Saul was not alone. He wasn't a lone ranger. He was a member of the church, with brothers and sisters who labored to love him as Jesus loves us. He was no longer a threat—now he was a brother.

That's why when he arrived at Jerusalem he sought to "join the disciples." That word in verse 26 is a unique word that's a carpentry word. It implies the gluing together of two things. He knew he was called to unique ministry—but at the core of his identity was his view of belonging to a church. In seasons of trial and difficulty—he sought out his union with the church wherever he was. Conversion not only changes the way we view our acceptance with God—but it changes where we view our acceptance in the world.

Saul's theology of the Christian life is simple—to be a Christian is to serve the Jesus, with the church, as the church, in the fellowship of the church. The church is meant to be the place we feel most at home. It's not heaven—but it's God's best place for the Christian this side of heaven.

As a church—it's safe to assume that more people experience this kind of loneliness and fear than you think. Coming to Jesus means losing a lot with regard to the world—we need to be eager to overextend ourselves to each other to make up for what was lost.

Maybe you've heard stories of people coming to church and not having anyone talk to them. Maybe you've been sinned against by someone in the church. All those things can happen here because we are still sinners, we are just repentant sinners. But on the whole—the church has a far greater capacity to help than harm.

We see this even for Saul don't we? When he gets to Jerusalem, he's met with a special kind of suspicion. They are wondering if the crocodile has awakened. Was Saul just trying to infiltrate the church only to blow it up from the inside?

Last time Saul was in Jerusalem—he was harming these very people. We all want conversion stories—but life with new converts is sometimes uncomfortable. I've shared the gospel a handful of times with a guy who I see frequently. I want him to come to faith—and yet he has some really weird views on aliens. I bet that if he did come to church—I would be a little nervous, and you'd be a little uncomfortable.

We want college students to come to faith—but what happens when a baby Christian accidentally lets some colorful language slip while around our kids? What happens when the guy who was an alcoholic shows up to guy's night and his presence threatens what you might drink that night?

I know one church who had a transgendered man start coming to church, and kept coming. It's an amazing story. But it was hard for their church. It would have been easier to say, "Please don't come." But they didn't. At times there were people concerned about the conversations they had to have with their kids. At times they were worried about which bathrooms the individual would use.

But guess what, at one point in time, this person was saved. The message of the gospel was believed, and the church who had struggled at times to feel comfortable with everything was able to baptize him. They were able to affirm his salvation and say, "You belong here and whatever bumps there are along the way, we are here for it." This man is uncomfortable in his flesh because he desires to walk out his faith as the biological male who God made him to be—he has had medical interventions which make him look like a woman. But as uncomfortable as he is there—he feels the comfort of his church who has moved towards him in that process.

Conversion—is uncomfortable. Why? Because there's no Christian "type." God saves all people, and all people are messy people. If we love a good conversion story—we will never be a welcoming church. But when we love the converts—we will embrace the growing pains and rejoice at the work God has done in the life of this person.

That's what Barnabas does for Saul. His name literally means, "Son of Encouragement." He did what we do at our own membership meetings. He took him into the community he couldn't get access to on his own and he affirmed two things (vs. 27): Saul's conversion to Jesus and the visible fruit of it. He shared about the costly ways in which Saul was following Jesus, his baptism, his preaching, and he pressed for him to be welcomed into the community.

Church membership, affirming the conversion of those who are among us, helps us get comfortable with the natural discomfort we have around conversion. In this way conversion is a gift to the church because it exposes our own sins and reminds us of the size of God's grace. We have the privilege of seeing that young girl come to faith and wrestle with relationships with men early on and we get to help her process all of that with grace and repentance and we get to watch her grow into a servant of the Lord.

It is hard work to evangelize, it's often harder work to encounter our own sin in the process. But the church's job is to help everyone see Christians as Jesus sees them. We see them according to faith and future not according to their past.

And those who were once uncomfortable with each other, get so comfortable that we end up being complicit in hiding each other from persecution just like the Jerusalem church did with Saul.

And after we see all of this Luke concludes with a sweeping summary statement: **Luke 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 Holy Spirit, it multiplied."

Here is our final point this morning: **Conversion and the growth of the church.**

How does God grow the church? Well, apparently through persecution, plots and murderers in the pews. Those aren't great strategies for church growth by worldly standards. But God will grow his church as they submit themselves to him and to each other. When we have been delivered from our sins and brought to Jesus Christ we have a new fear, and a great comfort.

If we want our church to multiply, and may it be so, it starts with us walking in fear of the Lord and comfort of the Holy Spirit. We want more than anything to honor him even if it puts us in those uncomfortable moments we try so hard to avoid. But when find ourselves walking outside of our own wisdom we will find we are walking in the comfort of the Holy Spirit.

And notice how the church in the whole area was growing. Luke has focused on three particular stories of conversion in these chapters, and he's going to follow primarily two disciples moving forward. But I love how he says, "the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up."

If you have your Bible open you'll notice that in Acts 8 we saw the gospel go with Philip to Judea and Samaria. Then we see the gospel going south towards Africa and east up the Mediterranean. And with Saul we see it go up north to Damascus and back down to Jerusalem. Where do we see the church growing in Galilee? We don't!

But what is happening! The church is growing! How? Because people not named Philip, not named Ananias and not named Saul have been doing the faithful work of living in light of their conversion, preaching the good news of Jesus to those who need conversion, and then adding those new converts by baptism into the community of conversion which is the local church.

God works to save, and God works among the saved, in order to add to the saved, and comfort the saved. Walking as a Christian is difficult, and it's costly. But we gain not only the fellowship of our brothers and sisters in the faith—but the very comfort of God himself as we walk out our new mission together.