



MAY 23, 2021 | PASTOR TIMOTHY SONG

“Saul’s Conversion” (Acts 9:1-22)

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. ³ As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

⁵ “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked.

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. ⁶ “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

⁷ The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. ⁸ Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. ⁹ For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything. ¹⁰ In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, “Ananias!”

“Yes, Lord,” he answered.

¹¹ The Lord told him, “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. ¹² In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.”

¹³ “Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.”

¹⁵ But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. ¹⁶ I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”

¹⁷ Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” ¹⁸ Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, ¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. ²⁰ At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. ²¹ All those who heard him were astonished and asked, “Isn’t he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn’t he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?” ²² Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.



INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon church. Today we are continuing in Acts. So please open your Bibles to Acts 9 and we come to what is probably the most famous chapter in the book of Acts: Saul's conversion. Now, before we read, I want you to think about your conversion. When someone asks you, when did you become a Christian, what do you share? Is there a time or a place you recall? What happened? Conversion is this paradigm shift that occurs in our lives; a pattern has been changed. In other words, conversion leads to transformation. Saul's conversion is the most significant conversion in the whole Bible. We are about to read Saul's testimony. When you share your testimony, you include three parts: your life before Christ, when you met Christ, and your life after Christ. Today's passage gives us a taste of how God transformed Saul's life when he encountered Christ. My prayer is that we will look into this transformed life and see how our stories resonate with Saul. So, please follow along as I read Acts 9:1-22.

[read Acts 9:1-22]

This is the word of God. We know that Acts is about Christ followers becoming the Church and how the Gospel advances in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (1:8). The past couple sermons on Acts addressed the false conversion of Simon the Sorcerer and last Sunday, Pastor Woohyun preached on the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch. Which now leads us to Saul.

Saul's conversion is very important. Notice that Luke takes the time to share this story. Saul, who later changes his name to Paul, even recounts his conversion story twice in Acts 22 and 26 and so we have in the book of Acts three different times where we have Saul's conversion story told with incredible detail. There is a remarkable transformation that happens to Saul, but before we get into this transformed life, we need to know who Saul was first.

We first hear about Saul in the beginning of Acts 8 where it simply says, "And Saul approved of their killing him [Stephen]." Saul was present at the stoning of Stephen and we know that a new level of persecution began because of this. Fast forward now to the first two verses of chapter 9. It says that Saul was "still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples". The phrase "still breathing" may seem like Saul was simply speaking threats and murder, but the translation is that he was "inhaling" threat and the idea is that threatening and killing were the very element of which he was living. Saul was filled with such hatred that he wanted to destroy Christians. This is the frame of mind that he had on his way to Damascus. Saul even received letters from the high priest to give him permission to go to Damascus, find any belonging to the Way (that's what Christians were called back then), arrest them and bring them back to Jerusalem in chains.

This man was on a mission. He was so determined to crush this new movement that he didn't even care if they were men or women. He was ready to persecute anyone belonging to the Way. He wasn't going around giving Christians tickets and fines. No. He was forcing Christians out of their homes, arresting and imprisoning them, and even killing some. This is full on persecution of the Church. I remember the last time I was in India. I had the opportunity of meeting local pastors and one pastor just got out of prison for sharing the Gospel in his village. He and his family were threatened and yet, here he was at a Pastors' conference to learn more about Scripture so that he can return to his village to share the Gospel. It's happening to Christians today and it was happening back then too.

Saul was a religious man. He was a devout Jew who was absolutely convinced that Jesus was a false messiah and that those who believed in Jesus were blasphemous. Saul was so convinced that he thought it was necessary to persecute Christians!



This is who Saul was, but then, Jesus intervenes and completely transforms him. As we walk through Saul's conversion, I want to point out three elements of a transformed life:

1. A transformed life is initiated by divine intervention (9:3-6)
2. A transformed life is shaped by conviction and humility (9:7-12)
3. A transformed life is God's chosen instrument (9:13-22).

POINT #1: A TRANSFORMED LIFE IS INITIATED BY DIVINE INTERVENTION (9:3-6)

Let's read starting from verse 3: "As he neared Damascus on the journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?'" Now, why was Saul on his way to Damascus? It's probably because the Christian movement was growing there and on his way, suddenly a bright light flashed around him. Notice that it says suddenly. It wasn't a gradual light flashing on him like a sunrise slowly appearing. No. All of a sudden, a light from heaven, which in Acts 26:13, Saul mentions that it was brighter than the sun. When you read throughout the Bible, a blinding light often represented the presence of God. For a devout Jew who knew the Scriptures well, this would have been a sign for Saul. It's a sign that God has appeared.

So, this bright light flashes suddenly and that causes Saul to fall on the ground. John Calvin wrote that Saul was probably riding a horse on his way to Damascus. Just picture Saul falling off his horse! God was not appearing to him in a soft and gentle way. He knocks him off his horse onto the ground with blinding light surrounding him and then says, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Now again, being well-versed in Scripture, Saul would have noticed the significance of his name being called twice. Remember when God called out "Abraham, Abraham!" right before he was about to sacrifice his son Isaac (Genesis 22:11)? Or when God appeared to Moses in the burning bushes calling out, "Moses, Moses" (Exodus 3:4). When God wanted someone's attention, He said their names twice. "Saul, Saul". That would have caught his attention for sure. Then the voice asks, "Why do you persecute me?" This is present tense saying, "Why are you persecuting me?" We all know that this is Jesus and Jesus is making it very clear that what you do to His people, you are doing to Him. When you persecute people belonging to the Way, you are persecuting Jesus. There is a connection between Christ and His followers.

After hearing this, Saul responds with a question. Verse 5 says, "Who are you, Lord?" Calvin says that with this question, we now have a tamed Paul. The one who was breathing threats and murder is now thrown to the ground. Saul addresses this voice with the title "Lord". Knowing that a bright light and the calling of one's name twice both signified the divine presence of God, Saul addressed God as "Lord" even though he must have been so confused as to why God would appear to him like this. He must have been asking himself, "Why is the Lord rebuking me? Why is God saying that I am persecuting Him?" Stop and think about this. Here we have Saul who's on a mission thinking he's doing God's work. He thinks he's serving God. He thinks he's being zealous in protecting God's name, but here we have a divine encounter and Saul is confused. "Who are you, Lord?"

These next words will never ever leave Saul: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting". This is divine revelation. This is divine intervention. This is where Christ reveals Himself to Saul. Could you imagine what Saul would have felt hearing those three words "I am Jesus"? He probably had a stroke. He knew this was a God encounter, but when the question is asked, "Who are you?" God replies, "I am Jesus" and for the second time, Jesus says, "whom you are persecuting". What Jesus does on the road to Damascus is that He expresses a unity between Christ and His people. Put yourself in Saul's shoes for a moment. The person you believed was the false messiah and dead has now appeared to you. The one you thought was blaspheming against God is now revealing Himself as divine.



Jesus replies in verse 6: “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do”. If I were Saul, I don’t think those words would be comforting. I’d be scared. “Oh no. What is Jesus going to do with me?” There is no more explanation from Jesus. Just a straight-forward command. Think of the trauma Saul must’ve have been going through. Everything that he believed, everything that he was convicted of, in one flash of light and with one word, he realizes that everything he was doing was wrong. He was 100% wrong. This is a paradigm shift. Everybody has a pattern; a pattern that helps to make sense of things, to know what is right and wrong and when Jesus appeared, it changed everything for Saul.

Brothers and sisters, do you remember when Christ intervened in your life? Was it when you heard a sermon at a retreat, conference, or perhaps a Sunday service? Was it when you were reading your Bible alone in your room? Did someone approach you and share the Gospel with you? Like Saul, Jesus revealed Himself to us. A transformed life is initiated by divine intervention. That’s the first element. The second element of a transformed life is that it’s shaped by conviction and humility.

POINT #2: A TRANSFORMED LIFE IS SHAPED BY CONVICTION AND HUMILITY (9:7-12)

Now we read in verse 7 that there are men travelling with Saul. These men were probably soldiers accompanying him on his mission to arrest Christians and bring them to Jerusalem, but, these men were speechless. They heard a voice but didn’t see anyone. They don’t know what just happened. All they know is something significant happened and the one they were following is on the ground and cannot see.

Verse 8 says, “Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus”. Saul got up from the ground because Jesus told him to, but when he physically opened his eyes, he could see nothing. What does that tell us? Saul’s eyes were shut this whole time. He could not even open his eyes out of fear. The one he hated, the one he was persecuting, the one whose name he wanted to erase off the face of the earth, is the living true Messiah and when he opens his eyes, he is blind.

Blindness was a sign of a covenant breaker and therefore, a curse on those who turn their back on God. Deuteronomy 28:28-29 says, “The LORD will afflict you with madness, blindness and confusion of mind. At midday you will grope about like a blind person in the dark. You will be unsuccessful in everything you do; day after day you will be oppressed and robbed, with no one to rescue you”. Blindness was a curse from God for disobeying and turning away from Him. So when he opened his eyes and saw that he was blind, this is probably what he thought. He was blind for three days, but imagine not knowing if he’d ever receive his sight again. Every time he closed and opened his eyes, he’d wonder if his sight would return and when it didn’t, it was a reminder of His disobedience and turning away from God. For three days, he didn’t eat or drink anything.

If you’re newly blind, you would feel utterly helpless. You’d need to be led around everywhere. Think of the drastic contrast here! This self-righteous pharisee who was prideful, now had to be led by the hand because he was blind walking in darkness. It must have been so overwhelming for those three days. With every moment of blindness, he’s reminded of how wrong he was. Every time he felt helpless, he is humbled. It’s not an easy thing to be shown that you are wrong. How many of us love it when people point out that we’re wrong? Nobody likes it, but when you realize you’ve been wrong about everything, and everything you’ve been living for is wrong, everything you’ve been passionate about is wrong, everything you’ve said and done is wrong... your world crumbles.

In just three words, “I am Jesus”, Saul could not rest or eat or drink. For three days, all he probably did was think through all the Scriptures and realize that it pointed to Jesus as the Messiah. It’s true! The prophecies of Scripture have been fulfilled! Jesus is the Messiah!



However, he had rejected Jesus and thinking of all the evil things he had done against Christ and His Church... it would have been convicting him. Conviction of his sins was a necessary process to bring him to a place of humility.

We see that Saul begins to pray during this time (verse 11). Now, prayer wasn't a foreign thing to Saul. He was a devoted Jew who probably prayed more than many of us do and the text doesn't tell us what he prayed, but what do you think? As conviction continued to completely uproot his entire life, he realized that he is truly blind and all he could do was to pray for understanding and repent of his sins; wrestling and acknowledging that he was wrong and that he had sinned against Jesus the Son of God by persecuting Him and His followers. It is with the conviction of his sins and a heart of humility that Jesus begins to transform Saul's life. The third element of a transformed life is that we are God's chosen instruments.

POINT #3: A TRANSFORMED LIFE IS GOD'S CHOSEN INSTRUMENT (9:13-22)

We are introduced to a disciple named Ananias. Now this isn't the Ananias we read about in chapter 5. This is a disciple living in Damascus. Jesus appears in a vision and tells Ananias beginning in verse 11, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight." Jesus is saying that Saul is praying and is ready for someone to come restore his sight. This is not just about restoring his physical sight, but also bringing understanding of truth and restoring his spiritual blindness. Jesus gave three days for Saul to wrestle and pray and as he is doing that, Jesus is at work in sending Ananias at the right time to minister to Saul.

However, Ananias has heard about Saul and how he has been harming Christians in Jerusalem and now heading to other cities to persecute all who bear the name of Jesus. This is a subtle protest against Saul. Ananias says to Jesus, "He has done so much harm and evil to YOUR holy people." In another translation it reads "YOUR saints". Saul is arresting all who call on "YOUR name". It seems like Ananias is reminding Jesus of what Saul is doing against Him. It's also like he's asking Jesus, "Do You know what You are asking?" This command seemed like suicide. Ananias' life was at stake here and so was the ministry in Damascus.

However, the Lord patiently says to Ananias in verse 15, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel". Now, Jesus doesn't have to explain Himself. He could've simply said "Go!", but Jesus reveals His plans for Saul and the first thing Jesus tells Ananias is that Saul is a chosen instrument. In the NASB translation, it says that Saul is a "chosen instrument of Mine". Jesus has put special claim on Saul, and He will use him in a special way for His special plans. Saul is a vessel for Jesus and the purpose is to proclaim Jesus' name. I like the NASB translation that says "to bear My [Jesus'] name". Saul will become Jesus' representative to the Gentile world.

If there ever was an enemy of Christ, it was Saul and yet, Jesus says He is going to use Saul to preach and proclaim Christ to others who don't know Him; to make Jesus known. To be a chosen instrument of Jesus is to bear His name. In the previous chapter, it was Philip that brought the Gospel to the Gentiles. Then Peter and John also preached the Gospel, but we know that it is Paul who is used to spread the good news of Jesus Christ to the Gentile world, carrying the name of Christ and raising Christian churches and communities wherever he went. Paul devoted his life to this purpose, but another mark of being a chosen instrument is suffering for His name. Look with me in verse 16. Jesus says, "I will show him how much he must suffer for my name". The one who caused suffering for Christ followers will now suffer for Christ. He will suffer for the name of Christ. This is NOT a punishment for what Saul had done. This is NOT payback. The fact is that when Jesus died, He died in Saul's place. Jesus paid for Saul's sins so that he would never have to suffer the penalty of his sins, but that doesn't mean we don't suffer for the sake of the Gospel and that was a part of God's plan for Saul. Listen to 2 Corinthians 11:22-28 as Paul lists some of the sufferings he endured:



²² Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I. ²³ Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. ²⁴ Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, ²⁶ I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. ²⁷ I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. ²⁸ Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.

Paul understood this suffering. In 2 Timothy 2:10 Paul wrote, "Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory." Here, apostle Paul says that his suffering is for the promotion and advancement of the Gospel. When Paul, and all Christians, are willing to suffer for the Gospel, they are demonstrating how much they value the Gospel and then it attracts others to Christ. What Paul understood very clearly was that the Lord had ordained a path of suffering for him so that through that suffering he would promote the very Gospel that he once sought to destroy. He would suffer. He would suffer a lot, but with every beating, with every imprisonment, he understood that it fit into Christ's divine plan and it was going to be used for the advancement of the Gospel. Here's a challenging question: Do we resonate with this kind of evangelism?

Ok, so, after hearing the Lord speak, Ananias went to find Saul and when he did, he placed his hands on him and listen to what he calls Saul: "Brother Saul". Let me pause here for a second. Becoming a chosen instrument of Jesus also means that you go from being an enemy of Christ to being a part of His family. Imagine the significance and importance for both Ananias and Saul to say and hear that word "Brother". Saul was probably locked in a room for three days wrestling in his thoughts and prayers. He heard nothing from the Lord except a vision that a man named Ananias will come and place his hands on him to restore his sight (verse 12) and Ananias comes and places his hand on him. How wonderful and assuring that would have been! In the midst of the agonizing three days, Saul was longing to know if Jesus had accepted him and then, Ananias says "Brother Saul". Jesus sent Ananias to be His representative to Saul and he continues by saying, "the Lord – Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here – has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit" (verse 17). Isn't that funny? Saul was on the way to Damascus to destroy all who belonged to the Way, but the Lord Jesus appeared to Saul on the way.

The laying of hands was an instrument of healing but also for Saul to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Remember when Peter and John went to Samaria and placed hands on the believers there and they receive the Spirit? This is Saul's moment of becoming a part of the family of God. "Welcome Brother!". Immediately after Ananias does this, verse 18: "something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again". This is the picture of a transformed life: Saul, who once hated Christians and wanted to harm them, now the first person he sees when his sight is restored is Ananias, a Christian. Three days ago, he would have wanted to kill him. Now, he's looking at his brother. Not only was his physical blindness restored, but now he can spiritually see. Things are different. He has changed. Transformation has occurred and Saul was baptized right away.

In Acts 22:13, Paul is recounting his conversion story and adds more detail. He recalls Ananias calling him "Brother Saul". Isn't that wonderful? But Ananias also says this:

(Acts 22:14-16) The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know His will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from His mouth. You will be His witness to all people of what you have seen and heard and now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on His name.



Saul's conversion is now complete. His life is transformed because he is a chosen instrument of Jesus and after regaining his strength and spending several days with fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, Saul began preaching and bearing the name of Jesus and we know how he was used for the advancement of the Gospel.

CONCLUSION

Let me close with these final thoughts. When we look at the story of Saul's conversion, we must ask ourselves, have you ever been converted by Christ like this? Have you ever met Jesus like this? Has the living Christ appeared to you in His Word and knocked you on your knees in humility as He says, "I am Jesus" and have you gotten up and your life is radically transformed? Saul who was on the road seeking to devour Christians, but God intervened and arrested him in His sovereign grace and that same grace is freely offered to anyone who calls upon the name of the Lord. You may not have been an evil oppressor or persecutor of the Church like Saul, but the grace that transformed Saul's life is the same grace that woke us up when we were dead in our transgressions and sins.

For the Christians here... Are we fulfilling the purpose for which God has placed us here? Have we forgotten what it is to proclaim Jesus? Have we forgotten what it is to tell others about Christ? Have we forgotten what it was like to have Jesus save us on that Damascus road? Have we forgotten how He has changed and transformed our lives? As chosen instruments, have we forgotten that He calls us to obey His plans for our lives? This is why He has converted us: that we would bear His name and proclaim Christ and we must be willing to suffer for this.

For those who are not yet a Christian... You are not outside of the sovereign grace of God. It doesn't matter how bad or blind you've been. You could've violated every rule. You could've turned your back on God, but the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ extends to the greatest of sinners. There's a line in the song, "To God Be The Glory" that says, "The vilest offender who truly believes, that moment from Jesus a pardon receives". Jesus Christ is a willing and able Saviour and He will save any and all who come to Him in repentance and in faith. He won't turn you away. Anyone who says, "I am wrong. Lord Jesus save me", He will do it. He will forgive and save you.

This is a transformed life: while we were on the road to Damascus, turning away from God, Jesus intervened and arrested us by His truth and righteousness. May we live transformed lives knowing we are called as chosen instruments of Christ.

Let's pray.