

# **"A CONVERSION FOR THE AGES"**

**Acts 9:1-19**

**Sermon for Peace Church**

**July 27, 2008**

**PURPOSE** – To enter into the amazing grace of God’s work in salvation, and respond to it in lives of service to God.

**MAIN IDEA** – In the example of Paul’s salvation (and our own), God shows us his irresistible grace, humbling us in worship, inspiring us in service.

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Let’s open our Bibles to Acts 9.

1. When Jesus met with his followers just prior to His ascension, He outlined for them a 3 STAGE growth His Kingdom: *“When the Spirit comes upon you”, He said, “you will receive power to be my witnesses – in Jerusalem, in Judea & Samaria, then to the uttermost ends of the earth.”*

As we’ve made our way through this book of Acts, we’ve witnessed that development. The Spirit first descends in power on the believers gathered in Jerusalem – and the church of Christ begins there.

Following the stoning of Stephen, believers spread out to Samaria & Judea. Chapter 8, Philip goes to Samaria; then on to the Gaza Road, meeting the Ethiopian eunuch whose conversion takes the seed of Jesus down to Africa.

Now in chapter 9, this 3<sup>rd</sup> stage of the good-news movement kicks into high gear – for God is about to grab His KEY LEADER for that project.

### *2. Read Acts 9:1-19*

3. What a DRAMATIC story of conversion! There are a number of reasons why Jesus acted so DECISIVELY in Saul’s life:

(i) One is simply that He wanted to protect his church. Saul was hell-bent on destroying this new movement of Jesus' followers – The Way, as it was called. Damascus was a strategic city for the spread of the message of Jesus – a springboard city in the Roman Empire, to the east. Paul knew this. So he was heading there to put an end to things. This time, however, Jesus was not going to allow that.

(ii) Another reason Jesus intervened was to RECRUIT GREAT TALENT for his cause of bringing the message of new life to the “ends of the earth”. Saul's the man! He's obviously focused, passionate, convicted. He was not a “sit-on-the-fence” person. He was bright, gifted. He knew the Scriptures. He was extremely educated – (Once read that he had the equivalent of 3 Ph.D.s by the age of 21). He was fluent in Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic. He studied under Gamaliel, the greatest Hebrew intellect of that day. His parents had stature & resources. He was a leading Pharisee.

Jesus determines to put ALL OF THIS ABILITY under his Lordship and FOR HIS CAUSE!

A. = Reminds one of the conversion of C.S. Lewis – one of the great intellects of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Tremendous mind. Oxford scholar & professor. Great communicator. Deep thinker. Knows history & literature.

Jesus takes this ability & training, puts it under his Lordship – and now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century his writings are being read more than ever!

4. But the purpose for Saul's conversion that I'd like to focus on this morning is one that he himself articulates in a later letter to his young partner, Timothy (outline) – 1 Timothy 1:15-17

*Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst. But for that VERY REASON I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.*

Let me TEASE out 3 purposes that Paul sees in his dramatic conversion, from which to look at it more closely:

(i) He says, “God saved ME, the worst of sinners, to show YOU His UNLIMITED PATIENCE.

... = “Don't ever think that God's given up on you.

- If you're tempted to think a situation is hopeless, beyond God's ability to work ... hello! Remember me! God is UNLIMITED in patience & power. ... Don't lose heart.

- (ii) He also sees his conversion as an EXAMPLE for those who would believe. In it, we can recognize DYNAMICS of our own salvation. – what I means truly means to be saved.
- (iii) 3<sup>rd</sup>, for both his salvation & yours, believer, may it bring to the King eternal & immortal honor and glory forever.

## II. WHO

### 1. To begin – WHO DOES GOD SAVE? He saves His ENEMIES!

Paul's conversion would be like us hearing that Osama bin Laden had become a Christian & was now a flaming evangelist for Jesus in the Middle East Muslim world!

- Imagine hearing that news!

I think we'd have the same reaction as Ananias in our story – initial skepticism!

Verse 1 – Like Bin Laden, Saul is described as a man “breathing murderous threats .... him, against the Lord's disciples”.

- Persecution was the air he breathed. He lived for the cause of suppressing & exterminating Christians. He had been at Stephen's murder and gave it a thumbs up! In his zeal for his religion, this was his life cause!

THAT'S WHO GOD SAVES – a self-righteous, murderous enemy - Wow!

- (i) Did you know that the Bible calls ALL OF US, by nature – before we are reconciled through Jesus, ENEMIES OF GOD?

Romans 5:10 – *Since we've been justified by the blood of Jesus, how much more will we be saved from God's wrath through him. For if, WHEN WE WERE GOD'S ENEMIES, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life.*

- The argument of that verse is that, when God begins a work of salvation IN ANY OF US, we are first his enemies. If he begins to transform us from that condition, how much more certain should we be that that salvation will continue through our life and into the next!

- WE ALL START OUT AS ENEMIES OF GOD! (whether you feel it or not, believe it or not. The Bible declares it.)

A. Our enmity is likely not as OVERT & EXTREME an enemy as Saul's – especially if you've been raised going to church. But, from God's perspective, if you're not passionately FOR Him ... You're against him.

INDIFFERENCE is ENMITY before Him. (It's hate disguised.)

I.e. – if you're LUKEWARM, Jesus spits you out – Rev. 3

An apathetic, cold heart to God is a slap in His face – because His is a warm, inviting heart.

Never lose heart with God because, as Paul's example makes clear to us, when He began with ANY OF US, we were His enemies!

## II. HOW

1. On top of that, never lose hope because of HOW POWERFULLY His salvation comes.

BOOM! Paul is knocked down by a sudden flash of light from heaven!

(i) Flannery O'Connor comments: *"I reckon the Lord knew that the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his high horse!"*

A. Some speculate that he was struck by lightning ... others that he had an epileptic fit – to which Spurgeon remarked: *"O blessed epilepsy! Would that every man in London could have epilepsy like that!"*

But it wasn't epilepsy or lightning. Paul was introduced to Jesus, the Light of the world.

Spiritually, he was being taken out of a pitch black cellar into the sunshine on a bright, clear day. Like the SUN in our solar system, Jesus is the source of all LIFE. He is light & warmth. He is TRUTH & LOVE.

A. Saul is knocked down by this light & asks, "Who are you?"

a. *"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting!"*

We never lose heart for God because Jesus is the Light of the world.

Yes, clouds may cover it & storms come – but the sun is still there – 110X the size of earth, burning at 11,000 degrees Fahrenheit, a raging inferno of life for us!

(ii) WHENEVER HE SAVES ANYBODY, God flexes his power to reveal Jesus. ... "Who are you, Lord?"

Philip Yancey wrote a book titled, “The Jesus I Never Knew”. His salvation too involved seeing Jesus for Who he is. He read the gospels and wrote, *“The Jesus I found there bore little resemblance to the Mister Rogers figure I had met in Sunday school. For one thing, he was far less tame (tell Saul about that!). In my prior image, I realized, Jesus’ personality matched that of a Star Trek Vulcan: he remained calm, cool, and collected as he strode like a robot among excitable human beings on spaceship earth. But that is not what I found in the gospels. Other people affected Jesus deeply – obstinacy frustrated him, self-righteousness infuriated him, simple faith thrilled him. Indeed, he seemed more emotional and spontaneous than the average person, not less - More passionate, not less. There are two words that no one could apply to the Jesus of the gospels: boring & predictable. How is it, then, that the church has tamed such a character – has, in Dorothy Sayers’ words, ‘very efficiently pared the claws of the Lion of Judah, certifying Him as a fitting household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies?’”.*

... “Who are you Lord” ...When we’re saved, and as we’re GROWING in salvation, we SEE JESUS FOR WHO HE IS.

## 2. That light initially BLINDS US!

*“For 3 days Paul was blind (v. 9), and in those days he did not eat or drink anything.”*

(i) This was for Paul a time of DEEP PERSONAL CHANGE. He did not simply get a vision of Jesus, all excited & thankful, and then “go on in life”. NO! Paul’s entire system of thinking is changed.

A. Paul undergoes what they term, in science, a Copernician Revolution – named after Nicolaus Copernicus (1500 AD). Prior to his work, it was largely taught that the universe rotated around the earth – so we lived in a GEOCENTRIC universe. Then came Copernicus, and he proved that the solar system rotated around the SUN. Earth was not the center of things; the SUN is! We live in a HELIOCENTRIC universe!

= So science changed & human thinking changed ... That’s the change Paul went through on a personal level.

IT’S A CHANGE TRUE SALVATION BRINGS TO EVERYONE

(ii) Prior to meeting Jesus, Paul had built his system of thought around himself = what he was to do for God and how good he was at it. He was raised in church, from a leading family. He was a Hebrew of Hebrews. Zealous – had the SS pins; served God with fire – even persecuting the church.

But, he writes in Philippians 3, *“Whatever was to my profit, I now consider loss for the sake of Christ ... I consider those testaments to my goodness RUBBISH! – 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 is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from god and is by faith. I want to KNOW CHRIST.”*

When Paul met Christ, he realized that he had been all focused on being a planet, with all its satellites orbiting around him. Then he was made to face the sun and begin a life of orbiting around His will.

A. Paul’s salvation makes clear to all of us that the issue of life is not being good, it is BEING GOD’S in Jesus.

Prior to meeting Jesus, we all are inclined to measure ourselves by our own standards of goodness. We compare. We pat ourselves on the back. We try to arrange others in our world to orbit around us in such a way to affirm how good we are.

BEING GOD’S is to PURGE OURSELVES (as Paul’s fast represents) of all that way of thinking and learning to KNOW JESUS in order to build a life that ORBITS AROUND HIM!

- Because that is reality. This is a helio-centric solar system!

(iii) In salvation, Paul’s worldview is completely transformed!

Using the first person, Major Ian Thomas describes it this way: *On the Damascus road, something happened. There, in the blinding flash of a moment, I looked into the face of a man, and I saw God. There I found that he whom I thought to be nothing was everything, and I, whom I thought to be everything, was nothing. In that moment I came to a tremendous reversal of all the values of my life. Later I learned that I who was nothing, could be filled with him who was everything; and that would make my life something.*

A. Paul’s salvation is an example to us. And that purging of self (ongoing repentance) happens to EVERYONE who is truly saved, whether you’re raised in church or not.

3. Repentance & faith then lead to a LIFE OF SERVICE.

As we learn to ORBIT our lives around Jesus and His will, then he directs us:

*“Get up and go into the city and you will be told what you must do.” (v. 6)*

- Which Paul does

#### 4. And one last point about this SALVATION FOR THE AGES!

Do note that EVERYTHING ABOUT IT COMES FROM GOD!

(i) Saul was not searching for the Lord. He was not searching for salvation.

The Lord did not appear to him and plead, “Oh Saul, won’t you please trust in me as your Savior. I have done everything I can do to make that possible. Now the rest is up to you. It’s your decision. I can’t force your will.”

And God did not choose Saul because he was worthy of God’ grace. He was a Christ-hater!

(ii) ALL of salvation, from beginning to end, is GOD’S WORK.

The Bible makes it clear that if depended on anything in us, no one would be saved. *“There is none that does good; none that seeks after God” – Rom. 3.*

a. So even our seeking is a work of God in us. Like the hymnwriter states:

*I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew: He moved my heart to seek Him, seeking me. It was not I that found, O Savior true; No, I was found of Thee.*

THAT IS THE GOD OF SALVATION, converting self-righteous sinners to a Jesus-centered life.

To Him be honor and glory forever!

He is the ALMIGHTY GOD – who saves even the worst of sinners, even you and me.

If God can do so great a work in Saul and you & I, we never lose hope in him!

#### **V. CONCLUSION**

And we serve Him, like Ananias does courageously.

He shows us the role of the Church in the salvation of others (Let’s note that to finish):

(i) Ananias’ life already ORBITS around Jesus and in that, the Lord calls him to minister to Saul – to lay hands on him and restore his sight.

That’s how we serve God in the lives of others.

A. Ananias is afraid, but he goes. I’d be nervous to go meet Osama bin Laden in private.

He goes and here’s what he does (This is church!):

1. He LAYS HANDS ON HIM. He touches him:
  - In the nursery
  - In Sunday school
  - In the sanctuary
  
2. He CONFIRMS THE VISION Jesus gave him.
  - Paul may have thought he was going nuts – until Ananias comes to say, “Yes, Paul, that was Jesus you met!”
  - “That’s Jesus calling”, we help one another to understand.
  
3. He PRAYS FOR HIM.
  - For healing to see
  - Removing scales of pride & prejudice
  
4. He DIRECTS HIM IN HIS CALLING
  - That’s church! – *“Carry my name before the Gentiles & their kings and before the people of Israel. Suffer in love for Jesus name’s sake.”*
  
5. And He BAPTIZES HIM IN THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT

In response to SO GREAT A SALVATION as Paul’s, as your own, we never lose heart with God – nothing is hopeless ... and WE SERVE HIM, as part of the church, to express glory & honor ... as our lives ORBIT AROUND JESUS.

Then, as Ian Thomas puts it, “we who are nothing can be filled with Him who is everything, making our lives something.”

AMEN