

Alderwood Community Church
March 21, 2010

A Radically Transformed Life
 Acts 9:1-19

Big Idea: Our Salvation and Calling are possible only through the Sovereign Grace of God!

Intro: At a young age, John Newton went to sea. Like most sailors of his day, he lived a life of rebellion and debauchery. For several years, he worked on slave ships, capturing slaves for sale to the plantations of the New World. So low did he sink that at one point he became a slave himself, captive of another slave trader. Eventually, he became the captain of his own slave ship. The combination of a frightening storm at sea, coupled with his reading of Thomas à Kempis's classic *Imitation of Christ*, planted the seeds that resulted in his conversion. He went on to become a leader in the evangelical movement in eighteenth-century England, along with such men as John and Charles Wesley, George Whitefield, and William Wilberforce. On his tombstone is inscribed the following epitaph, written by Newton himself: "John Newton, clerk, once an infidel and Libertine, a servant of slavers in Africa, was, by the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the Faith he had long labored to destroy" When he penned the beloved hymn "Amazing Grace," he knew firsthand the truths it proclaimed.

Mel Trotter was a barber by profession and a drunkard by perversion. So debauched had he become that when his young daughter died, he stole the shoes she was to be buried in and pawned them for money to buy more drinks. One night he staggered into the Pacific Garden Mission in Chicago and was marvelously saved. Burdened for the men of skid row, he opened a rescue mission in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He went on to found more than sixty more missions and became supervisor of a chain of them stretching from Boston to San Francisco.

Church history is filled with accounts such as these, which highlight the incredible power of the gospel to transform sinners. But no transformation is as remarkable, or has had such far-reaching implications for history, as the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. So significant an event was his conversion that Scripture records it no less than three times (Acts 22:1–16; 26:4–18).

It is fitting that such a unique individual would have a unique conversion. Saul was by birth a Jew, by citizenship a Roman, by education a Greek, and purely by the grace of God a Christian (Phil. 3:4–9). He was a missionary, theologian, evangelist, pastor, organizer, leader, thinker, fighter for truth, and lover of souls. Never has a more godly man lived on this earth, except our Lord Himself.

While Paul's conversion is supernatural with the flash of light and a personal visit by the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ, it is clear from the rest of the New Testament that other features of Saul's conversion and commissioning are applicable to us today. For we too can (and must) experience a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, surrender to him in penitence and faith, and receive his summons to service.

Read Text: Acts 9:1-19

1. The Cause of Saul's Conversion. (9:1-9)

If we ask what caused Saul's conversion, only one answer is possible. What stands out from the narrative is The sovereign grace of God through Jesus Christ. Saul did not 'decide for Christ', as we might say. On the contrary, he was persecuting Christ. It was rather Christ who decided for him and intervened in his life. The evidence for this is indisputable.

A. Consider Saul's state of mind. (1-2)

Luke has already mentioned him three times, and each time as a bitter opponent of Christ and his church. He tells us that at Stephen's martyrdom 'the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul' (7:58), that 'Saul was there, giving approval to his death' (8:1), and that then 'Saul began to destroy the church' (8:3), making a house-to-house search for Christians, dragging men and women off to prison. Now Luke resumes Saul's story by saying that he *was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples* (9:1). He had not changed since Stephen's death; he was still in the same mental condition of hatred and hostility.

Saul had evidently hoped to capture the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem, in order to destroy them there (8:3). But some had escaped his net and fled to Damascus, where several synagogues served a large Jewish colony. Damascus was the capital of Syria located about 133 miles to the north of Jerusalem. Mention of Damascus shows that Christianity had spread rapidly. This is the first city outside the land of Israel to be noted as having Christians.

Determined to pursue these fugitive disciples to foreign cities, Saul persuaded the high priest to sanction it (9:1b-2) by giving him extradition orders. Paul then left Jerusalem, armed with written authority to the Damascus synagogues that, *if he found any there who belonged to the Way whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem* (2).

Some of the language Luke uses to describe Saul in his pre-conversion state seems deliberately to portray him as 'a wild and ferocious beast'. The verb *lymainomai*, whose only New Testament occurrence is in 8:3 of Saul's 'destroying' the church, is used in Psalm 80:13 (LXX) of wild boars devastating a vineyard; and it especially refers to 'the ravaging of a body by a wild beast'. A little later the Damascus Christians depicted him as having 'caused havoc in Jerusalem' (21), where the verb is *portheō* can be translated 'mauled'. Saul's 'breathing out murderous threats' (1) was 'an allusion to the panting or snorting of wild beasts'.

This, then, was the man (more wild animal than human being) who in a few days' time would be a converted and baptized Christian. But he was in no mood to consider the claims of Christ. His heart was filled with hatred and his mind was poisoned by prejudice. In his own language later, a 'raging fury' obsessed him (26:11, RSV).

"I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth.¹⁰ And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them.¹¹ Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force

them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them.” Acts 26:9-11

Why was Saul so bent on destroying the Church?

(1) Saul was a monotheistic Jew. Christians were claiming that Jesus was God. He would have regarded that as polytheism. If Jesus is God and if Jehovah is God, there must be two gods at least. Christianity would have been incompatible with Judaism.

(2) There is another reason that Saul was hostile to Christianity. Christians claimed not only that Jesus was the Son of God, but that he also had proved this by his resurrection from the dead. If Christianity was wrong, as Paul believed it was, then Jesus had not risen from the dead and was not God. Those who were going about saying that Jesus had been raised from the dead and therefore was God were obviously and consciously trying to deceive the Jewish community. So it was not just a matter of Christianity being wrong. Rather, Christianity was a damnable deceit. It was leading people away from the truth. (Boice)

Vrs. 2 “*any who belonged to the Way*” ‘The Way’ was the oldest designation of the Christian church for itself. It can be explained from two key verses: Matt. 7:14 where Jesus said, “*Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.*” as the Way to salvation. Probably John. 14:6 was most influential of all, for here Christ claims “*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*”

B. Consider Luke’s narrative of what happened. (3-9)

We will draw from all three accounts in the Acts. Saul and his escort (we are not told who they were) had nearly completed their journey of about 150 miles. It would have taken them approximately a week. When they approached Damascus, a beautiful oasis surrounded by desert, at about noon (22:6), suddenly it happened: *a light from heaven flashed around him* (3), brighter than the midday sun (26:13). It was such an overwhelming experience that it both blinded him (8–9) and knocked him over. *He fell to the ground* (4), ‘prostrate at the feet of his conqueror’. Then *a voice* addressed him personally and directly (in Aramaic, 26:14): ‘*Saul, Saul why do you persecute me?*’ And, in answer to Saul’s enquiry about the speaker’s identity, the voice continued: ‘*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting*’ (5). At once Saul must have grasped, from the extraordinary way in which Jesus identified with his followers, so that to persecute them was to persecute him, that Jesus was alive and his claims were true. So he promptly obeyed the order *get up and go into the city* (6), Where further instructions would be given him. Meanwhile, *the men travelling with Saul stood there speechless, for they heard the sound, but they did not see anyone* (7), nor did they understand the invisible speaker’s words (22:9). Nevertheless, *they led him by the hand into Damascus* (8). He who had expected to enter Damascus as a self-confident opponent of Christ, was actually led into it, a humbled and blinded captive of the very Christ he had opposed. There could be no misunderstanding what had happened. The risen Lord had appeared to Saul. It was not a subjective vision or dream; it was an objective appearance of the resurrected and now-glorified Jesus Christ. The light he saw was the glory of Christ, and the voice he heard was the voice of Christ. Christ had interrupted his headlong career of persecution and had turned him round to face in the opposite direction.

Two observations:

1. The connection between persecuting the followers of Christ (*the Way*) and Christ himself.
2. God in his Sovereign grace always initiates salvation.

“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him...” John 6:44

“For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness’, made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” 2 Corinthians 4:6

C. Consider Paul’s interpretation of this event.

The third piece of evidence which attributes Saul’s conversion to God’s grace is the apostle’s own later references to the event. He never mentioned his conversion without making this clear.

“But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased¹⁶ to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles..” Galatians 1:15-16

God took the initiative according to his own will and pleasure.

“Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.” Philippians 3:12

Paul said that Christ ‘took hold of’ him, or ‘seized’ him, the verb *katalambanō* perhaps even suggesting that Christ ‘arrested’ him before he had the chance to arrest any Christians in Damascus’

“Even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. And yet I was shown mercy, because I acted ignorantly in unbelief; and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus. It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. And yet for this reason I found mercy, in order that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience, as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life.” 1 Timothy 1:12-16

In the last chapters of his autobiography, C. S. Lewis uses a number of metaphors to describe God’s relentless pursuit of him. He likens him to ‘the great Angler’ playing his fish, to a cat chasing a mouse, to a pack of hounds closing in on a fox, and finally to the divine chess player maneuvering him into the most disadvantageous positions until in the end he concedes ‘checkmate’.

The Christ who appeared to him and spoke to him did not crush him. He humbled him, so that he fell to the ground, but he did not violate his personality. He did not demean Saul into a robot or compel him to perform certain actions in a kind of hypnotic trance. On the contrary, Jesus put to him a probing question, ‘Why do you persecute me?’ He thus appealed to his reason

and conscience, in order to bring into his consciousness the folly and evil of what he was doing. Jesus then told him to get up and go into the city, where he would be told what to do next. And Saul was not so overwhelmed by the vision and the voice as to be deprived of speech and unable to reply. No, he answered Christ's question with two counter-questions: first, 'Who are you, Lord?' (5) and secondly, 'What shall I do, Lord?' (22:10). His response was rational, conscientious and free.

To sum up, the cause of Saul's conversion was grace, the sovereign grace of God. But sovereign grace is gradual grace and gentle grace. He revealed himself to him by the light and the voice, not in order to overwhelm him, but in such a way as to enable him to make a free response. Divine grace does not trample on human personality. Rather the reverse, for it enables human beings to be truly human. It is sin which imprisons; it is grace which liberates. The grace of God so frees us from the bondage of our pride, prejudice and self-centeredness, as to enable us to repent and believe. One can but magnify the grace of God that he should have had mercy on such a rabid bigot as Saul of Tarsus, and indeed on such proud, rebellious and wayward creatures as ourselves. (Stott)

2. The Consequences of Saul's Conversion. (9:10-19)

We now turn from the causes to the consequences of Saul's conversion. It is incredible to see the radical transformation of his attitudes and character which immediately began to be apparent, and especially of his relationships to God, to the Christian church and to the unbelieving world.

A. Saul had a new reverence for God. (9-12)

Ananias, instructed to go and minister to the new convert, was told '*for he is praying*' (11). Three days had elapsed since his encounter on the road with the risen Lord, during which he *did not eat or drink anything* (9). Presumably, then, he spent those days in fasting and praying. It is not that Saul had never prayed or fasted before, after all, he was a devout Jew, but the difference now is that he has a new relationship having been reconciled to God through the death of Jesus Christ. He now enjoyed a new and immediate access to the Father through Christ.

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"
2 Corinthians 5:17

What did Paul pray? We can guess that he prayed for the forgiveness of all his sins, especially his self-righteousness and his cruel persecution of Jesus through his followers; for wisdom to know what God wanted him to do now; and for power to exercise the ministry he was given to be an minister to the Gentiles.

B. Saul had a new relationship with the church. (13-19)

Ananias 'one of the forgotten heroes of the Christian church'. At first, however, when told to minister to Saul, Ananias balked. He was very reluctant to go to Saul. It would be suicidal. For he had *heard many reports about this man and all the harm* he had done to Jesus' people in

Jerusalem (13). Ananias also knew that Saul had come to Damascus *with authority from the chief priests to arrest all believers* (14). But Jesus repeated his command ‘Go!’ and added that Saul was his *chosen instrument to carry his name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel* (15)—a ministry which would involve him in much suffering for the sake of the same name (16).

So Ananias went to *Straight Street* (11), which is still Damascus’ main east-west thoroughfare, and to the house of Judas, indeed to the very room where Saul was. There he placed his hands on him (17), perhaps to identify with him as he prayed for the healing of his blindness and for the fullness of the Spirit to empower him for his ministry. Ananias addressed him as ‘Brother Saul’ or ‘Saul, my brother’. They may well have been the first words which Saul heard from Christian lips after his conversion, and they were words of welcome into the fellowship of the believers. The arch-enemy of the church was welcomed as a brother! Ananias explained to Saul how the same Jesus, who had appeared to him on the road, had sent him to him so that he might both recover his sight *and be filled with the Holy Spirit* (17). Immediately *something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again*. After this he was baptized (18), and was received visibly and publicly into the community of Jesus. The next thing we are told is that Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus (19b). He knew that he now belonged to the very company which he had previously been trying to destroy.

C. Saul had a new responsibility to the world. (15)

“This man is My chosen instrument to carry My name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.” (15)

This verse is a good summary of Paul’s life and ministry. It was all of grace, for he did not choose God; it was God who chose him. This calling of Paul to be an Apostle to the Gentiles was certainly a sovereign selection by God, and Paul knew that. In Galatians 1:1 Paul wrote, *“Paul, an apostle- not sent from men, nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead”*

“But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, ¹⁷ delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you ¹⁸ to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.” Acts 26:16-18

Vrs. 16 *“I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”*

Paul’s suffering would begin in just a few days and would never end until an ax severed his head from his body.

²⁴ *Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one.* ²⁵ *Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea;* ²⁶ *on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from*

my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; ²⁷ in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.” 2 Cor. 11:24-27

Conclusion: Some practical lessons:

1. Salvation has always been and will always be an act of God’s Sovereign Grace.
2. No one, no matter how antagonistic to the Gospel is beyond the scope of God’s grace.
3. God can use even the most obscure saint.

Were it not for the conversion of Saul, we would never have heard of Ananias; and yet Ananias had an important part to play in the ongoing work of the church. Behind many well-known servants of God are lesser-known believers who have influenced them. God keeps the books and will see to it that each servant will get a just reward. The important thing is not fame but faithfulness (1 Cor. 4:1–5).