

"Paul's Conversion"

Acts 9:1-22

Baxter Exum (#1000)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
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Four Lakes Church of Christ



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Introduction:

This morning, I would like to ask that we look together at one of the most well-known characters in the New Testament. I am referring to the apostle Paul, and in just a few moments we will be looking together at Paul's conversion—in the account that is found in Acts 9. In our pew Bibles, the passage is found starting on page 1716.

»PPT»

In Romans 12:15, the Bible tells us that we are to *"rejoice with those who rejoice,"* and so as we begin I want to let you know that this morning's lesson has a very special meaning to me personally. Perhaps you have noticed the front of the bulletin this morning [on page 8 of this document]. Some of you know that I number my sermons. At my dad's suggestion, I have been doing this since my very first lesson at the age of 12, and I just want to let you know that this morning's lesson is sermon #1000. When you look at the bulletin, you will notice that Sermon #1 was delivered at the Crystal Lake Church of Christ on June 20, 1984. At that point I had been a Christian for about three months, and you might notice that the lesson appears to be about 30 seconds long! Perhaps, then, you would have liked #1 better than #1000, but nevertheless, I am thankful for the opportunity to be preaching here in Madison and to revisit this very important topic nearly 25 years later.

The apostle Paul continues to be one of the most interesting characters in the New Testament. And one of the challenges in learning about Paul is that Paul never wrote an autobiography. In other words, the information is scattered all throughout the New Testament. And there is no biography, there is no neat little chronological outline, because once Paul became a Christian, he no longer wanted to talk about himself, but the only one he ever wanted to talk about was the Lord Jesus Christ!

And yet from piecing together what we do know from the Bible, we know that Paul was born as a Roman citizen. We know that he came from Tarsus—the capital of a Roman province about 500 miles north of Jerusalem—a center of learning and the home of a major university (very similar to Madison, Wisconsin). We know that Paul's father was a Pharisee, and that Paul continued in that tradition. The Pharisees were the religious conservatives of his time. We also know that Paul was brilliant, he was highly educated, and he studied under one of the most respected teachers in all of Judaism, a man by the name of Gamaliel. In Philippians 3, Paul would later say that he was, *"...circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a*

persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless."

In the book of **Galatians**, Paul would later say that, ***"...I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions."*** Later in the book of **Acts**, Paul would explain to King Agrippa, ***"So then, I thought to myself that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And this is just what I did in Jerusalem; not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them. And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme; and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities."***

The first time we read about Paul in the New Testament comes at the end of **Acts 7** at the execution of a gospel preacher by the name of Stephen. After Stephen accuses the Jews of having murdered Jesus, the Bible says (starting in **Acts 7:58**), ***"When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul."*** The account continues into the next chapter, because starting with **Acts 8:1**, the Bible says that, ***"Saul was in hearty agreement with putting [Stephen] to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison."***

Thinking that he was offering service to God, therefore, Paul was motivated by the example of Godly people from the Old Testament—men like Elijah who destroyed the prophets of Baal—men like Gideon who took a leadership role in killing the enemies of God. It is interesting that Jesus predicted this in **John 16:2-3**, where Jesus warned His disciples, ***"They will make you outcasts from the synagogue, but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God. These things they will do because they have not known the Father or Me."*** That was Paul! And with that, we come to **Acts 9**. With Paul at the top of his career, with Paul being blinded by hatred and unbelief, we come to **Acts 9:1-22**...

- ¹ ***Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest,***
- ² ***and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.***
- ³ ***As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him;***
- ⁴ ***and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"***

- ⁵ *And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting,*
- ⁶ *but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do."*
- ⁷ *The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one.*
- ⁸ *Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus.*
- ⁹ *And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.*
- ¹⁰ *Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord."*
- ¹¹ *And the Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying,*
- ¹² *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."*
- ¹³ *But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem;*
- ¹⁴ *and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name."*
- ¹⁵ *But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel;*
- ¹⁶ *for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake."*
- ¹⁷ *So Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."*
- ¹⁸ *And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized;*
- ¹⁹ *and he took food and was strengthened. Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus,*
- ²⁰ *and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."*
- ²¹ *All those hearing him continued to be amazed, and were saying, "Is this not he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and who had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?"*
- ²² *But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Christ.*

This morning, as we think about Paul's conversion, and as we think about Paul's blindness, I would like to just briefly point out a number of things that this particular blind man was able to see; because, in his blindness, Paul was able to see things that he had never seen before.

I. **For example, we notice right away that even in his physical blindness, PAUL WAS ABLE TO VERY CLEARLY SEE THAT JESUS WAS, IN FACT, THE CHRIST, THE SON OF THE LIVING GOD.** **»PPT»**

In the opening verses of **Acts 9**, we find that Paul is on his way to Damascus, but as he travels along, he is knocked down to the ground by a bright light. The account in **Acts 26** tells us that this happened in the middle of the day and that the light from heaven was, *"...brighter than the sun."* We understand why Paul would go on to write later (in **1 Timothy 6**) that God, *"...is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see."* Paul knew this from experience!

As Paul is laying there blind on the ground, he wanted a name—Paul wanted to know who was speaking, and the voice that spoke the world into existence said, *"I am Jesus whom you are persecuting."* At that moment, Paul's whole world was completely turned upside down. At that moment, he understood that the Law was gone. At that moment, he understood that Gamaliel (his respected teacher) was wrong. At that moment, he understood that the temple was no longer necessary. At that moment, he understood that his heritage as a Pharisee from the tribe of Benjamin meant nothing. At that moment, he understood that all of his education had been pointing him in the wrong direction. At that moment, he understood that all of his zeal and righteous anger had been completely misdirected. At that moment, he understood that all of his plans for the future were totally wrong—wrong in every way. And we know this because Paul did not argue. Paul did argue because he now understood that Jesus was the Messiah. Paul now understood that the testimony of those Christians he had persecuted was true and that he had actually been fighting with God. He understood that what Stephen had said before his death was true. Those words were ringing in his ears, *"You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it"* (**Acts 7:51-53**). Stephen was right! Jesus was the Righteous One.

And as Paul sat there in his blindness over the next three days, as an expert in the Law, we can know for certain that Paul would have thought back to God's promise through Moses in **Deuteronomy 28:28-29**, the promise that if God's people ever turned away, *"The LORD will smite you with madness and with blindness and with bewilderment of heart; and you will grope at noon, as the blind man gropes in darkness...."* Paul now understood that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the Living God. We know this for a fact, because of what happens down in **verse 20**, *"...and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God,'"* and again (in **verse 22**) where we find that, *"Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Christ."* In his blindness, Paul was able to see that Jesus is the Christ.

II. As we look back at Acts 9, we notice something else, and that is: Even in his blindness, PAUL WAS ABLE TO SEE THAT JESUS AND THE CHURCH ARE ONE. »PPT»

Back up in verses 1-2, we find that Paul had letters from the high priest—letters giving him permission to arrest anyone, “...*belonging to the Way, both men and women*,” so that, “*he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.*” He was looking for members of the church. According to Acts 8:3, Paul was, “...*ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.*” Paul was persecuting the church. But in Acts 9:4, Jesus said, “*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?*” And again in verse 5, “*I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.*”

And here again, Paul did not argue. Paul never said, “**Oh no, Jesus, I have nothing against you—it’s the church I have a problem with.**” Paul never said that, because he now understood that Jesus and the church are one and the same. Jesus and the church cannot be separated.

This is an idea that we need to be reminded of, even today. Sometimes we run across people who claim to love Jesus but want nothing to do with the church. And yet years later, Paul would go on to write about the church in Ephesians 1:23, “*which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.*” The church is the body of Christ, which makes Jesus the head of the church.

Today, then, if we love Jesus, we will also love the church. If we love Jesus, then we will also love each other. If we love Jesus, then we will sacrifice for the church. If we love Jesus, then we will speak well of the church. If we love Jesus, then we will encourage one another in the church. Even though he was blind, then, the apostle Paul understood that Jesus and the church were one.

III. As we go back again to Acts 9, we see something else that Paul saw when he was blind, and that is: EVEN WHEN BLIND, PAUL VERY CLEARLY SAW THAT HE WAS A SINNER. »PPT»

Some have suggested that Paul was saved on the road to Damascus, and yet as we look at his behavior, we discover that he does not act like a saved person. There is no rejoicing, there is no singing, there is no praise—but in his blindness (according to verse 9), Paul reacts with three days of prayer and fasting. In other words, Paul finally realizes that he is a sinful person.

It was during this time that Paul came to understand what he would write later in 1 Timothy 1, that he was the “*foremost*” of all sinners. He came to understand that he was a, “...*blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor.*” And we notice here that Paul did not spend any time justifying his behavior. We have no record of Paul trying to convince God that he had simply been misunderstood. Paul never said, “**No, God, you just quoted me out of context.**” Paul never said that. But Paul came to understand that he was a sinful person.

You know, it is possible to be a sinful person while living with a good conscience. In **Acts 23:1**, Paul made his defense before the Jewish Council, and he said, ***“Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day.”*** But when it came to God, Paul made no such defense. Paul was zealous, he was energetic, but his zeal was not in accordance with knowledge. We have no record of Paul ever blaming his teacher. As far as we know, Paul never said, ***“But God, Gamaliel said so and so.”*** And yet these are all excuses that we hear all the time. Paul, though, made no excuses, but he spent three days in prayer and fasting. Paul understood what he would write later in **Romans 3:23** that ***“...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”*** Oh, that we would all look at our sins in the same way! When Paul was blind, he saw himself clearly for the very first time.

IV. As we come to the end of our lesson for this morning, there is something else that Paul saw as a blind man, and that is: PAUL SAW THAT HE NEEDED TO DO SOMETHING. »PPT»

And again, he was not saved the instant he believed in Jesus, he was not saved the moment he saw that he was a sinner, he was not saved when he realized the importance of the church, but even after all of these things, and even after three days of prayer and fasting, Paul was told that he had to do something. In fact, in **verse 6**, the Lord Himself said, ***“...but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do.”***

From Paul's later account in **Acts 22**, once Ananias met Paul after those three days of prayer and fasting, Ananias said (in **Acts 22:16**), ***“Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.”*** This was something that Paul had to do. It was something that he ***“must”*** do. Paul was to call on the name of the Lord by being immersed in water for the forgiveness of his sins. After believing in Jesus and after three days of prayer and fasting, Paul still had sins that needed to be washed away.

And from this point on, Paul was different. As he would write later in **2 Corinthians 5:17**, ***“Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.”*** From this point on, the apostle Paul never looks back.

Conclusion:

As we think about Paul's conversion, ***we see how important it is to be open and obedient to the word of God.*** No matter who we are, and no matter how long we think we have served God, we need to accept (like Paul) that we can always learn more. It is so interesting that Paul did not really see these things until he was blind.

- As a blind man, Paul saw that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God.
- As a blind man, Paul saw that Jesus and the church are one and the same.
- As a blind man, Paul saw very clearly that he was a sinner.

- And as a blind man, Paul saw that he needed to do something—he needed to call on the name of the Lord by allowing himself to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of sins.

As a congregation of God's people, we would remind each other and we would remind the world: Do not wait to be blinded to see what Paul saw. We would encourage all people to do what God commands—and do it right now. If you are already a Christian and you are facing some challenge that we need to pray about as a congregation, we would ask that you take a card from the pew in front of you and write it down—bring it to the front as we sing the next song. If you are facing some kind of challenge that seems to be overwhelming, let's pray about that together. If you have slipped up in sin and need the prayers of the church, if you need to make things right, we can pray about that right now—let's not put it off.

But maybe you are like the apostle Paul. Maybe you are not really doing God's will, and maybe you have finally **"seen the light,"** so to speak. The Bible teaches that all people must acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God, we must turn away from sin, and we must allow ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins. In the words of Ananias, ***"Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name."*** If you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know by coming to the front as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org

Paul's Conversion

Acts 9:1-19

Acts 22:16

#1
BTE 100%

Tonight let's take a look at Paul's conversion. Let's look at Acts 9. Would you please turn with me to Acts 9:1-19.

We remember that Paul was very heavily persecuting the church. He would bring the Christians bound to Jerusalem and we know that he consented to Stephen's death.

I'll be reading Acts 9 starting with verse 1. READ

There are many great lessons we can learn from this ^{story} passage one of the greatest is that we must be baptized as we see in Acts 22:16 it says: READ.

If there is anyone here tonight who has not been baptized and would like to be baptized, please come forward as we stand and sing.

June 20, 1984 CLCC