



Acts: The Church Unleashed: Session 7

Acts 9:1-25

INTRODUCTION

We have all heard stories where men or women who were on one path but then something changed and their lives were never the same. Think about how there have been people that have been the most outspoken critics of Christianity and then experienced a change. One of the most notables is Lee Strobel who investigated Christianity as a practicing atheist and now serves as an outspoken apologist. (<https://faithit.com/lee-strobel-testimony-the-case-for-christ/>)

Does anyone have a personal testimony of where you were going down one path in life and then God radically changed your direction?

When you hear a testimony of radical life change, why are we drawn to these types of testimonies?

When you understand the power of the gospel, why is every conversion, young or old, a story of radical life change?

Transition: In this session, we will encounter Saul, later known as Paul, colliding with God on the road to Damascus. More precisely, it was “the God who sends” who collided with Paul, and this Pharisee’s life was never the same. Paul’s story reminds us how God can transform even the hardest of hearts and what it looks like to become a converted, called messenger of the God who sends us on mission with His Son.

UNDERSTANDING

1. Saul is confronted by the Savior he opposes. Acts 9:1-9

Have a volunteer to read Acts 9:1-9

Now Saul was still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. He went to the high priest ² and requested letters from him to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any men or women who belonged to the Way, he might bring them as prisoners to Jerusalem. ³ As he traveled and was nearing Damascus, a light from heaven suddenly

flashed around him. ⁴ Falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”

⁵ “Who are you, Lord?” Saul said.

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

⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the sound but seeing no one. ⁸ Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing. So they took him by the hand and led him into Damascus. ⁹ He was unable to see for three days and did not eat or drink.

To get an understanding of Saul’s conversion use this video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SNgNtqRctEk>

Who is Saul?

We are introduced to Saul at the death of Stephen at the end of Acts 7. At the time, Saul was seen as an observer but approver of what was happening to Stephen in the name of religious zeal. Stephen’s death pushed those who loved him into a tailspin of deep mourning and also caused the followers of Jesus to scatter throughout the region (Acts 8:1-2). For a personal biography of Saul’s life, read Philippians 3:4-6.

Why Damascus?

In Saul’s day, Damascus was one of the ten cities of the Decapolis— a league of cities in the eastern portion of the Roman Empire ruled by Rome but filled with a melting pot of Semitic ethnic groups from across the Middle East. Roman and Greek culture were laid like a Roman road on top of ancient layers of eastern, religious identities. Chapter 8 of Acts gives several brief accounts of how believers went north, south, east, and west taking the gospel with them. For those fleeing, Damascus would have been one of the closest major towns just a few days travel away.

Travel and trade between Jerusalem and Damascus were common, so when the disciples of Jesus scattered, Saul eyed the nearby city as a destination for many of them. Therefore, Saul turned his fury from Jerusalem toward Damascus.

What happened?

The “Damascus Calling” or collision occurred as Saul approached Damascus. His plan was to capture and eliminate those who followed Jesus of Nazareth. But his own heart was captured instead. Jesus collided with him in the form of a bright light and question.

The question confounded Saul. He did not recognize the voice as coming from Jesus because he did not know Jesus. But Saul knew it was a divine messenger whom he needed to heed with reverence. But why would an angelic messenger from the one true God confront him about his righteous effort to get rid of those blaspheming God? Saul wasn’t persecuting God; he was trying to serve Him! The Pharisee couldn’t answer the divine messenger’s perplexing question, so he responded with a question of his own.

“Who are you, Lord?” Jesus identified Himself as the One being persecuted because Saul was persecuting His followers. What Saul was doing to the disciples he was actually doing to Christ Himself. At this moment, humiliation and humility began to set in. The world as Paul knew it was about to change, and the world as we now know it was about to begin its formation.

Some may think the story of Saul only relates to the way Jesus can collide with and transform arrogant, non-religious, hostile opponents of God—atheists and skeptics—but what happens here is comparable to one of the lessons in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). The challenge in the parable is not only for the self-indulgent, wandering younger brother who clearly rejected his father, left home, and wasted his inheritance. It’s also for the self-righteous, lofty older brother who stayed home and worked hard for his dad, believing he had earned his father’s love. Saul was like the older brother because he too believed he was obeying God and pleasing Him.

We can fall into that same trap. If you have been “churched” your whole life, beware. It is easy to become convinced your religious ways are the same as Christ’s ways when instead they are actually opposed to His righteous purposes. Jesus doesn’t collide with us to produce superficial, religious obedience. That was what Saul excelled at before his collision. Instead, Jesus collides with us to show us who He is and to transform our hearts, leading to loving, genuine obedience. Jesus’ encounter with Saul shows us that He can soften even the hardest hearts of people full of themselves.

How was Saul acting like the men that killed Stephen?

What does Jesus’ question about persecution reflect how He views His relationship to the church? (Jesus is concerned with every person in the body of Christ).

How might Saul’s thinking about Jesus have begun to change in that moment? How might his thinking about himself have begun to change?

God used a pretty unique “collision” with Saul to get his attention. In what ways do you see Jesus “colliding” with people today? How does God use us to do His “colliding” work? (when we share the gospel, we are helping people to have life changing encounters with God)

The blinding of Saul was a time of reflection and surrender for Saul. What are some of the ways we can be blind and confuse religious obedience with what truly pleases God?

Transition: God was going to use fellow believers to help Saul understand the impact of what he experienced on the road to Damascus.

2. Saul is served by a believer who obeys. Acts 9:10-19

Have a volunteer to read Acts 9:10-19.

10 There was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias, and the Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.”

“Here I am, Lord,” he replied.

11 “Get up and go to the street called Straight,” the Lord said to him, “to the house of Judas, and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, since he is praying there. 12 In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and placing his hands on him so that he may regain his sight.”

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

15 But the Lord said to him, “Go, for this man is my chosen instrument to take my name to Gentiles, kings, and Israelites. 16 I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”

17 Ananias went and entered the house. He placed his hands on him and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road you were traveling, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

18 At once something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he got up and was baptized. 19 And after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul was with the disciples in Damascus for some time.

How did Ananias respond?

Notice the difference in how Saul and Ananias responded to the Lord. Saul wanted to know who He was; Ananias wanted to know how he could serve Him. “Here I am, Lord,” Ananias declared, unaware of the great risk God was about to call on him to take. The instructions were straightforward, though. Ananias was to go to Straight Street to the house of Judas to give marching orders from Jesus to Saul.

Saul—the persecutor, prisoner, and murderer of guys like Ananias. Jesus said Saul would be expecting him. Ananias began trying to process this baffling instruction from God. His fellow Christ-followers and he had heard of Saul and were not planning on having bagels with him any time soon.

His reply was basically, “Maybe you have the wrong guy and wrong address, Lord.” This was not about Ananias questioning the authority of Jesus. Ananias wanted to understand why Jesus would call on him to run straight toward danger, but Jesus was adamant: “Go.” Ananias had to step out in faith and fulfill his mission by serving the man who had come to his city to kill him.

How did Saul respond?

Surrender! The former Christ-persecutor was now a Christ-follower, who, like Ananias, would be called on to step out in faith to share the gospel even when things would come full circle and he would be persecuted for his faith (Acts 9:16). We should all be so very grateful for the obedience of this Damascus resident whom God used to encourage the man who would become the greatest missionary and theologian of the church.

Have you felt that God called on you to do something that didn't make sense or that you didn't want to do? What did you do?

Ananias needed courage to obey Jesus and go to Saul. How can we have courage to obey God no matter what? From where does this courage come and what is it based on?

How would you feel if God wanted you to meet with someone known for killing Christians? Would you do it? How would you feel if God wanted you to talk with your neighbor about Jesus? Would you do it?

What motivated Ananias to obey?

We normally think of being sent by God as being sent to share the gospel with unbelievers. How does God send us to other believers too?

God called Saul his chosen instrument and Saul encouraged Saul in this truth. How have other believers come alongside you like Ananias did for Saul? Who are you encouraging to take a step of faith in the Lord?

Transition: Saul's tune changed quickly. He went where he was originally planning on going—the synagogues—but with a much different message.

3. Saul is compelled to proclaim Jesus as Messiah. Acts 9:20-25.

²⁰ Immediately he began proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues: "He is the Son of God."

²¹ All who heard him were astounded and said, "Isn't this the man in Jerusalem who was causing havoc for those who called on this name and came here for the purpose of taking them as prisoners to the chief priests?"

²² But Saul grew stronger and kept confounding the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

²³ After many days had passed, the Jews conspired to kill him, ²⁴ but Saul learned of their plot. So they were watching the gates day and night intending to kill him, ²⁵ but his disciples took him by night and lowered him in a large basket through an opening in the wall.

Imagine the surprise of those who knew of Saul, the zealous persecutor of the church, when they heard him proclaim the very thing that had been grounds to execute Stephen.

Furthermore, imagine the surprise of Jews beginning to believe Jesus was the Messiah because of the message from this fledgling preacher who had just recently collided with Jesus the Messiah on his way to Damascus. Saul preaching Jesus confounded the Jews (Acts 9:22), meaning, Saul was so convincing and clear that his listeners were at a loss as to how to refute him.

But this was not Saul the religious leader trying to perform well for God. This was Saul the new believer, empowered by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, sharing what had changed his life—the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This confounding ability of Saul did not sit well with the Jewish leaders of Damascus, so they planned to kill him. The Damascus believers knew the calling of Jesus on Saul's life. He was to be sent by the God who sends! So, they protected Saul and invented the first elevator to sneak him out of the city to safety, reminiscent of Rahab helping the two spies escape out of Jericho (Josh. 2).

Review the passage and list out the verbs in these verses that reflect action that Saul took. What does it tell you about Saul in that he began to take these action steps immediately? How should that encourage you to take the next step in your walk with Christ to serve, lead, share, etc?

What are some of the challenges we often face when it comes to sharing the gospel with others? What can we do to overcome them?

What is at the heart of your story of following Jesus? How can you tell your story in a compelling way?

Who do you identify with in this story: Saul, Ananias, or the critics? What changes do you need to make in your life to look more like Saul or Ananias?

APPLICATION

Remember, it is not about how compelling *your story* is. It is about how compelling *Jesus' story* is. It is His amazing story into which we have been invited, by which we have been identified, through which we have been secured, and for which we have now been purposed—sent as disciples of Jesus who make disciples with Jesus!

Pray for an opportunity to share your story this week with someone.

Like Saul, all of us who have been confronted by Jesus and changed by the gospel are sent by the God who sends. Most of us are familiar with the sending call on our lives known as the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20), but we often miss the significance of Jesus saying He will be with us as we go.

Reflect of how He is not just sending us to make disciples of Him. He is sending us to make disciples with Him! This matters so much that God even named His Son Immanuel—"God with us." Ask: What priorities in your life need to change to be someone sent for Jesus?

Most of the early church saw Saul in just one way—as an enemy of the gospel to be avoided at all cost. But God taught them, and us, a vital lesson through the conversion of Saul. No one is outside of the scope of God's generous grace. No one is beyond the reach

of Jesus Christ. God's power to save has no limit and can even extend to one of the world's most militant persecutors of Jesus Christ—Saul of Tarsus. If the gospel can transform Saul, it can transform anyone.

Spend time in prayer for someone by name that you have seen as too hard for Jesus to save. Think about an intentional way you can go and share the love of Christ with them.

Quotes/Commentary

Acts 9:1-9

“Within each of us exists the image of God, however disfigured and corrupted by sin it may presently be. God is able to recover this image through grace as we are conformed to Christ.”¹

—Alister McGrath

“We who formerly hated and murdered one another and did not even share our hearth with those of a different tribe because of their customs, now, after Christ's appearance, live together and share the same table. Now we pray for our enemies and try to win those who hate us.”²

—Justin Martyr (circa 100-165)

“The question, ‘Why do you persecute Me?’ (cf. Acts 9:5) is filled with significance for it shows the union of Christ with His church. The Lord did not ask, ‘Why do you persecute My church?’ The reference to ‘Me’ gave Saul his first glimpse into the great doctrine of Christians being in Christ. This same truth was implied earlier by Luke when he wrote that the Lord continues His work on earth in the church (1:1). Also Ananias' lie to Peter was a lie to the Holy Spirit (5:3). Luke, with Paul, saw Christ and the church as the Head and its body.”⁴

—Stanley D. Toussaint

The calling of God to salvation happens in two ways: externally through the proclamation of the gospel and internally through the Holy Spirit working in the heart of the person who hears. Both of these callings are essential, and both work together to bring someone to faith in Christ (2 Tim. 1:8-10).

“In every true conversion the will of man comes into line with the will of God.”⁵

—Billy Graham

“The deceitfulness of the heart of man appears in no one thing so much as this of spiritual pride and self-righteousness. The [subtlety] of Satan appears in its height, in his managing persons with respect to this sin. And perhaps one reason may be that here

he has most experience; he knows the way of its coming in; he is acquainted with the secret springs of it: it was his own sin. Experience gives vast advantage in leading souls, either in good or evil.”⁶

–Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758)

“Damascus was a Hellenized (dominated by Greco-Roman culture) city by this time. The city was no longer the political center of Syria...Still, due to its strategic situation, it has retained considerable economic and cultural influence in the area. From the Jewish historian of that time, Josephus, we learn that Damascus had a large and influential Jewish population. Although many were ethnic Jews of the Diaspora (Hellenized Jews outside the Jewish homeland), quite a number were probably proselytes.”⁷

–D. Paul Smith, *Biblical Illustrator*

Acts 9:10-19

“Ananias wasted no time in expressing reluctance. Saul’s reputation had preceded him to the Christians in Damascus; they even knew his mission. We should read no rebuke nor critique of Ananias by Luke or by Jesus in this passage. This normal human response seems no more negative than that expressed by the Jerusalem church later in the chapter. Ananias did not say (like Jonah) that he wouldn’t go, simply that he had a few reservations about his safety in answering this call...Verse 15 holds the key to the chapter, for it identifies not only the fact of God’s call but its intended purpose. One could argue that in one verse Luke has laid the foundation for everything he will tell us in the remaining chapters of this book. Some may think that Paul later deviated from the plan of proclaiming salvation in Jesus only to Jews when he dashed out on a mission to the Gentiles. We see here in Acts 9:15 that God himself changed the church’s strategy of evangelism, and that a humble Christian by the name of Ananias knew it before Paul had the slightest inkling of what lay ahead in his life. God had chosen a vessel (Rom. 1:1,5; 9:24; Gal. 1:15-16; Eph. 3:7-13), and that vessel would carry the name of Jesus and his message to Gentiles, as well as to Jews.”⁸

–Kenneth O. Gangel

“Ananias fulfilled his commission, going to Paul and laying his hands upon him as he had been instructed. Ananias’s greeting is striking: ‘Brother Saul.’ He could have said this as a fellow Jew, but it was surely as a brother in Christ that Ananias greeted Paul. Something of a ‘conversion’ had taken place in his own heart through *his* vision of the Lord, so that now he could receive as a fellow disciple the one whom he so shortly before had feared and distrusted.”⁹

–John B. Polhill

“Our vision is so limited we can hardly imagine a love that does not show itself in protection from suffering...The love of God did not protect His own Son...He will not

necessarily protect us—not from anything it takes to make us like His Son. A lot of hammering and chiseling and purifying by fire will have to go into the process.”¹⁰

–Elisabeth Elliot (1926-2015)

Acts 9:20-25

“‘In the synagogues’; the very synagogues (v. 2) to which the letters of the high priest were addressed, empowering him to arrest either man or woman who called upon the Name of Jesus, and bring them as prisoners to Jerusalem to be tried before the Sanhedrim. No wonder they were amazed.”¹¹

–A. C. Hervey

“Have you no wish for others to be saved? Then you are not saved yourself. Be sure of that.”¹²

–Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892)

“Christian disciples are sent men and women—sent out in the same work of world evangelism to which the Lord was sent, and for which he gave his life. Evangelism is not an optional accessory to our life. It is the heartbeat of all that we are called to be and do.”¹³

–Robert E. Coleman