

Conversion of a Terrorist



Acts 9:1-19

This morning we are starting a new series through the book of Galatians. I updated my tally on books I have preached through at Grace Church and found it interesting. I have preached through

Genesis	Luke	1 Thessalonians
Ruth	John	2 Thessalonians
1 Samuel	Acts	1 Timothy
2 Samuel	Romans	2 Timothy
Nehemiah	1 Corinthians	Titus
Daniel	2 Corinthians	Hebrews
Jonah	Ephesians (2x)	James
	Philippians	1 Peter
	Colossians	1 John

seven Old Testament books and eighteen New Testament books. So the plan is to squeeze Galatians in here to make number nineteen.

But in order to get to Galatians we have to take a slight detour down Acts chapter nine. Galatians is a gospel story that is also interwoven with Paul's story. That's what a testimony is, right? When our personal story intersects with the saving power of the gospel, you get a testimony. Most of chapter nine is

Paul's personal story of how he met Jesus and the amazing events that followed. In Galatians, Paul described his conversion in two verses. "But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles" (Galatians 1:15-16).

It's short and sweet. The Paul goes on to tell more of his testimony. We tend to use the word testimony only when referring to someone's conversion. We say, "Tell us your testimony. How did you get saved?" But we need to understand a testimony as the intersection between our story and the gospel. And that can happen every single day, right? Is the gospel woven into your life? Do you have a testimony from this week? From this month? Or do you mostly go back to your conversion and say, "Well I was saved when I was seven years and I've done OK since then." As believers, our testimony is our ongoing story of the gospel woven into our daily lives.

In Paul's case, he included this two verse conversion story in Galatians but then he goes on to describe the very early days of the spread of the gospel.

This brings us to Acts chapter nine. Here we have the extended version of Paul's conversion. So let's dig into his story.

But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³ Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. ⁴ And falling to the ground, he 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 rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." ⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. ⁸ Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹ And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

¹⁰ Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." ¹¹ And the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, 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 evil he has done 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 carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. ¹⁶ For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." ¹⁷ So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; ¹⁹ and taking food, he was strengthened.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-51405537>

You may have noticed that I titled this message, Conversion of a Terrorist. Here's how the FBI defines Domestic Terrorism: "Violent, criminal acts committed by individuals and/or groups to further ideological goals stemming from domestic influences, such as those of a political, religious, social, racial, or environmental nature."¹

Saul, before he became the Apostle Paul, was an extremely religious man. He could trace his spiritual ancestry to the tribe of Benjamin. Do you remember who was the first king of Israel? King Saul was his name. Do you recall what tribe king Saul was from? Also from the tribe of Benjamin. In terms of religion, he had a very important family history. He had the best religious training. He was trained under the famous Jewish teacher Gamaliel. Saul was trained as strict Pharisee. He had good beliefs. He understood the law of God. His Bible knowledge would put most contemporary Bible scholars to shame. He not only knew his religious beliefs, he practiced his beliefs. He held his beliefs so strongly that he was convinced these new Christians were

blaspheming the name of his God and that they must be stopped. Saul was at the forefront of the new policy of persecution of Christians. Here in chapter nine he was granted extradition letters from the High Priest to go to other towns and arrest these vile Christians. Saul was a Jewish terrorist. He had a good religious family, good religious training, good religious beliefs and good religious practices. In terms of being religious, particularly in regard to the Jewish religion, he was the ideal man. He was on a fast track to religious fame. The young religion students would have marveled at his knowledge. His nephews and male relatives would probably have held him up as their hero—striving to be like their Uncle Saul one day. He had all of this religion...but he did not know God. Saul had religion, but he did not have a relationship with God.

That is what all of us once were or may be still. At some point we placed our faith in Christ and moved beyond mere external religion and became a follower of Christ. How many of you are religious but still don't have a relationship with Christ? For some of you that might be an offensive question. "Are you telling me that I have gone to church my entire life and I am not a Christian?" Yes, for some of you that is the case. Do you think Saul would have been offended if someone told him he did not know God? He would have been supremely offended. As a matter of fact, that is probably exactly what happened. He knew the message of these Christians. He knew they were preaching about a man named Jesus and that if you didn't believe in Jesus you were not a true believer. You did not know God. That is an offensive message. This may have been the reason he hated them so much. "What do you mean I don't know God!" I am from the tribe of Benjamin, I am a Pharisee, I memorized the Law of Moses!" When Saul was on his way to Damascus to arrest more Christians, he was offended by their message. He was as mad as could be—until he met Jesus.

In Acts chapter 26, Paul told his conversion story to King Agrippa when he was on trial. Jesus came in a flash of light, a powerful voice and a vision from heaven. We have the words of Christ spoken to him.

I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' ¹⁵ And I said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And the Lord said, "'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' the Lord replied. ¹⁶ 'Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me. ¹⁷ I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them ¹⁸ to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'

Was Saul converted at that very moment? Did it happen sometime over the next 3 days as he thought about Christ's words? "among those who are sanctified by faith in me." Faith in Christ—maybe this Jesus really is the Messiah." Whenever his actual conversion took place, by the time Ananias prayed for him, he had been changed from the inside out.

And then there's poor Ananias—could you imagine having been in his shoes? Jesus told him to go pray for the Jewish terrorist Saul. "But Lord, you don't understand—this man is dangerous. I don't think.." "Go!" Jesus told him. You can't blame Ananias for being scared. He was commanded to lay hands on a terrorist. Saul was changed from the inside out. He moved beyond

religion and became a follower of Christ. How do we know this? His entire life proves this. Not only did he actually follow and serve Christ, he publicly renounced all ties to his religious background. In Philippians 3 he wrote, all those things that were important to me about my religion, I completely reject them. In fact, “I consider them 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.”

Have you been converted to Christ in this way? I realize we don't have the benefit of a bright light and the voice of Jesus, but we know we need to come to Jesus with empty hands. Nothing in our background, nothing in our experience—nothing about us at all can make us worthy in his sight. Is that how you came to Christ? I love the words of the hymn, Rock of Ages.

Nothing in my hand I bring
Simply to Thy cross I cling
Naked, come to Thee for dress
Helpless, look to Thee for grace
Vile, I to the fountain fly
Wash me, savior, or I die

When it comes to having a relationship with Christ, we bring absolutely nothing to the table. In fact, trying to bring anything is actually a hindrance to our coming.

This type of faith in Christ is much more than a decision, isn't it? Hundreds of millions of people have attended or watched Billy Graham in his evangelistic crusades and millions have made decisions to follow Christ. Do you know how many of those millions of decisions actually last? Less than 10% of people who make those decisions continue to genuinely follow Christ. You may well be one of those people who made a decision for Christ at one point in your life. Maybe you raised your hand in Awana. Maybe you responded to an altar call or raised your hand in a worship service. The question I think Scripture asks of you is: *Has that decision made a difference in your life?* If you were truly converted at that point in time, then, like Paul, your life will bear out the results of that conversion. But if it has not made a difference in your life, then perhaps you should think about how genuine that decision was for you. Please hear me out: I am not suggesting that good works is what makes you a Christian. I've spent ten minutes saying just the opposite. But the Bible warns us that if there are not good works, then it is possible that there was no conversion. If you think you have only had religion up to this point in your life, you need a relationship with Christ.

Before conversion we have religion without a relationship. At conversion, like Saul, we become God's chosen instrument. Look at v.15. ““Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine...” What is the longing of every human heart? Some people say we all have a God-shaped vacuum inside of us. That may be one way of saying the same thing, but doesn't every man, woman and child long to belong? Isn't that a universal desire—almost an obsession? We want to feel like we belong. We want to feel like someone loves us just the way we are. In fact, God has created us to need to belong.

Why else do we go from one marriage to another? Why else do we hop from one girlfriend to another—from one boyfriend to another? Why do we change jobs so often? We go through life feeling rejected. We long to be loved without any conditions. If we mess up, we still want to be loved.. When we fail, we want to be accepted. Where are we going to find such unconditional love? Will we find this kind of love without conditions in the marketplace? Will we find this kind of love without conditions in our neighborhoods and communities? Will we find this kind of love without conditions in the church? Sadly, even though the church is supposed to be most like this, our expectations will be crushed if we always expect it. The only place we will ever find love without condition is from the one who has made us his chosen instrument. We are chosen by God. We belong to God.

Do you understand the ramifications of this? This means that every other relationship will disappoint us. Why do couples get marital counseling? Because one or both feel that the other does not adequately love them. Doesn't it come down to just that? My husband doesn't love me enough. My wife loves me only under certain conditions. Parents do the same thing with their children and children put conditions on their parents. The old country song is so true—we're always looking for love in all the wrong places. People will disappoint us. Our spouse will disappoint us. Our children will disappoint us. If you require unconditional love from human relationships, you are as good as dead. It will never happen!!

Now Jesus loves us without any conditions, but we get so beaten down in life that we have a hard time believing that. Many months ago I showed you my personal mission statement. Here it is again. ***I am in a life long pursuit of increasing in the knowledge and experience of Christ's intimate love for me and out of gratitude and humility serving Christ by leading others toward this same pursuit.*** This is my understanding of what it means to be chosen by God. God loves each of us more than we could ever imagine. Even though I am already saved and chosen by God, I do not fully realize all that that means. Therefore, the deeper my understanding of Christ's love for me, the greater my ability to love others. Also, the more I understand Christ's love, the less I will require my love to come from others. We have a need for love and acceptance. If we cannot get it from God or do not understand his love, then we must get our love tanks filled by others. We have to be plugged in somewhere.

At the point of conversion we become God's chosen instrument. Actually, we are chosen from before the foundation of the world, but our conversion is the point at which this begins. Notice what Jesus said next about Paul's future. "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." Paul was to carry the name of Jesus to Jews and non-Jews and he was to suffer for the name of Christ. He was called to speak and to suffer. This chapter is an account of Paul's conversion. But it is also a type of commissioning from God similar to the commissioning of Moses in the burning bush and Isaiah being touched on the lips with a burning coal. You and I will not see a bright light like Paul. We will not see a burning bush like Moses. We will not be touched with a burning coal like Isaiah. We will not be asked to marry a prostitute like Hosea and we will not be asked to lie on our side for 430 days like Ezekiel. Even though the details of these commissionings from God are different and certainly dramatic, I believe Scripture is very clear that after conversion we are called to speak about Jesus and to suffer for him.

Jesus' plan for Paul was to talk to proclaim Jesus to others and to endure suffering. Are these not two of the scariest things in all of life? If we knew this before we became Christians how many of us would have signed up? Now we may never speak in the same way as Paul or suffer as badly as Paul. Actually, some of us may suffer worse than Paul. Christians already suffer around the world on a daily, ongoing basis. As Peter said in his first book, "It is better to suffer for doing good than for doing evil." We will suffer in this life so it might as well be purposeful suffering. Is this what you signed up for? To speak about Jesus and to suffer for him? "Where is the joy?" you might ask. "Why would God require this of me?" The joy comes in the serving, not avoidance of service.

We don't need to go far away or have unusual circumstances to speak and to suffer for Christ. How does a mom with young children speak and suffer for Christ? Her main job would be to bear the image of Christ to her children. The suffering part, well that is obvious with young children, isn't it? Seriously, parenting is very difficult and a parent's endurance through those hard times is itself bearing the name of Christ. And of course the only reason that we could take the risk of speaking and suffering for Christ is because we are chosen by God. We have that secure, unconditional relationship. We are not earning our relationship with him, we are expressing what the relationship already is.

That's the power of the gospel. It is an unstoppable force that can even convert a Jewish terrorist. Where are you this morning? Have you left aside your self-sufficiency and self-reliance? Have you been radically converted through faith in Christ alone?

Rich Maurer
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¹ <https://www.fbi.gov/investigate/terrorism>