

# Gamma

## Acts 9

### Study 9 Paul's conversion

**1. v.1-2. How do these verses shed light on John 6:44 and John 15:16? How is this an encouragement to us doing evangelism?**

In John 6:44 Jesus says, *"No one can come to me unless the Father draws him."* In John 15:16 Jesus speaks to his disciples and says, *"you have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and appointed you to go and bear fruit"*. One thing is certain from these texts. We do not, initially, "seek" God, unless first God comes and seeks us. The Bible says that in our natural state: *"No one seeks for God"* (Rom.3:11). That is categorical. Since no human being will naturally seek for God, those who are seeking do so because God has been at work on them. He opens our hearts (Acts 16:14). We only love him because he first loves us (I John 4:10, 19). Throughout the years, Christians have differed over whether this "seeking grace" from God is resistible or not. Those who believe in predestination say "no" and those who do not believe in predestination say "yes". But there is agreement that we cannot turn to God unless he comes to us first.

These two verses illustrate this very well. Saul was completely hostile to the gospel and the church. He was not "open" or "seeking" at all. Because the Christians had "dispersed" away from Jerusalem because of the persecution (Acts 8:1-4), Saul was now willing to travel to neighboring cities to find Christians and to bring them home for punishment (v.2). So his opposition to the gospel was fanatical. Thus his conversion is proof of the power of God's sovereign grace to bring people up short and take the scales off their eyes. C.S.Lewis, in his account of his conversion, likens God to a fisherman after his fish, or to a cat after his mouse, or to a pack of hounds after his fox, or to a divine chess player putting him into checkmate. (See *Surprised by Joy*, last chapter)

When we are sharing our faith, we must keep Saul in mind. First, we must not think much in terms of people who are very “likely” to become Christians versus others who are very “unlikely”. There are plenty of people who seem very wild, very hostile, and very “far” from the faith, and it is typical for Christians to think that their case is spiritually hopeless. We do not even consider trying to share the faith with them. And, in addition, Saul represents a particular kind of non-Christian that often intimidates Christians. He was brilliant, a leader, a member of the “elite”, and highly educated. Believers often either despise or fear the many non-believers in those ranks. But this incident proves that everyone is equally “unlikely” to believe (since every conversion is a miracle) and therefore, everyone is equally “likely” to believe. Have hope for everyone.

**2. v.3-4. Compare this account of Jesus first words to a fuller account in Acts 26:13-14. What indication is there that Saul’s conversion was not as “sudden” as it seems? What could these “goads” have been? What were the “goads” Jesus used on you?**

In Saul’s account of his conversion experience in Acts 26, he mentions that Jesus said to him, “*It is hard for you to kick against the goads*” (26:14). “Goads” were sharp sticks used by farmers to get animals to obey their commands and move along in the prescribed way. If an animal kicked against the goads, of course, they hurt worse than if they had obeyed. But what were these “goads” of Saul’s of which Jesus spoke?

Although the specifics were only speculation, in general the reference to “goads” must mean that Saul was actually wrestling with doubts and conviction about Christianity. In fact, his fanatical opposition to Christianity evidently was his effort to silence his ambivalence. What might some of these goads have been? Well, Romans 7:7ff indicates that Saul had come under tremendous conviction that he could not fulfill the law of God. In particular, the tenth commandment “thou shalt not covet” convicted him. He says that one day this commandment came “alive” to him (he realized what it demanded) and it “slew” him (he was devastated). Here he was, a Pharisee with great pride in his ability to satisfy the law, and

he realized that the law demanded a kind of inner peace and contentment that he did not have (*“not covet”*). So, on the basis of Romans 7:7ff, we see that he already was having some severe spiritual problems in the area of his conscience. No wonder he was so vigorously persecuting Christians, as a way to eliminate his self-doubts.

But then there was Stephen. We know that Saul had heard Stephen’s speech, which indicated that Jesus came to replace the temple (as the final atonement) and to fulfill the law. Saul had seen the amazing joy and love in Stephen’s face (6:15; 7:58-60). If Saul had been under deep conviction of his moral inadequacy (Rom.7) and heard Stephen’s proclamation of a whole new way to God (Acts 7), then he would certainly have been deeply “pricked” and troubled. These were Jesus’ “goads” in his mind and conscience.

So Saul’s conversion was not as instantaneous as it might appear. Jesus had been drawing him with his grace very gradually, and the dramatic “Damascus Road” experience brought it to a head. So conversion virtually always has a divine preparation.

**3. v.4-5. What is the significance of Jesus’ statement that Saul is persecuting Him? (How is a convicting statement? How is it an encouraging statement?)**

Jesus statement that Saul is *“persecuting... Jesus”* is surprising, since Saul thought he was persecuting a heretical Jewish sect. That is the reason that, when the voice says, *“why are you persecuting me?”*, Saul understandably asks “But who are you? I’m not persecuting you!” There are at least two implications.

First, though we are seldom conscious of the fact, we are all enemies of God, hostile and “persecutors” of God, until we are reconciled to him through the gospel. Paul says in no uncertain terms that we are all the Lord’s enemies (Rom.5:10; Col.1:21). Our problem is not just that we are failing God, but that we are fighting God. Our natural state is not just that we break the rules and fall short of being good, but that we resent God’s control over our lives, and we set ourselves up as our own saviour and lord, and we resist his exertion of his

power over us. Evidently, Paul never forgot this lesson, because in Romans 5 and 8 and Ephesians 2 and elsewhere, he insists that even very religious people who seek to obey the Bible are enemies of God, as long as they seek to save themselves by their goodness and holiness. They are trying to be their own Saviors, and they thus feel continually angry at God for not giving them their “due” in life. Spiritually, we are hostile and we attack God.

So “*why do you persecute me*” is, on the one hand, very bad news.

But second, on the other hand, it is very good news. For Jesus is saying that he so identifies with his people that he sees anyone assaulting us as assaulting him. This has many wonderful implications, but we will mention only three here. a) First, it shows that to become a Christian is not just to join a club, but to be grafted into a Body, the Body of Christ. When we get the Holy Spirit, which is the Spirit of Christ, that unites us to all other Christians by a unique, spiritual, living link (I Cor.12:13) b) Second, it shows that Jesus does protect us. He takes any assaults on us personally. We must be careful not to assume that this means we are exempt from harm! The book of Acts shows that Christians are tortured and die. But this means that Jesus is always present with us to “sanctify our distress to us” (e.g. II Cor.1:3-11; 4:16-18), and that he sometimes does deliver us from imminent danger (Acts 12:1ff.) c) Third, it hints that not only is Jesus identified with us, but that we are identified with Jesus. In other words, because he is loved by the Father and because he is at the right hand of the Father — then we are loved by the Father and we are at the right hand of the Father (Eph.2:6-8).

**4. v.10-31. What are the results of Saul’s conversion evident in these verses? In other words, what changes do we see?**

First, v.9 and v.11 together show that Saul was fasting and praying. This was not intermittent, periodic prayer, but very concentrated and prevailing prayer. So the first change is a new relationship God himself.

“Not that he had never fasted and prayed before... But now through Jesus and his cross Saul had been reconciled to God, and consequently enjoyed a new and immediate access to the Father... What was the content of his prayers? We can guess that he prayed for the forgiveness of all his sins, especially his self-

righteousness... for wisdom to know what God wanted him to do now... No doubt also his prayers included worship, as he poured out his soul in praise that God should have had mercy on him.”

– John Stott, *The Message of Acts*, p.175

Second, he had a new relationship to the church. Ananias rightly is shocked and incredulous that Saul could really be a Christian (v.13-14). But he does go to Saul and immediately calls him “*Brother*” (v.17). We should not overlook the significance of this. Saul doubtlessly had killed people that Ananias had known and loved. Yet the gospel destroys the old ties and identities, and now that Saul is Christian, he is Ananias’ brother! We see that Saul, both in Damascus and in Jerusalem, seeks out “*the disciples*” (v.19, 26), even when both churches were very wary of him and reticent to embrace him, (It is understandable that the Christians might have suspected his conversion to be a ruse to get inside the Christian community for the purpose of more devastating persecution.

So we see that conversion fundamentally changes our closest associations. Our new “family” becomes other Christians, regardless of our past record, regardless of class and national distinctions.

Third, we see that Saul has a new sense of obligation for the world. He risks his life immediately by proclaiming the gospel publically. He has a new sense of his responsibility, since he has powerful gifts of knowledge and articulation. His sense of this responsibility was so strong that he was willing to risk his own suffering and death.

## JOYFUL BOLDNESS

**Introduction:** We tend to talk boldly about the things that bring us the greatest joy. Our job, a wedding, a child’s birth, or something new. So it shouldn’t surprise us that boldness in witnessing should follow a personal, intimate, joyful encounter with the living God.

**A. Read John 1:35-42.**

Why was Andrew *joyful*?

How did Andrew demonstrate his joy and *boldness*?

What resources do we have that Andrew didn't have that should foster joyful boldness in our witness to others?

How do we allow ourselves to be robbed of joyfulness or boldness?

- B. The following verses describe the *spiritual boldness (confidence)* God wants us to experience in two other areas of our lives. What is the source of confidence in each situation... and what are the results?**

Heb. 4:16 and 10:19; Eph. 3:12

I John 4:13-19

- C. Ps. 35:9 says, "...my soul will rejoice in the Lord and delight in his salvation". But in Ps. 51:12 David pleaded, "Restore to me the joy of your salvation..." Which best describes where you are *experientially* right now with the Lord? Why?**

- D. Suggested action points**

**Remember your conversion.** Meditate on the things that brought joy to your heart when you first knew Jesus Christ personally. What were a few?

Acts 4:29 assures us we should **pray for boldness**: "Lord... enable your servant to speak your word with great boldness." Are you willing to pray that? Continue to pray for the four people you recorded in a recent project. Have you seen God at work in any of their lives yet?

**Believe** that God wants you to be joyful and bold in prayer, witnessing and on the day of judgment as you stand before Him, relying on the Father's Savior's and Spirit's love for you. **Conclude your discussion with prayer for one another... personal requests and also reflecting on what you've shared about joyful boldness in your lives. Don't miss it!**