

Acts Chapter 9

Acts 9 is about the conversion of Saul. Apostle Paul is extremely important and if we look at the Book of Acts, the second half of the Book of Acts we are looking at Chapter 18, 20, all the way to the end is actually all about Paul. If we look at the New Testament 13 letters were written by Paul, that is about half. He has a huge impact. What the difference is that Jesus talks about salvation but it is Paul who actually works out for us the nuts and bolts of how trusting Jesus Christ, salvation of Jesus Christ, how it actually works, what is justification by faith and how it works.

Saul started persecuting the Christians and now he goes all the way up to Damascus. There are three areas where we can look at information about Paul, Acts 9, 22 and 26. This is a testimony repeated three times, so it must be very-very important testimony that can be repeated three times and from these three episodes we can bring in certain bits of information. Many of the conversions in the Bible, even look at your conversions they are not all the same. If we look at Matthew 18:3

Matt 18:3 and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

For Jesus becoming a Christian is like being a child, trusting him. For John, Jesus said to Nicodemus,

John 3:3 Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

So therefore he describes conversion as being born again. One is being a child and one is being born again and then now we look at the conversion of Paul. There are different types of conversion, some are quiet, some are dramatic and in this particular case it is dramatic. There are three elements of the conversion that we want to look at:

- Collision (1-5)
- Darkness (7-9)
- Embrace (17-19)

And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. 2 Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. 3 But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison (Acts 8:1-3 ESV)

He is not satisfied in persecuting everybody in Samaria he goes up north to Damascus

Act 9:1 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.

So these letters are letter of authority. He cannot go and arrest people because he is just a theologian. Only Romans can actually arrest people and basically have the people killed, which is the Roman law at that time. What he gets is a subcontracted sort of issue from the Jewish authorities to go up to the synagogues and then look for disciples of Jesus so that he could confront them.

The collision

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. (Acts 9:3-5 ESV)

Here you actually have a situation where Paul describes this in

1 Corinthians 15:7-8 (ESV) Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. 8 Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

So he has a post-resurrection view of Christ. He is a personal witness of resurrection of Jesus Christ. He has seen the resurrected Jesus Christ which is one of the qualifications you need for being an apostle.

Why did Saul persecute people so badly?

He made it his personal mission to go and destroy everybody who has got to do with Jesus Christ. If we look at Saul himself he describes himself in

Philippians 3:4-6 (ESV) If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

He is a man who is intensely proud of all the things that he has achieved in life. This means he has kept within the boundaries of the law given. So this is actually his underlying basis of self-esteem, his heritage, his pedigree, and his works.

Acts 22:3 (ESV) I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day

Gamaliel is a very important figure. There are only two schools of rabbinic thought and teaching in Israel. One school is named after grandfather of Gamaliel and Paul is his disciple. So he comes from the highest traditions of Pharisees and he looks forward to Messiah. The whole people of Israel look forward to Messiah.

What kind of Messiah do they led forward to?

There are various Messiahs come.

Simon Barkova came some years after Jesus Christ in 132 AD. He had a rebel army of 200,000. He actually captured Jerusalem and lived there for 2.5 years, gutted entire legions and Romans retaliated and killed 58000. He actually had coins made up in his own name for this resurgence Israel at times.

So the idea of a Messiah at that time is always a military leader.

Simon of Perea was before Jesus Christ 4 AD after Herod the Great died there were revolts. He was a former slave, tall robust man. He burnt the royal palace at Jericho to the ground and he had a successful rebellion until the Roman Gratus cut off his head.

We have got a whole bunch of others:

- Anthrogenes, who was a shepherd
- Judas the Galilean
- Theudas

They are all zealots and at each time someone would expect the idea of God coming would be someone who would be powerful, who would reign.

Paul's idea of Messianic king was different, he was not expecting a crucified king. The crucified Messiah is a terrible insult to a person who is so highly educated as he is. Not only that he is also incensed because the people of the way which are Christians seem to attack.

The charge against Stephen

Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God and they set up false witnesses who said, 'This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, 14 for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us" (Acts 6:11, 13-14 ESV)

So basically attacking two central tenants of the Jewish faith which is law and the temple. So this is Paul's life. His whole life is basically around that, so it is very hard for him to change his mind. So all of his have our ideas of who God is and it is very hard to actually convert from that. We actually have to be challenged. Steven Fry is an atheist; he has acted in many movies. His idea of God is, *I would say "Bone cancer in children? What's that about? How dare you! How dare you create a world in which there is such misery that is not our fault. Its not right, it is utterly-utterly evil. Why should I respect a capricious mean-minded, stupid god who creates a world which is so full of injustice and pain.....because the God who created this universe if it was created by God is quite clearly a maniac, utter maniac, totally selfish....."*

Why did Paul persecute all the Christians?

Because the idea of a Christian God, Yahweh actually dying on the cross is not fixing in his mind, that he really is going to stop that and really snuff them out. Guy like Steven Fry, his criticism of Christianity is based on certain premises. His idea of God is if there is supposed

to be a God it should be a totally benevolent God and He should respect human beings, we can do whatever we want but He is got to be forgiving and kind and loving. So he totally ignores the fact that this happens to be God's world and every breath that we take belongs to him. So when he says thinks that we actually have to go and spend our whole life on our knees worshipping him as if God does not deserve to be worshipped, it is a very man-centered idea, now a lot of people have this idea of what God is. God is supposed to suit us. We have got this idea of God. God is a product of our needs, God is love, God accepts everyone, God does not punish. So Steven Fry comes from this idea, not only your friends in society will come from this idea, this is what God is, we create God in our minds but then you have got this collision when he comes in a big vision and he say

5 And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting (Acts 9:5 ESV)

So God is actually greater then whom we think.

By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; 20 for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything (1 John 3:19-20 ESV)

For you to confront a real God, when there is a collision with a real God, a real God got to contradict you. If you have a God who always is made after your own image and he makes you happy all the time then this is actually not a real God. A real God in order to transform you has got to contradict you. If a real God is a God that you choose after your own image then it is not a God at all, because it is a God made by your own.

Thomas Jefferson painted the picture Declaration of Independence. He actually had a concubine called Sally Hemings who was a negro and was wondering why would this good Christian man who writes in the document called the Declaration of Independence, all man are created and he kept 175 slaves and he never let them go. George Washington actually sold his slaves and got rid of his slaves because he believes in the declaration. The guy who wrote the declaration has a double life. If we look at the Bible that Thomas Jefferson used, he cuts out the passages that contradicts him. If you have a God that contradicts you that makes you uncomfortable that makes you embarrassed that makes you upset that makes you afraid to share someone else, so you actually make God in your own image.

A lot of people go for church shopping. The want to go to church where they can feel comfortable, people don't go to a church that actually has a truth that makes you uncomfortable that actually shines a light on your sin and the preachers who are brave enough to tell you, you actually are a sinner. So therefore in a sense we are like Paul, we are like Thomas Jefferson. We are looking and making God in our own image. So a collision comes and then you basically discover God. C.S. Lewis writes

Before God closed in on me I was aware that I was holding something at bay or shutting something out. I felt myself being there and given a free choice, I could open the door or keep it shut but I chose to open it. When I say I chose yet it did not really seem possible. Any

agnostic will cheerfully talk about a man's search for God but to me they might as well have talked about a mouse's search for a cat

So apparently he made a decision for God but for a man to make a decision for God is a likely as a mouse searching for a cat which always never happens.

So now he is talking about grace. So all our minds are so fixed on the kind of God that we have, it takes a collision with the real God to really shake us up and when we have a conversion stories we will have a period of illness, a period of economic difficulty or something in our life that will shakes out our idea of who and what God is and this collision makes you aware of one very-very important thing.

Collision –awareness of sin

Acts 9:4 (ESV) **And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”**

That is about his sin.

1 Timothy 1:15 (ESV) he saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

He counted himself the worst sinner.

1 Corinthians 15:9 (ESV) **For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God**

Acts 22:16 (ESV) **And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.**

A true conversion collision with God is a collision that changes your idea of who God is that God is someone who you cannot control and the God is someone who shines the light in the dirtiest most terrible parts of our life and we call it sin. Without a true awareness of sin in our lives you cannot have a proper conversion. You just join the church like a club but as Paul a proper conversion is when there is a collision.

2. Darkness

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 (Acts 9:5-9 ESV)

What was he doing in the darkness?

He might be in depression because all of his ideas about God have been completely overturned. We don't really know but we can think about is probably he has been a

theologian so his entire understanding of God has been turned upside down. Here is a God man who was actually crucified and now he saw him risen in great glory. So he goes back to the Bible, all the theology he has learned and tries to put the pieces together. As he is thinking about it, he will be thinking about a Strong Messiah.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, 4 but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked (Isaiah 11:3-4 ESV)

On the other hand he remembers the weak messiah

He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not (Isaiah 53:3 ESV)

So we have a strong Messiah and we have a weak Messiah. Then he thinks Messiah should be blessed by God, he should come with his 40 legions in the sky with angels and yet on the other hand he is a cursed messiah where he is hung on a tree. Everyone who was hung on the tree is cursed. How can you have a triumphant Messiah and at the same time a cursed Messiah. The two cannot come together but yet they are equally true and he has actually seen and then you have got the whole bunch of sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins over the last few centuries and then he sees the vision of the exalted Christ. If Christ is truly cursed for his own sin he would not be resurrected. He was cursed on tree for our sins and then the penny drops and then I can have a resultant exalted messiah. I can have a cursed Messiah because of my sin.

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 (Acts 26:14 ESV)

Saul is actually suffering because in his persecution of the saints he is kicking against himself. The more he persecutes the more pain he gets. Why is he having the pain?

For apart from the law, sin lies dead. 9 I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. 10 The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me (Romans 7:8-10 ESV)

He struggles. You think you actually fulfill the law. The most difficult law to fulfill is **thou shalt not covet**. It means that for you to completely fulfil the commandment you are going to be so satisfied in God, you don't like anything else. You are totally satisfied. So all of us failed. Right in the beginning as long as we covet we are discontent. As long as we discontent we fail the law. On one hand he says, as to the law I am totally righteous, on the other hand he knows he is struggling that he actually can't fulfil the law.

Why does he throw the stone at Stephen?

Because Stephen is telling the truth. Stephen says, you guys protect the law, you guys protect the temple but you guys are actually the first guys who rebel against the law and he knows that is true and yet to shut him up, take the stone throw it down. So he actually has this annoying suspicion that what he has been doing all along is wrong and in order to shut them up he has to kill them. So what he is doing is he is kicking against the goads.

3. Embrace

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 (Acts 9:10-19 ESV)

The last bit is that he was embraced by Ananias and there is a time when he actually came to faith.

How do I know I am converted?

So these are some of the features that you can see in Paul's life

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, (Acts 9:11ESV)

- **New intimacy with God**

Straight away Paul is blind. For the next three days he is looking back into scripture and how it works out, what the Messiah is and he is praying. Now the Pharisees usually prayer to gain merit, they will go to the temple, he is not in the temple, he is in Syria. He is actually in the darkness and he is actually praying. He has actually found a new intimacy with God. He is not like using a prayer wheel or rosary prayer. Now his prayer takes a different dimension, prayer is seen as intimacy, a new relationship with God.

- **Self-sacrifice**

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.” (Acts 9:15-17 ESV)

God sends a weak Messiah for the sake of others hence the sign is that His disciples do the same thing. It is in self-sacrifice that you see yourself not only having intimacy but your ability to sacrifice.

C.S. Lewis said, *In self-giving, if anywhere we touch a rhythm of not only of all creation but of all being for the eternal word but that is Jesus gave himself in sacrifice. So from the highest to the lowest self exists to be abdicated and by that abdication it becomes more truly self. To be there upon the more abdicated and so forever. This is not a law we can escape. What is outside the system of self-giving is simply and solely hell. That fierce imprisonment in self.*

It means that we all live in a prison and that prison is called **self**. When you get outside the prison, it is called heaven. How do you get outside, which means you start to look after others. The moment you look after your wife, your children or even beyond that to your friends and church members then you are actually stepping outside the cage. Because if you remain within this cage Lewis says that is hell. If you are doing everything motivated by what you will personally gain that is hell. When you actually step outside yourself you have then achieved a similar situation as our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus stepped outside himself from the realm of perfection in heaven, coming down to the world where he gave himself really. So the chief characteristics of all disciples of Jesus Christ is self-giving. If it is always about you then we highly doubt that you are a Christian, because all Christians carry the cross. **I am crucified with Christ, it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives within me.** When you are unselfish you are really converted, you give your life, and you have intimacy with God.

7 But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord (Philippians 3:7-8 ESV)

How are you able to give up yourself and serve others and the secret Paul tells you in Philippians chapter 3, he is able to do that because he got something more valuable and that is surpassing value of knowing Jesus Christ. That everything that you do for another person when you step outside yourself you are rewarded because that pleases him. Now if you know Jesus Christ and you actually feel the warmth and richness of his treasure and happiness with you when you do that then all of the stuff which you grab onto yourself either your money, your comfort, they are not important anymore. They are like rubbish. You are all able to let this go because you have found something more valuable. The fact that you don't do that, you are not self-giving, you still hang on to your money, you hang on to your self-esteem, you hang on to all the works that you have, means you haven't actually transacted, you haven't had a change in your concept. It is the same thing as tomorrow US dollars change to ringgit, 1 dollar to 1 RM. So all of you who will change will be clever, those of you who don't change are stupid. So if you ask are you a Christian and I see you hanging to yourself

and your own toys and your own money and your own self-esteem and your own gang and never go out of yourself with the prison of self that I know your value system is still 4 ringgit to the US dollar, it has not been transformed. Only when you see a value change you can see a transformation in character. So why is that Christians don't change, they become Christians and yet they are living within the prison of self and true disciples have a change, because they see the upside down cross that changes all the values. Because of this value change, then your life will change. This is worship. The more you worship God, the more you are appreciate the value that he has then the things of the world become dimer and dimer and dimer and dimer. The value of the word of God changes lives and it affects our behavior and as that happens you prove yourself to be true disciple of Jesus Christ.

3. Need for community

Not only you achieve intimacy we have a self-giving attitude we have community.

And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me" (Acts 9:4 ESV)

If you whack the Christians you are whacking Christ because we are the body of Christ. We exist in community.

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." Acts 9:17

Can God save Saul all by himself? Why God grabs someone else and drags into the story?

This is happening all the time, God can convert. Our faith exists in community. God wants you to be ministered to by other people. You could probably read the bible and probably counsel yourself and get everything all done but God does not want you to do that. God wants the humility of you trusting another brother which there has two implications.

When we come to a bible study not only we learn but we also share. A very strong part of your Christian faith exists in community. God refuses to touch you outside community. God can reach the people in Syria all on His own, but God wants it to be a community. So when Ananias lays his hands on him very gingerly because Paul was an evil enemy of Christ. He calls him brother. The moment that magical thing happens the two then become one and incorporated in the beautiful community of Jesus Christ. Isn't that a wonderful picture? So much better than God bringing Paul on its own. So therefore God will then challenge us not only to be Paul but also to be Ananias. There are a lot of dangerous people outside there and God asked us to go and reach out to them and put our hands on them and say Brother Saul. Some of them may persecute you, some of them may put you in jail but it is an act of faith that we become Ananias and he will guide us to do that.

Result of his conversion

He went around to Damascus and he confounded the Jews and he started proving Jesus Christ, Jesus was the Christ and the Messiah. Then he got persecution and after that they tell him you are causing too much trouble and was sent back to Tarsus. After they sent him to Tarsus peace restored.

31 So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.

So it seems that persecution and Paul are hand in hand. They come together. You take Paul away the persecution went away. So this persecution is actually very personal to Paul. He is the one started all this persecution. He is a bad dude.

Challenge:

No one is beyond the gospel. Paul was a bad dude. He really persecuted, some of them died and yet God can bring him to his saving. If you go to Syria today, you will see ISIS there and it is the same place as Paul and you will see the article in New York Times last year, is this the end of Christianity in the Middle East. We have seen horrible persecution, people being killed and the writers are thinking that there will not be any more Christianity there.

As they were stoning Steven, Steven was an eloquent preacher. God can use him in the future and yet allowed him to be killed because the next replacement would write 13 letters and change the face of Christianity. So God has a lot of soldiers, you kill one, the next one come up even better than the last one. God cannot be stopped; you cannot kill his soldiers because he will send another one even greater than the next one.

Mao's china kicked out all the missionaries in 1949 to 1953, hardly 700,000 Christians left in china at time and then we fast forward to the cultural revolution in 1966 to 1976 they banned every single religious institution, all churches turned into godowns and despite that Mao is now dead and the percentage of Christians in 2030 will be 16, 2040 will be 32% and 2050 if things go well will be 66%. This is how it is growing. Nobody can stop the goal to the gospel and in fact persecution makes the gospel grow even faster. So this is the kind of God that we worship and we take home that kind of message from a nasty person right up to a person who actually glorifies God with the gospel.

Paul has been chosen before the beginning of time, even before that God choose to save him God has a mission for him, he will suffer for the gospel sake. He will be executed in the end but he will bring gospel through three missionary journeys to the entire Asia Minor area. God has a plan for every single one of us in this world just like Paul and that plan will involve the gospel, every single one whether to your friends, your neighbours it will involve gospel. Some of it if it is really true and powerful God will involve suffering as well, but if that needs to be we are soldiers of Christ and if that is the price we need to pay that is the price we have to pay but the gospel comes first.