

Acts The Gospel on the Move

Study 9

The Conversion of Saul

Acts 9

A. Who Is Saul?

Acts 9:1-2 (NIV)

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

- 1. Comprehension Question. Based on Acts 8:1-3, Acts 9:1-2, Acts 22:3, Philippians 3:4-6 and elsewhere in the Bible, who is Saul and what's the significance of this character?**

Saul is a Pharisee, a teacher of the Jewish law that follows the laws strictly. He later converted and became Apostle Paul who wrote many epistles/letters (Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, Corinthians, etc)

Quick Verse Reference

Acts 22:3 (NIV)

"I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today.

Philippians 3:4-6 (NIV)

though I myself have reasons for such confidence.

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

B. The Collision

Acts 9:3-5 (NIV)

As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around

him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.

2. Comprehension Question. Based on Acts 9:3-5 and Acts 26:14, did Saul seem to have understood the gospel?

Kicking against goads describes futile and detrimental resistance to a stronger power. It seems that Saul/Paul may have started to believe but is suppressing it by killing and silencing the Christians

Quick Verse Reference

Acts 26:14 (NIV)

We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'

C. Darkness

Acts 9:5-9 (NIV)

"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

3. Comprehension Question. According to the video lecture, what was Saul doing during this time in darkness?

The darkness allowed Saul to think his entire understanding of God, going back to the Bible and seeing things he never saw before such as passages that included the cursed and weak Messiah (Isaiah 53:3) and the blessed and strong Messiah (Isaiah 11:3-4).

D. Embrace

Acts 9:10-16 (NIV)

In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"

"Yes, Lord," he answered.

The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

"Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

- 4. a) Discussion Question. According to the video lecture, the passage above and Paul's testimony in Philippians 3:4-8. How did Saul/Paul feel about suffering for God?**

Quick Verse Reference

Philippians 3:4-8 (NIV)

though I myself have reasons for such confidence.

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ

b) Reflection Question. How do you feel about suffering for the gospel at this point of your journey?

E. Results of Paul's Conversion

Acts 9:17-22 (NIV)

Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

- 5. Reflection Question. It seems that only after a few days spent with disciples and his conversion, he started to preach the gospel publicly. What prevents you from preaching the gospel publicly?**

F. Paul and Persecution

Acts 9:23-30 (NIV)

After many days had gone by, there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him, but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall.

When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He talked and debated with the Hellenistic Jews, but they tried to kill him. When the believers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

6. Reflection Question. Right now at this point of your Christian journey, do you think the gospel is worth dying for?

G. No one is Beyond the Gospel

Acts 9:31-30 (NIV)

Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

7. Discussion Question. According to D.A. Carson commentary, the church enjoyed a time of peace because (1) the church's greatest opponent is now its greatest advocate, and (2) his volatile presence has been removed from Jerusalem. It seems that both persecution and peace can be used by God to increase the number of believers. How do we wrestle with the fact that we can't predict how God uses different situations for His purpose, often in ways that don't make logical sense?

Takeaway

In Acts 9, we see Saul's confrontation with Jesus and his conversion to Christianity. He was almost immediately used by God, from the greatest opponent of Jesus Christ to its greatest advocate. We see that no one is Beyond the Gospel and that God can use different situations for His good purpose.

Case Study

Case 1 – The life and death of John Chau, the man who tried to convert his killers

In November, on an obscure island in the Indian Ocean, Chau – a 26-year-old American adventure blogger, beef-jerky marketer, and evangelical missionary – was killed by the isolated tribe he was attempting to convert to Christianity.

When Chau's death became international news, many Christians were keen to disavow his actions; Chau's father believes the American missionary community is culpable in his son's death. John was an "innocent child", his father told me, who died from an "extreme" vision of Christianity taken to its logical conclusion.

All Nations, the evangelical organization that trained Chau, described him as a martyr.

The “privilege of sharing the gospel has often involved great cost”, Dr Mary Ho, the organization’s leader, said in a statement. “We pray that John’s sacrificial efforts will bear eternal fruit in due season.”

Ho also told news organizations that Chau had received 13 immunizations, though Survival International, an indigenous rights group, disputes that these would have prevented infection of the isolated Sentinelese people. The Sentinelese, hunter-gatherers who inhabit North Sentinel Island in the Andaman island chain, are considered one of the Earth’s last uncontacted peoples; their entire tribe is believed to number several dozen people.

“John Allen Chau is not a martyr,” responded one Twitter user, capturing the prevailing sentiment on social media. “Just a dumb American who thought the tribals needed ‘Jesus’ when the tribals already lived in harmony with God and nature for years without outside interference.”

“I’m sorry,” another commented, “but what a deluded idiot.”

Full article: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/03/john-chau-christian-missionary-death-sentinelese>

1. a) Discussion question. Is John Chau a deluded idiot in your eyes? Why or why not?

b) Discussion question. Do you think this vision of Christianity is “extreme” like John’s father does?

c) Discussion question. Chau even got vaccinated to try and prevent spreading germs to the Sentinelese who are not exposed to the virus and germs the rest of the population are. It seems that he has thought this through, and not a rash decision. What are other factors that we should consider before reaching out to this group?