

## **Lessons from One Man's Conversion and Call**

**Acts 9:1-31**

**January 14, 2024**

**Pastor Jay Victory**

GOOD MORNING. GLAD YOU ARE HERE TODAY! Why you are here may vary. Maybe it's because your spouse or parent said you were going (they can be very motivating), maybe it's because it's Sunday and this is "what people do on Sundays," maybe it's because you are a Jesus follower.

Or maybe it's because you are not a Jesus follower but you are looking for purpose or answers to some of life's questions, and you figured this would be a good place to start. Regardless of why you're here, I'm confident God is capable of meeting you where you are this morning.

WHY WE MEET? As Jesus followers, we meet together each week to encourage and fellowship with one another, to acknowledge God through worship by singing, by giving of the resources we've been blessed with to be used in ministry, and to open up the Bible to learn together about God, his character, and His plan for our lives.

It is this last part that we begin now. As a kid and periodic worship service attender, I used to think this portion of the service was some sort of penance we had to endure to get on God's good side and have a shot at getting into heaven...and if you wanted extra insurance, you threw in Sunday School and a 20 into the offering plate. Even though we did not have instruments, the singing was cool, but this part was not high on my excitement meter.

But that was before I went from attending church to accepting Jesus and being the church. Then, if the message giver was prepared, this time became an opportunity to learn about God and His will for our lives. It's a significant perspective change.

To get started, let's pray and open the Bible together this morning. We will see what God has for us today. We will be in Acts chapter 9.

We were introduced to a Jewish pharisee named Saul a few weeks ago. He was present at Stephen's death, and we see in Acts 8:3 that he became a "ravager of the church." He put men and women who were part of the early church into prison. We see him continue this effort today. If you have your Bible, please open it with me.

### **I. Saul, The Man With A Plan, Meets Jesus (Acts 9:1-9)**

**1 Meanwhile, 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.**

Saul was “that guy.” If there was a person in this region who people thought would never be a Christian, it was Saul. He wanted to see every man and woman who were people of “The Way” imprisoned.

People of the Way was an early description of those who believed Jesus was the Son of God. Jesus had said He was “The Way, The Truth, and The Life.” Only later were they described as Christians (followers/disciples).

Saul was the type of person who was completely sold out to what he was doing and what he believed to be true. In this case, it resulted in the deaths of people who believed differently than he did.

Have you ever been there? Trucking in a different direction, and Jesus is not on your radar except as someone other people follow? You’re solely focused on what you’ve come to believe will fulfill you or make you happy.

It may sound weird to say we can relate to Saul here. Not many of us have set out to jail people who believed differently than we do. But Saul was doing his own thing, and it was hurting some people around him. And he was not interested in anyone else’s views. Can we relate to that? Then BAM! God interrupted.

**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?” he 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 Then 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.**

DECISION TIME IS NOT ALWAYS EASY FOR US.

Jesus definitely interrupted Saul’s regularly scheduled program! He did a super natural, miraculous (this was after Jesus had been put to death) intervention on the road to Damascus.

The struggle for Saul was obviously difficult. He was blind and did not eat or drink for three days.

It’s not always easy to lay down one life or path and pick up another. It can be a struggle unless we are absolutely at the bottom because we are tempted to stay with what is familiar.

Not everyone will have a blinding Damascus road experience. But the Bible says every human alive is pursued by a God. Our hearts have a conviction that something is missing and not right.

This means each of us comes to that fork in the road where we hear the invitation through the gospel and have the chance to respond. Some accept quickly, and others struggle for years.

But the important note here is that God does show up, and we have the free will to choose whether to accept His offer. If you are unfamiliar with this offer, I encourage you to read the following verses: John 3:16; Romans 3:23; Romans 6:23; Romans 5:8; Romans 10:9-10; Romans 10:13

FREE WILL VS FOREKNOWLEDGE. Now, you may notice this verse and what follows do not include the notion of free will, though we do eventually see God's foreknowledge.

Here, Jesus is more like Mr. George when someone walks on his freshly mopped floors "Go on, git!" Someone else can tackle the other if we go through Romans:) I'll be in the back eating popcorn. Let's pick back up with Saul and how God uses Christians in this journey

## **II. A Helping Hand Along the Way (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 said.**

**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 he can 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."**

IT'S OKAY TO HAVE QUESTIONS! BUT IN THE END WE NEED TO TRUST GOD'S LEADING. I absolutely love Ananias' response. Umm, God, I know I said, "Here am I," but have you met this guy? He's the one arresting people who follow you and would prefer they all die, and you want me to lay hands on him and pray for him?

"Just wanted to be absolutely sure I heard you correctly, God!" Ananias loved Jesus, but he wanted some clarification!

As Christians, we need to realize God sees things from a different perspective. He sees what can be in someone's life whether we can see it or not. Our job is simple obedience when the opportunity arises.

GOD'S PART VS OUR PART. It's also important to realize that it's not our job to judge or to save. Later in scripture, we can see this in Saul's (now Paul's) own words.

**I Corinthians 3:5-8 - What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? They are servants through whom you believed, and each has the role the Lord has given. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.**

**So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. Now the one planting and the one watering are one in purpose, and each will receive his own reward according to his own labor.**

**15 But the Lord said to him, “Go! For this man is My chosen instrument to take My name to Gentiles, kings, and the Israelites.**

WE CAN TRUST GOD KNOWS WHAT HE’S DOING. Verse 15 shows one of the reasons why we can trust God. “My chosen instrument and he will take (spread the good news) to Gentiles, kings, and Israelites.” God knew what would happen and that He would do it through Paul.

And Saul did exactly that - He was the apostle credited with taking the gospel to the Gentiles (non-Jews...that would include most of us today); we will see in the following passages he spoke in synagogues (the place of worship for Jews) whenever entering a city, and he wrote 13 of the 27 books in the New Testament.

It’s estimated Saul clocked over 10,000 miles during his four missionary journeys. We can trust that God knows what He is doing.

GOD DOES NOT SAY THE ROAD WILL BE EASY

**16 I will show him how much he must suffer for My name!” Another version reads, “I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”**

This verse hit me right in the feels. God knew the difference he was going to make through Saul, but He also knew what Saul would face while doing it. God called Saul to make a difference, and He did so, knowing Saul would face significant opposition and trials.

Again, unsurprisingly, we find it turned out just like God said it would. Paul’s own words in 2 Corinthians 11:24-27

**24 Five times, I received 39 lashes from Jews. 25 Three times, I was beaten with rods by the Romans. Once, I was stoned by my enemies. Three times, I was shipwrecked. I have spent a night and a day in the open sea.**

**26 On frequent journeys, I faced dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my own people, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the open country, dangers on the sea, and dangers among false brothers;**

**27 labor and hardship, many sleepless nights, hunger and thirst, often without food, cold, and lacking clothing.**

WHAT ABOUT US TODAY? This passage is not about things we face because we live in a fallen world, dumb decisions (others or our own), or general hardships that are a part of this

life. Its focus is on what Saul would face because he followed Jesus and was called to this path.

God does not say, "Follow me, and it's going to be a walk in the park. It will be easy; you'll be exempt from loss, hurt, sickness, and challenges." No, He promises to be with us, to sustain us, to be the Hope and Peace in the midst of the journey.

Now, you may be thinking, "You are not doing a great job convincing me to follow God!" Very few of us will face the kind of trials Saul faced, but the choice to follow Jesus is not a free pass to a trouble-free life. In fact, this false belief causes many to question their faith when troubles arise.

**BUT OH WHAT A JOURNEY** Think about it. What would Paul's life have looked like if he rejected Jesus and stayed on the other path? The people who would have been hurt, killed, or imprisoned as a result? Most likely, none of us today would know his name. Look at what God did through Saul in the midst of these hardships.

**FROM MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AND JOURNEY OF FOLLOWING JESUS.** Bronie and I have experienced great joy in this journey. Salvation, dear friends all over the world, weddings, births, life changes, healed marriages, and the absolute privilege of walking the path Jesus put us on.

But not all of it's been easy. Moving away from family, inner-city ministry challenges,, tornadoes, and hurricanes, and living below the poverty level as we stepped out on faith more than once.

And the call to vocational ministry on top of it. Who can prepare to walk with people through some of their toughest times without God? Nursing homes, hospital rooms, car crashes, unimaginable tragedies, navigating church splits, differences of opinions among sincere church members, stretches where 40-hour weeks would be like a vacation, late-night phone calls, and don't get me started on deacons meetings.

But right now, standing here, I would not trade Jesus or this life for any other. What about you, Jesus follower? Has it been easy? No, not if you've been on this journey any length of time. But can you imagine your life without Jesus?

Without that hope? Without the purpose? Without the peace in your heart? The lives God's touched because you surrendered to Him...including yours. It's not always easy, but it's always worth it. **ANANIAS WAS OBEDIENT, AND SAUL WAS SAVED**

**17 So Ananias left and entered the house. Then 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 can 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 days.**

Saul accepted Jesus; he could see again and made his decision public through baptism. If you've made a decision to accept and follow Jesus but not made it public, we have a baptism service coming in February! Let's look at the last part of this passage as we finish.

SUMMARY/INVITATION. I hope you've enjoyed our time together today, but you might be wondering, what now? If you've already accepted Jesus, you can glean whatever stuck out and apply it to your life. You can read the passages mentioned on your own and better understand them and the truths.

If you are one of those seekers we mentioned at the beginning, or you're on your own road to Damascus, and would like to talk to someone, we have our own Ananias' right out the back doors to my left, and they'd love to talk with or pray with you today. But please know God's invitation is not limited to this time or this building. We'd be glad to talk to you anytime. Let's pray.