
ACTS OF THE APOSTLES



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COMMUNITY BIBLE CHURCH
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SERMON RECAP

Pastor Gary drew our attention to one of the most overlooked questions in the story of Saul of Tarsus: How could a man so full of Scripture be so empty of love? Saul had been trained from childhood in the Torah, steeped in Scripture, shaped by religious discipline, and yet he became a persecutor of the church. His life reminds us that it is possible to know the words of God without having a heart that is surrendered to the voice of God.

The message was not given to shame anyone with a complicated religious past, but to invite us into a deeper and more personal walk with Christ. Some of us grew up around Scripture, church, rules, expectations, or religious systems, but never experienced the tenderness of knowing God personally. Like Saul, we may need the Lord to interrupt us, humble us, and give us new eyes, not just to see the world around us, but to see the condition of our own hearts before Him.

The pastoral invitation was simple and powerful: Ask God to reveal Himself to you. Pray, “Lord, if You are real, reveal Yourself to me.” Pray, “Enlighten the eyes of my heart.” Pray, “Show me where I am in relationship to You.” God is not finished with us. No matter our age, past, pain, or spiritual background, He still has depth to form in us, people to help us, burdens to teach us, and a new chapter to write with us.

STUDY GUIDE

Key Points

- Scripture must be received by the heart, not merely stored in the mind. Saul knew the Old Testament deeply, but the Word had not yet produced humility, love, or surrender in him.
- Spiritual emptiness is not always the absence of religion. Sometimes emptiness is being full of pride, resentment, fear, control, or self-righteousness, things that crowd out the voice of God.
- Jesus identifies with His people. When Saul persecuted Christians, Jesus asked, “Why are you persecuting Me?” To harm Christ’s people is to oppose Christ Himself.
- God sometimes uses darkness, dependence, and suffering to create spiritual depth. Saul’s blindness and three days without food or drink became a death to self-moment before his new life and calling began.
- The Christian life is meant to move from outside in religion to inside out transformation. Paul’s later writings focus deeply on the inner person, the heart, love, wisdom, discernment, and spiritual sight.
- We need faithful people like Ananias and Barnabas. God uses courageous, encouraging believers to help restore, disciple, challenge, and strengthen others.

Key Scripture

Primary Sermon Text

- Acts 8:1 to 3 — Saul consents to Stephen’s death and ravages the church.
- Acts 9:1 to 19 — Saul encounters the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, is blinded, humbled, prayed over by Ananias, and baptized.

Verses Mentioned or Directly Alluded to by Pastor Gary

- Isaiah 55:11 — God's Word does not return void but accomplishes His purpose.
- Acts 26:9 to 11 — Paul recounts persecuting Christians and trying to force them to blaspheme.
- Acts 9:4 to 6 — Jesus asks Saul, "Why are you persecuting Me?"
- Acts 9:15 to 16 — Saul is chosen by God and will suffer for the name of Jesus.
- Ephesians 1:18 to 19 — "The eyes of your heart" enlightened to know hope, inheritance, and power.
- Ephesians 3:16 to 18 — Strengthened in the inner being and rooted in love.
- Philippians 1:9 to 12 — Love abounding in knowledge and depth of insight.
- Colossians 3:16 — Let the message of Christ dwell richly among you.
- 1 Corinthians 10:4 — "That rock was Christ."
- Philippians 3:14 — Pressing on toward the goal for the prize in Christ Jesus.
- Acts 2:17 / Joel 2:28 — Dreams, visions, and the outpouring of the Spirit.
- Matthew 7:7 — Ask, seek, and knock.
- Ephesians 2:10 — God prepared good works in advance for us to do.
- Genesis 3:8 to 9 — God asks Adam, "Where are you?"
- John 10:30 — "I and the Father are one."
- John 17:21 to 23 — Christ in His people and His people in Him.
- Galatians 6:2 — Carry one another's burdens.
- 1 Corinthians 8:1 — Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.
- Psalm 119:11 — Hiding God's Word in the heart.
- Matthew 13:1 to 23 — The parable of the soils; the Word must take root in good soil.
- John 16:33 — In this world we will have trouble, but Christ has overcome the world.

Other Relevant Verses

- 2 Corinthians 5:17 — This verse expounds upon the transformation seen in Saul's conversion: "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation."
- Romans 12:2 — A thematic tie to the sermon's call for inside out transformation: God renews the mind and reshapes our discernment.
- Hebrews 4:12 — A general thematic tie showing that God's Word is living and active, able to pierce beyond surface religion into the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

DEVOTIONAL MATERIAL

Day 1: Full of Scripture, Empty of Love

Reflection Question

Where have I confused knowing about God with truly surrendering to God?

Reading

Acts 8:1 to 3

“Saul approved of their killing him... Saul began to destroy the church.”

Thought

Saul's story is deeply sobering because he was not an irreligious man. He was not spiritually uninformed. He was trained, disciplined, zealous, and deeply committed to what he believed was faithfulness to God. Yet his zeal had become violent. His knowledge had become detached from love. His confidence had become cruelty.

In the first century Jewish world, Pharisees were respected for their devotion to the Law. They studied intensely and sought to protect Israel's holiness. But when devotion to truth becomes separated from humility before God, even biblical knowledge can be weaponized. Saul's life shows us that spiritual formation is not measured only by information retained, but by fruit produced.

Pastor Gary pressed this question into our hearts: How could someone have so much of the Word and yet be so empty? The answer is that the Word must not merely strike the mind; it must take root in the heart. Scripture is not meant to make us proud, harsh, or superior. It is meant to make us more like Jesus.

Challenge

Ask God to show you one area where your knowledge of truth needs to become obedience, humility, or love.

Day 2: Why Are You Persecuting Me?

Reflection Question

Do I understand how deeply Jesus identifies with His people?

Reading

Acts 9:3 to 5

“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?”

“Who are You, Lord?” Saul asked.

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”

Thought

On the road to Damascus, Saul expected to confront Christians. Instead, he was confronted by Christ. Jesus did not say, “Why are you persecuting My followers?” He said, “Why are you persecuting Me?” This is one of the most profound truths in the New Testament: Jesus so identifies with His people that to touch them is to touch Him.

For Saul, this would have been devastating. He believed he was defending God. Instead, he discovered he was opposing God. The risen Christ stopped him in his tracks and revealed that his religious mission was rebellion.

This moment also gives great comfort to wounded believers. Jesus is not distant from the suffering of His people. He does not merely observe persecution, grief, betrayal, or pain. He identifies with His own. The church is not just an organization; it is the body of Christ.

Challenge

Pray through your relationships today. Ask God to show you where you need to treat another believer with greater tenderness because they belong to Christ.

Day 3: The Mercy of Being Stopped

Reflection Question

Where might God be using limitation, waiting, or dependence to get my attention?

Reading

Acts 9:8 to 9

“Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing... For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.”

Thought

Saul entered Damascus not as a conquering religious authority, but as a blind man being led by the hand. The man who came to bind Christians now had to be helped by others. The man who thought he saw clearly now could not see at all.

In Scripture, three days often signals death, waiting, and resurrection hope. Jonah was in the fish three days. Jesus was in the tomb three days. Saul's three days of blindness were a kind of burial. His old life was being put to death. His self-confidence, violence, pride, and religious superiority were being confronted in the dark.

Pastor Gary described this as Saul being unable to see outside himself, but finally able to see within. Sometimes God's mercy comes by stopping us. Not every closed door, season of weakness, or moment of dependence is punishment. Sometimes it is the grace of God creating space for repentance, surrender, and new sight.

Challenge

Identify one current limitation or frustration in your life. Instead of only asking God to remove it, ask Him what He wants to reveal through it.

Day 4: The Eyes of the Heart

Reflection Question

What would change if I asked God to help me see my life from the inside out?

Reading

Ephesians 1:18 to 19

“I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened...”

Thought

Years after Damascus, Paul prayed that believers would have “the eyes of your heart” enlightened. This phrase is not abstract religious language. Paul knew what it meant to have physical sight and still be spiritually blind. He knew what it meant to be stopped by Jesus and given a new way of seeing.

In the ancient world, the “heart” was not merely the place of emotions. It represented the center of the person, the will, desires, thoughts, motivations, and spiritual perception. To have the eyes of the heart enlightened means to see God, ourselves, others, and eternity with Spirit given clarity.

This is what Pastor Gary invited us to seek: not just more information, but deeper discernment. We need to see our spouse, children, grandchildren, neighbors, church, and future through the eyes of Christ. We need wisdom for the back nine of life. We need tenderness where we have grown hard. We need vision where we have become distracted.

Challenge

Pray in your own words around this theme: “Lord, enlighten the eyes of my heart.” Then write down one relationship or decision where you need His perspective.

Day 5: Brother Saul

Reflection Question

Who has God placed in my life to encourage, challenge, or restore me?

Reading

Acts 9:17 to 18

“Placing his hands on Saul, he said, ‘Brother Saul...’ Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes.”

Thought

Ananias had every reason to fear Saul. Saul’s reputation was violent and dangerous. Yet God told Ananias to go, and Ananias obeyed. His first recorded words to Saul are stunning: “Brother Saul.” Before Saul had written letters, planted churches, or become known as Paul the apostle, Ananias addressed him according to grace.

This moment shows the courage required for Christian community. Ananias did not excuse Saul’s past, but he trusted God’s work in Saul’s life. He laid hands on a man whose hands were stained with the suffering of believers. That is not sentimental kindness; that is Spirit empowered obedience.

Pastor Gary also reminded us of Barnabas, the “son of encouragement,” who later came alongside Paul. Every Saul needs an Ananias. Every Paul needs a Barnabas. We need people who will pray for us, speak truth to us, encourage us, and help us walk into God’s calling.

Challenge

Reach out to one person who has been an Ananias or Barnabas in your life. Thank them. Then ask God who you might encourage this week.

SMALL GROUP RESOURCES

Opening

Welcome everyone warmly. This week's conversation centers on Saul's conversion and the difference between religious information and heart transformation.

Begin with a brief time of prayer using prompts such as:

- Ask God to make the group honest and humble.
- Invite the Holy Spirit to reveal Christ personally.
- Ask for courage to discuss not just what we know, but where we are with God.

Thematic Recap

Pastor Gary challenged us to consider how Saul could know so much Scripture and yet be so far from the heart of God. Saul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus was not only a conversion; it was a death to his old way of seeing, striving, and relating to God.

Core Message Highlights

- Saul had biblical knowledge but lacked spiritual sight.
- Jesus personally identifies with His people.
- God used blindness, dependence, and waiting to humble Saul.
- True transformation moves from the head to the heart.
- Spiritual depth is often formed through pain, surrender, and dependence.
- We need people like Ananias and Barnabas to help us grow.

Icebreaker

Think of a time when you misunderstood something important, but later "saw it clearly." What changed your perspective?

This can be lighthearted or serious. The goal is to help the group begin thinking about the theme of spiritual sight.

Scripture Exploration

Passage 1: Acts 9:1 to 9 – Saul Meets the Risen Jesus

Discussion Prompts

1. What stands out to you about Saul's condition before Jesus confronts him?
2. Why is it significant that Jesus says, "Why are you persecuting Me?"
3. What do Saul's words, "Who are You, Lord?" reveal about his spiritual condition?
4. Why do you think God allowed Saul to be blind for three days?
5. What might Saul have been forced to confront during those days of darkness?
6. Where have you experienced God stopping you to redirect you?

Passage 2: Ephesians 1:18 to 19 – The Eyes of the Heart

Discussion Prompts

1. What do you think Paul means by "the eyes of your heart"?
2. How is spiritual sight different from religious knowledge?
3. What are the things Paul wants believers to "know" in this passage?
4. Where do you need God to give you greater clarity right now?
5. How can a believer grow in discernment without becoming proud or harsh?

Passage 3: Acts 9:10 to 18 – Ananias and Brother Saul

Discussion Prompts

1. Why was Ananias hesitant to go to Saul?
2. What does Ananias' obedience teach us about trusting God with difficult people?
3. Why are the words "Brother Saul" so powerful?
4. How does this passage challenge the way we view people with painful pasts?
5. Who has been an Ananias or Barnabas in your spiritual journey?
6. Who might God be asking you to encourage, pray for, or help restore?

Grand Synthesis Prompt

Looking at all three passages together, how does God move a person from spiritual blindness to spiritual sight, from isolation to community, and from religious activity to heart level transformation?

Application: Growing Personal and Communal Prayer

This week, invite the group to practice prayers that are honest, simple, and Spirit led.

Personal Prayer Practices

- Pray daily: "Lord, reveal Yourself to me."
- Ask God to show you the true condition of your heart.
- Pray Ephesians 1:18 in your own words.
- Sit quietly for a few minutes after praying; do not rush away.
- Journal anything God brings to mind: a person, conviction, encouragement, Scripture, or next step.

Communal Prayer Practices

- Pray for one another by name.
- Ask group members, "Where do you need spiritual sight right now?"
- Practice listening before giving advice.
- Encourage confession without condemnation.
- Pray for courage to obey God like Ananias.
- Pray for the group to become a safe place for spiritual growth, honesty, and restoration.

Closing

Create space for prayer needs.

Invite group members to share:

- Where they need God to reveal Himself.
- Where they feel spiritually stuck or blind.
- Where they need courage, humility, or healing.
- Who they are praying for that seems far from God.

Closing Prayer Prompt

Invite someone to close by praying around these themes:

- God revealing Himself personally.
- The eyes of our hearts being enlightened.
- Healing from empty or harmful religion.
- Courage to surrender like Saul.
- Obedience to encourage others like Ananias and Barnabas.
- A fresh sense of adventure with Jesus.

Leader Notes

- Create safety early. This sermon may stir memories of painful religious experiences, spiritual manipulation, or family pressure. Let people share honestly without rushing to correct or fix them.
- Keep the focus on the heart. The goal is not to debate Saul's background or Pharisaic training in detail, but to ask: "Where am I with God?"
- Avoid shame-based discussion. Pastor Gary's message was an invitation, not a condemnation. Keep pointing people toward the mercy of Jesus.
- Honor different spiritual journeys. Some group members may have grown up in church; others may be new to faith. Both can experience spiritual blindness, and both can receive fresh sight from Christ.
- Encourage practical next steps. If someone feels convicted, help them identify one step: prayer, confession, reconciliation, Scripture reading, counseling, baptism, or joining community.
- Leave room for silence. Questions about the heart often need time. Do not be afraid of quiet moments.
- Model vulnerability. Leaders can set the tone by sharing appropriately about areas where they are still asking God for sight, humility, or deeper love.