

From Religious to Rescued—Acts 9:1-9—11/23/25
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Open your Bibles to Acts 9 as we continue our study & come today to the Damascus Road experience of the Apostle Paul.

Of course, he was called by his Jewish name Saul at this point.

Let's read that whole account in Acts 9:1-31 & then we'll walk through the first 9 verses in detail. [READ]

This is a unique conversion story & yet it illustrates vital truths related to the Gospel that have innumerable applications for us.

The appearance of the Risen Christ & divine messages are unique, but the change of a religious man into a rescued man offers much to apply.

And the wonder of Saul's story is that it gives hope for anyone.

Think of it—who or what have you been praying for that is draining your hope or invading your heart with despair?

Who have you been witnessing to or standing for truth against or pleading with that is just crushing you somehow?

Or in broader circles, do you wonder if the terrible persecution of believers in Nigeria or elsewhere will ever change?

Do you look at the opposition to truth in our city or state or nation tempt you to dread what's next & avoid conversation?

I'm praying that our look at Acts 9:1-9 can meet those challenges.

I am praying for supernatural hope for such trials as we consider 3 lessons from Christ's work with Saul today.

We'll outline 3 transcendent & powerful lessons from what God has revealed about Saul's encounter with the Risen Christ in Acts 9:1-9.

The first of those is to learn from who Saul was.

You know this but we need let it sink in freshly again.

So takeaway point #1 to note—learn from who Saul was.

Read Acts 9:1-2 again. [READ]

Saul's life breath—his continual inhale & exhale—was threats & killing, pursuing violence & murder.

That's wicked, isn't it?—that's scary to think of someone's existence intent on harming people & taking their lives.

But that was Saul's opposition against the disciples of the Lord.

That word disciple is the word for a learner, for a pupil or apprentice who is receiving instruction & developing as a follower.

And these were disciples of the Lord, & Luke has repeatedly made clear that Lord is Jesus.

So this is a term for all true Christians—not a special class of advanced Christians—but a description for all who trust Christ.

Saul had a visceral hatred for those followers of Jesus.

And the word still indicates that this was not new, that this was an extended life pattern.

And you know that from studying prior chapters of Acts, right?

You remember Saul at the stoning of Stephen.

As Acts 7:58 says, *When they had driven him [Stephen] out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul.*

Then Acts 8:1 adds that *Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.*

Since Acts 22:3 says Saul was from the region of Cilicia, he may have been among those debating Stephen in Acts 6.

Whatever level his involvement, Acts 8:1 says Saul thought it was good together with others to kill Stephen.

That's a more literal translation of Saul's hearty agreement.

Saul may have been among those who slandered Stephen & set him up to be killed as the first Christian martyr.

And Saul had not been sorry for that—it ignited him for more.

So Acts 8:3 says *Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.*

He was vicious, like a wild animal tearing its prey, with no regard for people's homes or for proper treatment of women.

Saul's approach was different from his teacher Gamaliel who had advised in Acts 5:38-39 not to persecute Jesus' followers.

Gamaliel said to stay away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or action is of men, it will be overthrown; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be found fighting against God.

But Saul did not heed that counsel as Stephen's death began even greater pursuit to harass & inflict suffering & death on Christians.

That's what persecution is—it's chasing after people to oppress them with mental & emotional & financial & physical anguish.

That persecution in Acts 8 scattered believers & Saul was not happy that some escaped being captured & punished.

That's why Saul went to the high priest—to get authorization to chase the Christians who fled Jerusalem.

The high priest, which would've still been Caiaphas at that point, would've had some measure of authority over other synagogues.

Roman rule had allowed some measure of governance that flowed outward from the high priest to surrounding regions.

Letters from the high priest would authorize binding prisoners to extradite them to Jerusalem for prosecution.

Having gone to the high priest, Saul asked for such letters.

He wanted to go to Damascus, one of the cities of the Decapolis where many Jews lived & where some followers of Jesus had spread.

Damascus would have been between 135-160 miles northeast of Jerusalem, requiring a week of travel in that time.

Saul's intense zeal pressed him to Damascus as a capital city of Syria where Christians might influence others toward Jesus.

His purpose was to search for anyone belonging to the Way, another reference to the followers of Jesus.

That description fits with Jesus' words in John 14:6, that He is the way, the truth & the life & no one comes to the Father except by Him.

It's the way of God in Acts 18:26 & the way of truth in 2nd Peter 2:2 & the way into the Holy Place in Hebrews 10:19-20.

Saul was vigilantly hunting to see if he might find anyone of that way.

And again, Saul had no regard for the care of women in his vicious search-and-destroy efforts.

If he found anyone—men or women—he would bring them to Jerusalem already having been tied up & confined.

This man was tirelessly & aggressively evil.

He later spoke of his senseless rage in 1st Timothy 1:13 by saying he was *formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor*.

In Acts 22:4, he said he had *persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons*.

In Acts 26:9-11, he said, *“I thought to myself that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And this is just what I did in Jerusalem; not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them. And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme; and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities.”*

You would not like this guy—think about it—why would someone do such things to people he did not even know?

Why would he be so furiously enraged & want to people put to death?

He did it religiously because he thought he was right.

As he later said in Galatians 1:14, he was *more extremely zealous for [his] ancestral traditions*.

In John 16:2, Jesus said everyone like him *who kills you [will] think that he is offering service to God*.

But remember that what we have described is what Saul WAS—& then after Jesus rescued Saul, he lamented the evil he had done.

In 1st Corinthians 15:9, he later wrote that he was *the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle because [he] persecuted the church of God*.

So stop & ponder a 1st lesson from what Saul was.

Saul was likely the greatest enemy of Jesus & His church in that day.

But even the most aggressive persecutor could not stop the spread of the Gospel & the glory of Jesus’ name.

We’ve seen that theme in Acts repeatedly—we’ve seen the unstoppable power of the Gospel & Jesus’ name.

And here we see that Jesus conquered His chief antagonist.

God answered the prayers of Stephen for his persecutors as Saul was impacted by Stephen’s preaching & passing into glory.

That impact did not appear immediately, but it soaked in & could not be silenced.

So when we are tempted to give up or write off some aggressive adversary of the truth today, stop & remember what Saul was.

If God could save this man Saul—and if God could save me & you—then God could save anyone He wants to.

Even if people react angrily to the truth, even if they are blasphemers & violent aggressors, what people need is the truth spoken faithfully.

And then we pray & trust God to do His work.

Learning from what Saul was can give us **hope** in the character & power of God to overcome whatever controls the hearts of others.

May God help us learn from what Saul was & not lose hope.

And be clear—our hope is not in other people—it's not the potential for hard hearts to soften themselves or dead souls to initiate new life.

Our hope is in **who Jesus is**—our hope is in Jesus as the Risen Lord who crushes human pride & opens blind eyes.

Our hope is in Christ alone & He has said His grace is sufficient for us.

We see the robust power & trustworthiness of that hope in what we read next in verses 3-6—look there again. [READ]

We said **1st, that we can learn from what Saul WAS** in all his opposition to Jesus as Lord & Christ.

But that can only give us hope because we know who Jesus IS.

So as a way to frame a 2nd lesson, let's learn from who Jesus is.

Takeaway point #2—learn from who Jesus is.

Jesus is ALIVE—He had truly risen from the dead as the many witnesses had testified & as His early followers proclaimed.

Jesus had been a real man—that was indisputable.

And He had performed miracles so that news of Him had spread & He had taught as One having authority & not like the scribes & Pharisees.

But the Jewish leaders had opposed Jesus because His authority was a threat to their own positions & profits.

They had hated Him without a cause & Saul had joined that rejection.

Jesus had claimed to be God the Son, sent from the Father as the Promised Savior & Messiah & King.

But they unjustly crucified Him & tried to stop Him from rising again.

And Saul had joined their effort to suppress any mention of His name as the Jewish leaders had ordered in Acts 5:40.

But Jesus rose & is alive & unstoppable.

Death could not hold Him & Saul's most zealous pursuits could not hinder His Gospel from spreading.

Jesus was at the right hand of the Father, just as Stephen had seen & shared in his dying words.

Then Jesus proved that again by appearing to Saul himself.

And we know Jesus appeared visibly to Saul because verses 17 & 27 say so, as do Acts 22:14; 26:16 & 1st Corinthians 9:1; 15:8.

Saul saw the glorified Jesus that he had formerly been denying.

And therefore—all that Saul was believing & fighting to uphold was a **LIE**—he was shown that he was wrong about Jesus.

Verse 3 says in Saul's traveling, he was nearing Damascus—but the purpose of his journey was about to completely change.

That change was initiated by Jesus appearing from heaven in shining, radiant glory as in previous OT appearances of God.

A light out of heaven surrounded Saul & he could not escape.

Since Saul knew the OT Scriptures, he recognized the divine origin of this light that knocked him to the ground.

In that humbled posture, Saul heard a voice directly stating his name twice as when God appeared to others before.

And then the question was why Saul was persecuting this divine voice.

Since verse 5 reveals that the divine voice was Jesus, He was saying that Saul was persecuting HIM.

Jesus did not say Saul was persecuting Jesus' disciples or followers or the church or the people of the Way.

He equated persecution of the church with persecution of Him.

Jesus also equated treatment of His people with treatment of Him in passages like Matthew 18:5-6 & 25:40 & Luke 10:16.

So remember that perspective when people oppose you for speaking biblical truth & exalting Jesus.

Remember that He is with you, as He promised, as you bear His name.

He is sovereign over every soul & He will do what is right.

Remember that reality of His supremacy in His appearance to Saul.

It's possible for the term 'Lord' in verse 5 to mean 'sir', but in response to such heavenly power, Saul surely meant 'Lord.'

He knew he needed to call upon the name of the Lord to be saved because he would have known Joel 2:32 & other OT passages.

So he asked to be sure of that name, to know who this Lord is.

And Jesus answered with divine certainty & emphasis—I, I am Jesus.

Jesus was the One speaking from heaven & the One Saul was persecuting & Jesus was the One to submit to & obey.

In contrast to Saul's former plans—note the word 'but' to begin verse 6—in contrast to the former path, Jesus issued new commands.

He said get up & go into the city & await further instruction.

The last phrase of verse 6 is a divine necessity—it will be told you what is necessary to do.

There are no options here—it is necessary to obey the commands & to await further commands.

It's not that obedience merited Saul's new life—it's that Jesus merited Saul's new trust.

Jesus is the Sovereign Lord & Saul had met Him undeniably.

Read verse 7 for objective evidence from those around him. [READ]

Saul's ongoing traveling companions had been made to stand still by this & they were silenced in awe.

They did not see Jesus appear & they did not hear His specific words, but they had seen the light & heard the thundering sound.

We know that from the other accounts where Paul told this to the Sanhedrin in Acts 22 & King Agrippa in Acts 26.

In Acts 22:6-9, Paul said *as I was on my way, approaching Damascus about noontime, a very bright light suddenly flashed from heaven all around me, & I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?' & I answered, 'Who are You, Lord?' & He said to me, 'I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting.' & those who were with me saw the light, to be sure, but did not understand the voice of the One who was speaking to me.*

Notice this was at noontime & everyone saw the light & heard something, but did not understand the voice.

In Acts 26:13-14, he said at midday, *O King, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining all around me & those who were journeying with me. And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew dialect, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.*

They all fell to the ground, so the divine power was obvious.

Saul was confronted with the reality that Jesus is the true God he was opposing & so he had been fighting against God as Gamaliel warned.

Yet since God had initiated His saving grace, as Peter had preached in Acts 2:38, Saul needed to repent.

Saul needed to turn from his rejection of the true Messiah of Israel & the One Hope for all history & surrender in faith to Jesus as Lord.

In His mercy, Jesus humbled Saul & revealed his errors & evils to lead him to repentance.

And that mercy is not subject to any other powers.

The grace of God in Christ is not smaller than any other forces operating in the physical & spiritual universe.

Jesus is the Lord & Christ & He made sure Saul knew that.

So we can take hope in this same sovereign Lord Jesus.

We can **learn from who Jesus is** because He is **still** the sovereign Lord & saving Christ.

Jesus' resurrection was real & He is the Head of His church who is still conquering the hearts of rebels to save them.

He may not make such sight-and-sound appearances now that we have the completed NT, but He is still not to be trifled with.

He will accomplish his sovereign will & we can trust Him.

We can trust Him with the challenges we face & with the burdens we carry & with the enemies who oppose Him.

We can have hope & we can keep testifying & we can keep praying for Him to show His glory as He has designed.

And listen—we can be warned to stop resisting Him, to stop opposing Him, to stop ignoring His supremacy & saving commands.

Why would anyone keep fighting such a losing battle?

Why continue living as a loser who will finally be punished one day?

Hear this & please submit to Jesus in obedient faith.

Trust & follow Him & throw off every excuse or hindrance.

And know that He can save you—He can change you.

You are not a tougher case or worse enemy than Saul was.

Learn today (1) from what Saul was & (2) from who Jesus is.

And then 3rdly today, **learn from what salvation does.**

Takeaway point #3—learn from what salvation does.

We know more about what was going on in Saul's heart in this experience from other passages, but we'll unpack verses 7-9 first.

He knew he had met the Lord & he learned that Lord is Jesus.

But we know that Saul submitted to the Lord here because he did not disobey the heavenly vision—he did not reject the commands given.

If Saul's heart was still raging against Jesus, he could've been like the Sodomites who continued to beat against Lot's house even after the angel blinded them in judgment.

If Saul's heart was not humbled here, he would've continued to want to persecute Jesus' followers.

But it was unmistakable & undeniable that God had spoken.

Saul had been kicking against the prods of God in his conscience.

But struck with blindness in the light of Christ, he was humbled to realize his spiritual blindness & submit to Jesus.

Read verses 8-9 to see his obedient response. [READ]

Jesus said to get up & Saul got up.

But then having opened his eyes, he was seeing nothing & therefore could not obey the command to enter the city on his own.

Since he could not see how to go into the city, he depended on others to lead him by the hand to bring him into Damascus.

That's completely different from how Saul planned to enter Damascus because now Saul himself was completely different.

It appears he fasted while he waited for further instructions.

Verse 9 says three days were passing as he was not seeing & he did not eat nor drink.

That was likely a spiritual response of submission & seeking.

It reflects the humility of heart & inability to do anything to fix his condition physically & spiritually.

It reflects the spiritual bankruptcy & desperation he felt.

Everything he had so religiously lived for & chased & championed & served & spread had all turned out to be false & empty.

That's what he later wrote in his letter to the Philippians when he described what was going on inside him.

Acts 9 describes what was going on around him & Philippians 3 describes the transfer of trust from himself to Christ.

Philippians 3 describes that salvation as coming freely by faith & changing people from the inside out.

In Philippians 3:3-11, Saul wrote that we *worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh, although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless. But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.*

When he saw Jesus Christ in the perfect glory of who He really is, Saul saw his own emptiness & he turned from his pride to humble faith in Christ.

It was not merely the dramatic encounter with the Risen Christ that changed Saul, it was the internal truth of the rubbish or waste of his own works that could not get him right with God.

It was the full merit of Jesus' righteous life & the full payment for sin of Jesus' death & the full assurance of the resurrection.

So Paul moved from external religion to internal transformation after being confronted with his rebellion & with Christ's supremacy.

And that's what salvation does—that's what God's Spirit does when He draws a sinner to life & faith in Jesus as Lord.

Salvation creates a heart humility & helplessness that turns to Christ.

As 1st Corinthians 1:18 says, *the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*

So 1st Corinthians 1:23-24 says *we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block & to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews & Greeks, Christ the power of God & the wisdom of God.*

Salvation is powerful because Jesus the Savior is powerful.

So learn from what Saul was, who Jesus is, & what salvation does.

May God help us to remember these lessons when we linger in hopelessness or stew in anger in response to difficult people.

Remember God's saving grace in Saul's conversion story & keep praying & standing firm & speaking truth.

Remember Stephen boldly proclaiming truth & praying for his persecutors & not knowing his impact on this man Saul.

Stephen will have his eternal heavenly reward.

So even when people don't listen or react in anger or get worse when we share truth, remember these lessons from Acts 9.

And if you think that you are too bad or your life is too wasted for God to care—then take in these lessons from Saul's conversion story.

Hear what Saul later wrote in his letter 1st Timothy 1:15—*It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ*

Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all.

God saves sinners through Jesus Christ.

God does not save people who think they are good & trust in themselves to have something to offer God to get to Him.

Rather, God accepts people who give up on their own works & efforts & receive all that Jesus is as their only hope now & forever.

God promises to freely count Jesus' life as righteousness & Jesus' death as the sin payment for everyone who trusts Him.

So turn from your self & sin to faith in Jesus today.

And if you do know Christ, proclaim Him & expect Him to work through both the blessings & the difficulties He brings.

Seek Him & serve Him & trust Him to use you as He wishes.

Remember the conversion story of Saul whom God made the Apostle Paul & let the lessons from those stick with you.

Pray with me as we close.