

# Better Call Saul

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Acts of Paul (Pt 1) #1 | April 16, 2023 | 8:00, 9:30, 11:00 AM | Preached by Steve Howell

## *A Call to Action*

*\*\*\* Prior to sermon, elders will present a video featuring the Search Team members who will help select the next senior minister at TCC.\*\*\**

As we think about and pray for the **future** of Tonganoxie Christian Church, we recognize that God has the final say in **selecting people** to serve. We ask Him to guide the process for our church, and we ask Him to give our Search Team wisdom as they move forward. We **don't expect a shining light** to come down from heaven or an **audible voice** to point out the man for the job...But maybe that's not too "out there" to wish for! In fact, in today's sermon passage, we'll **see God doing just that** as he selects a man to fill an important role in the development of the early church.

Let's pray and then dig into God's Word!

>> Pray.

## *Previously, in Acts...*

During the **opening weeks of 2023**, Ross began a sermon series on the book of Acts. He began with a look at "The Acts of Peter," covering much of Acts 1-15. His intention was to cover the entire book over the course of this year, breaking it up into a few different series, just for variety. Now...here we are...knee-deep in the book, and Ross decided not to see it through, moving to Colorado (Quitter...lol)

With or without him, though, our staff discussed the importance of **finishing** what we started. We started Acts, and we are going to finish Acts! So, this morning we launch the **second set of sermons** walking us through the Acts of the Apostles. Rather than focusing on Peter, now we will focus on a **pivotal figure** in church history: the **apostle Paul**.

The **Peter/Paul division** in Acts is a key feature of the book. You may recall some of the basics from our first go-round. The book of Acts comes as a sequel to the gospel of Luke. While Luke's gospel shared the story of Jesus -- his life, death, burial and resurrection -- his follow-up book shares more about the **Holy Spirit** and His ministry of establishing the **Church** in the aftermath of the gospels. We've discussed **many key events** so far in the book:

- Jesus **ascends** to heaven ([Acts 1](#))
- The **Holy Spirit** arrives on the Day of **Pentecost** ([Acts 2](#))
- **Spirit-empowered followers** of Jesus build the **church** ([Acts 2-7](#), [8](#), [12](#))
  - ...in the face of **external opposition**
  - ...in the face of **internal opposition**

- The good news spreads and expands to **new groups** ([Acts 8](#), [10-11](#))
  - This expansion follows Jesus' thesis statement in [Acts 1:8](#)

*"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."*
  - So far, **JERUSALEM** and **JUDEA/SAMARIA** have heard the gospel...with more soon to come.
- The gospel has expanded **beyond the Jewish believers** and includes **Gentiles** (cf. Peter and Cornelius)
  - This expansion is driven by **persecution**...
  - After the martyrdom of Stephen, anti-Christian sentiment flares up. [Acts 8:1](#)

*"... 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."*
  - One person is explicitly named as a perpetrator in this persecution. Note the opening part of verse one: [Acts 8:1](#) *"And Saul approved of his execution..."*

Saul is going to be the key figure moving forward. The story temporarily jumps back to Peter, and like the passing of a baton in a relay race, the text of Acts has a few chapters where we are intertwined with the stories of both Peter and Saul (or as he would later be known, Paul). But eventually the book's focus changes to -- and stays on -- Paul only.

Chapter 9, the focus of today's sermon, is the first big section about Paul. We skipped over it while preaching about Peter, but today we'll kick off our sermons with **Saul/Paul's big conversion** from **persecutor** to **preacher**! We'll explore the Bible passage, and then consider a big takeaway.

## ***Conversion of Saul (9:1-9)***

*"Every story of conversion is the story of a blessed defeat." - C. S. Lewis*

Saul's conversion certainly **fits that template**! Let's begin by listening to his story.

### **Acts 9:1–9, ESV**

*But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 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. Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. 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. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.*

If you've been in church for any length of time, chances are that you've **heard this passage** or one similar to it. The story of Saul's conversion is recorded by Luke on **three separate occasions** (here, [Acts 22](#), and [Acts 26](#)). The repetition shows that Luke views this event as **important**. He wants his readers to

know this material...and as we've said many times from the pulpit, if the Bible repeats something, we need to pay extra attention!

## *Saul's Intentions*

Saul desired to **expand the persecution** that started after Stephen's stoning in [Acts 8](#). He wanted to purge the land of Christians and wipe out any of the gains the church had made. If Jesus wanted expansion from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and then to the ends of the earth, then Saul wanted to make a wide containment perimeter and close it all back to nothing.

Verse 1 tells us that Saul gets approval to head north to **Damascus, Syria** (a good 5-6 days' journey) to halt the spread of Christianity. His travels leave no doubt about Saul's **intensity and zeal**. But it raises the question of "**why?**" Why did Saul care so much?

We can get some clues from his later, post-conversion communications. The **New Testament letters** give us insight into Saul's **mindset and character** at this time. In his letter to the Philippian church, Paul gives us a short **resume**:

### **Philippians 3:5–6, ESV**

*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; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.*

Saul was an **all-star follower of Yahweh!** He had the **pedigree**, the **experience**, the **education**, and the **enthusiasm** to serve God and honor His Name. It was his love for God that drove his persecution of the church (or "the Way," as it was called - long before *The Mandalorian* stole the phrase).

How did **Jews view Christians** and their beliefs about Jesus?

- **False.** They didn't think Jesus had resurrected.
- **Blasphemous.** They didn't think Jesus was the divine Son of God
- **Insidious.** They worried that it would corrupt the pure and proper worship the Jews observed
- **Dangerous.** They worried it might affect the way the Romans tolerated Jewish religion

If you're Saul, you see **Jesus as a threat** to the true faith. You think this Jesus fellow was a joke, and the best way to **protect** your fellow Jews — and to **stand for God** — is to get rid of his followers! Saul probably had in mind something like the words from [2 Maccabees 6:13](#) as he took action.

*[FYI - not God's Word, but a source of instruction for the Jews. It was later included in Catholic Bibles...but that's a topic for another day]*

[2 Macc 6:13](#) "it is a mark of great kindness when the impious are not let alone for a long time, but punished at once." - **The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 9: John and Acts (Acts 9:1–2)**

So, Saul enthusiastically sets out for Damascus to show this "great kindness."

## The Lord's Intervention

You have to **view Saul in light of this mindset** to get the **full effect** of what happens in [Acts 9:3](#)

*"Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him."*

What did Saul think was happening at that moment? **How did he view this encounter?**

As the defender of Yahweh, Saul must have felt like he was being **singled out** by God...perhaps as a **blessing!** The voice from heaven calls out, "**Saul, Saul...**" - **repetition** like God had used with Abraham, Abraham ([Gen 22:11](#)), Moses, Moses ([Ex 3:4](#)), and Samuel, Samuel ([1 Sam 3:10](#)).

Saul readies himself for commendation...and then...

**Acts 9:4, ESV**

*And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"*

**Persecuting? Persecuting?** Saul is **confused**. He fumbles with a response. "**Who are you, Lord?**" he asks in verse 5. In other words, "Did I **miss something**? You don't sound like the God I expected!"

But then comes the **kicker**.

**Acts 9:5, ESV**

*And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."*

Wow.

As Christians, we have **lost the impact** of this statement. It's about as shocking as "Luke, I am your Father" or finding out the Great and Powerful Oz is just a man behind the curtain - in other words, it isn't! But our **familiarity doesn't undo Saul's shock**. Saul is *floored* by this news. He was faced with a **reversal** of all the beliefs he had about Christianity.

- **False is now TRUE**. Jesus had resurrected!
- **Blasphemy is now WORSHIP**. Jesus was the divine Son of God!
- **Insidious is now IMPERATIVE**. The pure and proper worship the Jews observed must be changed!
- **Dangerous is now IRRELEVANT**. Others' opinions no longer matter!

Saul is **blinded** by the light, yet he is starting to **see more clearly** than he ever has before. This encounter forces him to think about **who He worships** and **how He should live**.

His companions lead him to Damascus, and there he sits...contemplating...**praying**...and **waiting** for instructions.

I want you to **hold on to this view of Paul** -- shaken, worldview shattered -- while we look at **one more key figure** in this encounter.

# Challenge for Ananias (9:10-19)

The scene shifts and we are introduced to a **new person** in [Acts 9](#).

## [Acts 9:10](#)

*“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.””*

*Note: This is a **different** Ananias than the husband of Sapphira in **chapter 5!!!** Same name, different heart.*

We don't know much about this dude at all! But we know all we need to know. He is in **Damascus**, and he is a **follower of Jesus**.

Much is made about Saul's vision, but Ananias must have been just as shocked at his! Not often do we get specific instructions from God, yet here Ananias receives some **extremely detailed divine information**.

## **Acts 9:11–12, ESV**

*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, 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.”*

So there it is:

- Go to **Straight Street**, to the house of Judas.
  - *Fun fact: you can still find this road in Damascus today! It's one of the main roads running east-west in the city!*
- Find **Saul**, who is in there praying. Saul's faith in God is still strong, even as it shifts.
- **Lay hands** on him so he can be **healed and regain his sight**. Similar to other miraculous healings in Scripture, there is physical contact to go along with the healing provided by God.

Easy enough, right?!

Just go track down a guy and pray for him. No problem! However...

## *Dangerous Mission*

### **Acts 9:13–14, ESV**

*But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.”*

Ananias has a bit of **hesitation** before carrying out his assignment. He's not just praying for **ANY** guy...he's praying for **SAUL**. And Saul's **reputation precedes** him. Saul's history is one of **persecution** and **murder**. He is tracking down **people like Ananias** to arrest...and try...and possibly execute. You can hear the **backpedaling** in his voice!!!

Ananias **follows in the footsteps** of some other **big, biblical names** as he feels **doubt** and **fear** creep in.

- Like **Moses** at the burning bush ([Exodus 3-4](#)), hesitant to confront Pharaoh
- Like **Gideon**, hesitant to fight the Midianites ([Judges 6](#))
- Like **Jonah**, hesitant to preach to the Ninevites ([Jonah 1-4](#))

Actually, the **connection to Jonah** runs a little deeper. Some of God's encounter with Ananias **echoes** what we find in Jonah's mission. **God responds** in verse 15-16.

## *The Lord's Intervention*

### **Acts 9:15–16, ESV**

*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. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."*

**Like Jonah**, Ananias is told to "**rise and go**" ([Jonah 1:2](#); [Acts 9:11](#)). Like Jonah, Saul has been **three days** in the dark. Like Jonah, there is a connection of going before **gentiles, kings, and Israelites**. And like Jonah, the emphasis is not on the messenger's personal comfort, but on the **sometimes-painful bearing** and **sharing** of God's Name.

Ananias does **better than Jonah**, though. He doesn't **flee** to the city of Tarshish, but instead **seeks out** the man from Tarsus.

### **Acts 9:17–19, ESV**

*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." And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; and taking food, he was strengthened. For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus.*

The mission is a **success!** Saul gains **spiritual clarity** as he submits to Jesus through **baptism**, and he regains his **sight**. He'll never see the world the same way again!!!

# The Takeaway

## Information

There is so much **awesome information** in this passage! It's full of **historical** insight. It's the **opening moment of ministry** as Saul/Paul is called into service as God's "chosen instrument." It **previews** what we'll see throughout the rest of the book as Saul becomes THE missionary to the **Gentiles** (he literally appears before gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel in later chapters of Acts). The passage launches right into Saul's ministry as the former **persecutor** of Christians becomes a **preacher** of the gospel in Damascus, then Jerusalem, and eventually his hometown of Tarsus.

## Application

But from a **practical standpoint**, I want to focus on **one word** that sums up a big **theological truth** and presents a **huge challenge** for us. It comes in verse 17, and it might not be a word that you even caught the first time.

*"Brother Saul...," Ananias says.*

**BROTHER** Saul.

Brother.

Think about that **word choice** for a moment.

- On the one hand you have **Saul, killer** of Christians. A man whose stated goal is to track down and eliminate the church in Damascus.
- On the other hand you have **Ananias**, a man **fearful** for his safety, a representative of all that Saul had hated, and (perhaps) a friend of some that had already been persecuted or killed by Saul.

How would this interaction **normally** go? You can imagine **how this SHOULD play** out, right? What if you had found yourself **face-to-face with your biggest enemy**? There you are, suddenly seated with Osama Bin Laden, Joe Biden, Tom Brady, your ex, your boss (...or fill in the blank).

**Society** tells us what should happen. I'm sure you've seen videos and stories and reels highlighting the **volatile interactions between enemies**.

One high profile encounter took place last month at Stanford Law School, where Judge Kyle Duncan from the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals was shouted down during a guest lecture by students who disagreed on his views. The disrupters repeatedly shouted at Duncan that he was a "scumbag" and drowned out the judge's attempts to speak. An associate dean of the school even got up and lectured the judge in front of the crowd.

The school issued an apology afterwards, but students still were not satisfied. Administrators who apologized for the disruption were also protested, demonized, and intimidated.

It's a giant game of "who can **scream the loudest**," a game most of us mastered in preschool. The **immature** tactics are now **commonplace** as we treat each other like **enemies**. Enemies fight. Enemies scream. Enemies don't care about others' thoughts or feelings. Society is drifting toward a **less civil and more hostile** approach towards people we fight - whether we fight intellectually, emotionally, or spiritually - and **church members are far too often keeping pace**.

Even when we play the enemy game with **manners**, there is an icy wall between the two sides. You might allow the other person to talk, but you will not concede anything. You ignore and stare. You hold your ground.

And **what you never do** is follow in Ananias' footsteps and **call the other person "Brother" or "Sister!"**

## *The Motivation for Unity*

I've always heard a **note of fear** in Ananias' statement. "*Brother Saul*" seemed like a way to **appease** the murderer rather than a heartfelt emotion. ("hey there friend...hey buddy...hey pal...don't kill me"). It wasn't until I was working on this sermon that I **contemplated it as a genuine address said with a sincere heart**.

**"BROTHER Saul."**

**What would allow** Saul and Ananias to handle the tension differently than we expect or practice? What could put them on the same level?

It's no shock - the answer is: **Jesus. Jesus changes the way I approach others!!!**

- Jesus **changed** Saul's entire world in a flash of light.
- Jesus **pushed** Ananias to expand his trust in a risky assignment.

And in doing so, he forever **changed** their relationships. **Here's why it works**.

Today, in the audience I have my brother-in-law, Craig. And I figured I might as well use our relationship to help shed some light on what is going on here. See, aside from our haircut, Craig and I are not into the same things. He likes fishing. I'd rather go to Long John Silver's. He likes hunting. I like hockey. We're both football fans, but he likes the Huskers instead of the Wildcats. He's handy; I have hands. I'm hilarious; he sometimes gives my family weird looks for our humor. Based solely on our interests, we probably wouldn't cross paths much or hang out. (Amen, Craig?)

We might not love the same things, but we DO both love *someone*: my sister, Allison. He chose her; I was stuck with her. But I think she's a pretty awesome sister and a super-cool aunt for my kids. Craig thinks she's a great wife and mom to their own kids. And Allison's feelings (as far as I can tell) are mutual for both of us.

I might not love Craig based on our interests, but someone I love, loves him. He might not think I'm all that, but if Allison still claims me, so does he. A **person** overcomes **personalities** and make us "brothers."



It's the **Transitive Property of Equality**, just with a **spiritual twist**.  
(Remember: if **A = B**, and **B = C**, then **A = C**)

- Jesus loves Craig. I love Jesus. So I love Craig.
- Jesus loves Steve. Craig loves Jesus. So Craig loves Steve.

Jesus has been in this business **since the beginning**. He did it with his **disciples** (Simon the Zealot, anti-Roman vs Matthew the tax collector, a Roman collaborator), and He did it with **people groups** (Jews and Gentiles), and He did it here with **Saul and Ananias**.

Ananias could look at his **former enemy** and **see** someone **chosen** and **beloved** by Jesus. He could see the man who was God's **chosen instrument** to spread the gospel instead of squelch it.

Can Jesus do the same for us?

That **spirit of unity** continues to be the **ideal** we should strive for:

#### **Ephesians 2:13–17, ESV**

*But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near.*

The church is full of **different personalities, ideas** and **interests**. We have different **backgrounds**. We have different **passions**. We have different **goals**.

But we **share a Savior**. Jesus died on the cross for your sins as well as mine. He **loves both of us**...and so we need to **extend that love to one another**.

Look to your left. Look to your right.

- If you have hostility, **confess** it.

Don't go to any person yet. Tell it to **God instead**. Tell him your frustrations. And ask for a heart that can forgive. Pray earnestly for the wisdom you need in the situation, and pray for His will to prevail. Continue praying as it flares up - because anger and hurt are unpredictable. But don't stop there.

- If you have **hostility, kill it**.

I'm not just making generalities. Some of you are hurt about decisions that have been made or not made by church leaders or church members. You harbor frustrations...maybe not enough to leave the church, but enough to make you glare. I'm sorry, but your animosity is not fitting for God's family! Say right now "                     is

**my brother/sister. Jesus died for and loves that person, so I will love them, too.”** Offer undeserved forgiveness. Be reckless with your grace. Forgive as the Lord has forgiven you! And don't just cease hostilities...

- If you have hostility, **draw near**.

**Serve** your enemy. Turn the other cheek. Extend grace. Go the extra mile. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you (or drive you crazy or just make dumb choices or irritate you to no end)\*

*\*Not sure that's in the original Greek, but it might be implied!*

Enabled by the Holy Spirit, make every effort to cultivate peace so God can properly use the men and women he has redeemed and reconciled.

*Every story of conversion is the story of a blessed defeat. - C. S. Lewis*

May your hostilities, fears, anger, persecutions, divisions, and doubts stay crucified on the cross and overcome by the blood of Jesus!

May your story be a blessed defeat, just like Saul's and Ananias.”

>> *Prayer*