

When Jesus Changes Everything

I. Introduction

- A. Saul's conversion is one of the most significant events recorded in the New Testament. Luke tells the story three times in Acts (9:1-9; 22:3-16; 26:4-18), and Paul repeatedly returns to it in his own writings (1 Cor. 15:8; Gal. 1:12-17; Phil. 3:4-7; 1 Tim. 1:12-16). It was an encounter he—and the early church—could never forget.
 - 1. Scholars debate whether Saul's experience on the Damascus road is best understood as a conversion or a calling. After all, in what sense was Saul "converted"? He was not an agnostic who suddenly began believing in God, nor did he simply abandon one religion for another. He continued to worship the God of Israel and read the same Scriptures. Yet his encounter with the risen Jesus radically transformed how he understood both. Everything that came before—and everything that would follow—would now be interpreted through the lens of Jesus as Israel's crucified and risen Messiah.
- B. In many ways, Saul's conversion was unique. This encounter would alter the course of the church and, in many respects, the trajectory of history. Saul would become known as Paul, (Saul his Hebrew name, Paul his Roman name) carry the gospel throughout the Roman world, and write letters that have shaped countless lives for nearly two thousand years.
- C. Yet the essential realities of his conversion are also true for every follower of Jesus. Saul discovered that Jesus was alive, that God was more gracious than he could have imagined, and that his life would never be the same. His story shows us that an encounter with Jesus changes what we believe about him, transforms who we are by grace, and redirects the trajectory of our lives.

II. When Jesus Changes Everything

- A. Encountering Jesus changes what we believe about Jesus.
 - 1. Who was Saul before his encounter with Jesus? He was not irreligious, spiritually indifferent, or unfamiliar with the Scriptures. Saul was a Pharisee, a student of the respected rabbi Gamaliel, highly educated, and extraordinarily zealous for the God of Israel. In Philippians 3, he describes himself as

someone who possessed impeccable religious credentials and was, “as to zeal, a persecutor of the church.”

2. Saul was completely convinced that he was serving God by opposing the followers of Jesus. Acts 8:3 tells us that he “ravaged the church.” The word describes the violence of a wild animal attacking its prey. Saul entered homes, dragged away men and women, and committed them to prison. Among the early Christians, he would have been regarded as a terrifying and brutal enemy.
 - a) Note: we can be deeply sincere in our beliefs and still be sincerely wrong. Passion is not proof that we are right. Religious knowledge, spiritual zeal, and strong convictions do not guarantee that we see Jesus clearly. Saul knew the Scriptures, believed he was defending God, and was willing to sacrifice for his convictions—and yet he was actively opposing the God he believed he was serving.
3. Everything changed on the road to Damascus. A light from heaven flashed around Saul, he fell to the ground, and he heard a voice say, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” Saul responded, “Who are you, Lord?” Saul must have been thoroughly confused. As far as he was concerned, he was not persecuting the Lord; he was defending the Lord.¹ He believed he was protecting God’s honor and preserving faithfulness to God’s law. But this question challenged his entire belief system and exposed the terrible possibility that his understanding of God had been profoundly mistaken.
4. Then came the answer Saul could never have expected: “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” In that moment, Saul’s world collapsed—and an entirely new world opened before him. The Jesus he had rejected was alive. The crucified man whose followers he had hunted was Israel’s Messiah and

¹ Frank E. Gaebelin, J. D. Douglas, and Dick Polcyn, *The expositor's Bible commentary : with the New International Version*, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995).

exalted Lord. Saul's zeal for the cause of God had actually become an attack against the God who raised Jesus from the dead.²

5. Saul had no category for a crucified Messiah. According to Deuteronomy 21:23, anyone hung on a tree was under a curse. How could Israel's promised King be rejected, crucified, and apparently defeated? But standing before the risen Jesus, Saul could no longer deny that God had vindicated the very One whom Israel had crucified. Everything Saul had hoped for, prayed for, and longed for had been fulfilled—but in a way that shattered his former understanding. The hope of Israel had come, but he had come as the crucified and risen Jesus.³ This brief encounter established what would become the central proclamation of Paul's life: God raised the crucified Jesus from the dead and made him known as Messiah and Lord. Saul now saw Jesus differently. The One he had opposed was the One to whom he must surrender.
 - a) The resurrection would never become a secondary doctrine for Paul; it stood at the center of everything he believed and proclaimed. He would later write in 1 Corinthians 15:14–17: “And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ...And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.”
 - b) For Paul, everything depended upon the resurrection. If Jesus remained dead, then the apostles' preaching was empty, Christian faith was futile, sin remained undefeated, and the witnesses of Jesus had misrepresented God. But Paul knew that Christ had been raised because he had encountered the risen Jesus himself. The resurrection was not merely an

² I. Howard Marshall, *Acts : an introduction and commentary*, Tyndale New Testament commentaries, (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2008), 179.

³ N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Acts: Rediscovering What the Church Was and Is* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Academic, 2024), 53.

idea Paul had accepted; it was the reality that confronted him on the Damascus road and overturned his entire understanding of Jesus.

- c) The Jesus whom Saul had regarded as a defeated impostor was, in fact, the risen Lord. That reality became the foundation of Paul's gospel and the message to which he would devote the rest of his life: Jesus Christ was crucified, Jesus Christ has been raised, and Jesus Christ is Lord.
- 6. These truths are at the heart of every genuine conversion. We may encounter Jesus in different ways—Saul's encounter was uniquely dramatic and physical—but conversion always involves coming to see Jesus for who he truly is. It is more than adopting a religious system, improving our behavior, or adding Jesus to the life we already have. It is recognizing that the crucified Jesus is risen, exalted, and Lord.⁴
 - a) C. S. Lewis described his own journey by saying, "I have just passed on from believing in God to definitely believing in Christ—in Christianity." There is a difference between believing generally in God and entrusting ourselves personally to Jesus Christ. We do not merely accept certain ideas about him; we meet the living Lord and enter into relationship with him.
- 7. Part of the irony of Saul's encounter is that he loses his physical sight at the very moment he begins to see Jesus clearly. He had entered the road to Damascus able to see but spiritually blind. He would leave it physically blind but awakened to the truth. Paul would later describe conversion using this same imagery in 2 Corinthians 4:6: "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." Conversion begins when God shines his light into our darkness and enables us to see his glory in the face of Jesus.

8. Reflection Question

⁴ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts : Zondervan Exegetical commentary on the New Testament*, Zondervan exegetical commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2012), 459.

- a) The central question, then, is not merely whether we are sincere, religious, knowledgeable, or passionate. The question is: Do we see Jesus for who he truly is? This week ask yourself: Do I see Jesus as he truly is—the crucified and risen Lord—or have I settled for a version of Jesus shaped by my own assumptions, preferences, and expectations?

B. The grace of Jesus transforms who we are.

1. If God treated Saul the way Saul treated his enemies, Saul would have died on the Damascus road. Saul approached those he considered enemies with threats and violence, but Jesus approached his enemy with mercy and grace. This is something Paul never got over.
2. Paul knew exactly who he had been and what he deserved. He had opposed Jesus, persecuted his people, and attempted to destroy his church. Yet Jesus did not give Saul the judgment he expected. He sought him, confronted him, and began transforming him. Paul was not changed through his own effort or merit, but through the pursuing and transforming grace of Jesus—God’s unearned and undeserved favor.
 - a) Paul would later write in 1 Corinthians 15:9–10: “For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain.”
 - b) Paul never minimized the seriousness of his past. He remembered who he had been, but his past no longer defined who he was. The defining reality of his life was now the grace of God: **“By the grace of God I am what I am.”** This grace was what began to transform him—to shape him into the image of Jesus, not from the outside in, but the inside out.
3. We see this grace embodied in Ananias. Saul had come to Damascus to arrest followers of Jesus, yet when Ananias entered the house, he placed his hands on him and said, “Brother Saul.” Saul arrived as an enemy of the church, but grace received him as a brother. His sight was restored, he was filled with the Holy Spirit, and he was baptized into the very community he had intended to destroy.

- a) Years later, Paul described the wonder of this grace in 1 Timothy 1
“Formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy.... The grace of our Lord overflowed for me.... Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.”
 - b) Paul had a clear understanding of who he had been and what he deserved. To his astonishment, Jesus offered him not only mercy that withheld judgment, but grace that welcomed him, restored him, and gave him a new identity.
- 4. We may not have actively persecuted the church, but Scripture says that we were all once enemies of God. Romans 5:10 declares that “while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son.” Like Paul, it is the grace of God that transforms all of us, it is his kindness that leads to repentance. None of us are changed through our own effort, merit, or worthiness. We are transformed by the grace of Jesus. “Personal transformation is a mark of genuine conversion.”⁵
 - 5. Reflection Question: Where can I see the transforming work of grace in my life—and where am I still resisting the person Jesus is calling me to become?
- C. The call of Jesus directs the trajectory of our lives.
- 1. The Lord says to Ananias in verse 15: “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.” Saul had come to Damascus with his own plans, authority, and destination. He intended to arrest the followers of Jesus and return with them to Jerusalem. But after encountering Jesus, Saul’s life would move in an entirely different direction.
 - 2. Saul surrenders his former direction and receives a new purpose within the mission of God. We sometimes speak about conversion as “deciding for Christ,” “choosing Jesus,” or “making a commitment.” Decision and commitment are certainly involved, but conversion is more than a decision

⁵ Abingdon Press, *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, 12 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015).

we make. “Conversion is at root not a decision, nor a commitment, but a surrender to the supreme authority of Jesus.”⁶

3. In this surrender Saul would discover the new trajectory of his life—he would now be a key piece in God’s mission of redemption and restoration. Through our conversion experience Jesus certainly does an internal work in us—one that fundamentally transforms us from the inside out. We have deep personal experiences of God’s forgiveness, we become acutely aware of his life for us. But it is important to remember that, “Personal transformation never collapses into sanctified self-absorption. Rather, conversion prepares the believer for performance of concrete tasks in the service of God.”⁷
4. Saul’s calling would not be easy. Jesus continues in verse 16: “For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” Saul would not only proclaim the name of Jesus; he would suffer for it. “The great antagonist of the gospel will become its outstanding protagonist. The persecutory will become the persecuted and suffer like Jesus himself. He will join the fellowship of those who are afflicted because of their identification with the Lord Jesus.”⁸
 - a) Paul would later express this desire in Philippians 3:10: “That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.”
 - b) For Paul, his calling was not merely to accomplish great things for Jesus but to become like Jesus—even through suffering. The risen Lord who redirected Paul’s life also led him along the way of the cross.
5. The same is true for us. Our encounter with Jesus shapes the trajectory of our lives. Conversion is not the finish line of the Christian life; it is the starting line of a whole new journey. We are forgiven and reconciled to God, but we

⁶ Ajith Fernando, *Acts*, The NIV application commentary, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1998), 303.

⁷ Abingdon Press, *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*.

⁸ David Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Pillar New Testament commentary, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co. ; Apollos, 2009), 309.

are also called to follow Jesus and participate in his redemptive purposes in the world.

- a) “Conversion-centered approach to the gospel has for many people been interpreted as a finish line or an ending, instead of a starting line or new beginning...The conversion-centered gospel is that it has no missional appeal, meaning it doesn’t propel me beyond myself. Because the conversion-centered gospel is a private individual transaction, once the prayer is said , it is complete. There is no appeal to enter into a new kind of life whereby we take on God’s agenda for the world, which is at the heart of the real gospel.”⁹
 - b) ‘Being saved’ focus often times solely on having my sins forgiven and going to heaven when I die. Often times it fails to tell us that, “we are also saved for a purpose, to become part of God’s redemptive purposes in the world, that my salvation matters now, and that becoming a disciple of Jesus was my process in learning from Him how to affect the redemption of the community around me as well as the world.”¹⁰
6. Our calling may not take us into vocational ministry or send us around the world to preach the gospel. But we share this with Paul: our relationship with Jesus becomes the primary reality that directs our lives. It shapes how we use our gifts, pursue our work, treat our neighbors, order our relationships, spend our resources, and understand our purpose.
7. And like Paul, following Jesus will sometimes involve suffering. Jesus told every disciple, not only Paul, to take up the cross and follow him. Our suffering will not look exactly like Paul’s, but obedience will cost us something. Following Jesus may require us to surrender comfort, control, approval, ambition, or the future we had imagined. Yet this is the path on which we come to know both the fellowship of Christ’s sufferings and the power of his resurrection.

⁹ Alan Andrews, *The kingdom life : a practical theology of discipleship and spiritual formation* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010), 86-87.

¹⁰ Andrews, *The kingdom life : a practical theology of discipleship and spiritual formation*, 88.

8. Following Jesus means surrendering our plans, direction, and purpose to his will. The question is not simply whether we once decided to believe in Jesus, but whether his call is presently directing the trajectory of our lives.
9. **Reflection Question:** If Jesus is truly Lord, how is his call changing the direction of my life—and what might I still need to surrender in order to follow him?

III. Closing Thoughts

- A. Paul began the road to Damascus convinced that he could see clearly. But when he encountered the risen Jesus, everything changed. He saw Jesus as Lord, experienced a grace greater than anything he deserved, and received an entirely new direction for his life.
- B. The details of our stories may look different, but the same realities mark every genuine encounter with Jesus. Jesus changes what we believe about him, his grace transforms who we are, and his call redirects where our lives are going. The question is not simply whether we have had a conversion experience, but whether we are still surrendering to the risen Jesus—allowing him to reshape what we believe, who we are becoming, and how we live.

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