

How Jesus Wins a Soul

Acts 9

INTRO: Today we will look at what very well might be the 2nd most important event in all of human history. The first being the death and resurrection of our Lord. The second might very well be the conversion of Saul of Tarsus.

Luke devotes 1/12 of the book Acts to Saul's conversion.
He retells the story of Saul's conversion **3 times**. Acts 9, Acts 22, Acts 26

CONTEXT: In Acts 8 we see the **martyrdom of Stephen** and the crowds laying their garments at the feet of a young man named **Saul**, this was significant in that it showed both approval and perhaps responsibility fell at the feet of Saul of Tarsus as **8:1** points out.

Luke's attention turns in chapter 8 toward the ministry of **Phillip** and the conversion of a Eunuch from Ethiopia. We will say more about that in a moment. Then chapter 9 returns our attention back to Saul.

TEXT: Acts 8:3 (ESV)

³ But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

That same Greek word was used for what the animals did to humans in the coliseum.

Acts 9:1 (ESV)

¹ But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord...

Try for a moment to see the perspective of this young Pharisee. In his mind he was following in a noble and godly tradition.

- He saw himself as an **Elijah** who called for the execution of the prophet of Baal.
- He saw himself as a **Phineus** who in zeal for the Lord killed the sinners.
- He saw himself like the **Maccabean Rebels** who rebelled against Antiochus Epiphanies.

We have no indication that Saul was under any distress about his persecution of the church. So many have the idea that the sinfulness of sin lies in a persons **visceral response** to committing sin.

However, it is quite possible to sin and never feel bad whatsoever, I'll go further than that - it is possible to sin and feel as though you are NOT sinning, in fact doing God a favor. His biggest problem was that he didn't realize how utterly lost he really was.

Acts 9:1-2 (ESV)

¹ But Saul, went to the high priest ² 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.

Damascus was an ancient city and capital of the Roman Province of Syria just north/northeast of Galilee. It was some 150 miles from Jerusalem. Apparently, word had come to Jerusalem that many of the Christians who were scattered in connection to Stephen's death had taken up refuge in Damascus.

According to Chuck Swindoll, *“Saul devised an aggressive plan to storm the city, capture the infidels, and drag them into court. Thankfully, God had a different plan”*

Imagine it if you will – Saul with the fury and hatred of a **Hitler** is storming toward Damascus on a Mission. Then imagine if you will another standing from the right hand of the Father also on His way to Damascus for a Divine encounter with Saul.

Acts 9:3 (ESV)

³ Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him.

Paul himself indicates in Acts 26:13

13 at midday, ...I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun,

Can you imagine a light so bright that it eclipsed the burning of the middle-eastern mid-day sun? Such is the revelation of the Shikyna Glory of the risen savior.

NOW WE HAVE SAUL THE CHEIF OF SINNERS FACE TO FACE WITH JESUS THE FRIEND OF SINNERS....

I want us to look at three METHODS Jesus employed to lead Saul to Salvation - these are three WEAPONS in YOUR arsenal. You should master them, you should wield them. And you should expect them to fall with great effect on the lost soul.

NOW - I need you to focus - I need you to ask yourself are these three things true of your story? Can you at all relate? If not friend you are not backslidden you are utterly lost. Here they are -

1. The Gravity of Sin

Acts 9:4–5 (ESV)

⁴ And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, “**Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?**” ⁵ And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “**I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.**

A. Communicate Personally -

Take note for a moment that our Lord’s **attention was fixed on Saul**. Twice he calls his name - “**Saul, Saul**” as in his earthly pilgrimage he said to his friend, “Martha, Martha”. **What of Saul’s comrades?** His traveling companions? Their name is not uttered, at least not on this occasion. Jesus came after one man, one man must hear his voice, one man must respond. Saul, Saul was that man.

- As in the day he called for **Lazarus** from the grave, with a specific, effectual - “Lazarus come forth” he calls for Saul from the grave of his sin.
- As he summoned **Zacheus** by name to “come down from the tree”, he calls, “Saul, Saul”.

There is a call that goes out to all men. A drawing that goes to the masses. **John 12:32** (NASB95) 32 “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw **all men** to Myself.” That calling is broad in its scope, it brings all men into accountability to God.

This is a universal calling, but oh friend, don’t despise the more specific calling - the effectual calling of

our Lord. For you see Saul's comrades heard something - but it was muffled, murky, like a burst of thunder that accompanies a storm.... But Saul heard his name.

Then notice - Jesus

B. Communicate Specifically -

"Saul, Saul, why are you *persecuting* me?"

Was this the only sin that Saul of Tarsus was committing? Surely not - we are all guilty of many sins. BUT - there is typically one that rises to the top. There is typically one stronghold that rises above all others.

Have you ever noticed that those who are cast into Hell are never identified by their names, but rather the sin that was the most dominant in their life?

Lazarus was identified by name, but the rich man... simply by the idolatry of wealth.

Listen to this warning from **Revelation 21:7-8 (ESV)**

⁷ The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. ⁸ But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death."

Can you imagine all the universe forgetting your name, and you being called by that sin that is dominant in your life?

You see that's how God saves a man. He doesn't mention 10,000 sins the man is guilty of... He places his Divine finger on one specific issue.

THAT issue will be the area of a person's life that they are most defensive about.
THAT issue will be the area that they typically want to talk about most.

There is a great movement in the church that calls us to lay all of the specifics of sin aside and just focus on Jesus. Don't worry about that this man is a homosexual, worry that he is lost, don't worry that this woman is an adulteress only that she's lost... but my dear friend don't forget the admonition of Paul to the Galatians -

Galatians 3:24 (NASB95) ²⁴ Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith.

Law ALWAYS precedes Gospel in the New Testament.

ILLUSTRATION: The rich young ruler comes and falls before Jesus and says, "Good master, what must I do to be saved?" He came to the right person, he came in the right posture, he asked the right question... most of us would have him say a sinners prayer, fill out a card and Baptize him.

JESUS SAID - Go get rid of your god... sell all you own, come follow me... then you'll have treasure in Heaven... You see? Law before Grace.

Communicate Personally, Specifically,

3. Communicate Broadly

“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”

Notice that Jesus pointed out the scope of his sin... Saul, you haven't only sinned against Stephen... against his wife, against his son, against his church... Saul, you've sinned against Jesus himself.

Apparently, Jesus meant it when he said, **Matthew 25:40 (NASB95)** ⁴⁰ “... ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.’

Saul, Jesus so identifies with his people that to attack them is to attack Jesus.

Like David confessed under the mighty prophet Nathan - your sin was ULTIMATELY Against God. He was the most offended party. So that David could say - **Psalms 51:4 (NASB95)** ⁴ Against You, You only, I have sinned And done what is evil in Your sight,

I think that Saul was so marked by this explicit, direct, specific word from Jesus that he absolutely never forgot it.

Toward the end of his life, Paul confessed, “I am the chief of sinners”. This man who opened the door to every christian martyrdom that followed, this man who was confronted with that fact by Jesus himself... never got over the reality of his sin.

Military strategist tell us that if you deal with the Mountains, the valleys take care of themselves.
Attack the high places... attack the dominant transgression.

Communicate the GRAVITY OF SIN...

2. The Impact of Sin

In Acts 26:14 Paul gives us another quote from our Lord on this occasion.

¹⁴ “... It is hard for you to kick against the goads.”

Goads were 8ft long sticks used by ox drivers, one end was sharp and pointed the other was flat for cleaning the plow. The driver would point the Ox Goads toward the business end of the animal and from time to time in ignorance the Oxen would kick back against the goads only increasing their pain and delaying the inevitable.

Jesus said, “Saul, that's what you are doing”. It was reminiscent of the advice of Saul's on rabbi, **Gamaliel**. Who warned the Jewish leaders not to battle against these disciples lest they be found battling against God himself.

What a kind statement this was from our Lord - Saul the path of life you have chosen has only produced pain and it will increasingly produce pain till you repent.

Not only will you suffer eternally, you are suffering NOW. *Sometimes, hell is a category people don't have developed in their mind, so they don't fear it. Sometimes, it's more effective to help them see the temporal cost of sin.*

Dr. Adrian Rogers used to say - *people don't break the law of God, they are broken on the law of God. It's like gravity - you jump off the building attempting to violate the law of gravity, you will be broken by the law of gravity.*

ILLUSTRATION: I regularly hear of young people who are trying new and different ways of getting high, typically they are self medicating some sort of pain caused by a family in turmoil, but nevertheless, they are playing with something that plays for keeps.... It will be hard for him to kick against the goads.

ILLUSTRATION: I know men who develop relationships with women who are not their wives, they think they will be the exception to the rule, they will play with fire and not be burned, but inevitably it will leave devastation in the children he loves.... It will be hard for him to kick against the goads.

You need to know it is the kindness of God that has designed life such that the normal pain of life is only increased by rebellion.

- The **prodigal** was feasting on slop with the hogs before he realized that it was hard for him to kick against the goads.
- **David** was burying a baby before he realized it was hard for him to kick against the goads.
- **Ananias and Saphira** were dead in a church service before they realized that it's hard for them to kick against the goads.
- **SAUL OF TARSUS** was knocked off his horse into a ditch before he realized it was hard for him to kick against the goads.

Show them the Gravity of Sin, the Impact of Sin...

3. The Graciousness of the Savior

Acts 9:6–19 (ESV)

6 But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” 7 The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. 8 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. 9 And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. 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.” 11 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.

For he is praying...why do you think that it mentioned here? Saul was a Pharisee. The **Pharisees** took great pride in their abilities in prayer. They prayed long prayers, loud prayers, public prayers. But here it points out the fact that Saul is praying. You see when you really meet God it is as though you have never prayed before. All other prayers were utter from a proud heart - but now Saul is praying as it were for the first time.

12 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.” 13 But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. 14 And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.”

Swindoll in his book on Paul captured some of what Ananias was feeling. He writes, “*imagine that it's 1940. You live on the outskirts of Vienna, Austria. The Nazis have occupied your city and you are*

Jewish. Most of your relatives have vanished and you are planning to escape the city by night when just before your planned escape, you are awakened by a strange presence in your bedroom. Out of the darkness a voice commands you, "Arise, go to a street named Wickenburg, just to the west of the University of Vienna. There you'll find a home owned by Franz Kaiser. When you enter you'll find a man of Upper Austria named Adolf Hitler. I have appeared to him and now he is praying, go touch him, he will regain eyesight and he will save your people." This terrified Ananias.

¹⁵ 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."¹⁶ For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."¹⁷ 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."¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized;¹⁹ and taking food, he was strengthened. For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus.

NOW - why did Jesus not simply heal Saul of the scales upon his eyes right there on the Damascus road? Simply because the Lord **refuses to fulfill a commission he has given to us**. He will not divorce you from the process of saving sinners.

- He could write it in the sky.
- He could recruit an army of Angels
- But he has chosen to use you to reach them.

Never forget that God transformed the Church's greatest enemy to its most important Preacher.

- Who are the Saul's in your life?
- Who are the Saul's in this community?
- Have you stopped praying for them?

Perhaps some of you are here today and you feel like you are beyond grace. Something you've done, a habit you can't break, a decision you made. Can God still use you?