



Paul ... His Conversion

Acts 9

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[VIDEO¹] Sam Nadler grew up in a Jewish family in New York, and like every other young Jewish man, wanted nothing to do with Jesus. But when he read Isaiah 53, he could not deny that his Scriptures, the Hebrew Scriptures, pointed to Jesus. Reluctantly, he was convinced and believed that Jesus is the Messiah.

In the first century, there were thousands of Jews who became convinced and believed that Jesus was the Messiah. And this morning, I want to tell you the story of one of them. Take your Bibles and go to Acts 9.

The book of Acts records the birth of the Church and the thirty-year period following the resurrection of Jesus. The book is filled with dramatic events and incredible stories of faith. Those who were there heard His teaching and witnessed His miracles. They saw Him die and they saw Him alive again. They believed Jesus was the Son of God.

Acts 9 is the story of Saul's conversion, later known as Paul. All of us have a conversion story as well, about the day we met Jesus and believed in Him. The circumstances of our stories may be different, but one thing is the same. Every story is about God's grace.

And here's the story of a reluctant Jew named Saul who met Jesus and whose life was dramatically changed.

SAUL'S ZEAL FOR GOD

Saul's story actually begins at the end of Acts 7. In a dramatic scene, a young follower of Jesus named Stephen stood before the Jewish Council and declared that Jesus was the Son of God. This was such an insult and such a threat that the religious mob pounced on Stephen. They dragged him outside the city and stoned him to death. And the Bible says that those who stoned Stephen "laid their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul" (Acts 7:58, NAS). And Chuck Swindoll writes, "The blood of the first martyr splattered across Saul's clothes."²

Saul was born into a Jewish family which lived in Cilicia, thus making him a Roman citizen.³ So Saul was his Jewish name, and Paul was his Roman/Gentile name. It is not until Acts 13 that the New Testament refers to him solely as Paul.⁴

Who was Saul? Well, if anyone had a right to brag about what they had done for God, it was Saul. His resume is included in Philippians 3.⁵ As an infant, he was "circumcised the eighth day," in compliance with the Mosaic law. He was born "of the nation of Israel." He was a direct descendant of Jacob. He was "of the tribe of Benjamin." He had a privileged genealogy and historically linked to one of the tribes most faithful to God. He was a "Hebrew of Hebrews." Saul was a pure blood. He was "a Pharisee," a member of the most elite Jewish sect. "As to zeal," he was "a persecutor of the church." He was relentless in his defense of Jewish tradition. And with

respect to “righteousness in the Law, found blameless.” Saul was one of the best at keeping the do’s and don’ts of the Jewish religion.⁶

In Acts 8, we read about his zeal for God, and his zeal for protecting the religious system. “Saul was in hearty agreement with putting Stephen 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 ... And Saul began ravaging the church,⁷ entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison” (Acts 8:1, 3, NAS).⁸

The story continues in Acts 9. “Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem” (Acts 9:1-2, NIV). A large number of converted Jews escaped the persecution in Jerusalem and settled in Damascus. So Saul requested permission from the high priest to go to Damascus and hunt them down. His heart was filled with brutality in the name of religion.

Later in life, after he became a Christian, Saul/Paul never hid his past. He admitted, “You know what I was like when I followed the Jewish religion – how I violently persecuted God’s church. I did my best to destroy it” (Galatians 1:13, NLT). “I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy ... Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all” (1 Timothy 1:13-15, NAS).

Saul was zealous for God, and that meant protecting the Jewish system. Jesus was an insult and a threat to that system. So he was on his way to Damascus to hunt down Christians. Swindoll describes Saul as “killing Christians in allegiance to the God of heaven.”⁹

SAUL’S ENCOUNTER WITH JESUS

But something dramatic happened on the road to Damascus.

“As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ ‘Who are you, Lord?’ Saul asked. ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.’ The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless, they heard the sound but did not see anyone” (Acts 9:3-7, NIV).

“A light flashed around him.” He “fell to the ground.” He heard a voice. How shocked he must have been when the voice said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”¹⁰ A light. A voice. An encounter with Jesus!

“Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything” (Acts 9:8-9, NIV). Saul went to Damascus to arrest Christians, instead Jesus arrested him. Like throwing a net over a wild animal, Jesus seized Saul. He subdued his brutality and humbled his pride.

Jesus spoke to another man in the story. “In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called him in a vision, ‘Ananias!’ ‘Yes, Lord,’ he answered. The Lord told him, ‘Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight’” (Acts 9:10-12, NIV). God’s leading could not have been more specific. Go to this street. Go to this house. Look for this man.

But Ananias objected. “Lord, I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name” (Acts 9:13-14, NIV). Saul was a Jewish terrorist. Arresting, beating, and in some cases, killing Christians. Ananias was right to be afraid of him.

But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel” (Acts 9:15, NIV). God had a plan for Saul’s life, and Ananias had a part to play in that plan.

“Then Ananias,” brave and obedient, “went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here, has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’ Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized” (Acts 9:17-18, NIV).

This is the conversion of a man who hated Jesus. Who persecuted Christians. But Jesus seized him, subdued him, and humbled him. And Jesus showed him grace. Saul, as Paul, would later write, “Through His grace, God revealed His Son to me” (Galatians 1:15-16, NAS). He did not seek it and he did not deserve, but Jesus showed him grace. The circumstances of our stories may be different, but in every conversion story one thing is the same. Every story is about God’s grace.

And what proof of a changed life? Saul “began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, ‘He is the Son of God!’” (Acts 9:20, NAS).

SAUL’S UNLIKELY CONVERSION

Saul was one of the most unlikely converts in history. And there are many others.

Like mobster Michael Franzese of the Colombo crime family. In the 1980s, his racketeering schemes earned \$10 million a week for the mob. Arrested in 1991, Franzese spent three years in solitary confinement, and his only possession was a Bible given to him by a prison guard. In the loneliness of his cell, Michael read that Bible and met Jesus and became a born-again Christian. Of the top 50 mobsters from the 1980s, Michael Franzese is the only one alive today and travels the country talking about Jesus Christ.

Another unlikely convert to Christianity was Mitsuo Fuchida. Fuchida was the Japanese pilot who led the bombing attack on Pearl Harbor. After the war, he came across a pamphlet telling the story of American airman Jacob DeShazer, one of Doolittle’s Raiders, the first to bomb Japan.

Fuchida read about DeShazer being shot down, being a prisoner of war, and being tortured. The pamphlet also told of how DeShazer read a Bible while a prisoner of war and how God convicted him of his hatred for the Japanese, how he asked God for forgiveness, and how he became a Christian. DeShazer even moved to Japan as a Christian missionary. So Fuchida bought a Bible, and for the first time in his life read about Jesus. In his own words, he said, "I met Jesus. I was convicted of my bitterness and sin, and asked God to forgive me. He did, and I became a new person. My life was changed by Jesus Christ." The man who cried, "Tora! Tora! Tora!" also cried out, "Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!" For years, Fuchida and Deshazer traveled the world, speaking at Billy Graham crusades, telling people about Jesus.

Another unlikely convert to Christianity was Dr. Rosario Butterfield, a lesbian professor at Syracuse University. She described almost choking on the name of Jesus and having disdain for people who believed such a ridiculous story. But one project required her to read the Bible. It was just a research project, yet "God's words overwhelmed me," she said. "I fought against it with all my might. Yet when I looked in the mirror, I was a broken mess. Who was I? A lesbian? Or who had God made me to be? Then I realized I had come to Jesus, or rather He had come to me." Today, Rosario Butterfield is a pastor's wife and writes about the grace of God that changed her life.

Again, the most unlikely candidate to become a Christian was Saul. He hated Jesus, because Jesus was a threat to the religious system to which he had devoted his entire life. For years, Saul thought he was pleasing God. But when he met Jesus, he fell to the ground.

Acts 9 says the other Christians could not believe that Saul had been converted. They knew his reputation and could not believe it. But he proved his life had changed. Acts 9 says, "Saul's preaching became more and more powerful" as he declared that Jesus was the Son of God.¹¹

In fact, Saul became such a threat, that forty Jews plotted to kill him!¹² How ironic. Saul had persecuted and killed Christians to protect the Jewish system, and now he was the one being hunted down. So the disciples lowered him in a basket outside the city wall, and he escaped with Barnabas. But when they arrived back in Jerusalem, everyone knew Saul's reputation, and the Bible says, "They were all afraid of him, not believing he really was a disciple" (Acts 9:26, NIV).

The most unlikely candidate met Jesus. And became a missionary.¹³ The one who persecuted followers of Jesus now urged others to become followers of Jesus.

Saul/Paul would go on to write most of the New Testament. He wrote a long letter to the Romans, the greatest theological explanation of the Gospel in the entire Bible. He wrote a letter to the Ephesians, the greatest explanation of God's grace. He wrote two letters rebuking the scandalous and dysfunctional church in Corinth. He wrote about joy in his letter to the Philippians. He exalted Jesus in his letter to the Colossians. And he wrote two letters mentoring a young Timothy. And in all the pastoral instructions he wrote to Timothy, one leaps off the page, when Paul simply said, "Oh Timothy, remember Jesus Christ."¹⁴

Paul wrote about the great trials he faced for the sake of Christ. "I have faced death again and again. Five different times the Jewish leaders gave me thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked" (2 Corinthians 11:23-25, NLT). He debated the philosophers in Athens, challenging their many gods and declaring there

was only one true God. He proclaimed Jesus and how the resurrection proved that Jesus was the Son of God. On one occasion he described being caught up into heaven, into Paradise, and hearing things no man had ever heard.¹⁵ Later in the book of Acts, he defended his faith before priests and kings.¹⁶ And in his final letter to Timothy, Paul said, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7, NAS). And then he was beheaded for his faith in Jesus Christ.¹⁷

Again, Paul wrote most of the New Testament, and he wrote things like this.

- “Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God” (Romans 1:1, NIV).
- “My life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus, the work of telling others the good news about the wonderful grace of God” (Acts 20:24, NLT).
- “For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21, NAS). For Paul, life was about faithfully serving Jesus, and death was about finally seeing Jesus. So whether he lived or died, it was all about Jesus.
- “For the love of Christ compels me, because I am convinced that Jesus died for me, and He died for everyone. Therefore, those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again” (2 Corinthians 5:14-15, paraphrase).
- “I know whom I have believed and I am convinced” (2 Timothy 1:12, NAS).

THE GIFT OF GRACE

How could someone like Saul be so convinced? Because he met Jesus. And because of the gift of grace.

The Gospel is both good news and bad news. The bad news is that “all have sinned” (Romans 3:23). The Bible tells us what we already know. “There is no one who does not sin” and “there is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins.”¹⁸

Sin is a choice to ignore God and to rebel against God. When we sin, we declare our independence and snub our noses at God’s authority. When we sin, we choose self-will, self-reliance, self-indulgence. When we sin, we break God’s law and bring upon ourselves the consequences of His judgment. When we sin, we miss the mark and fall short of His best. And sadly, when we sin, we spurn the one who loves us the most, we break His heart, and we offend a holy God.¹⁹ And sin separates us from Him.²⁰

But the good news. Two of the greatest words in the Bible are **“but God.”** “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved” (Ephesians 2:4-5, ESV).²¹ “But God demonstrates his love for us. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8, NIV). “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own

doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9, ESV).

What is grace?

- Grace is a gift from God. It is free and it cannot be earned.
- Grace is undeserved. It’s God giving us the opposite of what we deserve.
- Grace is always greater than our sin. God willing to forgive us no matter what we’ve done.
- Grace is not God looking the other way and ignoring our sin.
- Grace is God taking the initiative and doing the unthinkable.
- Grace is the cross.
- Grace is God watching His Son bleed and die.
- Grace is Jesus absorbing our sin and nailing Himself to a cross.
- Grace is God pouring out His holy wrath on Jesus instead of on us.
- Grace is Jesus sacrificing His life to pay the penalty for sin.
- Grace is Jesus dying in our place.
- Grace is forgiveness of everything we’ve ever done wrong.
- Grace is relief from shame, guilt, and regret.
- Grace is God welcoming us into His arms and into His family.
- Grace is God watching and waiting, ready to forgive and welcome any who will come back to Him.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9, ESV).²² There can be no boasting. Only humility. Only gratitude.

To the degree that we recognize our lostness will be the degree of our gratitude. To the degree that we realize we have offended a holy God and how sin separates from God will be the degree of our thankfulness. A true Christian sings “Amazing Grace” and means it. *Amazing grace, how sweet the sound ... that saved a wretch like me ... I once was lost, but now am found ... was blind, but now I see.*”

CONCLUSION

Acts 9 is the story of Saul’s conversion. All of us have a story as well, about the day we met Jesus and believed in Him. The circumstances of our stories may be different, but one thing is the same. Every story is about God’s grace.

By God's grace, the moment we believed in Jesus, we were forgiven of everything we've ever done wrong. By grace, we experienced peace with God and peace within. By grace, the moment we believed, we became children of God and He became our Father. And because of grace, we have the hope and assurance of one day seeing Jesus face to face and living with Him forever in heaven.

"For by grace you have been saved." Oh Jesus! Thank You! Thank You! Thank You!

NOTES

¹ Video testimony of Sam Nadler on the website of One for Israel.

² Charle R. Swindoll, *Paul, A Man of Grace and Grit*, Great Lives from God's Word (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2002), page 3.

³ See Acts 21:39.

⁴ After his conversion, when he began preaching in Gentile territory, he used his Roman/Gentile name Paul.

⁵ See Philippians 3:4-6.

⁶ See Philippians 3:4, where Paul said, "I could have confidence in my own effort if anyone could. Indeed, if others have reason for confidence in their own efforts, I have even more!" (Philippians 3:4, NLT).

⁷ "Ravaging," like a wild animal mauling its prey.

⁸ Paul described his brutal past in Acts 22:4-5, Acts 26:9-11, Galatians 1:13-14.

⁹ Swindoll, page 4.

¹⁰ "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads" (Acts 26:14, NIV). "Goads" were cattle prods. Long poles with a sharp end used to poke cattle to make them move. Jesus had been goading Saul all along, poking him with evidence and with truth. Saul had been fighting back, trying to silence it all by persecuting the church.

¹¹ See Acts 9:22.

¹² See Acts 9:23, 23:13.

¹³ See Acts 13:2.

¹⁴ See 2 Timothy 2:8.

¹⁵ See 2 Corinthians 12:1-4.

¹⁶ See Acts 21-28.

¹⁷ Clement was the first to record Paul's martyrdom, although without details, in *The Fate of the Apostles*, 97-103. In the second century, Tertullian specifically mentions Paul's beheading in *Scorpiace* 15:4 and in *The Prescription Against Heretics* 36. Eusebius later confirms Paul's martyrdom by beheading in *Ecclesiastical History* 2.25.

¹⁸ 1 Kings 8:46 and Ecclesiastes 7:20.

¹⁹ See Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*.

²⁰ See Isaiah 59:2.

²¹ See Romans 3:24.

²² See Titus 3:5.