

Saul of Tarsus

Acts 9

This is the story of one of the **greatest threats** to the early church in the New Testament. The greatest threat, as it usually is, comes from a **person of zealous disagreement** with the movement of Jesus Christ. He is zealous in that he **is not adverse to taking extreme** measures, such as arrests that lead to executions. In other words, **he's not afraid to crack a few eggs** in order to make the omelet of his choice. **On top of zeal**, the greatest threat is someone with **influence who can sway others** to his way of thinking. Another way to put it is a **fanatical enemy who is well connected to power**.

This person is Saul, from the city of Tarsus. And this is his story. Meanwhile, Saul was uttering threats with every breath and was eager to kill the Lord's followers. (Fanatical zealous opposition unafraid of violence) So he went to the high priest. ²He requested letters addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, asking for their cooperation in the arrest of any followers of the Way he found there. He wanted to bring them—both men and women—back to Jerusalem in chains. This is influence and connection to power. ³As he was approaching Damascus on this mission, a light from heaven suddenly shone down around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?" ⁵"Who are you, lord?" Saul asked. And the voice replied, "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting!" ⁶Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." ⁷The men with Saul stood speechless, for they heard the sound of someone's voice but saw no one! ⁸Saul picked himself up off the ground, but when he opened his eyes he was blind. So his companions led him by the hand to Damascus. ⁹He remained there blind for three days and did not eat or drink. **He is a pharisee, a religious, pious Jew**, who wanted to keep the law of Moses to a "t." This is that type of man's response to what he has seen, heard, and no longer sees. He fasts for three days. ¹⁰Now there was a believer in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord spoke to him in a vision, calling, "Ananias!"

"Yes, Lord!" he replied. ¹¹The Lord said, "Go over to Straight Street, to the house of Judas. When you get there, ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. He is praying to me right now. ¹²I have shown him a vision of a man named Ananias coming in and laying hands on him so he can see again." ¹³"But Lord," exclaimed Ananias, "I've heard many people talk about the terrible things this man has done to the believers in Jerusalem!" ¹⁴And he is authorized by the leading priests to arrest everyone who calls upon your name."

¹⁵But the Lord said, "Go, for Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel. ¹⁶And I will show him how much he must suffer for my name's sake." ¹⁷So Ananias went and found Saul. He laid his hands on him and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road, has sent me so that you might regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸Instantly something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he got up and was baptized. ¹⁹Afterward he ate some food and regained his strength.

How does complete life change happen? This story is the greatest example in the history of the world. **I'm not going to boil life change down to three or four happy hops or easy steps**. This is a

real-life example. We know that true life change is **difficult**. Anyone who tells you any different is **lying or selling something**.

There's also **another sentiment** that says **people don't really change; they are who they are** and that is the end of it. This is what **several of the people who encounter Saul** were probably thinking.

The story of Saul of Tarsus is, at its core, a story about radical life change. Saul did not have some **incremental** change, or he **tweaked a few things** in his life. It wasn't a matter of **emphasizing and growing his strengths**. It wasn't even about **recognizing his weaknesses** and working hard to improve them, even to make them strengths. The story of Saul of Tarsus in Acts, Chapter 9 is the **story of transformation, of becoming a different person** for the good; a story of Jesus making all things new. In this case, it's a person Saul decorated, pharisee, learned man, expert in the law of Moses, **becoming what he was persecuting**.

These are the necessary ingredients we see that lead to Saul's radical life change. First...Recognizing that it is Jesus.

⁵“Who are you, lord?” Saul asked. And the voice replied, “I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting!” ⁶Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.” Acts 9:5-6

Earlier in the story in the book of Acts we see where Saul comes on the scene. He is a part of the **stoning of Steven**. **Steven was arrested** because he was teaching that Jesus was the Messiah. **After giving a history of Israel**, then culminates in him **accusing them of doing the same to Jesus** as their ancestors who killed the prophets. As they began to shake their fists at him, Steven says **“Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing in the place of honor at God's right hand!”** This was too much, believing that he was **blaspheming God, they stoned him to death**. It says that they **left their coats with Saul**, and he was in approval of what they did to Stephen. **What Stephen saw was real and true, not blasphemy.** (7:59)

What Stephen saw was a vision. This isn't a vision, this is the last **post resurrection appearance** of Jesus. Because the others with Saul **saw the light** and **heard sounds**.

This is not a vision, but rather an encounter with the Risen Jesus. This is why he is **qualified to be an apostle**. Only those who had seen Jesus could be called apostles. In other words, **Saul did not make himself an apostle** by calling him an apostle; he was **because he came face to face with Jesus, the risen Christ**.

This isn't what typically happens with us. Not that Jesus couldn't do that again, but he hasn't. **He does it differently now through his Holy Spirit.** The Holy Spirit is, after all, the **presence of the risen King Jesus**. We have **experiences with Jesus in the form of the Holy Spirit**. These can come in all different forms using words **from the Bible**, words **from a brother or sister in Christ**, or an **experience with God's creation**.

When the Bible speaks of “knowing” or “knowledge” we, from the west, tend to interpret that as **intellectual or information**. We **understand and agree** with those facts or ideas, therefore, we know. **Knowing, in the Bible, is always experiential.** **You don't know someone or something**

unless you have experienced it. I saw pictures of the Grand Canyon, but I didn't know what **the Grand Canyon** was until I saw it and words wouldn't capture what I was taking in.

Real complete life change begins here. All the rest is incremental tweaking, because they don't get to the core. Meeting Jesus means he gets to your core. **We don't change, we get changed.**

Are you trying to change, but continually failing? The problem might be that **you haven't met and submitted to King Jesus** and allowed him to begin the right kind of change. That brings us to the next ingredient...Being humbled by Jesus.

When you submit to a king, you must receive whatever he has for you. You see **the difference between who you are and who he is, and it is disarming.**

⁷The men with Saul stood speechless, for they heard the sound of someone's voice but saw no one! ⁸Saul picked himself up off the ground, but when he opened his eyes he was blind. So his companions led him by the hand to Damascus. ⁹He remained there blind for three days and did not eat or drink. Acts 9:7-9

The man who thought he was seeing things correctly according to what he had been taught about life and God was suddenly blind. Anyone **suggesting that they are God** and that they have the right to **set aside the law of Moses** must go. **Now that guy can't see anything.** He must be led around by others **like a helpless child.** He has **no control** of his situation.

Many times, being humbled by Jesus isn't that extreme but, after all, Saul's complete change is joining the group he thinks needs to be arrested and killed. Big change comes **from not being knocked down a few pegs**, but clear to the ground with a **thud.** **For someone like Saul to get the message, it must be extreme.**

He wasn't going to simply humble himself. That is **an option** you know. We can, when **confronted with Jesus' right to lead our lives, kneel and submit** to his loving rule instead of being tossed down. **I had a friend in Columbus who worked at TICO which was an "18 and under" prison.** This wasn't a county lock up, this was for very bad boys. He was teaching at TICO, helping kids get a diploma or GED. **It was understood that if the guards rushed** in for any reason, as an inmate, you either laid face down on the floor or you were forcibly put face down on the floor. **He had a sensor on his body** and if his body went parallel to the ground or close to it the alarm would go off and the guards would rush in. One day he leaned too far back in his chair and the alarm went off. **The boys in his class immediately hit the floor.**

It's easier if you choose to humble yourself than to be humbled. Don't take **the best seat at the banquet...**

Real life change begins with Jesus and that is a humbling experience which leads to...Real conversion...

Conversion is by divine initiative...God gets there first. We use the word **"drawn" by the Holy Spirit.** Someone who is **spiritually dead must be drawn.** It is **never our idea.** Again, it begins with Jesus, through the Holy Spirit **putting new desires in our minds and hearts.** We start wanting something we didn't want before.

Saul was not leaning in this direction and only needed a nudge. **Complete conversion is initiated from without not within.** This is huge, because **our culture believes that truth is within,** we just need to **become self-aware, because our selves have everything we need.**

Do you see where the focus is? Yes, it is on me, not God. The focus in real life change is on God. **When we look at God, he helps us to see ourselves accurately.**

Conversion has a bad name right now. The world is saying we **don't care about people, we just want converts.** The idea of conversion has a bad name because **we watered it down to saying a prayer,** raising your hand for the real purpose of making it to heaven when we die avoiding hell. **It has nothing to do with following and obeying Jesus.** We say that **God has called us to make disciples, not get these kinds of converts** who come to church from time to time, maybe toss something in the plate and try not to sin too much.

Conversion is the “the process of changing from one form to another.” You could say from **one team to the opposing team.** This is what happened to Saul. **Conversion is the beginning of this process of total change.** Conversion is a personal encounter with Jesus who is risen and alive.

You could call conversion total surrender...You didn't see Saul **telling those who were leading him into the city to leave him alone because he was fine.** No, he surrendered to the situation. But it goes deeper. **It says that he went on a three day fast.** He didn't eat or drink. Think about that for a second. **He was being converted and his part was total surrender to Jesus humbling him and for three days, seeking God for answers to what is happening and what does he needs to do.**

The problem with the American church and our idea of total change is that it stops right there. **God has made me new; I am transformed into a new creation and now I am better suited to survive this world unscathed** and slip into heaven when I die.

Roy Clements says he does not “use the phrases ‘decided for Christ’ or ‘committed to Christ,’ though decision and commitment are certainly involved...Conversion is at root not a decision, nor a commitment, but a surrender to the supreme authority of Jesus.” *The Church that Turned.*

The problem American church type of change is that it demands very little. You don't really have to obey or follow Jesus. **Your status has been changed and now because of Jesus' death for your sins, you are ready for eternity.** In this system **you don't have to join what Jesus is doing in this world.** **He must leave you alone now that forgiveness has been given and heaven is set.**

Notice that in Saul's situation it is very, very different. That is because real life change starts with **Jesus, humbling, conversion...and commissioning.** **It's conversion and commissioning as a package deal.** We tend to see commissioning as a **second step, but only for the real go getters.**

¹⁵But the Lord said, “Go, for Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel. ¹⁶And I will show him how much he must suffer for my

name's sake." Acts 9:15 Notice that this **"chosen instrument" talk starts at the very beginning.** It isn't separate from conversion. **It is a part of real conversion and life change.**

And the voice replied, "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting! ⁶ Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." Acts 9:5-6 **Saul didn't raise his hand at a church meeting or feel a warming in his heart during a worship song.** He's about to be **told what he must do.** He's about to get his **marching orders.** **That is a commissioning.**

¹⁶ **Now get to your feet!** For I have appeared to you to appoint you as my servant and witness. Tell people that you have seen me, and tell them what I will show you in the future. ¹⁷ And I will rescue you from both your own people and the Gentiles. Yes, I am sending you to the Gentiles ¹⁸ to open their eyes, so they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God. Then they will receive forgiveness for their sins and be given a place among God's people, who are set apart by faith in me.' Acts 26:16-18

"Rise and enter" is typical language for a commissioning. You have submitted, now you must do as I tell you. This is your task.

Ok, I'll say it. **If commissioning to go do what God tells you to do as a part of what he is doing in the world isn't a part of your faith, then you haven't been converted.**

Conversion without commissioning is self-focused, not God and neighbor focused. It's about what **I need to get through this life** and into heaven. **But with commissioning it is about not just what God did but what he is doing now in this world.** And if it's about what **he is doing in this world** then it is about loving neighbor. **I have been loved deeply by God, not simply so I could enjoy that, but so that I could love others like Jesus.**

No one is born anew into the kingdom of God and sent into the world to represent him alone. That is why...This must include the family of God! **Life change happens in community with others.**

Here's the problem. Saul needs the family that he was actively trying to destroy. So Ananias went and found Saul. He laid his hands on him and said, "Brother Saul..." Acts 9:17

Lloyd Ogilvie muses, **' imagine laying your hands on someone who you know had been on his way to arrest you.'**

Saul is immediately brought to people in the family of God. Even before he can see. In his state of being humbled **Ananias took the risk of obeying God** and reaching out to the enemy.

"Though Saul's conversion is individual, it is not individualistic." (NIV Application Comm) **It's the same for us. You don't get Jesus without his family. And you can't ignore his family any more than you can ignore Jesus.** We learn and **practice all of what we will use out there** in relationships in here.

But this story doesn't stop with Ananias. Look at verse 26. ²⁶ When Saul arrived in Jerusalem, he tried to meet with the believers, but they were all afraid of him. They did not believe he had truly become a believer! ²⁷ Then Barnabas brought him to the apostles and told them how Saul had seen

the Lord on the way to Damascus and how the Lord had spoken to Saul. He also told them that Saul had preached boldly in the name of Jesus in Damascus. Acts 9:26-27

Aligning my life to what Jesus is saying.

1. Have I been converted and commissioned?

It must be both.

1. Am I willing to be like Ananias and Barnabas?

Are you willing to risk coming into relationship with people who appear to be the enemy to what God is doing?