

A Teach on Saul's Conversion from Acts 9

Sue Collins, September, 2016

Acts 9: Story time!

About the time that Jesus was having his famous visit to the temple in Jerusalem at the age of twelve, another little boy was being born to Jewish parents in the town of Tarsus. They were Hellenistic Jews, which meant they spoke both Hebrew and Greek, because they lived in an area where the Greek language and culture were dominant. They were Roman citizens, and Roman citizenship came with a lot of advantages—including the ability to travel freely throughout the empire. They named their little boy Saul, like the first king of Israel. He had a sister, although how many other siblings we don't know.

Tarsus was no backwater. It was a commercial and literary city and housed one of the three universities of the Roman Empire. His parents moved the family to Jerusalem at some point in Saul's childhood, and he picked up the rudiments of a classical education. In his letters he quoted Greek poets, and he was pretty good at rhetoric, which is just the art of persuasive writing. Once in Jerusalem his education made him into a Hebrew scholar. He trained under Gamaliel, who still has a reputation of being one of the greatest teachers of all time of Judaism. Saul himself tells us that he was advanced beyond his age, thoroughly trained in the Jewish Law, and very zealous for God. He was probably in the Sanhedrin (like a Jewish Supreme Court), which was remarkable for someone so young. He was well-off, confident, and sure of himself and what he was doing.

And what he was doing was trying with everything he had to stamp out this new thing called The Way. We know it now as Christianity. Saul had a tremendous regard for the reputation of the Lord. By persecuting Christians he thought that he was fighting against blasphemy and heresy—Lies! Saul was a devout man whose mission in life had become the elimination of this nasty cult that was leading Israel badly astray. He was doing his utmost to serve God and keep Israel pure. We see in Acts 8:3 that Saul was determined to destroy the church, going from house to house dragging believers off to prison, and he was in a raging fury. He was a man obsessed—and this is the story of how he changed.

As Acts 9 opens, we see Saul setting out in a huff for Damascus. Damascus is the capitol of Syria. It was about 150 miles from Jerusalem, so about a week's journey, and tens of thousands of Jews lived there at the time. Let's read verses 1-9.

So there Saul was, crossing the desert and getting near Damascus, and there was a flash of light. That doesn't seem so extraordinary until you think that the desert sun at noon is very hot and bright, and so for something to be **recognized** as a flash of light it would have to be on the level of a nuclear flash. That's bright. No wonder Saul was knocked to the ground and blinded by it. And then came the clincher—a voice from heaven. Now to the rabbinic mind, which Paul certainly had, voices from heaven were invariably from God. So it makes sense that he reacted in confusion, asking "Who are you?", because he hadn't been persecuting God, he'd been strenuously defending him! But when the voice declared that it was the voice of Jesus, Saul must have felt the bottom drop out of his world. You do the math. If a voice from heaven = God and THIS voice from heaven = Jesus, therefore, Jesus = God. Oh No. So in that one second, Saul must have become a deeply broken man. That formerly angry, confident man let himself be tamely led by the hand to the city.

Did you notice? Jesus claimed that Saul was persecuting him. Well, Jesus was already dead.

Q. How can you persecute a dead man? (Matt 25).

Jesus identifies so closely with those who believe in him that whatever you do to them, either good or bad, it's as though you do it to him.

It's worth looking at a couple of other places in Acts where Paul later recounted this story for others, because he adds some other details that it's interesting to hear. Ch 22:6-11 and ch 26: 15-18.

Here you see a mention of Saul pricking against the goads. You know what a goad is? It's a long pointy stick, and if your ox won't get a move on, you poke him with it. Oxen would sometimes kick against it, which just made more likely that they'd get stuck in a tender part. So Jesus said there's something Saul is fighting, and it's difficult for him.

Q. What is that? What are Saul's goads?

God had been prodding and pricking Saul's mind and his conscience with evidence that Jesus was who he said he was, and Saul was resisting with everything he had. Remember, Saul lived in Jerusalem. It's possible he even heard Jesus preach, since Jesus hung out at both the temple and the synagogues. And if he never heard Jesus personally he surely heard **about** his teachings, his miracles, and his character. He'd probably seen the actions and the character of Jesus' followers. If he *was* on the Sanhedrin, he may very well have been present at Jesus's trial. He certainly heard Stephen's speech and saw his face shining like an angel and saw Stephen's courage and heard his prayer as he died—and he died with Saul's approval. And yet Saul had continued to resist. It must have been a tremendous relief to really KNOW the truth and give in at last.

Let's read 9:10-16. Ananias. Poor Ananias. He gets one of the scariest jobs ever—and he gently questions God to make sure he is up to date on this Saul guy because what God is asking sounds very dangerous and a little insane. Ever feel that way? It's interesting—as Ananias is having a vision to tell him to go to Saul, Saul is having a vision telling him that Ananias is coming! God did indeed have it all worked out.

Ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul “for he is praying”. This is one of those times when you definitely want to be a fly on the wall. Let's do some conjecture here, and think about what the content of those prayers might have been. In three days, you can cover a lot of prayer territory.

Q. What do you think might have been in these prayers? (mourning and repentance, fear, forgiveness, wisdom, strength, worship, instruction from Jesus himself (ch22:14-15, ch9:16, Gal1: 11-12)).

Q. 9:16—just how much is that?

Phil 3:8—he says that for Jesus Christ his Lord he lost ALL things. He gets death threats, his life is in danger almost immediately, and it continues to be in danger for the rest of his life. He loses his wealth, his position in society and the Jewish hierarchy, his status as Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, his security, he spends the rest of his life as a traveling preacher who depends on others for his support and sometimes has to make tents to keep the daily coin coming, he spends a lot of his future in prison (which was not the three-hots-and-a-cot that is today), he gets beaten, left for dead a couple of times, shipwrecked, diseased, the list goes on. And yet—he saw the implications, saw his future, and wasn't afraid to go forward and live it out: this is courage. Saul felt that his sufferings were no more than he deserved, and more than worth it for the privilege of being used by God to the point of being all used up.

But back to Ananias. (9:17-19). he's a brave man too. I can't imagine that the brilliant, furious Saul got a lot of hugs, but the first thing Ananias does is place his hands on Saul. For a man who cannot see, and especially can't see your facial expression, feeling someone's kind touch is very meaningful. It was also the way that God chose to restore Saul's sight and release his Spirit into him. The other thing Ananias does is call Saul his Brother. Brother Saul, Saul my brother. That transmits love, grace, and belonging. It's amazing, and profound. Just like that, Saul is welcomed into the family of believers, and he demonstrates it by being baptised. His sight has been restored, and he starts his new life.

9:19-25. So Saul already knows what he needs to know, and sets out passing it on—at once! And here comes the first death threat already—that didn't take long. So his followers (he already has followers!) help him escape, and it's the first escape of many. It's mentioned in Galatians that Paul actually spends three years in Damascus and Arabia preaching the gospel. There is a church tradition that Saul spends those three years alone with Jesus in the desert just learning from him, like the other apostles had their three years with Jesus. But

Galatians doesn't actually say that, and honestly It makes no sense. He wouldn't be a threat to anybody if he was just having quiet contemplative time in the desert. Nobody would be conspiring to kill him because nobody bothers to persecute someone who is ineffective. No, he was very much around other people, preaching away. Paul must have really been making sense, and bringing many people to salvation, so the persecutor became the persecuted.

What's next after Damascus? He hits the big time, and goes home to Jerusalem. Ch9:26-30 (death threat number two!), 22:17-21, 26:19-23. Good for Barnabas. He isn't called Son of Encouragement for nothing. The Spirit must have revealed the truth about Saul's change of heart and life to him, and he says that Saul really is a fellow disciple because (1) he saw Jesus, (2) he heard Jesus, and (3) he witnesses boldly. So Saul seems to have been accepted by the other apostles, and went about speaking boldly.

But did you notice the way that these last two accounts end, the thing that started the riots? It wasn't the gospel, really, it was that he had been sent to give God's word to the Gentiles! That was outrageously offensive—that the things of God were to be given to another group of people. But that was God's plan all along, that his people would include believers from every country, every language, every background—you know, like us. This was Saul's special mission, and he was remarkably qualified for it. He could argue with the Pharisees as a son of Abraham, address Greek-speaking people in their own language, and as a Roman citizen he could theoretically travel safely through the whole empire, which was vast.

You know, we do have some idea of what Paul looked like. There's a bronze medallion dating from the late first century featuring Peter and Paul. Peter is tall, but Saul, known as Paul is short—which is kind of funny, because Paul means Little. He's bald on top, with a curly fringe around the outside, and a short curly beard. It makes him a little more real, and little more human. But I said at the beginning that this is the story of how he changed. So think about the letters from this man that you've read, like the ones to Philemon, the Timothys, Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, the Corinthians.

Q. What comes through of his personality? What was the converted Paul like?

To me, his letters just bleed love and concern. He was no longer a smart young know-it-all; he became a lover of people and a servant of Jesus, filled with grace and even gentleness. Some things didn't change—he still had an unshakeable passion for the truth and for God himself. When he regarded himself as a rabbinic Jew he marched firmly in that direction, doing his utmost for the God he served. But once Jesus got ahold of him he marched just as firmly in the other direction. He was still a man obsessed!

Two things to think about, in the coming days. When Saul was confronted with the truth, he bowed before it, even though it was a truth he was not expecting, and it left him broken. When we encounter God's truth, whether from his word or from the mouths of others, and it sits uncomfortably with us, what do we do with it? Brush it under the carpet, or look it in the face and change our paths?

The other thing to think about is that Saul's example shows us that NOBODY is too bad for God to redeem—there are no lost causes. Here's a paragraph from John Stott to close with:

“There are many Sauls of Tarsus in the world today. Like him, they are richly endowed with natural gifts of intellect and character: men and women of personality, energy, initiative and drive; having the courage of their non-Christian convictions; utterly sincere, but sincerely mistaken; traveling as it were from Jerusalem to Damascus instead of Damascus to Jerusalem; hard, stubborn, even fanatical in their rejection of Jesus Christ. But they are not beyond his sovereign grace. We need more faith, more holy expectation, which will lead us to pray for them (as we may be sure the early Christians prayed for Saul) that Christ will first prick them with his goads and then lay hold of them. “