

Acts 9: The Conversion of Saul

How's everyone doing tonight?

Good, good. Let's pray.

Father, I pray for us tonight, as we look into a familiar story for us father. I pray that the scales of familiarity would fall from our eyes tonight, and that you teach us from your word tonight. We love you Lord. Amen

Well this week we are looking at the conversion of Saul. And we will see once again this overarching theme of God building his Church, against all odds, and against man's attempt to stop.

So let's read together the story here of Saul, and it's quite a few verses, so if you're prone to scripture fatigue, buckle up butter cup:

The Conversion of Saul

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

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

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. Saul Proclaims Jesus in Synagogues
For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus.

20 And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." **21** And all who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?" **22** But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.
Saul Escapes from Damascus

23 When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, **24** but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him, **25** but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.

Saul in Jerusalem

26 And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. **27** But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus. **28** So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. **29** And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him. **30** And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

31 So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And

walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.

Not only is this story incredible, the conversion of Saul of Tarsus is considered one of the most crucial events in the history of the NT Church.

Think about this, for the rest of the book of Acts Saul, will dominate the rest of the book of Acts. Not only that, Saul's writings will to the early church will take up much of the new testament letters.

It's safe to say, that through the life of Saul, God uses this man, as a hinge, as a turning point to effect humanity, and it's ripples are still being felt today, even tonight with us meeting together singing praises to Jesus, praying together, encouraging one another, we can trace this thread throughout history back to Saul.

That is so incredible to me. God is faithful.

There are some rich and unchanging truths about God, and the Gospel that we can glean here from the story of Saul's conversion to Jesus. And that's what we're going to do tonight as we look through Saul's story.

So we enter Chapter 9 and we are told Saul is still leading the charge against the church.

But understand here Saul is not just a critic of Jesus and His movement. He is warring against Jesus in a very real way.

Think about it, just a little bit before this, Saul is standing above the body of Stephen, who has just been stoned and is dead. And scripture says he stood there and gave his approval.

This is like classic evil, maniacal behavior. Like I just imagine Saul delivering the slow clap as Stephen dies.

That is messed up.

And remember, Saul isn't just some crazed Psycho working on his own, he is doing this with the blessing of the leaders of Judaism.

Understand here, in a very real way, Saul is being a good Jew here. He is protecting and weeding out something that is threatening all that he loves and holds dear.

Saul is hunting and bringing to justice what he would see as theological terrorists who are threatening the Jewish faith.

With all this in mind, we see the beauty in verses 3-5.

On the road to Damascus, a bright light surrounds Saul, and the resurrected Jesus encounters Saul, and this murderous, laser focused persecutor of the church, immediately is changed.

And that's where I want to draw our attention to our first point, and it's this:

God has long arms!

Isaiah 59:1 says this:

Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear;

God has long arms!

Here's what I mean:

The conversion of Saul is the great reminder to us that no one is beyond the reach of Jesus.

Saul wasn't on the road to Damascus, reading Timothy Keller's book *The Reason for God*, being introspective and contemplating that he might be wrong about all that he was doing.

No, God in his strong and everlasting love, reached down, on the road to Damascus and grabbed hold of the most violent, aggressive, rage-filled man that the scriptures record in the 1st century.

And that love, cause the mighty Saul, yes even him, to fall on his face, and fall in love with Jesus.

Of all the people in the 1st century most likely not to fall in love with Jesus, Saul's name was at the top of that list.

But here's where that 1st point and truth come and hits us between the eyes, is that God has long arms!

Do you believe this?

My Mom isn't a believer. I love my mom. She is a great mother. I love and care for her deeply. But she doesn't know Jesus. And in some ways, my mom is adamantly apposed to Jesus.

And early on in my faith journey this used to really bother. I used to have these conversations where I would beg God to save my mother and when I would hear silence I would just be filled with despair.

It's like I used to view God as having these little t-rex arms, and his reach was only so far. Surely my mom is out of his reach, I would think, without admitting to anyone.

But let me tell you, that is the farthest thing from the truth.

No one is out of reach of the loving arms of Jesus!

This is a great gospel truth that we have to remind ourselves of, sometimes daily because we're often prone to discouragement.

Discouragement where we believe the lie there's no way that God could save this person or that person.

Maybe for you it's a child that's walked away from the faith.

Maybe your like me and it's a parent.

Maybe for you it's that neighbor, or that close friend and days, weeks, and months go by and you think, "Is God even able to save this person?"

Let me be the one to remind you of the glorious Gospel truth that God has long arms!

The second point I want to draw from Saul's story that is a rich and deep Gospel truth is that Salvation is not up to us.

I know these seems like a no brainer, but let me explain. Sometimes you and I, we get in the trenches.

Like we're studying our Bible, and we're praying, and we're doing the work day in and day out of loving this person and loving that person.

And we utilize every opportunity we feel God gives us to live out and even tell this person and about Jesus, and we scratch our heads and we get discouraged because we think to ourself, "Why hasn't God saved this person yet."

And sometimes we think to ourselves, “Well, I’m doing all this stuff God, look at all this stuff I’m doing God, why won’t this person just respond?”

And then we’re discouraged. And we believe the lie that a lot of us believe at one time or another that it’s up to us to save people.

We fall into the trap thinking that it is because of our work that someone will come to salvation.

But Saul/Paul, reminds us in 1 Corinthians 3:5-7:

5 What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. **6** I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.

7 So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.

There’s this great Gospel truth that Salvation isn’t something we produce.

And I know that sometimes we just want to go up to people and slap them upside the head with our Bibles like that will save them, but we have to remember that God never called for you or to me to save anyone.

We can’t save anyone.

But God has called us to be his instruments in the world, to live out the love of Jesus, to boldly tell people about Jesus and what he does for us in our lives.

We are literally sowers of seeds, called to go out in the field and plant.

But sometimes we forget that truth, and so we go out in the field, and we sow seeds, but then we stop, and get

discouraged by looking at the ground and wondering why the seed isn't growing faster than we think it should.

Salvation is not up to us. It's not. So don't be discouraged when the seeds that you've sown haven't grown yet.

It's not up to you.

If you are sowing seeds you're doing your job, let God do the rest.

So that family member that you've been loving and witnessing to with your life and your words for years hasn't come to Jesus yet, don't worry about that.

Don't lather yourself into frenzy, and trick yourself that there is anything that you can do other than sow seeds.

The late R.C. Sproul said this about salvation and I love it:

Salvation is something that God does in us and for us, not something that we in any way do for ourselves.

I'll read that again,

Salvation is something that God does in us and for us, not something that we in any way do for ourselves...or for others.

R.C. Sproul's quote here reminds me of Ephesians 2:8-9:

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,
9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

And although that can comfort us, you might be sitting here thinking, "Well Erik, I love this person deeply and care

for their eternal security, and so I want them to know Jesus with all my heart.”

And I get that. But my only response to that type of thinking is, I know a God who loves them more, infinity and deeply that we ever could, and calls us not to worry, but to sow seeds of the Gospel around our lives and others lives.

And so hang onto that Gospel truth that Salvation doesn't rest in your hands, it rests in God's and that is a beautiful truth.

There's some application I want to draw from this story of Saul's conversion, and it's Ananias.

In verse 10 we meet Ananias, and it says:

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,

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.”

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.

So Saul, encounters the resurrected Jesus, and God call Ananias to go to find Saul, and usher Saul into God’s mission of preaching the Gospel.

What is Ananias’ response here when God tell’s him to go find Saul.

It’s one word, fear. He’s fearful. And let’s be honest, he has reason to be.

He’s not just fearful in a shy way, he’s fearful because people who go against Saul are dying and being arrested.

So, how does Ananias respond. Does he keep the conveyor belt of excuses coming?

Does he pull a Jonah and run?

No, it says in verse 17” So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him...

Ananias was obedient despite the perceived potential consequences.

That’s really where I want to close for tonight. We all know God calls us to live the love of Jesus out in our lives and to tell, and I mean speak about Jesus into peoples lives.

But maybe you're here tonight and you've been paralyzed by fear. Or maybe you've been paralyzed by excuse.

Like you know your to tell others about Jesus, but for some reason with that co-worker you've failed over and over to talk about Jesus with.

And I'm not even talking about sitting them down and having a hard sell on who Jesus is.

I'm talking about just speaking about how God's working in your life, like being a witness in the places God has put you.

I just want to challenge you that God has placed you in the friendships and places, and jobs you're at for very real and specific reasons, to reach very real and specific people.

And God has chosen you as his instrument to sow the seeds of the Gospel in peoples lives.

But you hinder God's work when you don't talk about Jesus, when you aren't sowing seeds when you're paralyzed by fear.

Let me say this: It's ok to be afraid. It's ok to have fear. That's the human condition.

But it's when you let that fear stop you from doing what you know God has called you to do, does that fear become an issue.

So be courageous like Ananias.

Do what God is calling you to do. Talk about what Jesus is doing in your life around those who don't know him. Be sensitive to the Spirits leading in your relationships.

There are people who need Jesus, and need you to sow the seeds that God has charged you with sowing in their lives.

Do the work, and watch what God can do.

Remember:

God has long arms-no one is out of his reach.

Saving people is not up to us.

And Lastly,

There are people who need Jesus, and need you to sow the seeds that God has charged you with sowing in their lives.

Do the work, and watch what God can do with hopeful expectation.