

A Changed Man

Acts 9:19-25

¹⁹ 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.

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. – Acts 9:19-25 ESV

Saul was a man of action. Once he got his sight and his strength back, he was back at it again. But this time, his mission in life had a distinctly different direction to it. He was a changed man. He had come to know Jesus in a very real and personal way. The very one Saul had discounted as dead and had viewed as nothing more than a cause célèbre on which the disciples were building their religious revolution. No, he had discovered that Jesus was anything *but* dead. This Galilean, whose name was causing so much trouble for the Jewish religious leaders, was alive and had appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus. Saul had been blinded by His glory and convicted by His words: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:5 ESV).

It is interesting to note that Jesus' words to Saul were few. What is particularly fascinating is what Jesus doesn't say. He never claims to be the Messiah. He doesn't offer Saul living water or eternal life. He doesn't speak to Saul about his need to be born again. Once Jesus had introduced himself to Saul, He said, "But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do" (Acts 9:6 ESV). Nothing more, nothing less. Short and sweet. But they made an impact on Saul. The whole experience left Saul more than just physically blind. He was spiritually rocked. His religious sensibilities had been shattered. All he knew to be true had been turned on its head. And while he found himself unable to see, he had a new insight and spiritual eyesight he had never had before.

The only other words we have recorded by Luke that reveal what was said to Saul are those spoken by Ananias.

"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." – Acts 9:17 ESV

And the next thing we know, Saul is proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues of Damascus, giving proof that He really was the Son of God. His words confounded the Jews. His message confused

them. They had a difficult time reconciling what Saul was saying with the reputation that had preceded him. Rather than defending Jesus as the Messiah, he should have been apprehending Christians. But Luke tells us, “Saul’s preaching became more and more powerful, and the Jews in Damascus couldn’t refute his proofs that Jesus was indeed the Messiah” (Acts 9:22 NLT).

In these verses, we get a glimpse into Saul’s personality. He was an intense individual who had a strong inner drive. He was determined and disciplined. It’s what made him so good at his job as a Pharisee and as a persecutor of the church. And now that he was a follower of Christ, he had the added incentive of the indwelling Holy Spirit. God had taken this hard-driving, passionate, and self-motivated man and transformed him into a Spirit-filled, heat-seeking missile for the cause of Christ. Luke’s description of the early days of Saul’s conversion provides us with a teaser of what the rest of his life would look like. God had redeemed Saul’s zeal and inner drive. Those very same qualities that Saul had used to persecute Jesus and His church, God would now use to proclaim Jesus and build the church.

It didn’t take long before Saul found himself on the receiving end of the persecution he used to mete out. Now, he was the hunted. Luke simply tells us that “some of the Jews plotted together to kill him” (Acts 9:23 NLT). They wanted him dead, and they set guards at all the gates of the city to watch for him so they could murder him. But Saul escaped. And he would later provide further details regarding his escape, revealing that the Jews had even enlisted the aid of the local city officials in their plot to have him killed.

³² When I was in Damascus, the governor under King Aretas kept guards at the city gates to catch me. ³³ I had to be lowered in a basket through a window in the city wall to escape from him. – 2 Corinthians 11:32-33 NLT

What Luke provides us with in these verses is a summary or abridged version of Saul’s conversion. Later, Saul, writing under his Greek name, Paul, would provide more detail about all that had happened in those days.

¹⁵ But even before I was born, God chose me and called me by his marvelous grace. Then it pleased him ¹⁶ to reveal his Son to me so that I would proclaim the Good News about Jesus to the Gentiles.

When this happened, I did not rush out to consult with any human being. ¹⁷ Nor did I go up to Jerusalem to consult with those who were apostles before I was. Instead, I went away into Arabia, and later I returned to the city of Damascus.

¹⁸ Then three years later I went to Jerusalem to get to know Peter, and I stayed with him for fifteen days. ¹⁹ The only other apostle I met at that time was James, the Lord’s brother. ²⁰ I declare before God that what I am writing to you is not a lie. – Galatians 1:15-20 NLT

In his Acts account, Luke does not include Saul's detour into Arabia. But according to Saul, after his conversion, he went into the wilderness and then returned to Damascus. And it would be three years before he made his trip to Jerusalem, recorded by Luke in the following verses of this chapter.

It was most likely during his time in the wilderness of Arabia that Saul received additional insight from the Holy Spirit regarding his mission and commission. Saul would arrive back in Damascus fully convinced that Jesus was the Messiah and he would be fully prepared to defend that belief, even if it cost him his life. And this determination would not fade with time. Luke states, "Saul increased all the more in strength" (Acts 9:22 ESV). He grew stronger in his faith. His assurance that Jesus truly was the Messiah and that He alone was how men could be made right with God grew stronger with each passing day. We aren't told what happened during Saul's days in the Arabian wilderness, but we can easily assume it was Spirit-directed and filled with further insight from Jesus Himself. Saul most likely wrestled with God, debating with Him about Old Testament passages and receiving divine insight into the many prophetic passages that spoke of the coming Messiah. Saul received a theological education from the Godhead. When he showed back up in Damascus, he was fully convinced that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. And his determination regarding that matter would grow stronger over time. Saul would not relent. He would never retreat from his belief that the good news of Jesus Christ was real and needed to be shared with any and all, which is what he would later write in his letter to the Romans.

¹⁶ "For I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes—the Jew first and also the Gentile. ¹⁷ This Good News tells us how God makes us right in his sight. This is accomplished from start to finish by faith. As the Scriptures say, "It is through faith that a righteous person has life." – Romans 1:16--17 NLT

Saul had met Jesus. He had received the Holy Spirit of God. He had been chosen as an instrument for God. And his life would never be the same again. He had a new mission in life. He had a new purpose for life. And all that had come before, all that he had accomplished up until that time, had all become futile and pointless. His Jewish citizenship, his membership in the sect of the Pharisees, his education and his many accomplishments were nothing when compared to his newfound knowledge of Jesus as his Savior.

⁵ "I was circumcised when I was eight days old. I am a pure-blooded citizen of Israel and a member of the tribe of Benjamin—a real Hebrew if there ever was one! I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law. ⁶ I was so zealous that I harshly persecuted the church. And as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault.

⁷ I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. ⁸ Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." – Philippians 3:5-8 NLT

All on God's Timetable

Acts 9:26-31

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. – Acts 9:26-31 ESV

Two contrasting passages bookend this little pericope regarding Saul's life. The first is found at the beginning of chapter eight.

¹ And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. ² Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. ³ But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. – Acts 8:1-3 ESV

The second is found in verse 31 of chapter nine.

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.

Notice the differences. In the first passage, the church is mentioned as being located only in Jerusalem and as suffering great persecution. As a result of that persecution, its congregants were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samara. Then, by the time Luke closes out his introduction to Saul, his conversion and ministry, we find the church is now located throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria. Not only that, but it is also experiencing peace, spiritual and numerical growth, the fear of the Lord, and the comfort of the Holy Spirit. God was at work. His will was being accomplished. Persecution by the high priest, the Sanhedrin, or even Saul himself, could do nothing to stop the sovereign will of God from being fulfilled just as He had planned. He knows the schemes of men, even before they do. He knows the thoughts of men, even before they've had a chance to think them. King David wrote about this all-knowing aspect of God's nature.

- ¹ *O Lord, you have examined my heart
and know everything about me.*
- ² *You know when I sit down or stand up.
You know my thoughts even when I'm far away.*
- ³ *You see me when I travel
and when I rest at home.
You know everything I do.*
- ⁴ *You know what I am going to say
even before I say it, Lord. – Psalm 139:1-4 NLT*

So, despite the best laid plans of men, God's will was being accomplished. His church was growing and prospering, even in the face of opposition and adversity. And God had taken one of the primary instigators of persecution against the church and miraculously transformed him into His chosen instrument, a powerful tool for the spread of the gospel and the growth of the church.

According to Galatians 1:15-20, Saul spent three years in Damascus before he ever attempted to make the journey to Jerusalem, home of the original congregation of believers and headquarters of the 11 original disciples of Jesus. And when he finally arrived in Jerusalem, he was met with fear and skepticism. Even after three years, they doubted whether he was really a changed man. His former reputation still preceded him. But Barnabas brought Saul to the apostles and told them all that had happened on the road to Damascus and how Saul had become a powerful proclaimer of Jesus throughout that entire region. If you recall, Barnabas, also known as Joseph, was a Levite from Cyprus who sold a portion of his land and gave the proceeds to the apostles to care for the needs of the poor within the church family. So, he was well known to the apostles and had a good reputation among them. They had even nicknamed him Barnabas, which means "Son of Encouragement." His endorsement of Saul played a vital role in securing their acceptance of this former enemy of the church, and it opened up the opportunity for Saul to minister freely among them, preaching the gospel and debating with the Jews who still refused to accept Jesus as their Messiah. And Luke records that Saul also disputed with the Hellenists or Greek-speaking Jews. In doing this, Saul was carrying on the work of Stephen, the young man whose death he had approvingly observed as recorded in chapter six. Stephen had been a Hellenist, as Saul was, and now Saul was picking up where Stephen had left off, debating with the Greek-speaking Jews and boldly defending the deity of Christ and the truth regarding His claims to be the Messiah, the Son of God. But it seems that he fared no better than Stephen, because Luke tells us, "they were seeking to kill him" (Acts 9:29 ESV), and so, he was forced to leave town, escaping to Tarsus, by way of Caesarea.

Luke gives the impression that Saul fled from Jerusalem at the insistence of his fellow disciples, who, no doubt, feared for his life. But Saul would later testify that Jesus Himself had commanded his departure from Jerusalem.

¹⁷ “After I returned to Jerusalem, I was praying in the Temple and fell into a trance. ¹⁸ I saw a vision of Jesus saying to me, ‘Hurry! Leave Jerusalem, for the people here won’t accept your testimony about me.’

¹⁹ “‘But Lord,’ I argued, ‘they certainly know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. ²⁰ And I was in complete agreement when your witness Stephen was killed. I stood by and kept the coats they took off when they stoned him.’

²¹ “But the Lord said to me, ‘Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles!’” – Acts 22:17-21 NLT

So, it would appear that Saul had not fled for his life, but under direct orders from Jesus, and with the clear intent to take the gospel to the Gentiles. Saul also revealed that he was in keeping with the word spoken to him by Ananias immediately after his blinding encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, Ananias had given him the following message from Jesus: “For you are to be his witness, telling everyone what you have seen and heard” (Acts 22:15 NLT). And now, that commission from Jesus was going to be fulfilled. He was going to take the gospel to the Gentiles. And, as we will see, he would end up taking the gospel to places it had never been heard before, among people who knew nothing about Judaism, the Messiah, or the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And what a perfect candidate Saul made for this assignment. He was a Jew, but hailed from Tarsus, a Greek-speaking province. He was also a Roman citizen, a former Pharisee, and a serious student of the Hebrew Scriptures. He had the perfect blend of attributes and a personality profile well-suited to what Jesus had commissioned him to do. On top of that, he now had the Spirit of God living within him, guiding, directing, and empowering him for the task at hand. And he would prove to be a formidable force for the gospel for many years to come.

We are not provided with any details regarding Saul’s activities during his time in Tarsus. Still, we can easily assume that he continued to do what he had done before: To preach boldly in the name of Jesus (Acts 9:28). We do know from chapter 11 that it would be about six years before Barnabas arrived in Tarsus, seeking out Saul, to take him to Antioch in Syria. Here is Luke’s record of the reunion between these two men.

¹⁹ Meanwhile, the believers who had been scattered during the persecution after Stephen’s death traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch of Syria. They preached the word of God, but only to Jews. ²⁰ However, some of the believers who went to Antioch from Cyprus and Cyrene began preaching to the Gentiles about the Lord Jesus. ²¹ The power of the Lord was with them, and a large number of these Gentiles believed and turned to the Lord.

²² When the church at Jerusalem heard what had happened, they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³ When he arrived and saw this evidence of God’s blessing, he was filled with joy, and he encouraged the believers to stay true to the Lord. ²⁴ Barnabas was a good

man, full of the Holy Spirit and strong in faith. And many people were brought to the Lord.

*²⁵ Then Barnabas went on to Tarsus to look for Saul. ²⁶ When he found him, he brought him back to Antioch. Both of them stayed there with the church for a full year, teaching large crowds of people. (It was at Antioch that the believers were first called Christians.),
– Acts 11:19-26 NLT*

No doubt, the six years that Saul spent in Tarsus, where the inhabitants were predominantly Greek-speaking and non-Jews, he had ample opportunity to practice his preaching of the gospel to Gentiles. He would have had plenty of chances to debate and dispute with those who found his message unconvincing. It is also likely that he would have spent time poring over the Hebrew Scriptures, studying the Old Testament passages for all references to the Messiah. So, by the time Barnabas summoned him to accompany him back to Antioch, Saul would have been well-prepared for the task at hand.

Everything was falling into place. The divine plan for Saul's life was happening just as God had ordained it. There was not a single aspect of his life that was outside of God's will or devoid of God's divine influence. He was God's chosen instrument, and God was preparing him for a long and fruitful ministry.