

May 18, 2025
Saul Converted
Acts 9:1-31
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Would you bow your heads and pray with me?

Father, we thank you that you're here, and we pray that we would encounter you today. It's in Jesus name we pray. Amen. Today we're talking about a story that I think most of us are pretty familiar with, and that's the story of Saul coming to know Jesus. It's a very, very powerful story.

Now, before we get into that, I'm curious if you can think of a time in your life where you can remember vividly the first time you met somebody who would go on to completely change the trajectory of your life, someone who would just shift everything. You would no longer be the same. I think for a lot of you, the person that comes to mind is probably your spouse. I don't know if you can remember, like maybe locking eyes with him from across the room or the first conversation you had with him. Maybe some of you can't remember the first time you met.

And I just brought up a point of contention, and I'm sorry if I did that. I think for a lot of us, it might have been like a teacher. Maybe you sat in a classroom for the first time and you remember seeing somebody teach and thinking, this is somebody who's going to teach me some things, that it's just going to change me. Maybe you can remember sitting at the lunch table in middle school and making a best friend just in one conversation, thinking, this is somebody that's going to be in the thick and thin with me. One of the fun privileges I have being in the young adult small group here at Covenant is that I get to watch these young married couples experience having a child for the first time.

And one of the consistent things that happens over and over and over again when they come back and tell us about it, they say there is nothing like holding your own child for the first time and seeing this being. Because all of a sudden, everything that you are at the very core of your humanity, it changes everything you've been working toward, every ambition, everything that drives you, all of a sudden it's directed toward this little baby. Everything changes. And I'm convinced that there's no encounter quite like that. I mean, these first encounters with people who change our lives, they're powerful.

They are very, very powerful. And I'm curious. I wish I could just talk to each and every one of you. If I were to ask you, have you ever encountered. I'd love to hear.

I think we'd have a ton of different answers. I think some of you would say, oh, yeah, I've had an encounter with God, and it was powerful. And you might be one of those people who found yourself living a life that just had a total 180 because you experienced the love, the power and the grace of Jesus, and everything changed for you. You were one way you encountered Jesus, and now you're another. You have a powerful, powerful testimony.

And then there are those of you in this congregation who I think grew up in the faith. In fact, you came to know Jesus at such a young age, you can't really remember a life before him. And I think sometimes we tend to struggle because we think, well, my first encounter with Jesus, I was so young, and it was so subtle. Like, was it even real? Did I ever actually even come to know Jesus?

Did I ever even have an encounter with him? You didn't get to see your BC self before Christ self, Peter. Come to a place where you could see a drastic change when you encountered Jesus. So was this experience even real? And then I think there are those of you in this congregation who would just say, no, I've never encountered God.

That's not something I've experienced. And in fact, maybe the idea of encountering God sounds kind of strange to you. Maybe it sounds exciting because it's like, yeah, if this God person is here and Jesus is who he says he is, bring it on. I want to encounter him. And maybe to others of you, the idea of encountering God is kind of terrifying because you know that if that happens, things are going to have to change.

You see, every encounter we have, whether it be with a human being or whether it be with God, is a point of decision. Every single time. Every time you encounter a new person, you have to decide, is this somebody that I am going to let in? Is this someone who's going to change my life? Is this someone I'm going to allow to take a hold on me?

Or is this somebody that I'm just going to say, you know what, it was nice to meet you. I'm going to go now and just move on? And there's wisdom in both. When we encounter different people, you know, you can't let everybody in, but you can't reject everybody either. There's a process of discernment here.

And when we encounter God, we have the same exact choice to make. Is this God somebody I'm going to let in? Somebody I'm going to allow to change the trajectory of my life? Someone I'm going to allow to shape my motives? Or am I just going to say, it was nice to meet you, I've got to go now.

And let me tell you, I think our culture is obsessed with this idea of like, of changing, of trying to change ourselves. And you have all these books on habits and disciplines and things like that. But let me tell you, and all of you know this. Nothing changes a human being more drastically or more quickly than falling in love. You fall in love with somebody, you fall in love with your baby, you fall in love with the Lord.

That's what changes you. And as we read about Saul here, you're going to realize that the thing that changes Saul is the fact that he falls deeper and deeper in love with Jesus. If you've got your Bibles with you today, you can turn to Acts chapter nine. And this is the story of Saul's encounter with God. Now, it's important to note what we know about Saul coming into this story.

The first time we learn about Saul is in Acts, chapter seven. And what we learn about him is that he's just a young man standing there holding people's coats while they're stoning the Christian martyr Stephen. And so you have kind of this passive endorsement of murdering Christians from Saul because he's basically holding people's jackets so that they can get a better shot. And Stephen, then in Acts chapter 8, we find that Saul gives an active endorsement of Stephen's murder. It says he approves of it, he's glad that it happened, he doesn't regret it, he would do it again.

This was the right move. Saul doubles down. And then in Acts 8, verse 3, this is the last thing we learn about Saul before we get to chapter nine. It says that Saul began to destroy the church, going house to house, dragging Christians out, both men and women, and having them sent to jail and executed. So this Saul guy is scary when we meet him.

And he's especially scary if you look in the Greek here when it says Saul began to destroy. That word we translate to destroy is a Greek word that only appears once in the entire New Testament. And it's right

here to describe Saul. And it's a word that's used to describe when an animal or a beast goes on a violent rampage and is completely out of control. It's a scary word.

If you've ever been near a giant animal when it's out of control and on a violent rampage. It's scary. Like there's a moment when you realize this thing could turn on me and kill me and there's not a thing I could do to stop it. And that's how Scripture describes Saul's. State of mind as he's targeting Christians.

And when Saul looks back later on his state of mind in Acts chapter 26, this is how he describes it. He says, I used to believe that I ought to do everything I could to oppose the very name of Jesus, the Nazarene. Indeed, I did just that in Jerusalem, authorized by the leading priests. I caused many believers there to be sent to prison. And I cast my vote against them when they were condemned to death.

Many times I had them punished in the synagogues to get them to curse Jesus. I was so violently opposed to them that I chased them down in foreign cities. Saul is extreme here. He's a scary religious leader. And in every category today, he would rightly be labeled as a religious terrorist.

That's who we're starting with. And so when we get into Acts chapter nine and we hear Saul mentioned, we should be thinking, oh, boy.

So in verse one, it says this. Meanwhile, 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. So as we open chapter nine, we see that Saul is working to expand his efforts to exterminate the Christian movement. That's where we meet him.

And what you need to know about Rome at this time is that traveling from city to city was quite dangerous. And so what you do is you'd go in a pack, usually with strangers. You just kind of all travel together for safety because there are robbers and thieves and marauders between the cities. So you just kind of travel together. Kind of like if you went to Europe today and went with a group, like, that's kind of what the vibe was.

And yet here you have Saul probably decked out in pharisaical robes with walking down the street with a group of strangers headed toward Damascus. And it says he's sitting there breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. Can you imagine being a part of this group just walking with him and he's sitting there going, like, the whole way up. He'd be like, okay, this guy's freaking me out. Like, he is so hell bent on getting these Christians killed that he's muttering about it on the road like, that's insane.

And the truth is, I think there are people in our lives today that we think of as just as far gone as Saul. Because when you read the story of Saul, the first two verses, you think There is no hope for him. He is too far gone. He is violently opposed to Jesus. And I am convinced that each and every one of us probably has someone in our lives, whether it be in our school or our office or even in our own family, someone that we think, you know what, you might just be too far gone.

You might be too opposed to Jesus. You might have crossed the point of no return. And the very first thing that this story teaches us is the fact that it is incredibly dangerous to get to a point where we can look another human being in the eyes and think, you're too far gone for Jesus to redeem you. You're too far gone. That is a dangerous place to be because it means we don't understand the power that this Jesus has.

And what we see here is Jesus demonstrate just how he's going to bring Saul back. And so in verse three, it continues. As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him and he fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? Notice how Jesus doesn't say, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute my followers? He says, why do you persecute me?

How sweet is it that when the followers of Jesus are persecuted, Jesus himself experiences it, that when you're in suffering, he's in suffering. When you're in pain, he's in pain. That's what it means to be in Christ, the body of Christ, he is our head. That means when we experience persecution, he experiences it with us. And Saul asks a really good question here.

He says, who are you, Lord? Saul asked, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting, he replied, 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. 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. And for three days he was blind and did not eat or drink anything. Now I remember first reading this story and reading that last part and thinking, wow, God really punished him for messing up, blinded him, just like that. But that's not at all how that should be read. It is not God punishing Saul by blinding him.

Instead, what God is doing is he's giving him this three-day period, this chance to reflect on what he's been experiencing spiritually, this blindness physically. And so you have Saul here. He's fasting and praying and blind and unable to do anything. Now what's funny is that later on in the Book of Acts, Saul tells this very same story again when he's on trial before King Agrippa. But when he tells the story that time, there's two details that are a little different.

I want to see if you can catch them. I'll read this to you. This is Saul talking on one of these journeys. I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests at about noon, King Agrippa. As I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven brighter than the sun blazing around me and my companions.

We all fell to the ground. And I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads. Then I asked, who are you, Lord? I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

The Lord replied, okay, two things I want you to take note of. The first one, the author, for some reason, felt that it was incredibly important for you to know that the Lord spoke to Saul in Aramaic. That's going to become important in a second. I want you to take that, put it in your back pocket. We're going to come back to that.

The other thing I want you to notice is you probably heard this phrase before and you caught it here. Jesus says it is hard for you to kick against the goads. What does that mean? I'm glad you asked. A goad was a stick with a sharp point on the end of it.

And what farmers or shepherds would do is, as they're guiding cattle down a path, if one started to kind of veer off the path, give them a little, you know, nudge with the thing, and they go out and get back on the path, right? And what. What they had the option to do, right? If you get hit with the goat, your option is fight it and go harder, and then, you know, get the goat harder, or just get back on the path and keep going, right? Those are kind of your options.

And so when Jesus says, it is hard for you to kick against the goads, what he's saying is, Saul, every time I try to get you right back on the path, you veer harder toward me. This was a common phrase in ancient Greek and Roman times. So Saul would have heard this and been like, oh, he totally knew what it meant, right? And so I read this, and all I can do is wonder how often I sit here veering off the road that God has me nudged toward. And every time he gives me a little poke, I go, no.

And I kick against it. And guess who it hurts? Me. Right. That's what the phrase really encapsulates.

It's the idea that when God is guiding you and you kick against him, it hurts you.

This makes a lot of sense. When you think about the fact that Saul is described as this ferocious wild beast on a complete rampage. It's no wonder he needed to get hit hard with a goad. And then God gives him this sharp sting by blinding him with light. Kind of cool.

And as the story continues, we change perspective all of a sudden. Now we're going to see this from a different character's view. In verse 10, it continues. In Damascus, there was a disciple named Ananias. And the Lord called to him in a vision.

Ananias. Yes, Lord? He answered, do you notice the difference there? When the Lord spoke to Saul, he said, who are you, Lord? And when he spoke to Ananias, he said, yes, Lord.

I wonder if the Lord were to speak to you today, how you might respond. 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. Lord, Ananias answered, I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.

But the Lord said to Ananias, go. This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. And I will show him how much he must suffer for my name. Then Ananias 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.

And immediately something like scales fell from Saul's eyes and he could see again. He got up and was baptized. And after taking some food, he regained his strength. That's an incredible story. I think we've all probably heard it before.

But there's one important thing I want you to pay close attention to. You remember that God spoke to Saul in Aramaic. That's a little important detail. Pull that out of your back pocket. We're going to talk about that now.

This would have been a mind-blowing moment for Saul because as Saul is sitting there in darkness, unable to move, fasting and Reflecting on his life, trying to figure things out. You know, he speaks quite a few languages, but he's specifically thinking in Aramaic because that's how the Lord spoke to him. And so all of a sudden, when this man named Ananias appears, it's got to be a mind-blowing moment because in Aramaic, the name Ananias very clearly means Yahweh is gracious. Yahweh is gracious. And so what you have is this, this embodiment, this manifestation of God's grace who's called to go seek out a man who doesn't even have the ability to do or go anywhere.

He's stuck. And this man goes, God's grace goes and seeks him out. He finds him a specific man at a specific time at a specific place, and he meets him there and he grabs him and he says, brother, I mean, can you imagine that Saul is killing Christians? And one of the people he's after grabs him and says, brother, and his name is God's grace. It's God's grace that brings him in.

And then he goes on and it's God's grace that lays hands on Saul and fills him with the power of the Holy Spirit and scales fall from his eyes and he can see. It's God's grace that allows Saul to see. I mean, that's where this all starts. And you have to understand, this is especially mind blowing for Saul because his perspective of God was that God was the kind of God who, who would want him to go house to house, dragging people out who disagree with him and kill them, like that's who he thought God was. So when God appears to him on the road, Saul very clearly thinks, I'm a dead man.

God has got me. He's found me. I'm toast. And yet, for some reason, God does not do that. He doesn't.

He does just the opposite. And this shouldn't be surprising because when we read about God in the Old Testament, when God encounters Moses and he's telling Moses, here's what I'm like. The very first thing God says, he says, the Lord, the Lord, the gracious and compassionate God. Like that's the first thing God wants you to know about him. He's a gracious God.

And it's no surprise then that when you read Paul's letters later on after this encounter, every single one of them, without fail, begins with grace from our Lord Jesus Christ. It's so sweet. And it makes perfect sense when you look at the way that Saul talks about his experience with God.

I think a place we all tend to get stuck as Christians is in this kind of self-pity thing where we just can't quite accept God's grace on our lives and we can't move and we just get stagnant because we just, we're unqualified, we're too messed up, we can't go anywhere. And no one would have understood the temptation to sit in stagnant self-pity like Saul would have. I cannot imagine. I mean Saul is responsible for the murder of people on the basis of them loving Jesus. Can you imagine later on in his life how easy it would have been for the enemy, for Satan to take that crime and throw it back in Saul's face and say, yeah, you think you can write letters to churches encouraging them to follow you?

You think you have the authority to speak about this Jesus guy? Don't you know you're the one who murdered people for following him? I mean Saul would have been so tempted to sit and think I am too messed up. And he gets stuck in this self-pity. He would have stayed blind.

I don't know about you guys but I, I can kind of trick myself sometimes and I can think that the humble thing to do is to sit and acknowledge the fact that I'm just too messed up. That's the humble thing to do. And that's a lie. It's really not quite true. And let me tell you why.

Imagine for a moment that you're a parent and you pay off all of your student's college loans. They're gone. Like you cover them debt free. You find out 10, 20 years later that your student just felt bad about the fact that you paid off that debt. So for the last 10 to 20 years what they'd been doing was taking a big chunk out of their paycheck and just throwing it in the garbage, just making payments every month to the trash because they felt bad about the fact that you paid their debt off.

Now would you sit there as their parent and be like, good job. That's very humble of you to hold yourself responsible for the debt I paid off. No, not at all. You would never do that. You'd be so upset.

You're like, what? Do you know how expensive it was for me to pay off that debt? And you're continuing to make payments on it anyway. I did that so that you could be free. That's why I did it.

Guys, there's only one judge of our lives and it's not us. We don't have the right to sit in self-pity. We don't have the right to punish ourselves for things that God has set us free from. And Saul would have understood the temptation to do that more than anyone else. And yet he doesn't.

He gets up and he goes by the power of God's grace, he gets up and he goes. God doesn't change lives by beating people over the head, by condemning you for what you've done wrong. He changes lives by meeting you with extreme grace that you don't deserve. But if you get stuck on the fact that you don't deserve it, you're not going to be able to go anywhere. So this is what we see Jesus do.

He tells Saul who he is. He says, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. And then he shows Saul what he's like. He sends this man Ananias, God's grace, to go find him and extend forgiveness and new vision, new life. And then he says, now get up and go.

Now I want you to go back to that person in your life who just seems like they're too far gone. Who is it? Is it that person in your office? Is it in your school? Is it in your own family?

Someone that it's hard to have hope for? And what I want you to do is, as I read the way that chapter nine ends, I want you to imagine this being true of them.

Scripture says this: "Immediately Saul began preaching about Jesus in the synagogues, saying he is indeed the Son of God. And all who heard him were amazed. Isn't this the same man who caused such devastation among Jesus followers in Jerusalem? And didn't he come here to arrest them and take them in chains to the leading priests?"

But Saul's preaching became more and more powerful, and the Jews in Damascus couldn't refute his proofs that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. And after a while, some of the Jews plotted together to kill him. They were watching for him day and night at the city gate so they could murder him. But Saul was told about their plot. So during the night, some of the other believers lowered him in a large basket through an opening in the city wall.

And when Saul arrived in Jerusalem, he tried to meet with the believers, but they were all afraid of him. They did not believe he'd truly become a believer. 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. And so Saul stayed with the apostles, and he went all around Jerusalem with them.

Preaching boldly in the name of Jesus. He debated with some Greek speaking Jews, but they tried to murder him. And when the believers heard about this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus in his hometown. And then the church had peace throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria. And it became stronger as the believers lived in the fear of the Lord.

And with the encouragement of the Holy Spirit, it also grew in numbers. And that's how this story ends. That's one chapter. In one chapter, this man goes from killing Christians to people trying to kill him for being such a prominent Christian. I mean, it's just one movement.

I wonder for us today how God is commissioning us to go out and live like Paul goes and lives. I wonder how God is inviting you to be set free from the sin that he paid to forgive you from. You know, your transgressions are as far from you as the east is from the west, right? Will you live like that's true? Are you free?

And I wonder if. If you were to encounter God today, would you let him change you? Would you say you are somebody that I want to change my life?

I'd invite you to do that. Would you pray with me?

Father, we thank you that you are God and that we are not. We thank you for the way that you pursue us and chase after us and extend a grace to us that doesn't make sense, that we could never possibly earn. Father, I pray that you would take the scales off of our eyes, that we could see clearly by the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would fill this church with new life.

And I pray that we would go out and be the hands and feet of you, that we could be the Ananias in the world today, extending grace to the people who seem furthest from you.

Father, would you fill us with the same love for others that you have for them? We love you. And it's in Jesus name we pray. Amen.