

In the first half of Acts 9, we considered the astounding conversion of Saul, who we also know as the Apostle Paul. This morning's passage overviews Saul's early public ministry (before he disappears from the storyline for three chapters). But before we get there, I want us to have fresh in our mind everything Luke's told us about Saul up to his conversion:

They dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. And the witnesses laid their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul... Saul agreed with putting him to death. On that day, a severe persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the land of Judea and Samaria.ⁱ

Saul stood at the center of a "severe persecution against the church." He scattered "all" the Christians (except the apostles) throughout Judea and Samaria.

Our passage takes place in two settings—Damascus and Jerusalem. The disciples in Jerusalem—particularly the apostles—would remember Saul. The "disciples in Damascus," mentioned in verse 19, are likely refugees that fled his persecution. They likely saw family (or someone close in the church) arrested, beaten, or killed. They witnessed or heard about cruel and frightening things. They had to run for their lives, leaving everyone and everything they knew behind. They would know about Saul of Tarsus, the mastermind behind the terrorism.

Acts 9 opened, "Now Saul was still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. He went to the high priest and requested letters from him to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any men or women who belonged to the Way, he might bring them as prisoners to Jerusalem." Saul was not content to run the Christians out of Jerusalem. He wanted to snuff out the name of Jesus entirely—and so, he hunted the Christians that fled.

The people knew why Saul had come to Damascus. The people in the synagogues will say (verse 21), "Isn't this the man in Jerusalem who was causing havoc for those who called on this name and came here for the purpose of taking them as prisoners to the chief priests?" Certainly, the church knew that Saul was coming to Damascus and coming *for them*.

So imagine being the Damascus church, gathering on Sunday morning (perhaps in secret). Ananias, a familiar face, walks through the door. Then, behind him appears the man you fear more than any other—Saul of Tarsus. Involuntary, soul-freezing terror would grip the heart. So, it's amazing to read the opening sentence of our text: "Saul was with the disciples in Damascus for some time." (In Galatians 1, Paul says he stayed in Damascus for three years.)

Even more amazing are the words that open verse 25, "his disciples." Paul not only stayed there three years—but, when he finally had to flee, there was a group of Christians discipled by him. Their former terrorist had become their friend. How could this happen?

We know how it happened because we just read it—Jesus appeared to Saul and caused him to be born again. But for a Damascus Christian, it would be difficult to believe that Saul really changed. You might even wonder if it was all a ruse to infiltrate the church. In fact, what do we find when he reaches Jerusalem? Verse 26, "When he arrived in Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, since they did not believe he was a disciple."

As I study Acts, I ask of each passage, "Why did Luke (the author) want Theophilus (the recipient) to know *this* in particular?" Luke is not writing an exhaustive history. (He sums up three years with the word "for some time!") So, what's Luke's point? Why include this? To answer that, we first notice the passage's structure. We have high-level summaries of events in two settings—Damascus and Jerusalem—separated over three years.

Then we ask what's happening. Both deal with Saul's arrival and his reception. In both, we immediately meet people who find it unbelievable that Saul has become a disciple of Jesus. In Damascus, it's the Jews in the synagogue. In Jerusalem, it's the disciples in the church. So, we have both unbelievers *and* believers astounded by and questioning the transformation of Saul. I think that reveals what Luke is getting at. The central question being answered in Acts 9:19-31 is "Did Saul the terrorist really become Saul the evangelist?"

Imagine you're reading Acts for the first time. In chapter 8, a well-known sorcerer believed the gospel and was baptized. But soon after, he's severely rebuked for trying to buy the power of the Holy Spirit. So, you wonder, "How does Saul end up?" Luke writes this passage to demonstrate that the conversion (and apostolic calling) of Saul was genuine.

In a bit, we'll look at how Luke builds his case. But I want to deal first with a side question: How should we think about the skepticism of the disciples and their reluctance to receive Saul? We saw it in Ananias in Damascus and then in the disciples *and apostles* in Jerusalem. Was it sinful to doubt Saul's conversion—a lack of faith in God's power?

I'm convinced that their skepticism and reluctance to receive Saul was *not* sinful. On the contrary, it was a godly, righteous instinct that we should imitate. Nothing in the text indicates that Ananias or the disciples in Jerusalem are sinning in their hesitation. In fact, I would argue that they are *obeying* Jesus' command in Matthew 10:

Look, I'm sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as serpents and as innocent as doves. Beware of them, because they will hand you over to local courts and flog you in their synagogues.

Jesus promised a day would come when they would be arrested and flogged for their faith. *And this man—Saul—had just fulfilled that prophesy!* They *obey* Jesus when they resist receiving Saul until they are convinced that he is truly changed beyond a reasonable doubt. They are seeking to be shrewd in their dealing with Saul so that they might be innocent of harming the church. A naïve, hasty reception of Saul could lead to horrific consequences for the church—and they would share the guilt of that sin. It's when they receive sufficient, credible evidence that their terrorist was now their brother.

What convinced them beyond a reasonable doubt? For Ananias, it was God speaking and telling him that he had chosen Saul. For the apostles, it was the credible testimony of a trusted source about *both* Saul's personal encounter with the risen Jesus *and* the three years of life that followed. This is not a matter of Saul showing up, saying he's reformed, and being welcomed into the church and into leadership. In both situations, it's overwhelming evidence—as it should be. When we consider the extent and severity of the harm done by Saul, we should expect the evidence of his conversion to be of equal weight.

Saul doesn't condemn this shrewdness—he shares it. In Acts 15, Paul didn't think it prudent to bring Mark along because Mark had done them harm in the past by abandoning them. Barnabas disagreed. Such things are a matter of wisdom and conscience. These brothers had "such a sharp disagreement" that obeying their conscience required them to part ways.

In Acts 20, Paul exhorts the elders in Ephesus:

Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has appointed you as overseers, to shepherd the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Men will rise up even from your own number and distort the truth to lure the disciples into

following them. Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for three years I never stopped warning each one of you with tears.

Night and day for three years, Paul constantly warned each elder that, from them, wolves would arise to devour the flock. These aren't wolves in sheep's clothing; they're wolves in *shepherd's clothing*.

This is why Paul commends shrewdness when he tells the Corinthians:

[S]uch people are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no great surprise if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness.ⁱⁱ

Satan dresses as an angel of light to harm the church. So, it's no surprise that Satan's servants disguise themselves as Christ's servants to do the same. A man (like Saul) that you've known to be extremely wicked could now be an apostle. Likewise, a person who appears worthy of the title "apostle" could be a servant of the devil. This is why Paul tells Timothy to be shrewd in appointing church leaders:

Don't be too quick to appoint anyone as an elder, and don't share in the sins of others... Some people's sins are obvious, preceding them to judgment, but the sins of others surface later. Likewise, good works are obvious, and those that are not obvious cannot remain hidden.ⁱⁱⁱ

You can't see the sins of some people who are headed to judgment; they take a long time to appear. Evil people can appear godly enough to lead the church!

I can't count the number of times I've heard of the conversion of Saul being used to strongarm believers into hastily receiving someone who has done them serious harm. And in far, far too many cases, it results in further and greater harm being done. "If God can change Saul, he can change anybody. He says he's sorry! You *have to* take him back. You *have to* restore him!" That's not why this passage was written. And it's *not* what is happening here.

Saul's reception by the Jerusalem church and apostles wasn't overnight. He had done profound harm to the church. The apostles only received him (and ministered with him) when they heard of over *three years* of faithful service to Jesus in the face of opposition.

When a person has an established track record of doing real harm, we are not wrong to insist on an established track record of genuine repentance before allowing them into a position of trust. That's not being unloving; it's loving the people who could suffer more harm. It's not a lack of faith in God's ability to change people. Believing God really does transform great sinners, we have every reason to expect great evidence of that change.

The shrewdness of Ananias, the Jerusalem disciples, and the apostles is actually Luke's point here. They were not being naïve or hasty. They knew about Saul and resisted. But, in the end, they were convinced that he was a true disciple. In fact, Luke writes in verse 28, "Saul was coming and going with them in Jerusalem." He was part of the church's life and ministry.

So, what convinced them? Barnabas convinces the apostles of the genuine nature of Saul's discipleship by pointing to two things—Saul's conversion and Saul's boldness. "Barnabas, however, took him and brought him to the apostles and explained to them how Saul had seen the Lord on the road and that the Lord had talked to him [his conversion and calling], and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus [his ministry]."

On Saul's conversion—The Lord literally spoke to Ananias (who likely spoke on Saul's behalf to the Damascus church). He told him that Saul was his "chosen instrument." Barnabas

recounted how the risen Lord appeared to and talked to Saul. But the apostles are not merely given a conversion story; they are shown the results of that conversion—Saul’s boldness.

In Damascus, Saul was continually “confounding the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.”^{iv} In Jerusalem, he was “speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He conversed and debated with the Hellenistic Jews.”^v Through Saul’s training as a Pharisee, the Lord equipped him with knowledge of the Scriptures. After meeting Jesus, he sees how it all fits together. So, right away, we find Saul “proving that Jesus is the Messiah.”

But the point here is *not* that Saul was a gifted and orthodox teacher. It’s certainly not that he got results. Though he made disciples, his preaching did not result in mass revivals and soaring popularity. In both places, his evangelism results in people wanting to kill him. I think *that*—Saul’s perseverance in the face of deadly opposition—is Luke’s main point of evidence.

In John 10, Jesus said:

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, since he is not the shepherd and doesn’t own the sheep, leaves them and runs away when he sees a wolf coming. The wolf then snatches and scatters them. This happens because he is a hired hand and doesn’t care about the sheep.

A “hired hand...doesn’t care about the sheep;” he’s only in it for what’s in it for him. Anyone can claim to be converted and reformed. Anyone can declare the right doctrine. It’s easy to show up and tell people what they already believe. When you do that, those people give you honor, authority, leadership, wealth. It’s easy to love the flock when it brings you comfort.

But what happens when you see danger approaching—a snarling wolf, ready to kill you to get at the sheep? The genuineness of your love for Christ and his people is tested in that situation. “The hired hand, since he is not the shepherd and doesn’t own the sheep, leaves them and runs away when he sees a wolf coming.”

But, Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” So Jesus doesn’t just say that; he proves it. He sees Satan, the accuser. He sees the Law with its demand for perfection and the penalty of death. He sees sin, which must be paid for with blood. He sees the grave. But he doesn’t leave.

Jesus cares about the sheep. So, he doesn’t run away and let his people go to hell. He walks in obedience toward the threat and lays down his life for his friends. He died for our sin, satisfying the demands of righteousness. Then he rose from the dead so that all who call on him as their Saving King could be forgiven, changed, and resurrected with him.

The shepherd’s servant is tested the same way as the shepherd. Saul is tested in the fire of suffering. When Saul sees the threats of murder, it does not stop him from proclaiming the truth. That is strong evidence of *both* his conversion *and* his calling as an apostle. He truly believes that Jesus is the crucified and resurrected Christ—so he suffers for the good of others.

Now, someone might object, “But Saul ran away—both times!” In Damascus, his disciples put him in a basket and lowered him down through an opening in the wall. In Jerusalem, “When the brothers found out, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.” Saul wasn’t running away from suffering as a coward; he was running *toward* his calling.

This is similar to Luke 4:29, where the people drive Jesus out of town to the edge of a hill, where they intend to hurl him over the cliff. Jesus escapes and runs away. He doesn’t escape because he cares nothing for the sheep. He escapes because he *does* care for the sheep—the sheep that he’s appointed to die for on a cross (not a cliff). It’s the same with Saul. The Lord

said, “this man is my chosen instrument to take my name to Gentiles, kings, and Israelites.” So far, he’s only preached to Israelites. If he dies in Damascus or Jerusalem, he won’t have even made a start of taking Jesus to the Gentiles. But when he knows he’s fulfilled his ministry, Paul gladly submits to execution for Christ’s sake.

Luke ends this section on Saul, “So the church throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.” The old Saul, whose zeal fueled the tribulation, was now a disciple. So, naturally, the persecution died out; they had peace.

When you’ve seen God transform your greatest enemy into your brother and friend, you can’t help but be strengthened in your faith. So, they lived in awe of this sovereign Lord and were encouraged by the Holy Spirit. They preached the gospel, and God brought growth.

This should have the same impact on us. God took a middle-eastern terrorist, dead-set on destroying the church, and transformed him into the greatest missionary in history. We should never despair, even in the worst of circumstances. The risen Messiah reigns overall.

The Lord who conquered sin, death, and the devil is on our side. Believing this, we have peace and are strengthened in the Lord and by his Spirit. So, we should pray and share the gospel in bold ways, expecting the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to save many.

ⁱ Acts 7:58–8:1

ⁱⁱ 2 Cor 11:13–15

ⁱⁱⁱ 1 Timothy 5:22-25

^{iv} Acts 9:22

^v Acts 9:28-29