

A Persecutor Turned Preacher

Acts 9:1-31

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Every conversion is a miracle of God by God's grace. You cannot become a Christian apart from conversion. When I say conversion, I'm talking about being born again. The theological term for that (I think it's important for you to know and understand) is regeneration. When a person is born again they're regenerated. The word "regenerate" means to be given new life. A believer is a person that has trusted Christ; and God, by His Spirit, has regenerated them or given them new life. They've been born into God's family by the Holy Spirit. Jesus said this in John 3:3, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God," right? The only way to get into heaven is by being born again or regenerated or given the "new life" of God's Spirit in our hearts.

Tonight we're going to look at the most famous conversion in church history—the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. If you're taking notes (I encourage you to do that), there are three places in the New Testament, the book of Acts specifically, where this testimony is recorded. This is the historic event in Acts 9. In Acts 22 and Acts 26, we're going to find the story told once again but this time by Paul recounting his testimony as he preached in the courts of many great kings. In Acts 9, Acts 22, and Acts 26 you find the story of Saul's conversion. By the way, Saul is converted and becomes Paul the apostle. In case you're wondering, Well, who is this Saul? Saul becomes Paul, the great apostle, who penned most of the epistles in our New Testament. It's all recorded for us so that we know that God, by His grace, saves sinners; thus, there is hope for us. Paul's testimony of conversion stands as an example of how God can save and transform a life.

We're going to take a long narrative tonight. We're going to cover a lot of passages, so I want you to buckle your seatbelts, have your Bibles open, and I'm going to outline this narrative for you. There are four divisions or sections. The first is verses 1-9, Saul's conversion. Let's read it. It says, "And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, 2 And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem. 3 And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: 4 And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? 5 And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks," goads, "And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do. 7 And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man. 8 And Saul arose from the earth; and when his eyes were opened, he saw no man: but they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus. 9 And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink."

We've been introduced to Saul, and by the way, the name Saul is Hebrew. It literally means to be asked for. It's believed that Saul was named after the first king of Israel. You've heard of King Saul, the first king followed by David. Saul was maybe named after that first king. Then, his name Paul was the second name that he had. We have a middle name. My middle name is actually Paul—John Paul Miller—so he had the name Paul. Paul actually means little or short of stature. That's more of a Gentile name that he adapted when he went to preach among the Gentiles.

We read first about Saul earlier when we read about the stoning of Stephen. Those that stoned Stephen, "...laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul," who was consenting unto Stephen's death, and Saul was the leader of the persecution in Jerusalem. We come back to Saul in Acts 9:1. It's kind of a, "meanwhile, back at the ranch," kind of a text. "And Saul, yet breathing out," in the Greek it's literally he was breathing in. It was used of a horse that would be ridden into battle that was snorting and breathing real hard. He was, "breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, 2 And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues," the believers who were in Damascus. It's believed there were a lot of Christians in Damascus. There were several synagogues. They were still worshiping the Lord in synagogues, so the Christians who were mainly Jewish hadn't broken away from the synagogues. They certainly hadn't built Christian churches yet, and they were still mingling among other Jews there in the synagogue.

Saul goes to the high priest in Jerusalem and says, "I want you to give me authority to go all the way to Damascus," that's about 150 miles northeast. As a matter of fact, when you hear in the news today about Syria and the fighting that's going on, Damascus is the capitol of Syria. It's still there to this day. Actually, there is still a street called "Straight" where Paul is going to go in and encounter Ananias there in Damascus. Of course, what's going on in that country today is really sad in Syria, but he was going to take this long journey beginning there in verse 3. It was 150 miles and would've taken him about one week. This guy is hard core! He is not satisfied to just arrest people in his neighborhood, "I want authority! I want letters! I want power to go all the way up to Damascus, and if I find anybody that is a Christian, is calling on the Lord," and by the way, it's referred to in verse 2 as being "this way." It's one of the descriptive terms used for the followers of Jesus Christ who followed this way, whether men or women, "I want to bring them bound back to Jerusalem."

Saul is a very religious Jew. He's a Pharisee. He's a very strict orthodox Jewish man. You can read about his pedigree according to the flesh in Philippians 3:5 when he's talking about, "...an Hebrew of the Hebrews...a Pharisee; Concerning zeal, persecuting the church," he's listing in his pre-converted days, "I was a really good Jew. If anyone could get to heaven by being Jewish or by being religious, I'm your boy. I was as religious as you come." That was before he met the Lord on this Damascus road, but he actually believed that he was doing God a service.

Do you know that you can be religious yet lost? Sometimes people get the idea today that as long as you're sincere, as long as you really believe, and as long as you're really devoted that's enough. You can be sincerely wrong. You can be sincerely deceived. You can be fervent,

zealous, and devoted for a wrong cause. It's all about truth. It's not necessarily about fervor, zeal, or excitement. It's about truth. You can be very zealous for a wrong thing. You can have zeal, but it's not according to knowledge. With all this knowledge that he had, and by the way, he was highly educated, the Bible tells us that he was trained at the feet of a rabbi by the name of Gamaliel who was the most distinguished and respected rabbi in all of Jerusalem. He was just an elite Pharisee devoted to keeping the law. Saul was actually believing that he was doing God a service. He thought, How could Jesus be the Messiah? He's dead. He's been crucified, and these Jews who say that Jesus is the Messiah, they're wrong. They're heretics, and it's dangerous. This is evil. It's demonic, and I'm going to do all I can to stop and put an end to it. He gets his papers and takes off on his journey.

Verse 3, "And as he journeyed," he sees this light from heaven. When we read the other accounts of his conversion, we're going to get a lot of information filled in that isn't here in the historical narrative. In that bit of information, this light which comes from heaven strikes Saul and the other men that are in his group are driven to the ground as well. This happens at high noon. This is like the middle of the day, the brightest period of day, and outshining the brightness of the sun, there is this light that comes from heaven. It's so bright that it drives them to the ground. The Bible doesn't say that Saul was on a horse, but you hear a lot of preachers say that God knocked him off his high horse—that he was on his high horse and God knocked him off. You'll search in vain for saying he was on a horse. Was he on a horse? Maybe. We'll have to ask Saul when we get to heaven, "Hey, were you riding a horse when you got saved?" If the Bible doesn't say it, we don't really know. We don't know if he was on a horse. We don't know if he was driving a Porsche. We don't know what he was doing. Maybe he was driving a VW bus—that would be very cool, wouldn't it? Or, he might have been on a donkey. Most likely, he was probably walking with a walking stick in a little entourage with his official papers. He's very proud and coming to Damascus to arrest these Christians, but God had other plans. Isn't it amazing when God intervenes with His plans and uses the wrath of man to praise Him?

Saul sees this light from heaven and falls to the earth (verse 4). Then, he actually hears a voice. First, there is the vision and, by the way, he did actually see Jesus in the light from heaven which qualified him to be an apostle. In order to be an apostle, you had to have seen the resurrected Jesus Christ, and this is where Paul saw the resurrected Christ. At this time he's known as Saul. First, there's the vision, and then there's the voice saying unto him, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" There's a lot you can draw from this statement. By the way, Jesus is speaking here when He says, "me." He says, "...why persecutest thou me?" Interesting because Saul was persecuting who? Christians. Thus, he was persecuting the body of Christ, the Church; but because we are the body and Christ is the head, when someone persecutes us as Christians, they are in reality persecuting Jesus Christ. When someone rejects Christ, they're not rejecting you, they're rejecting Jesus Christ. When someone persecutes you in the name of Christ, they're persecuting Christ and rejecting Jesus Christ.

Jesus asks, "...why persecutest thou me?" Saul says, verse 5, "Who art thou, Lord?" He knew

that this was a divine encounter. "Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said," this is where Saul's mind gets absolutely blown away, "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest." I can imagine he's thinking, And I am history! You are Jesus? I am dead meat right now because I've been persecuting Christians saying that they are blasphemous by believing in Jesus Christ. There are a lot implications on this conversion but, lest I forget, let me point this out. Saul's conversion is implying that Jesus Christ is alive. Amen? If Jesus met him on the Damascus Road and turned his life around, guess what? Jesus is alive, and if He's in heaven saving Saul, He's still there today saving sinners. Amen? Your neighbor, your friend, your family member, co-worker that's persecuting Christians, he might be the next Saul of Tarsus. Pray that God would come to him at work and knock him down with a great light. You never know what God can do.

It's interesting because the Lord said, "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest." He evidently came under conviction because it says, "it is hard for thee," the Lord speaking, "to kick against the pricks." My King James has "pricks" but it's a goad. What is a goad? A goad is a big long pointed stick either made out of hard wood or sometimes a long piece of metal. It's very sharp in the end and was used by the farmer when plowing his field. If the ox would start to stall, you would take this stick...it was actually just a poker. You would just go BOINK! and poke the ox MOO! and he would actually take off—that's kind of the way you step on the gas. You just take the goad and poke the ox and he starts going. What is He referring to here? I believe He's referring to the Holy Spirit who was convicting Saul of his sin. When he saw that great light and heard the voice of Jesus, trust me he was over. He says, "Man, I'm a sinner! I'm undone. Lord, what do you want me to do?"

I believe that Stephen's testimony of his face shining like an angel and the prayer that he prayed, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge," and the witness that he gave, "Lord, I trust You. I yield to You my spirit," and he saw Jesus standing in heaven. Saul watched that whole episode. I believe that it was convicting him, and God was using that. It's interesting that Saul was persecuting Christians. Sometimes when somebody is really opposing Christianity and opposing the truth of the gospel, you never know, they might be the next one to be saved. It's like that old saying that if you throw a rock into a pack of dogs, the one that yelps is the one that got hit. Isn't that awesome? That's a deep theological truth, but it's true! Sometimes the one that is objecting the most and yelling the most and violent, coming against Christians, that's the one that is under conviction. A person under conviction is miserable. Like a little child fighting sleep, they just get miserable and cranky. The hound dog of heaven is pursuing them and they need to get saved. Isn't it hard for you to resist and fight against the conviction of the Holy Spirit?

Verse 6, "And he trembling and astonished said, Lord." We can't be sure at exactly what point in the story Saul went from unsaved to saved, from unconverted to converted, but I tend to believe that at this point he's already believed in Jesus Christ and actually calls Him Lord. "...astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" He sees a vision, hears a voice, he comes under conviction, and then, I believe, there's conversion, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" Which also involved consecration, "Lord, I'll do whatever it is You want me to do. I'm

Your servant, and I'm here to obey and to follow You." "And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city," he was outside Damascus, "and it shall be told thee what thou must do. 7 And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless," they heard a sound but saw no man. They saw the light, which the other accounts tell us, and heard a sound. It was a phone, but they didn't hear the distinction. By the way, it was spoken in Hebrew to Saul. They don't really know what was said. They just see this great light. They get knocked to the earth, and then they see Saul dialoguing with the Lord and think, "Oh, man! He's losing his mind!"

A lot of critics of the Bible themselves say, "This wasn't really Jesus appearing to Saul converting him and turning his life around. This was an epileptic seizure." No. I'm not kidding you. This is what these intellectuals say, "This was an epileptic seizure and wasn't really an encounter with the Lord." One of the church fathers said, "If this was an epileptic seizure, Oh blessed epilepsy because it turned a persecutor into a preacher." It turned this Pharisee into a proclaimer of the grace of God. Some say it was heat stroke. Well, if it was heat stroke, his life radically changed. I don't think you can explain it away any other way than it was a miraculous intervention of God's grace.

Verse 8, "And Saul arose from the earth; and when his eyes were opened, he saw no man," Saul was now physically blinded. He was going to begin to see spiritually, but his eyes were physically blinded. This proud persecutor, this Pharisee, now is humbled and unable to see. He was going in with papers and authority to arrest Christians, now he is blind and they have to take his hand and lead him into the city of Damascus. "...but they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus. 9 And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink." What an amazing encounter Saul had on that road to Damascus.

The second division in verses 10-19 involves Saul's commission. He was first converted, now he's commissioned to go and preach the gospel. "And there was a certain disciple at Damascus, named Ananias." The name Ananias is also the name Hananias which means the Lord is gracious. By the way, we don't know anything about this Ananias. There is no mention of him before this and he disappears after this; but when we get to heaven, we're going to meet Ananias and can thank him for being a blessing in the life of Saul and helping him get started in his walk with the Lord. The Lord comes to Ananias, "and to him said the Lord in a vision, Ananias. And he said, Behold, I am here, Lord. 11 And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight, and enquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul, of Tarsus: for, behold, he prayeth," which, again, was an indication that he is now saved and is talking to God. He's not just going through the Jewish prayers, but he's really praying and talking to God. God is working in his heart.

Verse 12, "And hath seen in a vision a man named Ananias coming in, and putting his hand on him, that he might receive his sight. 13 Then Ananias answered, Lord, I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he hath done to thy saints at Jerusalem: 14 And here he hath authority from the chief priests to bind all that call on thy name." God comes to Ananias and says, "Ananias, I have a job for you." "Okay, Lord, whatever it is." He says, "I want you to go to Damascus. There's a guy named Saul, and he has actually seen a vision of you coming in to

lay hands on him.” It’s interesting that God works at both ends. God spoke to Ananias to go to Saul, and God spoke to Saul that Ananias was coming to him. If someone comes to you with a word from the Lord, the Lord ought to speak to you as well. God works at both ends. God has your phone number, by the way, as well. God speaks to Saul and to Ananias, and He’s working to bring them together.

I love how human Ananias is. Ananias begins to inform God. Have you ever done that? “Uhhh, let me share a few things with You first, Lord, before we undertake this mission...in case You missed it. I’ve heard about this Saul, he’s bad news. He hates Christians, and I’m one. He came here to arrest and throw us into prison, and You want me to go lay my hands on him? He came here to lay hands on me! What’re You talking about?” Can you imagine the Lord saying, “Huh? Oh, get out! Seriously?! I’m sorry, Ananias. Dude, I didn’t know that. Never mind. Forget that. Cancel that order.” Isn’t it funny how we want to inform God? The Lord tells us to do something. Maybe He says, “Go into Barstow and start a ministry.” “I rebuke you, devil,” kind of a thing. The Lord tells you to do something, “Oh, Lord, these are all the reasons why I can’t do that.” We start to argue with God or inform God. I don’t think God needs our information. I think He just needs our obedience. There is an idea that you can look at that Ananias was afraid, which was normal. He does end up obeying God, and that’s commendable. The lesson there is: Even when you don’t understand, even when you don’t like, even when you are afraid, when God’s will is clear for your life, we must obey. Amen? We must obey. Even when it’s going to be hard or difficult or dangerous and we don’t want to do it, but God is telling us to do something, it’s for us to simply obey. When we do that we find out God always comes through for us. God will never forsake us. God will never abandon us. God will never let you fall. God will never, ever be your debtor. If you trust God, God will prove Himself strong on your behalf. Ananias, you don’t have to worry about this. Just do what the Lord is telling you to do.

Verse 15, “But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he,” Saul, “is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel: 16 For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name’s sake.” Verses 15-16 are some of my favorite verses in the Bible. They summarize the life of Paul the apostle, I believe, the greatest Christian that ever lived. The Lord tells Ananias, “Just go, and this is the reason why. Saul, who will become Paul, ‘is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel.’” This is the first time in the book of Acts that Gentiles are specifically mentioned to be recipients of the gospel of Jesus Christ. God actually chose Saul, equipped, and prepared him. He was born in Tarsus and educated in this city. He had dual citizenship—both an Israelite and a Roman. He was just perfectly suited to take the gospel and to pen the New Testament. All the time God had been working in his life from the time he was born. Actually, in the book of Galatians, Paul makes reference that God, “separated me from my mother’s womb, and called me by his grace.” What an awesome thought! That from the very time that I was born and a young child, God separated me from my mother’s womb and called me by his grace. I’ve always loved that!

Only a few times in my life did my mother tell me this story. She didn’t tell me this story until after I was saved and became a Christian and started preaching. She actually says that when I

was just born and in the hospital, one of the nurses came into my mother and said that the Lord spoke to her and said that your son is going to be a preacher. Now, she might've seen the name John Paul on my little bassinet or something, I don't know, and just said, "Well, he's gonna be a preacher." I didn't even know that story until after I became a Christian and God called me into the ministry. Then, my mom shared that with me that this nurse came in and said the Lord spoke to her and said, "That boy is going to preach the gospel." It's awesome to think that God would actually put His hand on your life! I believe that God has put His hand on your life. I believe that even maybe some of the hurts and the pains and the problems that you've gone through is God shaping, molding, and preparing you for the ministry He has called you to and what He wants you to do, the lives He wants you to affect, and the people He wants you to help. All of life is preparation for God's will, purpose, and calling in our lives. I like that idea that we're a chosen vessel. Not just Saul, the apostle, or Paul the apostle, not just those that are called to preach, but all of us are chosen instruments and vessels by God; and He wants us to be clean vessels to be used for His purpose, "...to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel."

Verse 16, don't miss it, "For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake." Put that alongside some of the modern health and wealth and prosperity preaching going on today in the church that if you really are spiritual and you really have a lot of faith and you're really strong in the Lord you'll be healthy, wealthy, and prosperous. Life will be wonderful and hunky dory and smooth and nothing will go wrong. Nothing can be farther from the truth, certainly, in Paul's life and in anyone's life that God has mightily used. There has to be the making of a man by breaking a man and a woman. Do you know if God is going to use you, God first has to break you? He has to empty you. He has to refine you, and it's not talents that God is looking for. He's just looking for a heart that's surrendered and yielded and obedient and humble. God can give you the gifts and the abilities you need to do what He's called you to do as His chosen vessel, but God has to sometimes make us and then shape and mold us and break us for what He's calling us to do. Sometimes it's all of our life. He's still working on us for what He still has yet for us to do. Don't be discouraged thinking that life has passed you by and you haven't been used by God. It could be that God still has marvelous plans for you and you're still being shaped and molded and prepared for what God has for you, so stay faithful to God. I've always loved that, "For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake." Read 2 Corinthians 11 and 12 where Paul lists the things that he went through for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Verse 17, "And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul," notice he calls him a brother, so Saul is now part of the family of God, "the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost. 18 And immediately there fell from his eyes," Saul's, "as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized." Notice, by the way, that he was filled with the Holy Spirit, so he's very clearly a believer at this point. He's, very clearly, saved; he has the Holy Spirit. In Acts 13:9 there will be another reference to Saul being filled with the Spirit which is an indication that this is a repeated experience. As Christians, we don't just get filled once, but it's something that happens many

times. "And immediately there fell from his eyes...scales," now, he sees physically as well as spiritually, "and arose, and was baptized." He is now confessing Christ. "And when he had received meat, he was strengthened. Then was Saul certain days with the disciples which were at Damascus." These were days of transforming Saul's life.

Can you imagine how blown away this guy was? Steeped in tradition, a Pharisee, hating Jesus, persecuting Christians, killing them. He's on his way to arrest them, BOOM! like that his life was turned around. "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new," and these days were days of transformation. Remember the first few days, maybe weeks, when you first got saved? It was all so exciting and fresh and new and your life was being transformed. It's just amazing! I just try to imagine for Saul what a life transformation was taking place. He had a new life. He had a new friend, his name was Ananias, and he had a new family, a fellowship of believers.

By the way, God can use the most obscure saints. In church history, everyone knows about Paul the apostle. Actually, his conversion is only second in great events to Pentecost. What we owe to Paul in the Christian church today and what the western world owes to Paul can never be estimated. How many people know about Ananias? He's just some unnamed disciple in Damascus. He was, by the way, what we would call a "layman." He wasn't ordained or a clergyman. He was just a Christian, yet God used him to touch the life of Saul who would touch the lives of millions upon millions upon millions of people. Never underestimate that God can't use one humble believer to touch one person that God can use to touch a multitude of people. Never be afraid to obey God's will no matter how difficult the task, and never underestimate the value of one person brought to Christ. One person brought to Christ and the world can be totally changed and transformed.

Here's the third division or movement. It's much shorter, verses 20-22. We see Saul is preaching Christ. First, we see his conversion. Then, we see his commission, and now we see he's preaching Christ. It says in verse 20, "And straightway he preached Christ," or the Messiah, "in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God," a reference to Jesus, which is really rare in the book of Acts of being the Son of God, but Paul's preaching was Christ-centered as preaching today should be in the Christian church. "But all that heard him were amazed, and said; Is not this he that destroyed them which called on this name in Jerusalem, and came hither for that intent, that he might bring them bound unto the chief priests? 22 But Saul increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ," or the Meshiaak, the Messiah, the anointed One. Saul's radical conversion resulted in Saul's radical preaching. He's preaching Jesus. He's on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians and put them in prison and ends up getting saved. Now, he's preaching Jesus Christ. That's an amazing thing how God can turn a life around.

Here's the fourth and last division, verses 23-31, Saul is now persecuted. The minute you get converted, the minute you get commissioned, the minute you start preaching, what happens? People come against you, right? Maybe when you were converted, a husband or wife, Jesus said, "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a

sword,” not a literal sword, but He says a man’s foes will be those of his own household—a husband and wife, a father and a child—they will be in opposition, so we see the persecution that results. “And after that many days were fulfilled, the Jews took counsel to kill him,” I have to give you a little footnote here, you Bible students, make a note of this. In this little phrase (verse 23), “after that many days,” make a note that it was about right at this time, and it’s believed that it’s during this “many days” that Saul journeyed out into the Arabian desert for three years. This “many days” was three years, and he was directly taught there by Jesus. He was a very trained Pharisee. He sat at the feet of Gamaliel, but now he has to go to school at the feet of Jesus Himself. He’s taken out into the Arabian desert and Jesus Christ personally instructed Saul and taught him the gospel of God’s grace. These, again, were three years of total transformation for Saul’s life. Before he could go out and be effective in ministry he needed this time of being taught. Then, he came back to Damascus and from Damascus he would escape in the basket to Jerusalem. The cross reference for that (I’ll read it in just a moment) is Galatians 1:17. These “many days” were three years in the Arabian desert being taught by God.

Verse 23, “...the Jews took counsel to kill him,” they want to persecute him, “But their laying await was known of Saul. And they watched the gates day and night to kill him. 25 Then the disciples took him by night, and let him down by the wall in a basket,” now that is humbling. This proud Pharisee now becomes a Christian and at night has to climb into a little basket. They have to lower him down and he escapes out. You can see him kind of huddled in his little basket. He’s holding the ropes, and it’s kind of swinging against the wall. He’s going down the wall as they lower him. By the way, it’s interesting to me: Who was holding the ropes? If I’m going to get in a basket and you’re going to lower me down, I want to make sure you don’t let me go, okay? It’s like, WHOA! CRASH! “Oh, sorry, Saul!” Who is holding the ropes? I don’t know but whoever held those ropes, I want to meet ‘em when we get to heaven.

You’re sitting at the supper of the Lamb in heaven praising God and you meet some saint and he says, “Hey, by the way, I’m the dude that held the ropes. I’m one of the guys that let Saul down the wall in the basket.” I’ll say, “Thank you so much because I love Paul’s letters. They were awesome! If you were to slip and let him go and he would’ve died, we wouldn’t have had the book of Romans, okay?” You say, “John, where are you getting this?” In the white spaces! This is what is called sanctified imagination. Somebody had to hold the ropes, right? Someone had to lower him down. Again, I’m thinking about how God uses people to bless others. God uses others to help us do our ministries, some of these unnamed people who have great reward in heaven. By the way, Paul (forgive me, I keep calling him Paul and he’s Saul. They are one in the same, but I know him as Paul more readily) goes back when he lists the things he suffered—shipwrecked, bit by a snake, stoned, all these horrible things—and then he says and besides all this I had to leave Damascus in a basket. It was part of the humbling things that he had to go through and had to be let down the wall in a basket and escape for my life in the dark.

Verse 26, “And when Saul was come to Jerusalem, he assayed to join himself to the disciples,” in other words, he went to church. He goes, “Where do Christians go? Well, they go to church.” Now, when I say “church” they were still gathering in the synagogues or in their

homes, more likely, in Jerusalem. He tried to go to church and meet other Christians, “but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple.” Can you imagine that? Can you imagine you gather on Sunday morning and some guy shows up and everyone goes, “AHHHH!” They go running and the church empties, and he’s sitting there all by himself. You know, it’s like, “Whoa!” No one believed he had really been saved and that he was actually okay.

Barnabas comes back into the picture. We met Barnabas earlier in the book of Acts. His name means son of encouragement. “But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared unto them how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus. 28 And he was with them coming in and going out at Jerusalem.” Thank God for the son of encouragement! We need Barnabas’ in the church today. Someone could come to this church—maybe a new believer, maybe not a believer, but someone coming to hear God—and you reaching out, encouraging, and welcoming them might solidify their coming or growing or blossoming in Christ. Just reaching out to one person in the foyer on a Sunday or Wednesday night that looks a little bewildered or looks like they might be new and kind of don’t know where they’re going, like a deer in the headlights, you know, “Wow, where do I go? What’s going on?” “Hi. Are you new? Welcome. What’s your name? Well, come on, you can sit with me. You can fellowship here. Come and sit in the pew with me,” and tell them what to do. Maybe take them to lunch after church, and then you share with them, and they come to Christ or they grow in Christ. We all ought to be Barnabas’, son of encouragement, looking out for others that we can reach out to.

Barnabas told the disciples, “Look, he did get saved. He’s been preaching in Damascus. I think he’s okay. Let’s trust the Lord that he’s saved, and let’s let him come hang out with us.” “And he was with them coming in and going out at Jerusalem.” Then he begins to preach again, “he spake boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus, and disputed against the Grecians,” these are the Jews who followed Greek culture. They were the hellenists, of which Stephen was a part, “but they went about to slay him.” They tried to persecute and kill him. “Which when the brethren knew, they brought him down,” that is, Saul, “to Caesarea,” which is over to the coast of the Mediterranean and put him on a ship, “and sent him forth to Tarsus.”

Tarsus is in the southeast corner of Turkey. It’s up off the north of the Mediterranean Sea. You can get a map and look at it, but Tarsus was the place of Paul’s birth and was his home. It was his roots. That’s where he came from, Tarsus. He is known as Saul of Tarsus. The persecution breaks out in Jerusalem. They’re trying to kill him, so they put him on a ship and send him back to Tarsus. Again, make these notes somewhere, he would be there for 10 years. Before Barnabas, again, would leave Antioch in chapter 11, go find him and bring him back to the church to teach the Bible to the believers that were getting saved in Antioch.

Antioch is going to become the sending church of the missionary endeavors. The church was growing, and there were many Gentile believers in Antioch. Barnabas says, “We need a strong Bible teacher. I know just the man, Saul of Tarsus.” He went up to Tarsus and found Saul and said, “You’ve got to come with me to Antioch. God is doing an awesome work there, and we need you to teach the believers.” So, Saul followed him down to Antioch, and as a result of

Saul's teaching, the Christians in Antioch for the first time (it's where we're going to get it in a few weeks) were called Christians. They grew in the Lord. They blossomed in the Lord, and began to live like Christ. They said, "These people were Christians," there in the city of Antioch; but it was 10 years so we need to learn to wait on God, not to be in a hurry, that God has His timing, and God is preparing us.

Verse 31, "Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied." Isn't it interesting that Saul is shipped out, and now there is peace. Wherever Saul would go there was either a riot or a revival, and he was so aggressive in preaching the gospel that he stirred up so much persecution that they go, "Let's put this dude on a boat and send him home for a little while." When they did, Scripture says they had rest "and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied."

If you can turn there real quickly, turn to Galatians 1:11-18. I'm going to read that to you. If you want to just listen to what Paul said when writing to the Galatians, he said, "But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man. 12 For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ. 13 For ye have heard of my conversation in time past in the Jews' religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it," that means, I made savage of it, "And profited in the Jews' religion above many my equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers. 15 But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace, 16 To reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen," or the Gentiles, "immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood," again, he's alluding to the fact that he was taught directly by God. Verse 17, "Neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me; but I went to Arabia, and returned again unto Damascus." He went into Arabia and came back to Damascus. Then, they had to put him in the basket and lower him down at night, and he escaped back in the dark to the city of Jerusalem.

What a day! What a time in the life of Saul. He was totally transformed by the power and the grace of God. Saul discovered something that day. He discovered that Jesus Christ was alive. Isn't that an awesome day when you make the personal discovery: Jesus Christ is alive! He also discovered that he was a sinner—that's a good thing, by the way. He also discovered that Jesus Christ could forgive his sins and give him a clean slate and he could have a fresh start. Thirty years after this Damascus Road conversion, Paul the apostle was writing to the Philippians in Philippians 3. He said, "But what things were gain to me," that moment I met Jesus on that Damascus Road, he said, "those I counted loss for Christ," refuse. He said all my religion, all my rites, all my rituals, all my Judaism, it was just a pile of manure. That's exactly what he called it. He said, "I count them but refuse," a pile of dung. In order that I might, "be found in him," that is, Jesus Christ, "not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith." Paul realized that all his religion was nothing compared to the righteousness of Christ which could be given to him by faith.

We can have that same righteousness tonight if we'll put our faith and trust in Jesus Christ. You cannot work your soul to save, you can't be good enough, righteous enough, religious enough, or zealous enough to go to heaven; but if you'll come to Christ, who died on the Cross for your sins, rose from the dead, and is alive right now, whoever calls on the name of the Lord can be saved. Amen? If you haven't trusted Jesus Christ...Christianity is not a religion, it's a relationship. You can actually know the risen Christ. You can encounter Him. You can have a Damascus Road experience.

John Newton was a slave trader converted to Christ. His life was so wicked and sinful. He wrote the words:

Amazing Grace, How sweet the sound

That saved a wretch like me

I once was lost, but now am found

T'was blind but now I see

I think that Paul and John Newton are going to be singing that together when we get to heaven, "Amazing Grace." This man who hated Christ and persecuted Christians was converted by the grace of God. God called him and he was a chosen vessel. God did the same for you, and God's done the same for me. We don't earn it. We don't deserve it; but God, in His love, reaches down and saves us by His grace. We need to be grateful. We need to be obedient, and we need to say, "Lord, I want to be Your vessel. I want to be Your instrument. Take my life and let it be, consecrated, Lord, to You, and to serve You, and to be used for You to do Your will." God has saved you by His grace, you ought to serve Him in love. Amen?