

I. Introduction

Good morning! The testimony of the Apostle Paul is one of the most powerful conversion stories in Christian history. Millions of people have come to faith through studying the story of how Saul the persecutor became Paul the Apostle.



In his letter to the Galatians, Paul wrote about his old self, saying (**Galatians 1:13-14**), **“For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.”**

These words are a good description of the man who was called Saul of Tarsus. Saul was an enemy of the church and he hated all who followed Jesus. Saul thought Jesus was a false messiah and that the followers of Jesus should be hunted down and killed or imprisoned. At the same time, Saul was an educated man, trained by the best teachers, and he was well on his way to a prominent career in the religious system.

But then, quite suddenly, Saul changed his attitude completely. Saul accepted Jesus as Lord and became the most dedicated Christian and the most passionate evangelist in the church. His name was changed from Saul to Paul, and he journeyed hundreds of miles to spread the gospel of Jesus to many cities and peoples. How did this change occur? How did Saul the persecutor become Paul the apostle?



Let's read the story of Saul's conversion in Acts 9:1-19a.

II. Scripture Reading Acts 9:1-19a, (NIV, 1984)

1 Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest 2 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.

3 As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" 5 "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. 6 "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

7 The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. 8 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. 9 For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

10 In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. 11 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. 12 In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight." 13 "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. 14 And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name." 15 But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. 16 I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

17 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." 18 Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, 19a and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

III. Teaching

Saul was on his way from Jerusalem to Damascus when the Lord Jesus suddenly appeared to Him in heavenly light. **Acts 9:3, "As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him."** Peter Paul Rubens painted the scene like this. The details in the painting are from Rubens' own imagination and are probably quite different from what the real scene was like. However, I think Rubens did a good job of capturing the drama of the moment. Jesus, accompanied by angels and clothed in light, is looking down from heaven. Saul is flat on his back, looking up. The horses are panicked and the attention of the rest of the people is mostly focused on trying to restrain the horses.



Acts 9:4-5, "He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' 'Who are you, Lord?' Saul asked. 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' he replied." Saul was persecuting the followers of Jesus, but Jesus asks Saul, **"Why do you persecute me?"** This should be an encouragement to every Christian who suffers persecution for their faith. If we suffer persecution, ridicule, or mistreatment because of our faith in Jesus, the hostility is not really directed against us; it is directed against our Lord Jesus. In spiritual terms, hostility against Christians is hostility against Jesus.

We do not have to respond to those who mock or persecute, because they are really opposing Jesus, not us, and Jesus Himself will take care of it. as it says in **1 Corinthians 12:27, "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it."** Christ Jesus dwells in His church, that is, in us, through His Holy Spirit in such a way that together we are the Body of Christ in this world. If we are persecuted, He is persecuted. If we suffer, He suffers. Because of this we can never be alone in suffering or hardship, because Jesus is always with us in every pain or sorrow that we feel. Because of the Lord's presence with us, we can leave all things in His hands and be filled with peace and joy even in times of persecution.



Saul will go on to become Paul the apostle, so we tend to focus on him when we read this story. But many of us may feel that we have more in common with Ananias. Ananias was a good man, but he was not famous and the details of his life are not recorded in history. But on this occasion, the Lord spoke to Ananias and asked him to do a very important task. **Acts 9:10-11, "In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. 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."** (Photo: Shopping on Straight Street)



Ananias hesitated, he had no desire to go and see Saul the persecutor. **Acts 9:13-14, "'Lord,' Ananias answered, 'I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.'"** It appears that in his fear, Ananias momentarily forgot that the Lord knows all things and tried to explain to the Lord the facts of the situation. Or perhaps Ananias was just stalling for time.

Either way, we can see that Ananias did not immediately say, *"Yes, Lord,"* when he was called on for service. Before Ananias went, he had to be told twice. What about us? Has that ever happened to us? Has the Lord ever had to tell us something twice before we obeyed? Have we hesitated, stalled for time, or tried to explain the facts of the situation to the Lord? Why do we do that? If we call Him Lord and we know that He has spoken, why is it so hard to obey the first time? Now, I am not talking about those times when we are unsure whether we are hearing from the Lord or unsure what He wants us to do. But I am talking about those

times when we know what He wants us to do, but we fail to do it. I have been there, and I suspect that we have all been there.

We need to grow in our faith and trust of the Lord. He is loving. He is good. He is Lord and we are His people. We would do well to learn to say, “Yes, Lord,” whenever we hear His voice. Yes to His will. Yes to His way. Yes to His time.



Ananias had to be told twice. I think we can relate to that, but it would have been better to say, “Yes, Lord” the first time. Praise the Lord that He is gracious and patient with His people! The Lord told Ananias again, and He also provided some more explanation. **Acts 9:15-16, “But the Lord said to Ananias, ‘Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.’”** We generally think of Paul as the apostle to the gentiles, and Paul did spend most of his ministry preaching to the gentiles. But we see here that the Lord also sent Paul to the people of Israel as well.

We also know that Paul suffered greatly. Paul was beaten, whipped, jailed, stoned, and shipwrecked during the years of his ministry. Sometimes he was hungry and cold. Sometimes his friends and coworkers abandoned him. But the Lord was always with Him, and we see here that the suffering of Paul was also part of the Lord’s plan. The Lord said, **“I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”** It is often hard for us to understand, but sometimes suffering is part of God’s plan. Suffering helps us to become more Christ-like. And sometimes our witness is more effective when people see that we are willing to suffer for our beliefs. We should accept that suffering is not always a bad thing, sometimes it is what we need.

Let’s get back to Ananias. Ananias was sent to a house on Straight Street. If you visit Damascus, and go to Straight Street, you will be able to visit a chapel that is claimed to be the very same house where Ananias went to see Saul. I would like to visit this chapel someday. It looks very peaceful, like a good place to pray. I don’t know for sure if it is really the same building that was there when Ananias visited Saul, but it is an ancient building and it is perfectly possible for a stone building to last that long with some repairs. But even if the building has been rebuilt, it seems likely that it really is the same location.



Acts 9:17, “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.’” Pietro da Cortona painted the scene like this. I think his painting of the scene looks more like Paris than Damascus, but I am happy to see that he painted Saul as a young man, perhaps about 30 years old. Often, painters depict the Apostle Paul as an old man. At the end of Paul’s ministry that might be accurate, but here, at the time when Saul has not yet started his ministry as Paul, we know that Saul was quite young.



Acts 9:18-19a, “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.” Nothing is said about Saul’s name being changed to Paul until Acts 13. But I think it is already obvious that Saul is a changed man. Saul met Jesus on the road to Damascus and he was never the same old Saul after that. Saul was a new man. He was born again as a follower of Jesus.

Saul becomes Paul, the greatest evangelist of all time. He will go on to personally reach many thousands for Jesus and his letters to the churches comprise half of the books of the New Testament. But he recognizes that despite all of his achievements, the credit does not belong to him, but to God. In **1 Corinthians 15:9-10**, Paul says, **“For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them--yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.”**

Paul had a large ministry; the ministry of Ananias was smaller. But, whatever we are and whatever we may accomplish, it is by the grace of God. We are given the privilege of working for the glory of the Lord, but that is only by His grace. This is a good lesson for us to remember. **“By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect.”** It all comes from His grace; apart from His grace we are lost. With His grace, we are effective servants of God.

Before we close, I would like to share about one way that the story of Saul’s conversion on the Damascus Road has become very meaningful for me. For some years after I became a Christian I was troubled by what Jesus says in **Matthew 7:13-14**, **“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”**

I think the main point our Lord Jesus is making here is that if you are following the crowd and going with the flow on the easy and obvious road, then you are heading in the wrong direction. And, in John 10:9, Jesus reveals that He Himself is the gate that leads to life. So the teaching of the narrow gate emphasizes that there is only one way to salvation, and that is through Jesus Christ. Once I understood that Jesus is God come into this world to die on the cross for the sins of the world, it was easy for me to accept that Jesus is the only way to salvation. But the part of this Scripture that used to trouble me is the last part, which says concerning the road that leads to life, **“only a few find it.”**

Largely because of this verse, there are quite a few Christians who believe that only a small number of people will be saved. But other Scriptures tell us that many people will be saved. **Revelation 7:9-10**, **“After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: ‘Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.’”**

But, how could there be such a great multitude in heaven if only a few people find the narrow gate that leads to salvation? This apparent conflict used to trouble me. I wanted to rejoice that a great multitude would be saved and that heaven would be filled, but the teaching of the narrow gate seemed to warn that only a few would find Jesus and be saved. Revelation reveals that there will be a great multitude in heaven. But Matthew 7:13-14 says the way to salvation is a narrow gate and, **“only a few find it.”**

We know the gate that leads to salvation is Jesus because in **John 10:7-9**, we read, **“Therefore Jesus said again, “I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture.”**



In these verses, Jesus uses an image that would have been familiar to the people at the time to teach that He is the only way to salvation. In ancient Israel, the shepherd would sleep sitting or lying in the narrow gate of the sheep pen at night so that the sheep could not get out and wolves could not get in.

Jesus uses this image and calls Himself the gate, but here the gate is also the shepherd. Jesus is the narrow gate, and only a few find Him. How then can a great multitude be saved? I used to wonder about this and then one day when I was reading the story of Saul, I noticed something. Saul did not find Jesus; Jesus came and found Saul.

Very few people find the narrow gate that is Jesus. In most cases, Jesus finds us. I did not go out seeking a savior and find Jesus. Jesus found me. When we consider this, the teaching of the narrow gate takes on a new meaning. The narrow gate does not mean that only a few will be saved, it means that we need to trust the Lord to seek out His sheep and find them and bring them home to heaven. Only a few find Jesus, but many are found by Jesus.

IV. Conclusion

The lost sheep rarely search and find the shepherd. Perhaps a few Christians can honestly say they were searching for a savior and they searched until they found Jesus. But most of us weren't even looking for a savior until Jesus came and found us. Praise the Lord that He is the Great Shepherd and He comes and find His lost sheep!



Saul was not looking for Jesus. Saul was looking for Christians so that he could arrest them and throw them in jail. Left to himself, Saul would never have found the narrow gate that leads to life. But Jesus, the Great Shepherd, went and found Saul.

We are God's lost sheep. We have turned away from the truth and wandered into all kinds of sin, far away from our heavenly Father. But Jesus comes and finds us. Jesus comes and lifts us up, bandages our wounds, and places us on His shoulders and carries us home. Heaven will be filled with people whom Jesus has carried home.

Let's pray.

V. Prayer