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ACTS 9:17

THE POWER

OF SALVATION

DATE

October 31 & November 1

WEEK

5 of 5

OVERVIEW

Acts 9:1-22

KEY VERSE

Acts 9:17

SETTING THE STAGE

The Apostle Paul's ministry spanned approximately 35 years, and he wrote 13 of the 27 books in the New Testament. He traveled over 10,000 miles sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. He experienced three shipwrecks and at least three arrests. Paul was arguably the most influential Christ-follower in the first century based on miles traveled, churches planted, and letters written.

However, Paul never walked with Jesus as the original 12 apostles did. Paul never saw Jesus perform a miracle or heard Him preach a sermon. Yet, while the original 12 were primarily ordinary men without religious training, Paul was well educated in religious matters. In fact, Paul was a well-respected, well-educated, and well-read rabbi, born into a family of Pharisees. He was thoroughly trained in the Pharisees' ultra-orthodox traditions, educated in Jerusalem at the feet of Gamaliel. (Acts 22:3)¹ At birth, Paul was named Saul and known by that name throughout most of his adult life as a high-ranking Pharisee.

Saul climbed the proverbial ladder of success in the Pharisees religious group, enforcing the law of the Hebrews and the Law of Moses. Saul was ruthless towards those who embraced the gospel of Jesus. He would be considered by most as unchangeable with a heart of stone toward Jesus Christ and His followers. Yet, God had a different plan for the one formerly known as Saul. That which the world considered unchangeable changed. Without Paul or someone like him, the infant church would not have grown into the spiritual and intellectual maturity, changing the course of history.²

LESSON OUTLINE

1. Encounter
2. Erosion
3. Encouragement
4. Empowerment

THINGS TO KNOW

- Saul is Paul's Hebrew name given at birth. Paul is the Greek name used after his conversion, and as he began ministering throughout the Roman Empire.
- Acts Chapter 9 is the turning point where the story begins to follow Paul more so than Peter.

THE POWER OF SALVATION

Introduction

This is not the first time we have seen Saul in the book of Acts. Saul was a well-known leader among the Pharisees in Jerusalem. His education was the equivalent of being educated at a Harvard, Yale, Oxford, or Cambridge. He had a high level of recognizable and revered education and upbringing.

Saul was from a city called Tarsus, which was known for its leaders and education. Saul was a Hebrew Pharisee and a man of the world. Both Hebrew culture, as well as the Greek culture, influenced his life. Saul studied under a man named Gamaliel, which we read about in Acts 5, where he told the Sadducees concerning Peter and John that if their plan were of men, it would be overthrown, but if it was of God, no one would be able to defeat it. (Acts 5:38-39)

Up to this point in Acts, Saul has not been a major character, though he has been present. (See Acts 7:58, 8:1-3). But that was all about to change.

1. ENCOUNTER

ACTS 9:1-2 *Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest,² and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.*

Saul had a rabid reputation among the religious leaders, the political leaders, and the newly formed Church, still in its infancy

Saul had a rabid reputation among the religious leaders, the political leaders, and the newly formed Church, still in its infancy. A diligent persecutor of the Church, he was very good at his job. His motivation was to thwart the message of Jesus Christ by taking down the followers of Christ, both men and women, not just in Jerusalem but also elsewhere.

In Acts 1, Jesus charged the disciples to be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth. By the time we get to chapter 9, that message has gone beyond Jerusalem. In chapter 8, Phillip had a ministry in Samaria and shared the gospel with an Ethiopian Eunuch while on the road towards Gaza. The message of Christ was going out in all directions beyond Jerusalem.

Saul wanted desperately to put an end to it but to do so legally and in an official capacity. So, he got the paperwork that would allow him to go to Damascus, a key commercial city located about 175 miles northeast of Jerusalem in the Roman province of Syria.³ It was a six-day journey. When he got there, Saul could arrest the Christians and extradite them to Jerusalem.

¹ John MacArthur, *One Faithful Life*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville TN, 2019, p. xiii.

² Dr. Lloyd J. Ogilvie, *Master the New Testament-Acts*, Word Publishing, 1983, p. 164.

³ *Life Application Bible Commentary-Acts*, Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, IL, 1999, p. 152.



Notice he did this with deep-seated anger and hatred towards Christians. Saul was laser-focused on putting an end to the growing movement of Christ-followers. He was determined to succeed in this endeavor, but alas, he was stopped by Jesus Himself.

ACTS 9:3-6 *As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; ⁴ and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” ⁵ And he said, “Who are You, Lord?” And He said, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, ⁶ but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do.”*

Have you ever been walking or driving, completely focused on where you are heading, when out of nowhere something happens that you did not see coming? Saul was on a journey with a single focus. He was almost to his destination of Damascus. Saul had his eyes on the prize and hatred in his heart, willing to take those who believed in Jesus down one by one.

But God had other plans. Saul was outside of his natural surroundings; typically, he was in Jerusalem. He knew the neighborhoods of Jerusalem as well as the leaders. He was accustomed to going house to house with the sole intention of capturing Christians and putting them in prison or worse. He believed the locals of Jerusalem were becoming troublesome because of their newly found faith and belief in Jesus.

Saul was outside his regular routine. I would not say he was outside his comfort zone, because his reputation was such that he was not intimidated very easily. Yet, Saul was beyond his regular streets, neighborhoods, and familiar people. On the road for at least 4 or 5 days by now, the excitement was building as he approached Damascus; he took great pride in what he did.

And then the encounter! It started with a light from heaven, perhaps like lightening. Later in Acts, he would describe the light as *“brighter than the sun shining all around him.”* (Acts 26:13) There was no confusion, doubt, nor questioning by Saul about this encounter. Jesus knew that He had to capture Saul’s attention in a dramatic way that could not be denied. It reaffirms the truth we learned in our last series about Christ in His own words where He said, *“I am the Light of the World.”* This was a personal and intimate encounter with Jesus Christ. Saul had spent His professional adult life denouncing the truth that literally knocked him to the ground. Jesus had his attention.

Then Jesus asked him an interesting question, *“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”*

Saul, in his mind, was persecuting Peter, John, and other disciples. Saul was persecuting Stephen. Saul was persecuting people from house to house. Saul did not think he was persecuting Jesus, because he did not think Jesus was alive. This voice used the pronoun, “me” rather than “them” or “the church,” which probably confused Saul initially. He had earnestly pursued a course that he thought righteous as he wanted to stamp out heresy. Some of his Jewish brethren were calling a dead man the Messiah, which violated everything he knew about the Hebrew Scriptures.⁴

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Jesus was a man who claimed to be God, but Saul did not believe that Jesus was the Son of God. Nor did he believe Jesus was the Messiah. Jesus was crucified on the cross, and something must have happened to his body, perhaps stolen or hidden; but Saul did not believe Jesus was alive.

Yet, while on the ground after the blinding light, Saul hears this voice, the voice of Jesus saying, *“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”* Saul’s response was one of respect.

⁴ Chuck Swindoll, *Living Insights Commentary, Acts*; Tyndale House Publishing, Carol Stream, IL; 2016; p. 165.

ACTS 9:5A *And he said, “Who are You, Lord?”*

He did not use the term Lord, as we would use it as a name for Jesus. Rather it was a term of respect.⁵ Saul was a religious man, very knowledgeable of the Old Testament, very rigid in his belief, and upholding the Law of Moses. Saul believed in God without any doubt, but he did not believe in Jesus. So, at best, he thought it might be the Lord God, similar to Moses hearing the voice of God in the burning bush. In this brief dialogue, Jesus identifies Himself clearly and gives instructions.

ACTS 9:5B-6 *And He said, “I am **Jesus** whom you are persecuting, ⁶ but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do.”*

Notice that Jesus did not give Saul the full picture, but merely the next step. So often, when we have an encounter with Jesus in Worship or Bible Study, at home or while away from our daily routine, we want the big picture. We want to see the finished masterpiece. We want to fast forward to the end of the story. Saul had this dramatic encounter and received instructions. What would happen next?

2. EROSION

ACTS 9:7-9 *The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. ⁸ Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus. ⁹ And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.*

The word “erosion” means “gradual destruction”⁶ I do not think Saul woke up one day and thought to himself, “I am going to hate Christians.” I think it was a gradual destruction from within. You are probably familiar with the story of the frog and boiling water. If the water starts out boiling, the frog will jump out, but if the frog is in the water while it is soothing and then becomes warmer and warmer eventually boiling, the frog will not jump out and ultimately die.

Saul was eroding from within. This hatred for Christians was driving his life and motivation to work, to the point of going outside of Jerusalem, traveling six days to Damascus simply to persecute more Christians to stop something that in his mind was out of control.

After the encounter, the erosion became clear. The eyes that had looked with rage upon the disciples and followers of Christ were now blinded. The eyes that had allowed him to be on the road traveling approximately 175 miles to Damascus for almost six days were seeing nothing for three days. He had no appetite or thirst. Saul was eroding from the years of hatred and rage towards the truth of the gospel.

He spent three days in a strange place in utter physical darkness caused by a supernatural light from heaven.

- Three days, perhaps seeing in his mind, the houses in Jerusalem and the faces of the men and women he had taken to prison.
- Three days, perhaps seeing the angelic face of Stephen, whom he helped stone to death.
- Three days, perhaps seeing Gamaliel, his teacher and mentor and remembering what Gamaliel said, “if it is of God, nothing or no one will be able to overthrow it.”

⁵ Chuck Swindoll, *Living Insights Commentary, Acts*; Tyndale House Publishing, Carol Stream, IL; 2016; p. 165.

⁶ www.dictionary.com

- Three days, perhaps seeing this Light from the Heavens and hearing this voice saying, “*I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.*”
- Three days, reflecting in darkness the erosion that has taken place over the years leading to this point of vulnerability and blindness.

It may not take a light from heaven or blinded eyes to capture our attention, but everyone who has an encounter with Christ will have to come to grips with their own internal erosion due to sin.

Each of us, when we truly encounter Jesus realizes the erosion in our life. It may not take a light from heaven or blinded eyes to capture our attention, but everyone who has an encounter with Christ will have to come to grips with their own internal erosion due to sin. However, it is by confessing that internal erosion that we can find salvation.

Saul, also known as Paul, would later write in a letter to the Church in Corinth the following, reminding us that the erosion would ultimately be a thing of the past.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:17 *Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.*

After the encounter and erosion, look at the encouragement that takes place for Saul.

3. ENCOURAGEMENT

ACTS 9:10-17 *Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” And he said, “Here I am, Lord.”¹¹ And the Lord said to him, “Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying,¹² and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight.”¹³ But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem;¹⁴ and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name.”¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel;¹⁶ for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name’s sake.”¹⁷ So Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”*

We see two names in this passage that other men in Scripture have been known by who were without godly character: Ananias and Judas. These two men referenced above are not the Ananias of Acts 5 nor the Judas who betrayed Jesus. We honestly know nothing about this Ananias. He was anonymous in many ways, but not where it counted. Jesus knew his name. The Lord was going to use this otherwise anonymous man to do something we often taken for granted, give someone encouragement.

Notice Ananias was going about his business and the Lord spoke to him in a vision. He was not scared or taken aback; he simply said, “*Here I am Lord.*” But then the Lord gave him instructions and mentioned the name Saul of Tarsus. Ananias had heard about Saul, knowing that he was one who hated those who followed Jesus Christ. The word was out about what Saul wanted to do in town. Saul’s reputation had preceded him.

But the Lord had other plans for Saul. I love the phrase Jesus used to describe Saul, “*He is a chosen instrument of Mine.*” It would be easy to put Saul/ Paul in a different category because of his pre-Damascus success and also because of his post-Damascus work for the Lord. But the reality is that each of us who have had that personal encounter with Jesus and dealt with the erosion in our lives, surrendering ourselves to Him, are a *chosen instrument* to be used for the glory of God.

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Even the anonymous Ananias was a chosen instrument. The Lord told Ananias, chosen for this very specific assignment, to go to Saul, who had also been chosen, and encourage him. Look again at verse 17.

ACTS 9:17 *So Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”*

There are two specific phrases that show us this act of encouragement:

1. Ananias laying his hands on him,
2. Ananias calling him “Brother Saul.”

Knowing who Saul was and his reputation, Ananias was obviously nervous at first. He knew that when Saul “laid hands on you,” it was typically to grab you out of your house and throw you in jail. In fact, that was the original intent of Saul as he was traveling to Damascus.

Yet out of obedience to the Lord, Ananias laid his hands on him. And I would venture to say he did so very gently. Remember, Saul was still not able to see, nor was he eating or drinking. Saul, perhaps for the first time in his life, was vulnerable.

And it was in that setting that Ananias encouraged him not only with his actions by laying hands on him but also by his words, “*Brother Saul.*” Extraordinary in its simplicity. A very simple thing that might go unnoticed unless you had been in darkness for three days; unless you had not eaten in three days; unless you had not had anything to drink in three days; unless you had no idea what was going to happen to you next after falling to the ground because of a light brighter than the sun.

And then to hear the gentle words, “Brother Saul.”

With that phrase, you become family. You are no longer the accuser. No longer the tyrant. No longer the feared, rabid Pharisee, raging against Christ-followers. You are now *Brother Saul*. Our actions and our words are to encourage. What an incredible opportunity for us to be used by the Lord Jesus to encourage someone who might be alone, vulnerable, empty, and lost.

There was first an encounter, then erosion, then encouragement, which ultimately led to empowerment.

4. EMPOWERMENT

ACTS 5:17B-20 *“Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”*

¹⁸ *And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized;*¹⁹ *and he took food and was strengthened. Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus,*²⁰ *and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.”*

This is the power of salvation. Saul regained his sight as the scales fell from his eyes. He was filled with the Holy Spirit, which happens to each of us at conversion, and he got up and was baptized. We often talk about “getting your baptism on the right side of your salvation;” this is a great picture of that truth. Baptism did not cause Saul to be saved. He knew that all Christ-followers got baptized. He had seen it, he had condemned it, and he had punished people for baptism. But now, Saul wanted to be baptized because he was one of them! This is a turning point not only in the life of Saul, who would later become known as Paul, but it was also a turning point for the Church.

Saul was empowered to do what we should all do, proclaim Jesus. He went to the very location he was most familiar with, the synagogue. This time he did not go as an educated authoritative leader of the Pharisees; he went as a Christ-follower whose eyes had literally and spiritually been opened. Notice the words he proclaimed with confidence and power, “*He is the Son of God.*” Saul did not use the past tense but the present tense verb. Jesus IS the Son of God.

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Look at the response of the people in the following verses.

ACTS 9:21-22 *All those hearing him continued to be amazed, and were saying, “Is this not he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and who had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?”²² But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Christ.*

Life was not easy for Saul after that moment. In fact, if you continue reading, many of the disciples were afraid of Saul. There was Barnabas who, like Ananias, encouraged Saul and befriended him, literally taking him by the hand to the others. Saul never gave up, regardless of the obstacles. He was God’s chosen instrument to accept what Jesus had challenged His disciples to do in Acts 1:8, being a witness to the uttermost parts of the world.

Saul’s life changed completely from the inside out all because of his personal encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. Once his eyes were opened, he never looked back. His life had new purpose and vision. Saul went on to suffer for the sake of Christ. He regarded anything he had gained before his salvation to be rubbish. Paul looked forward. He wrote out his life goal in a letter to the Church in Philippi.

PHILIPPIANS 3:14 *I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*

May our goal in life be as clear and concise as we are empowered to press on toward the upper call of God in Christ Jesus.

HOW HIS PLAN SHAPES OUR PURPOSE

Sometimes we forget that God knows each one of us intimately, our strengths and weaknesses. He knows our fears and doubts. God knows our hearts even when they are hearts of stone, like Saul’s heart. God had the power of salvation planned even in the days of the prophets.

EZEKIEL 36:26 *Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.*

God is persistent and determined when it comes to saving someone’s life. He pursues those who are lost, sometimes by any means necessary, even a light from the heavens brighter than the sun for one traveling to Damascus. He desires to give you a new heart, a new life, and a new purpose. *Continued on page 46 >*

HOW HIS PLAN SHAPES OUR PURPOSE

By God's grace and mercy, we as Christ-followers are His chosen instruments. How are you being used by God today? How are you proclaiming Jesus as the Son of God? The beautiful thing about salvation is that it has not changed in over 2,000 years. The same process of changing from a heart of stone to a new spirit within is the same.

As Christ-followers, we have the power of the Holy Spirit inside us as did the disciples in Acts. We have the power of the Gospel, which is the good news of Jesus Christ. We have the power to stand for the name of Jesus in an ever-changing world with ever-changing rules; Jesus remains the same. We have the power of the Church that provides community, teaching, and worship. We have the power of salvation that gives us new life and a new purpose for all eternity.