

Text: Acts 9
St Stephen's

Persecutor Turned Apostle

We are looking at three chapters in Acts featuring three conversion stories... case studies in conversions.

- Ch 8 The conversion of a black African eunuch
- Ch 9 The conversion of a member of the Jewish leadership, who had been in charge of persecuting the church
- Ch 10 The conversion of a Gentile roman soldier

Conversion is dirty word in today's pluralistic and relativistic world. We have an '**Aversion to Conversion...**' We think it smacks of pride, arrogance, disrespect, perhaps worse.

Today we are looking at the most well attested conversion in the pages of scripture. **Three times** in the book of acts, in chapters 9,22, and 26 we hear the story of the **conversion of the Apostle Paul**, and when you look at all three chapters, you get the full story.

First I want you to hear **the conversion story of John Guss**. John and Julie have been at St Stephens for ___ years. They have ___ kids (Jordan___) and have cared for _____ foster kids over the years. They live in Ambridge, and have been active in ministry after ministry around here and in many of the neighborhoods around here and overseas as well. John is going to share some of his conversion story with us today...

We meet Paul first in the book of Acts at the **martyrdom of Stephen**. His name then is **Saul** (his name would be changed to Paul after his conversion). Stephen lies dying, and praying...and we are told,

The witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

Acts 7:58

Saul was there, giving approval to his death.

Acts 8:1

That was a **decisive moment** in the career of Saul. It **launched him** into a fury of terrorist activity against the Christians...

Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.

Acts 8:3

As we move to Chapter 9 in Acts...

Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples.

Acts 9:1

In chapter 22 he describes these months like this...

*"I went after anyone connected with this 'Way,' went at them hammer and tongs, **ready to kill for God**. I rounded up men and women right and left and had them thrown in prison*

Acts 22:4 (Msg)

Something was eating him. Just keep your eyes on that...

Hundreds flee the city. Saul begins to hunt them down. He has heard numbers of them fled to Damascus. He got an extradition order from the local Jewish authorities so he could have them arrested and brought back to Jerusalem for trial. He takes some soldiers and begins his journey to hunt them down.

Do you know **how far** Damascus is from Jerusalem? About 140 miles. About as far as from Pittsburgh to Cleveland, without the turnpike. He walked. It would take about 7 days. 20 miles per day. Just to run them down and then bring them back. It is a **measure of his passion**. So he has been on the road for about 6 days. A long, hot, exhausting walk. A lot of time to think.

You have to say that there is **nothing in his life at this point looking like he is ready for conversion**. I want to think about that a bit. He is only moments away from conversion, but **you can't see it**. **What do you see?** A Pharisee. A disciplined, moral, highly educated Jewish leader. He is **serious** about his faith. And he is **angry**. He is on a tear. He is ruthless towards these Christians.

But you see nothing indicating he is ready to turn his life over to Christ. Nothing at all. We will come back to that...

As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice
Acts 9:3-4; 26.14

Others were thrown to the ground around him also. Others saw the flash of light and heard a sound, but **Saul alone** saw the risen Jesus – not in bodily form but glorified, a great being of light - and Saul alone understood his voice.

"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "It is hard for you to kick against the goads."

Goads are sharp sticks to prick, to prod animals. They would use them to prod an ox, to train it, to discipline it, to break it in, to make it go. Some shepherds used them to prod sheep. Sometimes the animals would **kick back** – that's called kicking against the goads - but when they kicked back into a sharp goad, it just hurt them more. So a stubborn animal could in this way be broken in and trained.

It's not visible to anyone who looks at Paul, but Jesus has been at work in his life for some time, prodding him, poking him, breaking him. And **Saul has been kicking back**. It hasn't been going well.

"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.

Acts 9:5 (NIV)

With that answer, **Saul's world collapsed...**

- Right then and there he knew that Jesus was **real – alive – risen – Lord!** That's his phrase.
- Right then and there he knew that all his hatred, all his anger, all his obsession - his zeal for God – had **blinded him to God...**
- Right then and there he knew that he had **a problem**, and the problem wasn't the Christians, wasn't the Gentiles, wasn't someone else. The **problem was Saul** himself.
- Right then and right there he saw that He had not just been **fighting with others**, he had been **fighting with Jesus**. It was

personal between Saul and God...

Ever been there with Saul? It is worth thinking about. Sometimes we say, 'Why is **life so difficult?**' You think your problem is with money or a relationship or a career circumstance... Maybe you are **kicking against his goads...** Maybe you have been **fighting against Jesus.**

Maybe Jesus is saying, 'I am drawing you, you are fighting me. I am pursuing you, you are running from me. I am pushing you, you are pushing back against me.'

What do we learn? 3 Thoughts

1) Conversion Is for Everyone.

We think that it is the bad people who need to be converted, and it is easy to get lost by badness. But **Saul got lost by his goodness.** With irreligious people the way you get lost is by breaking the rules. With religious people the way you can get lost is **by keeping the rules.** You are the one who stays home, does it all right, and you **think God owes you.** You think you have **earned his favor.** And that's the **poison.** If you go this way, your goodness can be more of a barrier to God than your badness.

So Jesus came to Saul. '**Saul, Saul...**' Because everyone **needs to be converted.** Everyone **needs a shepherd.** Bad people need to be converted. Good people need to be converted.

Have you been converted? Have you heard him speak your name?

2) Conversion Flows from Supernatural Vision of Yourself

Paul's story is a story of **spiritual blindness.** He thought a great deal of himself. He thought he was right. He thought God owed him. And all along he was blind.

What we find is that Jesus arranges the circumstances of your life to help you **see yourself as God sees you.** He gives you moments when you have eyes to see what your heart really looks like. I call it '**looking in**

the mirror'. Jesus just holds it up, and you look, and you are horrified.

That's a very important moment in your life.

Sometimes it is easy for people to say, '**I can see!** I know what I am doing! I can run my own life!'

But **the acid test** of whether you can really see is whether you can see your own brokenness, your blindness. 'I have been an idiot' I have been kicking against Jesus, fighting with God. 'I am the chief of sinners...' Paul said. You need a supernatural vision of yourself.

When you have a moment like that, **don't run from Jesus, run to him.**

3) Conversion Flows from a Supernatural Vision of Jesus

"Who are you, Lord?" Paul asked

"I am Jesus..."

That day was the first day Paul saw Jesus that we know of. But **Jesus had had his eyes on Paul** for some time. I think Jesus might have had his eyes on Paul during his earthly ministry. It is likely they would have visited the Temple together over the years of their lives; they were almost the **same age**, and surely **went up to the Temple** during the great feasts over the years. Maybe **their eyes met** once or twice. Maybe Paul heard him teach. Paul certainly **heard stories** about him. **Ever caught a glimpse of Jesus in a moment like that?**

And we know Jesus **had Paul in sight on that day Stephen died**, when Paul was holding everyone's coat. And Stephen looked up and saw Jesus in heaven, standing, and looking, and listening to Stephen pray, 'forgive them Lord...' **Jesus was looking at Stephen, and looking at Paul.** Maybe Paul caught a glimpse of Jesus as he watched Stephen die like that. **Ever caught a glimpse of Jesus in a moment like that?**

Finally there came the day on the road to Damascus. Then it was **face to face.** Everything else fades away. Everyone else drops away. It is **just you and Jesus.** Ever had a moment like that?

It is the moment when you know, **'no, I am not good enough.** It is not even close. I have really screwed things up. Maybe by my badness. Maybe by my goodness.

And right there when you know **you are so much worse** than you have ever admitted that you are, you hear him call your name... 'Saul, Saul...' and you know that **you are much more loved** than you ever dared to dream.

And you know that **it is him you've been looking for** and that **it is him you have been fighting** and you've been a fool. And you look at **his hands** and you see **the scars.** And you yield to him. You give over to him. You come home to him.

Forgiven and free and loved. And everything changes.

That is conversion. That can happen right when you think it could never happen. That could happen today. Now. Here...