

Book of Acts Series - Part 13 | the Conversion

by Jim Cymbala

Jim Cymbala's sermon emphasizes the transformative power of God through the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, illustrating that Christianity is fundamentally about change and grace.

Duration: 31:47

Scripture: Psalm 103:8-9, Jeremiah 32:17, Matthew 5:44, Acts 9:1-19, Romans 1:17, Galatians 2:16, Ephesians 2:4-5

Topics: "Book Of Acts"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the trend of shortening church meetings in America due to people's lack of interest. He emphasizes that being in God's presence should bring joy and questions why people would want to leave early. The preacher then focuses on the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, highlighting how God made him blind for three days to help him understand spiritual truth. He also mentions the importance of the true gospel of Jesus Christ, which brings about genuine change in a person's life. The sermon concludes with an invitation for those who are merely churchgoers to become true Christians by accepting Jesus and experiencing a transformation.

Transcript

We're gonna continue in our series that we're doing together on the book of Acts. The book of Acts, and this is a good review for all of us, is the fifth book of the New Testament. Now, the first five books, two of them are written by the same person, Luke.

He wrote Luke, and then he wrote Acts. And they're both histories, but selective histories, not sequential, but just snapshots of Jesus's life from the book of Luke. Now, snapshots of what happened when the church formed, the Christian church formed, for the first time, and then after Jesus went back to heaven, and from whence we wait for his return, and how the church formed at his direction and began to do his work preaching Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

We've learned that the Spirit was poured out in Acts chapter two, and Peter preaches a sermon in Acts two, and Acts three, thousands are converted to the Lord, and the church forms, and they start meeting together, loving each other, having meals together. One of the things they did was they took communion together, and they gathered together in prayer, the Bible says. That was one of the hallmarks of the early church.

They continued steadfastly in not only the apostles' doctrine, verbal teaching from the apostles, fellowship, prayer, and prayers, and taking communion in between, remembering the Lord's death until he comes again. Well, now the church is, the gospel is spreading, but it's all Jewish still. It's all Jewish.

Why? Because it's starting in Jerusalem, it's going to Judea, and now it's spreading, but these are all among Jewish people, and all the preachers are Jewish. Luke, who wrote this, has not been converted yet. He researched it and did it.

He was a doctor and a scientist, but he was a Gentile. He's the only Gentile writer of any book of the Bible, and now we have the church spreading, as we've learned, and the gospel going to Samaria, which was north of Judea, and had a people that didn't get along well with the true Israelites, but it's looked at as a Jewish sect. This was a real detriment to the early church.

The Roman Empire wrote it off as some kind of offshoot of Judaism. Why? Because all the apostles were Jewish, Jesus was Jewish, and it was Jewish in nature, but of course, it had a universal message, which hasn't yet spread to the other parts of the world, but the early, one of the early detriments against the church was persecution. At the beginning, it wasn't the Roman Empire.

That came later when Christianity spread, the Roman Empire, some of those Caesars who took the throne in Rome, they put the hammer down on the Christian church. They blamed them for things, and they persecuted them. The early persecution came from the Jewish religious establishment, because when you believed in Yeshua, Jesus, as the Messiah, what you were saying is you missed it.

He came, and you missed it. This is the fulfillment of all the prophecies in the Old Testament. You missed it.

This is what Stephen said before they killed him. He was the first martyr of the church, and when they killed him, Stephen, which we read about, they took their garments, because they had to get free from those robes so they could really take a good shot with those stones at Stephen, as he was praying, Lord, don't lay this against their charge, against their account. They took the garments, and they put it at the feet of a young fireball, firebrand, religious fanatic by the name of Saul of Tarsus.

He's later gonna become known as what? The Apostle Paul. But now he is opposed to Christianity, and now he goes beyond just being there and consenting to the death of Stephen, although something must have bothered him when they were stoning Stephen that he would hear Stephen say, Lord, as the stones are hitting him, don't charge this to them as they're killing him. You usually don't see people say that when they're getting killed by someone.

They're cursing, they're fighting, they're opposing. Well, Saul of Tarsus ratchets up his opposition, and he becomes the archenemy of the Christian church. He starts persecuting any Jew who claims to believe in Yeshua, and he's running all over Jerusalem, wrecking havoc in the churches, both men, women, tossing them in jail.

There's indications that some of them died by the hand of Saul of Tarsus or through his agency, which meant children lost their parents, at least to jail, maybe to death, and he's just, he's out of control. But he doesn't stop at Jerusalem. He finds out that there's people in other cities who are in the synagogues worshipping, but they secretly believe in Yeshua, and they're starting to spread this message that the Messiah has come.

No sense waiting any longer. The Messiah has come. It's Yeshua, Jesus of Nazareth.

He's on his way now to Damascus, which is in Syria, where all the killing is going on. Way more than 100,000 people have died here in the last couple of years in Syria as they're trying to overthrow the president Assad and a lot of bloodshed. A street that still exists in Damascus is gonna come into this story as Saul of Tarsus, breathing out threats against the church, is on his way to Damascus.

Why is he going there? He has letters from the high priest in Jerusalem that authorizes him to arrest any Jew who comes to the synagogue who admits to being a follower of Yeshua. In other words, he can't leave it alone. He can't say, oh, that's where you wanna go? We don't believe in that.

No, no, no, no, no. He has to persecute them, physically molest them, and haul them into jail. And here's what happens.

Very famous story. We're calling this message the conversion because this man will become the greatest Christian and the greatest preacher that the world's ever seen. Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples.

He went to the high priest and asked them for letters to the synagogues in Damascus so that if he found any there who belonged to the way, and by the way, it took about five days, four to five days to get to Damascus, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. I mean, he's out of control. He just doesn't wanna mess up Jerusalem.

He wants to get them from Damascus. As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and he heard a voice say to him, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? I wanna just stop there for a second and just say this real quick to you.

Why do you persecute me? He wasn't persecuting Jesus. He was persecuting the church. Ah, oh, but the church is the body of Christ.

He's the head, we're the body. That tells us that whenever you hurt the church, you're hurting Jesus. Because Jesus said, why do you persecute me? Jesus was in heaven.

How do you persecute Jesus in heaven? No, you're persecuting the church. Can I just say a little further note? Whenever you hurt a member of the body of Christ, you hurt Jesus. Whenever you talk nasty smack about a member of the body of Christ, you're threatening Jesus.

Whenever you help someone in the body of Christ, you're helping Jesus. If you give a glass of water to me, you're blessing Jesus because I belong to him. That should make us really love each other and treat each other good, don't you think? So to oppose the church, all these people who are persecuting Christians around the world today and in America, they're not persecuting just the church, they're persecuting Jesus.

Why do you persecute me, he said. So let's look. Who are you, Lord? He didn't know who the voice was.

Saul asked, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting, he replied. Now get up and go into the city and you will be told what you must do. Notice Christianity always ends up that you do something.

You do something. You will be told not what song to sing, but there's things to do. That's why he's converting you.

That's why he gave you this experience of becoming a Christian, so that you can do what? What he wants you to do. That goes for you, me, and Saul of Tarsus. The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless.

They heard the sound, but they did not see anyone. 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.

Now he's blind. For three days, he was blind and did not eat or drink anything. Notice, God cut him off from the physical world so he could start to understand for the first time spiritual truth.

Sometimes to understand spiritual truth, you have to be cut off from the physical world because the physical world can overpower us and then spiritual things get lost. So God made him blind. Now he can't see anything.

Then he cuts him off from food. And now Saul has nothing to do, but in the spirit and prayer, search and listen and wait for God to talk to him. In Damascus, there was a disciple named Adoniaias.

The Lord called to him in a vision. Adoniaias. Yes, Lord, he answered.

The Lord told him, go to the house of Judas on Straight Street. That street still exists in Damascus. And ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying.

In a vision, he's seen a man named Adoniaias come. In other words, God showed him what was gonna happen before it happened so that he could know that this is truly the work of Jesus. In a vision, he's seen a man named Adoniaias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.

Lord, Adoniaias answered, I've 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. In other words, he's informing the Lord about what he needs to know.

Lord, this is one bad dude. You want me to go there? Are you sure this is the place you want me to go? This guy's here for bad business. And the Lord says to Adoniaias, go, this man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.

And I will show him how much he must suffer for my name's sake. Notice there, the whole prosperity feel-good teaching that you hear from the televangelists and that has invaded the Christian church, it's all demolished right there in one sentence. Sometimes for Christians, we're called to suffer.

It's not the American dream. It's not the two-car garage. I must show him what things he must suffer.

There's a teaching going around saying if you suffer anything or you're deprived of anything or if they throw you in jail, you either don't have faith or there's sin in your life because God wants you to drive the biggest car, have the best clothes, and have everything. How many have ever heard of that teaching? Just lift your hand, you know of it, you've heard of it. Well, it's ridiculous because Jesus, who knows everything, says, no, in this case, not everyone's called to suffer like Paul.

Not everybody has their church burnt up like Christians in Pakistan. For his situation, I must show him how much he must suffer for my name's sake. Then Ananias went to the house and entered it.

Placing his hands on Saul, he said, brother Saul, hmm, hmm, hmm. That took some courage. He probably went, brother, brother, brother, brother, Saul, the Lord, Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you

were coming here, how would he know that? When Saul heard that, he went, how would you know that I saw him on the road? See the communication of the Holy Spirit there? You were coming here has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.

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. Now, that's the conversion of the one who's generally considered the greatest Christian who ever lived.

He's gonna write more than a third of the New Testament outside of Jesus. More books have been written about Paul, the apostle, than anyone else in the Bible. This is the one who founded churches, could go to a place for three or four weeks, start a church, ordain leaders.

How'd he do that? Could be thrown in prison in some places, beat half to death. One time they gave him up in a place called Lystra. They thought he had died.

Traveled, pushed his body, risked everything. He was like a dynamo for God. So that's why the Bible gives such careful attention to his conversion.

And as you read through the book of Acts, which we will, whenever he's arrested or he's put in a spot, he goes back to this story almost always. He said, listen, guys, timeout. I was on my road to, on the way to Damascus.

I used to persecute these guys. I didn't believe in this stuff. I thought it was junk.

I didn't believe in Jesus, but here's what happened. See, I was on this road and then a light and I got knocked down and then a voice said to me, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? And he goes over this story over and over again. You'll see it.

And I said, who are you, Lord? And he said, I'm Jesus, whom you're persecuting. And now the rest of the book of Acts is gonna change and we're gonna follow Paul, not Peter, not James, not John, not Matthew, even though they were the original 12. No, this man born out of season, this man who used to persecute the church, he becomes the man who now Luke is gonna follow.

He's gonna lead Luke probably to the Lord, the man who wrote this book. And he's just amazing. When I get to heaven, obviously we wanna see Jesus, but we're probably gonna have billions and billions of years to fellowship.

It wouldn't that be great to see everybody? How many have loved ones you can't wait to see again in heaven? And we're gonna be able to talk and fellowship, yes. There's food there too. That's what it says.

To see Paul, I mean, talk about an awesome example of God's grace. He's the one who gives us the book of Romans and Galatians where we understand the just shall live by faith. He's the one who's cured of his legalistic Judaism.

And now he tells the world that the Christian message is grace and mercy through faith in Jesus Christ. Oh my goodness, giant of a man, although probably small in stature, no one knows what he looked like. So that's why the Bible takes time to give us his conversion.

Here's what I wanna leave you with. What are the things about his conversion that are revelations of God and spiritual truth that the Lord wants us to concentrate on? Just from this one chapter, you could preach

10 sermons about different aspects of this. I highlighted some of them as we were reading through.

Number one, from the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, we know this, that Christianity is about change and God can change anybody. God's gonna now put on our screen this awesome man of God who's gonna affect the world and travel and affect so many people, affecting us still today. I'm talking about him now, 2000 years later.

And what was he before God got ahold of him? He was the nastiest guy that you would wanna meet. He was a tyrant. He was a hate-filled.

He says in one of his letters, before we knew Jesus, we not only were hated by people, but we hated other people. We were full of hate. And he was one of them.

He calls himself the chief of sinners, the least of all the saints, not even worthy to be called an apostle. Why? Because he was one nasty dude. God, to show us his power, says I'm gonna make the greatest Christian and I'm gonna use for my material the nastiest antichrist person you could imagine.

A persecutor of the church, full of hate, breaking up families, throwing women in prison, grabbing people by the neck and forcing them to try to curse Jesus and all kinds of other malicious things. And that's gonna be the greatest Christian who ever lived so that God would leave a message for all of us. Paul says in 1 Timothy, in the first chapter, he says, listen, God chose me as the worst of sinners as an example so that everybody could know there's nothing too hard for God.

He said he chose me on purpose. I didn't see it, but now as I've been walking with him, he picked me, an antichrist persecutor of the church because it goes to show that Christianity is about change. Jesus said you must be born again.

The Bible says if anyone be in Christ Jesus, he is a new creation. Old things pass away, all things become new. Paul's the one who was inspired to write that because he knew of what he spoke.

I don't care who you are today. Let's just look at it this way. I don't care what you struggle with.

I don't care what you've done or what I've done. God is a God of mercy and grace who can take the lowest and bring it to the highest. Can we say amen to that? Doesn't matter what you've done.

This is why the story is told in such detail. God wants us to know where sin abounds, grace even more abounds. That's what the apostle Paul wrote.

What do you think he wrote it from? He wrote it inspired by the Holy Spirit, but he wrote it from su corazon, from his heart. He knew what that meant. He knew what it was to be depraved and full of hate and blinded and prejudice.

No matter how nasty any of us are, God can make us sweet and great and Christ-like. And that goes for your son and your daughter and the people you're praying for. I don't care where they are today.

God can change them. Come on, can we say amen? God can change them. One point of conjecture, which maybe will bring some of your choir members and others here to the prayer meeting on Tuesday night with a specific request for someone.

It has been pointed out by some of the expositors of the New Testament that Paul probably was the most prayed for person on the face of the earth when he was Saul of Tarsus, why? Because Jesus said, don't curse those who curse you. Don't fight against them, bless those that curse you. Pray for those who spitefully use you.

Bless them, leave a blessing, don't leave a cursing. In the Old Testament, there's a lot of vindictiveness. God, strike my enemies, break their heads, smash their teeth.

These are not prayers that we pray in the new covenant. How many say amen? Amen. We don't do imprecatory prayers as Christians.

We bless those that curse us. And if they took Jesus's word seriously, the argument goes Saul of Tarsus was the most prayed for person in the world. Who was abusing them, who was hurting them the most? Saul of Tarsus.

Who would they pray for the most? Saul of Tarsus. Be that as it may, there's no situation too hard for God. I don't care, that's what, he wants to lay this down in the story of this conversion.

There's nothing too hard for God. There's no poison so deep in your heart or my heart that God can't rip it out and give us a new heart and a new spirit. Christianity, listen, is about change.

What's sweeping America today, and it's one of the causes of the decline of Christianity in America, is that the attention now in the church growth world, and what most pastors, especially younger ones, are going for, unfortunately, is numbers. You gotta have a filled building. You gotta have a lot of people.

That's a sign that you're a success because one of the gods of America is success, which usually brings perks and money and influence. So it's no longer, is someone change? It's just, can you get them to church on Sunday so that you can say you're running 500 or 1,000? But Christianity is not about attendance. It's not about coming in a building.

It's about being changed by the grace of God. Have a new heart, have a new spirit. Come on, let's all say amen to that.

This is why church meetings are being shortened all across America. Some of you don't travel, you don't know about these things, but I go to conferences and I hear all this chit-chat about this stuff, about shorten the meetings. Well, why? Because the folks don't wanna be there.

Oh yeah, that's the main reason. The pastors know it and they wanna keep the numbers and if you have a meeting a little too long, folks gonna walk out like, hey, you know. But I thought in his presence, there's fullness of joy.

And what are you gonna do in heaven? You can't get out once you get up there, right? But maybe the question is whether God will send you there. Because if you don't wanna be with him here on earth, why would he punish you by sending you up there to heaven when there's, listen, you can't text anybody. No one's gonna be doing that.

Both your hands are gonna be lifted up, praising God, there'll be nobody doing that. There'll be no video games, there'll be no whatever, no television, no, and the only music you're gonna have to sing along because there's praise. That's why, brothers and sisters, we have to maintain the true gospel of Jesus

Christ that brings about change, not church attendance, not some surface, yeah, I believe in the good man, the good Lord upstairs or all that, the man upstairs and all that.

No, your life has to be changed, you must be born again. If you're here today and you're just a churchgoer, that won't cut it in the day of Christ, in the day of judgment. He's not gonna reward churchgoers.

He's gonna welcome his children back home to him, the house he's prepared for us. Oh, please, today you can become a Christian. You can be changed right in your seat just by saying, God, I don't wanna live this way anymore.

I do believe in Jesus. Forgive me of my sins. This is what happened to Saul of Tarsus.

We all have to get converted the same way. Forgive me, I've been wrong. Don't you understand? When he was blind and alone, he had to be telling God every 30 seconds, I've been wrong, forgive me, I'm wrong.

I've been persecuting the one that I need most of all. And when he said he was wrong and he opened his heart, God changed him from the inside out. So we learn from this that Christianity is about change.

Just one more point. This conversion also shows us the difference between relationship and being a Christian versus being religious. Because the man that Jesus made into the greatest Christian of all time, he was full of religion, but he was fighting Jesus.

Is that not interesting? God could have made the greatest apostle to be a gladiator, some Gentile who knew nothing about anything, some Roman gladiator, some drunkard. No, no, Saul of Tarsus was not a drunkard. He knew the Old Testament better than you and me put together.

He knew all the verses. He knew the promises of the Messiah. He went to the temple regularly.

He was ahead of everybody else in doing the sacrifices. He learned more and progressed faster and further than all his peers. He tells us that later in some of his writings.

But he was lost. You can be religious and lost. And he wasn't a Buddhist or a Hindu.

Those religions really weren't prominent then or had even begun. Islam did not begin for a couple hundred years after this. He was a believer in the Old Testament.

He was quoting Moses. He knew about Abraham. And he was one nasty, lost individual.

And that's one of the other lessons that we wanna take home with us. It's not enough to be religious. You have to have a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Your heart has to be softened. I'll go further. You have to have a new heart, a new spirit.

Some of the nastiest things that are done are done in the name of religion. Oh yes, I just thought of what my grandson told me. He said, Papa, did you know what I heard about you? I heard a guy say on this Christian television program that if you'll give the offering to him, send in \$100 or whatever it was, he'll give you, he'll send you a cross which is a replica of the cross worn by the Christians who went on the Crusades and killed the Muslims to liberate Jerusalem.

And God bless my grandson. He said, Papa, that's horrible. The Crusades are not something to be proud of.

The Crusades to be shamed of. That has nothing to do with Jesus. Jesus never told anybody to go to Jerusalem to free it and never kill one Muslim or ever kill anyone.

Jesus would never kill anyone. Do I get an amen? We don't kill people who oppose what we believe in. We love them.

We love them. We show kindness to them. So to get money, it's almost like a principle of black magic that there's some value in a physical object.

You're gonna get a cross which is a replica of what they wore on the Crusades while they were slashing and killing people. Oh, how horrible religion can be. Think of what white religionists have done.

Justified slavery, ripped apart husbands and wives and their children, sold them on a slave block, then went to church on Sunday and pounded the Bible. Think of what anger, black anger can exist even in church and they're shouting and praising God and they hate the white man. White hate, black hate, Latino hate, Asian hate, all in the name of religion.

That's what Paul was. Had religion but hated. We gotta tell God, forgive us of any hate.

Any resentment, any bitterness. We're not here to defend white people or black people. People who defend people because they're your race, even though they're wrong, that doesn't make any sense.

We're Christians, we defend Jesus. We defend the word of God. Come on, can we say amen to that? Something is wrong, it's wrong.

So this conversion was a story of not just that God can change people who are so far from Him but it's a story of God, a relationship with God. Knowing Jesus is so different than just religion. Brothers and sisters, as we close, let's say goodbye to religion.

Let's say hello to Jesus today. Let's ask Jesus to come in and change us in those areas. One last thought just comes to me.

The patience of God. The mercy of God. The grace of God.

Paul says later on and again in 1 Timothy, he says, you know why I was saved? Because God could take me, the nasty person I was, to magnify His great patience. Just think if God wasn't patient, where would we be today? Brothers and sisters, look at this. Look at me, please.

You'd have no speaker this morning because if it wasn't for the patience and mercy of God, I would not be here. I have not been what I ought to be. How about you, anybody with me on here? Come on, lift up your hand high.

Not only before I became a Christian, since I've been a Christian, but God who is so rich in mercy. You know what we learn from Paul's conversion? That God delights in mercy. Judgment is a strange act.

If He just wanna show His power, He would've zapped Saul of Tarsus on the road and killed him and said, yo, you're gonna persecute me? How about this? No, He knocked him down so He could pick him up.

Whenever God knocks you down to break you, He doesn't do it to destroy you. He does it to pick you up so He can make you what He wants you and plans for you to be.

Oh, His mercy and His patience. Can we just lift our hands and close our eyes? And could you just open your mouth and thank God for showing patience in your life? Come on, He showed it to the Apostle Paul. Can't you thank Him out loud? You don't have to be embarrassed, God.

I praise you for your patience. I praise you for your mercy. I praise you for your grace in my life and our lives, Lord.

If it wasn't for you, so long-suffering God, where would we be today? For God, you know all things. You know all things, God. You know not just how we seem to be to other people, you know what we really are.

Thank you, Lord.

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