

# Book of Acts Series - Part 36 | a Conversion Story

by Jim Cymbala

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*Jim Cymbala explores the transformative conversion of the Apostle Paul and emphasizes the importance of personal testimony in the Christian faith.*

**Duration:** 33:27

**Scripture:** Psalm 23:1, Matthew 6:33, Mark 16:15, John 3:16, Acts 9:6, Romans 12:1, 1 Peter 3:15

**Topics:** "Book Of Acts"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker reflects on the story of Paul's encounter with God on the road to Damascus. The speaker emphasizes the courage that Paul displayed in his obedience to God's call. They encourage the audience to share their own testimonies and experiences with Jesus, highlighting the importance of personal stories in spreading the message of God's love. The speaker also emphasizes the significance of doing God's will and serving others, referencing passages from the Bible that emphasize the importance of caring for those in need.

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## Transcript

I want to continue the series that we're doing from the Book of Acts. Just to get on point here, the Apostle Paul, we're following his travels, and he has finished his third missionary journey. He has gone on three missionary journeys.

He stopped in Ephesus, which is in what we call Turkey, and now he's come back. We followed his travel itinerary last week and found out what he did when he stopped in a few places, and now he's gotten to Jerusalem. When he gets to Jerusalem, he ends up in the temple, but some people from Turkey, Asia, where he had traveled, they spot him, and in the Jewish temple where the Jewish people are worshipping, they don't like the idea that this preacher of a new religion is mingling among them, because Paul is Jewish, brought up as a Pharisee, as we'll find out, so they start to make a big commotion, and on top of that, because someone had seen him in town with a Greek, a Gentile called Trophimus, some people start shouting out, he's brought a Gentile into the temple area.

He's brought a Gentile into the temple area, and there's a sign in the temple when it was back then, 2,000 years ago. There was a court for the Gentiles that they could go, those who believed in one God and appreciated the Jewish religion, and then there was a court for the women who could go there, and then

there was a court for the Jewish men to be and to worship, and then you were getting near the spot where nobody could go except the priests, near the temple, in and out of the temple. Well, the Gentiles were not allowed to go past their area into where the Jewish people were, and now suddenly, they get this conviction in their minds, Paul has brought a Gentile where he doesn't belong, and we know he's preaching weird stuff that's anti-Jewish, so there was a sign as you went out of the Gentile area, there was a sign in case you wanted to step over the barricade, and it said, if you go beyond this point, you're to blame if you lose your life, because that was blasphemy to the religious system of that day.

They start grabbing Paul, and they're starting to give him a beatdown, and now it turns into a riot, a melee, and the Roman fort is right near the northern side of the temple, and the soldiers hear that there's a riot happening, and they're trying to kill some guy, so the soldiers come down, and they break it up, or they try to break it up, and they pry Paul away before they can kill him, and they start to take him out of the temple, he was already out of the temple, they had closed the door so they wouldn't kill him in sacred ground, and now on the steps of the fort, he's walking up there, and he says in Greek to the Roman officer, may I have a word with you, and when he speaks Greek, the Roman officer goes, what, you speak Greek? He said, yeah, I'm a citizen of the Roman empire. He not only spoke Hebrew, Aramaic, it was the dialect in Israel, but he spoke Greek. So the general, or the officer says, no, aren't you this Egyptian guy that tried to lead a revolt? And Paul says, no, I'm not that guy at all.

I'm a citizen of the Roman empire. Could I please speak to these people? And the officer says, yeah, you can talk to them. So there's a huge mob of people that were just trying to kill him, they're held back by the Roman soldiers, and now Paul, you talk about guts, you talk about courage, he says, no, let me talk to them, and he starts to speak in Hebrew, or Aramaic, the dialect that Jesus spoke, and now here's his speech.

We're just gonna get a few verses. Let's look where we pick it up. The commander gave him permission, so Paul stood on the steps and motioned with his hand for the people to be silent, and when they were quiet, Paul spoke to them in Hebrew.

My fellow Jews, listen to me as I make my defense before you. When they heard him speaking to them in Hebrew, they became even quieter, and Paul went on. Imagine the drama of this moment.

I'm a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up here in Jerusalem as a student of Gamaliel. Gamaliel was one of the great learned rabbis of that day, and Paul had lived most of his life, it seems, being trained or sitting at the feet of Gamaliel. In that day, the custom was everyone sat when the teaching went on, and the teachers sat on a little higher level, and all the students sat a little lower level.

I received strict instruction in the law of our ancestors, the Jewish people, and I was just as dedicated to God as all of you are here today. I persecuted to the death the people who followed this way. What's this way? That's the Christians.

He's referring, remember what we learned? He was, what was his original name before he was called the Apostle Paul? What was his name? Saul of what? Saul of Tarsus, so he's referring back to that. I arrested men and women and threw them into prison. The high priest and the whole council, that means the Sanhedrin, can prove that I am telling the truth.

I received from them letters written to fellow Jews in Damascus, in Syria, so I went there to arrest these people, the Christians, and bring them back in chains to Jerusalem to be punished. As I was traveling and

coming near Damascus, about midday, a bright light from the sky flashed suddenly around me, and I fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? Who are you, Lord, I asked. I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you persecute, he said to me.

The men with me saw the light, but did not hear the voice of the one who was speaking to me. They heard noise, but couldn't make out the words. I asked, what shall I do, Lord? And the Lord said to me, get up and go into Damascus, and there you will be told everything that God has determined for you to do.

God willing, we'll pick up more of that talk and what happens on those steps next week, but let's just focus in right here and try to learn three simple little lessons that we can learn from this passage. What courage Paul had. Mob is trying to kill him, and now he's turned into a preacher, and he's talking and holding them under in silence as he gives his defense or his testimony.

Let's just talk about the Apostle Paul for a second, and let's look at it this way. For anybody here who doubts Christianity and who doubts that Jesus ever lived, or if he did live, the historians recognize that he did live, but there are people who say he just was an ordinary guy, and there was no death that took the sins of the world on his back, on his body, on the cross that they were singing about. There was no resurrection from the dead.

He died like everyone else. He died like Muhammad, he died like Buddha, he died like everybody else. Well, this is a great refutation.

This is a great contradiction of that fact because Paul is giving personal testimony that in a supernatural way he encountered Jesus Christ. On the road to Damascus at noontime when the sun is the brightest, a light shone down that was so bright that it knocked him down, and then the Lord spoke to him and identified who he was. Now, either that's true or that's false.

Either Paul is lying or that really happened to Paul. There's no other alternative. It's either true or it's false.

If it's false, could somebody here explain to me why someone would make up a story that would cost him his life? Why would Paul make up a story about a conversion and Jesus appearing to him when this testimony and this story that he's giving has gotten him in jail that we read about, his back beat up with 39 lashes, he's chased out of towns, people try to stone him, and now they're just about to kill him, and he's still telling the same story. Now, listen, the tendency to lie is all around the world with human beings. We can lie when we're forced to.

But tell me why someone would make up a lie that would get himself killed. It's impossible. This is a great proof of the truth of Christianity and the supernaturalness of Jesus Christ.

Notice also what it means to be a convert to Christ, what it means to be a Christian. Now, Paul's story is very sensational. Paul, obviously, he got converted with, that's the bomb.

I mean, that is big. The light knocked down the voice. But notice this.

In whatever way it happens, the only way you can become a Christian is to have an experience with Jesus Christ. It might not be the way it happened with Paul, but there's no way anybody can become a Christian and put their faith in Christ unless in some way Christ reveals himself to your heart and you know he's alive, he's real. I'm going to have a relationship with him.

I'm going to put my trust in him. Going to church will not save you. Coming to the Brooklyn Tabernacle will not change your life.

Being a Catholic or a Protestant is worthless. You must, if you're going to really know what it means to have your sins forgiven and know that when you die, you're going to live with Christ forever, to know that peace and joy that God has promised for those who put their faith in Christ, you must have an experience with the Lord. And I'm praying, if you're not a Christian today, that while I'm speaking, you're going to have the same kind of experience I had.

I was a kid when it happened, but Jesus, I knew he was alive, he was real. That girl I was talking about, she had an experience with Jesus Christ. Pastor Burgos has had an experience with Jesus Christ.

Pastor Craig Holliday, he's had an experience with Jesus Christ. They're not in church today just because they believe certain doctrine. They know he's alive.

He's changed their life. It's supernatural. Can we say amen to that? You know, when the choir is voice tested, the applicants, and they want to come in the choir, Carol has an interview with all the women, and then someone interviews the men, and one of the first questions she asks is, are you a Christian? Because all kinds of people come to church, and yeah, how did you become a Christian? And when she says, how do you become a Christian, that's when things can get really fuzzy.

I've been a Christian all my life. Well, no one's a Christian all their life. The minute someone says I've been a Christian all my life, most likely they need help now to really focus on Jesus.

You have to have a moment where you were born again. I so hope, I pray, that every one of you here, if it hasn't happened already, you'll open up your heart and let Jesus Christ reveal himself to you. He will change you.

Why do you think they're up here and practicing? Why do you think I'm here? I'm not a nice person naturally. He had to save me and change me, and he's still working on me. Isn't it the same with you? How many here have had an experience with Jesus Christ? Just lift up your hand.

That's what it means to be a Christian. One last thing on this note. Notice the power of testimony.

Paul is trapped. He doesn't give him a sermon. He gives him a testimony.

He doesn't say, let's turn to the book of Deuteronomy. I'd like to speak from there. No.

What does he say? Listen, this is the way it happened to me. Because a testimony is irrefutable. If you've had an experience with Christ and he's changed your life, no one can disprove that.

No one can rob you of that. If you're able to say, I was lost but now I'm found, was blind spiritually but now I see, was depressed and empty and now I'm filled with joy and purpose and peace, nobody can take that from you. And that reminds us, brothers and sisters, that all of us should be sharing our testimony.

Because if you're a Christian, you have a testimony. No, but I don't know a lot of the Bible. But you have a testimony.

Keep learning the Bible and share it with somebody but you have a testimony. The greatest of all the Christians we've ever learned about in a moment of stress gave his testimony. What if tomorrow, every

choir member, everyone here on the job or with family and friends, what if you all just said, can you give me five minutes? Yeah, what about? Well, while we're having lunch, can I tell you my testimony, what happened to me? See, the way it happened with you, it has never happened quite that way with another person.

You have a testimony. Carol's is different than mine. Mine is different than Pastor Johnson.

But we all have a testimony. Let's open our mouths and tell people what Jesus means to us and what he's done. Do I get a witness here? Because Paul, notice, a lot of us are held back and we get shy because I don't know enough of the Bible.

Then give your testimony. Here's a verse that I, in case you don't know any, God is love. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

And you read in the New Testament and you get those verses in your heart and share them, but share your testimony. You all have a story. You lifted your hands, so you got a story.

How did it happen to you? When did you meet Jesus? What were the circumstances? How has he changed your life? Tell somebody. Number two, because I want to be brief, because I really do want to pray about something here before we leave. I want you to notice a strange thing that Jesus said to Paul.

He was called Saul back then. And he's knocked off and he's blinded. In fact, he remains blind when we hear the story in a different place.

And he goes into the city of Damascus, which we'll hear about. But he's knocked off by the light, dazzled, and then he hears a voice. Listen what the voice says.

Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? Well, wait a minute. That doesn't make sense. Saul wasn't persecuting Jesus.

He was persecuting the people in the church. Why would Jesus say, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? Who are you, Lord? I am Jesus, the one you're persecuting. Well, how can you persecute someone in heaven? How can you persecute someone who's risen from the dead? Ah, we learn an interesting fact here.

Jesus loves his church so much. And he so identifies with Christians around the world and with this local church and you and me. The image in the Bible is that he is the head and we are the what? The body.

The church is called the body of Christ. That's spiritually speaking. What does it mean? He is the head, my head is connected to my body.

From the head comes direction and intelligence and the body carries it out. But the head is connected to the body. And that's how close we are united to Jesus Christ.

He is the head, we are the body. And if you touch the body, the head feels it. So he says to Saul of Tarsus, why are you persecuting me? Why are you persecuting me? Who are you? I'm Jesus, whom you're persecuting.

No, I was persecuting your church. No, when you touch the church, you touch me. When you're mean to a Christian, Jesus is saying, you're mean to me.

Now we learn from history, Paul said it, we don't know how many, but he caused the death of Christians. He just didn't haul people into jail, which he was doing. This guy was so full of venom and so anti-Christian that he was breaking up families and husbands and wives, pregnant women, were being tossed into prison.

He didn't care. And what was their crime? They were Christians. They believed that Jesus was the Messiah.

That's how full of hate he was. And as he's persecuting the church, Jesus says, no, you're persecuting me. Well, that brings a whole other thought to us now.

Follow it through because let's be logical and let's go by what the words of Christ to Paul says. That means whatever happens to God's people, however people treat Christians, that's how you're treating Jesus because he's connected to us. If someone's mean to Deacon Zapata, they're being mean to Jesus.

If you hurt him, if you punch him, if you say something nasty to his lovely wife and you hurt her, that affects Jesus because he is connected to us. You can't break that connection. It's not like he's up in heaven and we're down here.

That's true, but spiritually, we are one in Christ. We're one with Christ. Ah, but let's take this further.

That means when you do something good to a Christian, you're not doing it to just to them. You're doing it to Jesus. Now, this is hard for us to accept, but what Jesus is telling us is when you persecute the church and you're mean to Christians and you gossip about Christians, let us all hear this word.

Anything you do to another Christian, I don't care how wrong they are, anything you do to a Christian, Jesus feels it. Anytime I hurt another believer, talk ugly about another believer and they learn of it or even if they don't, that affects Jesus. Why? Because he's one with his body.

He's the head, we're the body. Anytime you do something good to a Christian, anywhere in the world, you're doing it to Jesus. He's the one that feels good along with the person that you help.

Proof text, Matthew 25, look. Then the king, Jesus, will say to the people on his right, come, you that are blessed by my father. This is on judgment day.

Come and possess the kingdom which has been prepared for you ever since the creation of the world. I was hungry and you fed me. Thirsty and you gave me a drink.

I was a stranger and you received me into your home. I was naked, you gave me some clothes. I was sick and you took care of me.

Notice, you didn't heal me, you took care of me when I was sick. Some people are healed. Other people have to be taken care of.

I was in prison and you visited me. Just a visit to a prison. The righteous then will answer him, when, Lord, did we ever see you hungry and feed you or thirsty and give you a drink? When did we ever see you, king, as a stranger and welcome you into our homes or naked and clothe you? When did we ever see you sick or in prison and visit you? And the king will reply, I tell you, whenever you do this for one of the least important of these followers of mine, you did it for me.

Is that powerful? Is that powerful? Wouldn't that make every day special to us? If I can help my brother Daniel here and encourage him, I'm blessing Jesus. I'm not just doing something for him. It's touching Jesus.

Think how we would act and treat one another if that was real to us. When you hurt a believer, you hurt Jesus. When you snub a believer, you snub Jesus.

Because that story goes on to the other group. He says, I was naked and you didn't clothe me and I was thirsty and you didn't give me water and so on and so forth and I was homeless and you didn't take me in. And they said, when did we ever see you? And he said, because you rejected the least of these, my followers.

Oh God, let us every single day do something that will make Jesus happy. Let's bless someone. And what does it take? All you have to do is say, how are you, my sister? How are you doing? And then, can I pray for you? And then she's encouraged.

I just encouraged Jesus. Just think of that. Think how we would talk more and encourage and treat people to lunch and spend money on people and look for people in their problems and try to assist them in some way because we're not just doing it for them as much as we love them.

We're doing it for Jesus. God, help us never to hurt another Christian. I never wanna hurt another Christian as long as I live.

How many are with me? Say amen. Because when you hurt them, you hurt Jesus. No, don't say you did it to them.

And don't say they're not perfect and they bother you and you don't care for them. We're not so hot either. How many say amen? Let me close.

The minute he finds out who's talking to him, I am Jesus whom you're persecuting. Paul says something that's not in our vocabulary much in modern day Christianity. First thing he says, Lord, what will you have me to do? Notice what he said.

Lord, what will you have me to do? Now he realizes, whoa. The one I've been persecuting, these Christians, I've been persecuting him and I know their message that he died on the cross because God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son. And now it's all dawning on Paul.

And now he realizes that this Jesus, instead of killing him, has revealed himself to him. And he says, what do you want me to do? You know what it is for a lot of us? Lord, what church should I go to then on Sunday? That's not found anywhere in the Bible. We've reduced Christianity not to doing things every day for Jesus.

We've reduced it to, where do you go? You go to the tab? Oh, that's nice. Now I go to St. Augustine's Church. Now that's not what Paul said.

Paul said, what will you have me to do? Real faith in Jesus always causes action. Faith without works is sitting in a building for one hour and a half on a Sunday has nothing to do really with the essence of Christianity. If Jesus, you have experience with him and you know who he is, we should all be saying to him, what do you want me to do? You died for me.

You died for Jim Simla, rotten to the core as he is. You died for me. Now I belong to you, so what do you want me to do? More than just like I work for the post office, so I go to work every day.

No, I work in the office. I'm a school teacher, whatever. Beyond that, yes, I gotta do that because that's the right way to live and be respectable and pay my bills and be honorable, but now, Lord, why did you save me? What do you want me to do? Now, Paul was an apostle.

He's gonna get very strange instructions. It's foretold to him that he's gonna suffer a lot, so all kinds of things are different about Paul than us, but the principle is still the same. Jesus saved my dear sisters in the alto section.

He saved them so they would do something for him. The reason you're here today and not in heaven, he could have you in heaven. The reason we're all alive today, starting with me, is he wants us to do something for him, talk to someone, pray for someone, show love, show mercy, pick somebody else up, but not just live a little life in a bubble and then go to church on Sunday, and the only time we mention him otherwise is if we're in trouble.

Please let the church pray for me. That is not the Christianity of the Bible. The minute Paul knew what was happening, he said, what do you want me to do? And I believe, it seems like from the New Testament, that was his policy and attitude every day of his life.

Every new day was, Jesus, what do you want me to do? Who can I talk to? Where do I go? I'm gonna go in a logical way if I have a job and whatnot. He was a minister, an apostle, trekking all over the place, but the principle is for all of us, what do you want me to do? That's what Lord means. Lord means he's in charge, and we're the servants.

What do servants do? They do what they're told. Pastor Simba, I don't like that. I wanna live my life.

Here's the American, mostly concept of Christianity. Isn't it true that for most people, Christianity is this. I live my life the way I want.

I go to church on Sunday, and if I'm trouble, I ask for prayer because I need God to help me. And then when he helps me, I go back living my life, my way, doing what I wanna do, traveling where I wanna travel, following the career I wanna do until I'm in trouble. Then I go, and when I die, I know I'm gonna be in heaven.

This is a great life. But that's not the Christian life of the Bible. The Christian life of the Bible is right from the get-go.

Lord, what do you want me to do? Jesus said an interesting thing in John. They thought he was missing food, and they said, did someone bring him food? And he said, look, I have food to eat that you don't know about. Did someone bring him food? He said, my food, my meat, what keeps me going, what brings me peace and joy is to do the will of the one who sent me and to finish his work.

If you don't have an element in your Christian life, if I'm losing out on what does he want me to do, I'm gonna be empty and unfulfilled because I'm living a Christian life that he never planned for me. I'm trying to be isolated and independent and do my own thing, and then go to church on Sunday, and I gotta give honor to God, honor to the Father, honor to the Son, and serving the Lord. Then I go and do my thing, and if I'm in trouble, oh, Lord, here I am, I need a little help here.

But after you help me, I'm going right back to what I wanna do, and I wanna suggest to you today that that's a way to emptiness and no peace and no joy. When you say yes to Jesus every day and you tell him just that simple sentence, what do you want me to do? Now, from a persecutor, this man became the greatest Christian that ever lived. And I just wonder if the choir behind me and the people in front of me, by the grace of God, if we would begin to say today and then every day after today, Lord, what do you want me to do? Say that sentence with me.

What do you want me? Say it again. It's so simple, and guess what? If you pray that, he will tell you. If you surrender and you say, Lord, what do you want me to do? You'll start seeing exciting things happen every day of your life.

He'll give you little promptings. You'll pray prayers that you never dreamed. You'll talk to people.

You'll have a boldness. You'll see fruit from your life. You'll get involved with others instead of living isolated all by yourself.

It all starts with the way Paul got converted. Lord, I believe in you now. Now, what do you want me to do? I fought against that when I was a Christian and I got married.

I had plans for my life. I was in the business world. I could travel basically around the world for free because I was working for an airline.

It's not that I didn't believe in Jesus, I did. But I had plans. We had a baby about 11 months after we were married.

Cute little thing. And then the Lord started to interrupt my life. And I was feeling something wrong inside as God is my witness.

I knew something wasn't right. I was going to church, reading my Bible occasionally. Something was not right.

And boy, the Lord started to zero in on me. This is not why I saved you. Now again, I'm different than you are and you're different from the person next to you, but all of us have something to do.

The idea that he died on the cross so I would go to church once a week, that's almost painful to say. He wants you to do something. And it all began, no, but I'm not trained.

Don't say that. Just say, what do you want me to do? But I lack what it takes. Just don't say that.

He'll empower you, he'll strengthen you. Just say, what do you want me to do? Not 10 years from now, not 20 years from now. What do you want me to do like today, this week? Show me, Lord, I'll do it.

You died on the cross, I love you. I'm gonna show my love and my honor of you by submitting myself and saying, what do you want me to do? And there are some of you here, you know you're working at jobs maybe that God will move you out of and you're called to be missionaries or leaders or do things for God. And the only way to get there is not to go up, it's to go down and simply say, what do you want me to do? Yes, indeed, lead me, Lord.

I will follow. So that's my challenge to you today. Do you wanna go to church on Sunday? Or do you wanna be, what do you want me to do, Lord? We have a choice.

You wanna be religious and go to church on Sunday? But that's, I know that's how you saw it growing up in your island or your Brooklyn or my Polish-Ukrainian background. I don't wanna go by that. I wanna do what God wants me to do.

How many wanna do what God saved you to do? Just lift your hand. I mean, there's potential, there's potential. I found out in my own life, weak, frail, faulty, alcoholic son, all of that stuff is overcome when God begins to work in you.

And it begins by saying, what do you want me to do? I'm going out of my comfort zone. I think on the cross, you went out of your comfort zone. So since you died for me, I'm gonna live for you.

Let's close our eyes. While I was speaking, I believe certain hearts were especially warmed because you're in the spot that I was in. I would sit in meetings, and sometimes a sermon would come like this, and God would begin to give me this pressure inside.

Like, when will you say that sentence to me? What do you want me to do? Stop your self-will, Jim. Stop planning your life. I own your life now.

I died on a cross so that I would be not just your savior, but your Lord. And he's never gonna take you to a place where it's no peace, no joy. In fact, he takes you from emptiness to fulfillment when you just say, what do you want me to do? Those of you watching or listening on the webcast, right where you are, you gotta stop and say, what do you want me to do? Obviously, you didn't save me so I go to church on Sunday.

I wanna follow in the footsteps of the apostle. I wanna know your will for my life, and I wanna do it by your grace. Anybody who just wants us to say a special prayer over you along these lines, I'll stay with you for a while if that's what you feel.

Maybe you feel a calling to the ministry, to service for the Lord in a way you're not doing now, but there's something inside of you like it was inside of me. This is not the place and the life that God has planned for me. I love him, I'm living for him, but there's something that's elusive, and I wanna find it by just simply saying the sentence, what do you want me to do?

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