

# The Conversion of the Persecutor Acts 9:1-27

by J.R. Miller

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*The sermon tells the story of Saul's conversion from a persecutor of Christians to a zealous servant of Christ, highlighting the importance of Christian friendship and support in helping others grow in faith and service.*

**Scripture:** Acts 9:1

**Topics:** "Transformation", "Grace and Service"

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## Description

J.R. Miller explores the dramatic conversion of Saul, a fierce persecutor of Christians, who encounters the glorified Jesus on the road to Damascus. This pivotal moment transforms Saul's life, leading him to surrender to Christ and become a devoted follower, illustrating the profound impact of divine grace. Miller emphasizes the importance of individual relationships with Christ, the necessity of immediate action in faith, and the role of supportive friendships, as exemplified by Barnabas, in nurturing new believers. The sermon highlights that true conversion leads to a life of service and growth in faith, as seen in Saul's transition from persecutor to preacher. Ultimately, Miller encourages believers to embrace their mission and support one another in their spiritual journeys.

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## Transcript

The first mention of Saul is in Acts 7:58, at the close of the story of the death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. We are told that when the witnesses who had given testimony against Stephen were about to cast the first stone at the condemned man, they "laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul." It is further said of him that he was consenting to Stephen's death, or taking pleasure in it. Although Saul was called a young man, he was probably a member of the Sanhedrin, Acts 26:10, and so must have been above thirty years old. Men were called young in those days--until forty or forty-five.

Young as he was, Saul was full of zeal for the Jewish church, in which he had been trained. Earnestly believing that the followers of Christ were making a mistake, he became a chief agent in persecuting those who were known as Christians. Having received authority from the rulers, he searched far and near for the deluded people. Entering into every house, he dragged out men and women, committing them to prison.

It was perhaps after he had been engaged in the work of persecution for several months, that he went to the high priest and asked for letters to the rulers of the synagogues of Damascus, authorizing him to search there for Christians and take them away. As there were perhaps thirty or forty synagogues and not less than forty thousand Jews in Damascus, he thought he would have abundant opportunity to serve God there, by uncovering those who had become adherents of "the way," as the Christians were described.

The Christians still worshiped in the synagogues. The men and women whom he uncovered, were to be taken to Jerusalem to be tried before the Sanhedrin, which alone could pronounce the death sentence.

The time necessary for making the journey to Damascus would be five or six days. Saul was allowed to go on unhindered until he had nearly completed his journey. Then "suddenly a light from heaven shined around about him." We gather further facts from the other accounts of this occurrence given by Paul himself in chapters 22 and 26. The time was about noon, and the sun's light was at its brightest; yet this great light shone above the brightness of the sun. Saul's companions saw it--as well as himself. It was not any natural phenomenon, like lightning. It was not a mere vision--but an actual occurrence. It was nothing less than the appearance to the persecutor--of the glorified Jesus. This is evident from the words addressed to Saul, "Why do you persecute me?" Also from what Ananias said to him subsequently; from the words of Barnabas; and from Paul's own reference to the fact that he had seen Jesus (chapter 22:14; 1 Corinthians 9:1, 15:8).

Every word in the question asked him by Jesus is emphatic: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" What could be the reason? What cause had Jesus ever given for such treatment? If he had been a despot or a tyrant when on the earth; if he had gone about burning towns and pillaging and desolating homes, crushing the weak and the poor, and causing pain and poverty and sorrow, there would have been some excuse for Saul's animosity. But he had gone about doing good, scattering blessings, healing, comforting, lifting up, helping, and teaching. "Why this treatment?" "Why do you persecute me?"

The question became personal. He had to stand face to face with the glorified Christ and answer why he, Saul, was his enemy. This personal relation of every human soul to Christ is a very startling thought. We are not lost sight of in any crowd. We must each stand before Christ as individuals, and settle our own relation to him.

"Why do you persecute me?" He had never lifted a hand against Christ. It is not likely that he ever saw him. This persecution Saul had been carrying on--had not touched Christ. Ah! But whatever touched any of his followers--touched him. Christ identifies himself so closely with his own people--that he feels every pain, every wrong, and every cruelty toward any of them--as personal to himself! Parents can understand this. If anyone strikes my child, he strikes me! A husband can understand it. If anyone injures his wife, the injury touches him. These close human relationships help us to understand how dear believers are to Christ, and how well defended they are. This truth teaches us also to be most careful how we treat others lest we be found lifting up our hand against Christ--in the person of some of his lowly followers.

Saul's reply was instant: "Lord, what will you have me to do?" Here is a case of immediate surrender to Christ. He had not believed Jesus to be the Messiah. He had supposed him to be but an ordinary man, perhaps self-deceived, perhaps a deceiver. He had supposed that he was dead, and that the belief of his followers in his resurrection was either a delusion on their part, or a conspiracy. Now, however, he saw Jesus for himself, saw him living and glorified; heard from his own lips who he was. Before this plain appearance, all doubt vanished. He saw that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. And at once he accepted him and yielded to him, transferring his allegiance to him and asking for direction.

This second question also presents several emphatic points. "What will you have me to do?" Every disciple must do something; everyone has a mission. "What will you have me to do?" Christ has the sole right to command us and give us our work. We get our work from him. "What will you have me to do?" Duties are individual. Each one's work is personal. Everyone's life is a plan of God. "What will you have

me to do?" It has been remarked that he showed the same eagerness of zeal that many young converts show, in wanting to do something right away, while there was something to be done in him first.

Jesus told the trembling man to go into the city; it would be told him what he must do. And this is how Jesus prepared the way for him. He spoke to Ananias, one of his disciples in Damascus, as follows: "Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight, and inquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul." This remarkable verse shows how intimately acquainted our Lord is with all the circumstances of our lives. He knows our names and the street and the number of the house in which we live or are stopping, and just what are we doing. We need never fear that we are forgotten or overlooked by him in the crowd, or that he has too many things to do at any moment to attend to our needs. Especially if we are seeking light and peace we may be sure that he keeps his eye upon us and will not fail to send help.

The reason was clearly stated why Ananias should seek Paul: "Behold, he prays." When men pray on the earth, God knows it. A little child sat musing on her mothers' knee, and she said to herself, "When I being to say my prayers, God says to the angels, 'Keep quiet; I hear a noise!' And when they ask, 'What noise?' he answers, 'A little girl's prayer.'" Then all the angels stop their singing and playing on their harps until I say Amen." The child's sweet imagination is not far from the truth. Although God does not need to stop the angels' songs, he does hear every "little girl's noise," and listens until she says Amen. He knows when anyone is praying anywhere on this crowded earth.

But Ananias objected, "Lord, I have heard . . . of this man, how much evil he has done."

It is hard for us to believe that a very wicked man has truly been converted. We are apt to doubt his profession. We need to be very careful at this point lest we refuse Christian sympathy and help to one whom Christ wants us to help in starting in his new life.

Jesus' answer was ready, "He is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name." He is a vessel--nothing more. We are nothing in ourselves; we have nothing in ourselves to give to men; we are only vessels to carry that which God may give us. "A chosen vessel." He had been chosen from the beginning, for the work to which he was now called. He spent years as a bitter enemy of Christ--but he was still the Lord's chosen vessel, waiting only the appointed time to be called into service. He was to bear Christ's name. That is what God wants us to do in this world, not to carry our own wisdom, our own sympathy and love, our own help--to men; but to carry his name, the message of his grace and love, the bread from his table.

Ananias obeyed at once. Coming into the house of Simon, and finding Saul, "Ananias . . . putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul, Jesus, has sent me." God often uses his human servants to answer men's prayers. He likes to send blessings to distressed souls--through human hands. We should always be ready to impart comfort or strength or to give help or joy to other souls, for it may be that God has sent us to them for this very purpose. We should give a cordial welcome and prompt brotherly friendship to every new convert. He may never need our help so much again, as just at the beginning. A hand of friendship now, may lead him into the light; that hand withheld, may leave him to walk long in darkness.

Then Ananias ministered unto Saul, who had been blind since he had seen the vision of Jesus. His sight was restored, and he rose and was baptized. From that day, he was a zealous in the service of Jesus--as he had been in the persecution of the Christians. He remained some days with the disciples in the city. That was not the way he had meant to pass his time in Damascus. He intended to search out all the believer in the city and drag them off to Jerusalem for trial, and perhaps for death. He intended to begin a fierce and unrelenting persecution against the disciple. Instead of this, he was with the disciples in close

and loving fellowship. He came hating them; he stayed loving them and forming close friendships with them. He came to destroy; he stayed to help. This shows what the grace of God can do, what one look at Jesus can do.

More than this, he became a worker for Christ. "Immediately he preached Christ in the synagogues." 9:20. Here is an example for all young converts. They should at once begin to testify for Christ. They should immediately show where they stand. It is better for themselves, for by boldly confessing Jesus before the world--they cut themselves loose from all entanglements.

A young sailor was converted at the Mariner's Bethel, New York. One evening at the close of the service, he came to the minister in charge with a large card and asked him if he would write something on it for him. "You can do it better than I can," he said. The minister took the card and asked, "What shall I write?" "Put on it," said the young seaman, 'I love Jesus--Do you?' Make it large and plain." When the words were written the minister asked him what he was going to do with the card. "I go to sea tomorrow," he replied, "and I am going to tack this on my bunk before I sail, and then they will all know at once where I stand." He did the right thing. He took his true place at first, and there was no question after that--as to where he stood.

A Christian who has not come out boldly for Christ, is always entangled by his old associations. He had better cut all entanglements by coming clear out for Christ, at first. This is the true way, too, to honor Christ. As soon as he has saved us and we have given ourselves to him--we should begin to serve him and work for him.

There was another strong impulse in Saul's case. He had been a bitter persecutor. He had done all he could to destroy the cause of Christ. Now he felt an irresistible desire to correct and undo the evil he had wrought. Still another motive in the same direction--is our duty to others. We have found Christ ourselves, and we should seek at once to have others receive the same blessing.

Of course, the Christians were surprised. They began to ask, "Is not this the man who destroyed those who called on this name?" Yes, the same man. Yet it is not wonder the people could scarcely believe it. Surely it was a marvelous transformation. It would indeed be far less strange if we saw a lion changed into the gentleness and harmlessness of a lamb! We must not fail to ask how this transformation was wrought. Was it the result merely of Saul's own meditations and reflections on the way to Damascus? Was it caused by a lightning flash which stunned and blinded him and threw him from his horse, thus frightening him? Was it affected by the talk he had with Ananias and his earnest words in the house of Judas? Was he won over by the disciples into whose company he had fallen?

The simple answer to the question, is that he met Jesus in the way and was thoroughly convinced that he was the Messiah, and at once accepted him as such; and that he received the Holy Spirit when Ananias visited him. The change was wrought therefore by seeing Christ, believing on him and being filled with the Holy Spirit. It was as much a divine work--as was the creation of Adam. This same power is working in Christianity wherever it goes. That is what gives such triumph to the gospel everywhere.

As Saul's work continued, he "increased the more in strength." This is another point to be marked in the history of this young convert. He seemed very earnest at first--but he grew in grace. He became stronger--stronger in faith, stronger in work and argument, and stronger in influence. The same should be true of every young Christian. No matter how well he starts, his course should be like "the shining light that shines more and more unto the perfect day." Faithfulness is good in a Christian--but progress is better.

There are too many people who enter the Church and never get past their starting point. Babies are very sweet and beautiful--but we would not want them always to remain babies. Yet a good many Christians remain "babes" all their life. See Ephesians 4:13-15 for a description of what should and should not be the history of every Christian life. Saul is an example of the right kind of life. He grew.

Naturally the Jews did not welcome this activity on the part of one who had been their helper. They "took counsel to kill him."

The world does not like earnestness. It has killed many of its best and most earnest men, and has persecuted many more. So long as a man moves on quietly and takes no decided stand, and does not have any opinions of his own, or, if he has, does not press them with any particular ardor--the world will let him live in peace, and will pat him on the back and call him "a good fellow." But let him grow earnest and begin to think for himself, and then put emphasis into his utterances, and begin to work with zeal and intensity and enthusiasm, and the world wants to kill him! It is a great deal easier and safer just to live quietly and never speak out and never grow enthusiastic. Whether it is the best way--is another question. When these Jewish enemies sought to kill him, and lay in wait for him at a gate of the city, he escaped in a basket, which was let down from the wall by some of the disciples. Then he hurried back to Jerusalem.

At Jerusalem Saul tried to join the disciples--but they were afraid of him. A bad name clings to a man for a long time. It is almost impossible to outgrow it. One's past life throws a shadow over one, from which it is hard to escape. It takes a good many years sometimes of faithful life and service--to win back the confidence which has been forfeited by a very brief period of wrong living.

"But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles." Here we have an illustration of the office and the value of true Christian friendship. Saul yet lay under suspicion among those who had known him in his former days as a fierce enemy of Christianity. Barnabas knew that he was now a sincere Christian and ought to be no longer under suspicion, and he became his friend, speaking manly words for him and winning for him the confidence of the other believers. It was a noble and beautiful act, and shows us what we should be ready to do on every similar occasion. How much help it was to Saul--we can easily understand.

Many a young Christian needs just such a friend as Barnabas was to Saul. Most of us have known others who were unjustly under suspicion, who was suffering from some past error, or who was misunderstood. Have we spoken the few brave words needed to set them in proper light? It is very easy to fall into the current that sets against another, or to keep quiet even when we know the person is unjustly blamed; but it is not the Christian way. The way Barnabas treated Saul, is the Christian way.

Barnabas had been sent to Jerusalem to take charge of the Christians in the city. He found that everywhere there seemed to be an open door for the gospel. He saw at once that there was need for other helpers. Then it was that he thought of Saul. Saul had left Jerusalem and had retired to his old home in Tarsus. He seems to have been living there in obscurity. He probably had become disheartened and discouraged, perhaps feeling that he was not to have an opportunity to do much in the Church.

There are good men whom the coldness and indifference of others, prevent from taking the place in the Church which they might take. Sometimes men get even soured and embittered by the lack of confidence and interest in them. We do not know precisely what Saul's mood was in Tarsus--but it seems that if it had not been for Barnabas, he might have remained there altogether, and have been lost to the Church, buried in his studies, living perhaps the life of a recluse, and all his magnificent labor would have been lost to the

Church. But when another man was needed to enter upon the great work at Antioch, Barnabas thought at once of Saul. The record says, "Then Barnabas departed to Tarsus, for to seek Saul: and when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch."

One of the most distinguished scientific men of the latter part of the eighteenth century was Sir Humphry Davy. He made many great discoveries and added many valuable contributions to science.

Among those who worked with Sir Humphry Davy as a journeyman and amanuensis was Michael Faraday. He was employed at first only at weekly wages in unimportant positions. But soon it became apparent that Faraday was himself possessed of a great genius for scientific researches and discoveries. It is said that when Sir Humphry Davy was asked what had been his greatest discovery, he said, "Michael Faraday!" He claimed to have been himself the discoverer of Faraday, of his gifts and possibilities, and the means of bringing him to public notice and to his high place.

We may say that Barnabas was the discoverer of Paul. He seems to have been the only man who recognized in the young convert, the abilities he had for work and service. But for Barnabas, Saul might have remained all his life in obscurity! Think what the world would have lost--if Paul had not been discovered and had never been led into his place of marvelous usefulness. So far as we can see, Christianity never would have attained the place it holds in the world--had it not been for Paul. He became the great missionary, carrying the gospel to all lands. He became the writer, also, of the fourteen Epistles which have had such wonderful influence all these centuries. It is high honor, therefore, that belongs to Barnabas in having been the discoverer of Paul.

It showed also a beautiful spirit in Barnabas that he was willing to bring into the work with him at Antioch, a man who almost certainly would soon surpass him in usefulness and power among men. At the beginning we read of Barnabas and Saul--but soon the order of the names is reversed, and we read of Saul and Barnabas. Some people are afraid to help others into positions, or to encourage them in doing their work--lest these people excel them and go beyond them, by and by, in honor. Barnabas seems to have been entirely free from any jealousy or envy of this kind. He was willing to help Saul to a place of usefulness, although he knew that in a little while--he himself would be left in the shadow by the superior brilliance of his young helper. The Christian who would do the greatest good in the world--must have the same spirit as Barnabas. Jealousy of each other is always a most unchristian spirit!

We must seek first the honor of Christ and the advancement of his cause--and not the promotion of our own dignity and influence! There is not one of us who may not be tempted at some time, to wrong behavior in this regard. Suppose Barnabas had grown jealous of Paul when he saw him in Antioch revealing his best gifts, preaching wonderful sermons, getting masterly influence over the people, and going quietly forward in his humility and lowliness--to the highest place!

The man who accepts the lowest place, when it is evident that the Master wants him to take that place, and does the work humbly, sweetly, rejoicingly, honoring meanwhile his brother, who is being divinely led to the highest place--is showing a spirit like his Master's. On the other hand, the man who is not willing to take a lowly and obscure place, claiming a place of earthly honor instead--is only dishonoring himself, and belittling his influence for power and good.

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