

(Paul) 1. the Conversion of Saul

by Steve Gallagher

The sermon explores the life of Saul, his conversion to Paul, and the profound impact he had on early Christianity.

Duration: 58:30

Scripture: Galatians 1:13

Topics: "Spiritual Conversion", "Sanctification Process"

Description

This sermon delves into the life and writings of the Apostle Paul, highlighting his dramatic conversion experience on the road to Damascus. It emphasizes the radical transformation that took place in Paul's life, from a zealous persecutor of Christians to a fervent follower of Christ. The sermon also touches on the importance of conviction of sin, fear of God, spiritual enlightenment, true repentance, and the ongoing process of sanctification in a believer's life.

Transcript

The Life and Writings of the Apostle Paul. Let's open with the word of prayer. Lord, I come to you and I do express my need for you.

We want to hear your thoughts today, not just some little teaching. Really, all the way through this series, Lord, 12 teachings, messages about this man who you so dramatically impacted and who you used to dramatically impact the known world at the time. For 2,000 years, believers have been following in the footsteps of this man, the Apostle Paul.

It is a great subject of study and just feels so inadequate to express some of the things this man experienced and did in your spirit, Lord. Today, we get a glimpse of his introduction into a life of Christ. I pray, Lord, that you will make that real.

Make it real, Lord. I don't know how to different things I have written down to cover, things people have written, what I should read and not read. Lord, I'm just asking you to convey and to communicate your perception of what happened in this young man's life.

I thank you, Lord. I fully expect you to answer these prayers. In Jesus' name, amen.

Before we get started into Saul's life, I just want to bring your attention to the timeline of the life of Paul that you have been handed. Those who are watching or listening on the website, you'll see a link there in the

sidebar. You can go in there and take a look at this at will.

I may tweak it a little bit here and there as we go through, I don't know. I just want to mention a couple of things just in passing almost. You'll notice some things are underlined, and those are historical events that happened that we pretty much know the dates on, so they become anchors for the story that we build the story around, so you're aware of that.

As the early years of the church, and we've already covered that in those eight messages, the early years, it was very difficult to come up with dates and any sense about the timing of things, but now it's going to become increasingly more precise. But having said that, it's not going to be exactly precise. It's really within a year or two, pretty much everything in here can be nailed down.

But just look at this as a general roadmap of the New Testament and of Paul's life, and it helps you to see how all these pieces to the puzzle fit together. The different epistles when we get into when Paul wrote them and so on, and you can see the epistles are in bold when he wrote those different epistles. So just be aware of that, and I'll just give you a brief overview of his life.

From the years 37-44, he was being established in the faith, and then from the years 44-59, these were his years of intense activity, the building up of the church and so on. This is when he was building his ministry, and then from 59-63, pretty much in that time frame, he's incarcerated. So God is taking him into a different sort of life during that time, and a different sort of ministry.

Then the last few years, 63-67 is his final push to build up the church. So that is all reflected here in this timeline, and you guys can go over that at will, and I probably will refer to it in the coming messages, but I won't be using it today. Let's talk about Saul as a little boy.

He seems to have been born about the time of Christ. One of the ancient writers attributed his birthday to 2 BC. It would have been about the same time as Jesus, right around that time, give or take a couple of years.

He grew up in Tarsus, and Tarsus was a huge city in the Roman Empire, half a million people, which was huge in those days. It's a Gentile, Hellenized city. But in that city is this little neighborhood, a Jewish neighborhood.

By the way, the word ghetto comes from Jewish neighborhoods during the Middle Ages. So it was a Jewish ghetto within this Hellenized city, this Gentile city. And he grew up in that area.

So he grew up learning and knowing Greek as his regular language out there in the world in life, but in the home, he probably only spoke Hebrew. And we know his father was a strict Pharisee. So everything that went on in that home was with all the strict guidelines you would expect from a Pharisee.

Just think about the Pharisees in the life of Christ, and you hear them debating with Jesus and attacking him, and in that self-righteous, smug, arrogant attitude, and everything has to be exact and all of that stuff. That is what this kid grew up under. Now, each of us grew up under some kind of an atmosphere.

I grew up under an atmosphere. And that atmosphere shapes who we become as a person, doesn't it? And so this young boy, innocent, not knowing any better, but with a very strong nature, very intense personality, this is the home that he grew up under, eating kosher food only, and doing the whole ceremonial hand-washing before every meal and observing Shabbat and seeing his father pray with the

phylacteries on and studying scripture and all of that. It was a very strict Jewish upbringing that young Saul had.

Well, he was trained in the word of God, the scriptures, as a young boy there in the home, probably his mother or whatever, but somewhere between the ages of 10 and 13, he was sent to Jerusalem. What a tremendous honor. Now, I'm sure there were probably 100 different tutors there in Jerusalem at that time, but he somehow was sent to Gamaliel.

Gamaliel was the preeminent Pharisee of the age, no question about that. And for Saul to be chosen to be one of the students of Gamaliel was a tremendous privilege, unbelievable. So it tells me that his father was probably a wealthy businessman in Tarsus, probably had a tent making operation, made a lot of money, so he was prosperous, prestigious, but also known within the Jewish world as a very strict Pharisee, even though he was Hellenized.

So here he is off in this Gentile city, which we know the Pharisees despised. They despised Galilee. How much more did they despise, you know, cities that were outright Gentile? So I don't know how it came about that this little boy was accepted into Gamaliel's training program.

I don't know how that happened, except that I would say God's hand was in it, even in those days. So he's put on a ship for Caesarea. Probably his father took him there.

And I just could imagine after all his upbringing and the heavy focus and emphasis on the word of God and the stories of the Old Testament saints and all of that, you know, the stories of David and Joshua fighting those battles throughout Palestine and Saul and just all of these different Old Testament figures. And here comes this young boy, 10 or 13 years of age, coming up the passes from the plains of Sharon up into the hills where Jerusalem's at. Can you imagine what it must've been like for him? Just, he must've just been in awe.

And then he comes upon the city and there it is, Jerusalem. So he's brought into this training program and he says in Acts 22, I am a Jew born in Tarsus of Cilicia, okay, but brought up in this city. So if he's brought up in Jerusalem, then we know that it had to start early.

He wouldn't use that kind of terminology if he didn't get there until he was 17 or something. So he was brought up in Jerusalem, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God. That was this young man's life.

And well, let me read this biblical expositor because he really grasped what it was like for him. The schools at Jerusalem in the time of Gamaliel were wholly engaged in studies of the most wearisome, narrow, petty, technical kind. The Talmud devotes a whole treatise to washing of the hands and another to the proper method of killing fowls.

The Pharisees held indeed that there were 248 commandments and 365 prohibitions involved in the Jewish law. So they had it down to micromanaging everyone's life. And you were expected to live your life under this heavy bondage of the law.

You know, well, it was partially the law and partially the oral traditions. So that's what he was raised in. Whatever it was, he had the personality for it.

And he was able to just blossom and flourish in that setting. He had the sensitivity, the super awareness to be able to stay on top of all these details and the strength of personality, the intensity to just thrust himself into this Jewish lifestyle. That was what it was like for this young man.

He probably spent something like 10, 15, 20 years. We don't know. It doesn't say anywhere how long he spent, but we do know that he was coming up through the ranks as a young man.

Age was everything in the Pharisaic system. You know, you didn't just stick a young man, I don't care how gifted he was or how great he was at what he was doing. You didn't stick him into leadership positions till he was into his 30s.

So he came up through the ranks as a rising star. In fact, he said in Galatians 1.14, I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions. In other words, there were other young kids who they were going through the schooling and all that sort of stuff.

They were doing what they were supposed to do, but I mean, Saul was intensely into it. It was his whole life and he threw himself into it. All right, so he comes into adulthood and, you know, about 30 years of age, this man, Jesus, this miracle worker from Galilee comes on the scene.

Was Paul there? Did Paul hear his preaching? Well, I don't think so. And the two reasons I don't believe he did was first of all, when he expressed sorrow later for, excuse me, the way he attacked the Christian community, he never expressed any sorrow for attacking Jesus or arguing with him or any of that kind of stuff. There's no mention of Jesus.

And also the same thing when he's telling later about having seen Jesus, experienced him in that vision, he doesn't say anything about personal contact. And he would have definitely said something had he had any personal contact with Jesus. So probably what happened was he got to 25 years old or something, went back to Tarsus, lived there, you know, probably worked for his father in his business in the tent making and just continued as a young Pharisee thinking, well, I'll go back to Jerusalem later to pursue my career, which probably in his mind, he was thinking he would, you know, continue to work up the ranks in Judaism, but he was too young at this point.

So that's my guess is the whole time that Jesus was there, he was gone. And I think the Lord wanted it to be that way for his own purposes. So the first time we hear about this young man Saul is when Stephen is, you know, comes up and he's working miracles and preaching.

And then he's arguing with the Hellenized Jews, some of whom were from Cilicia. No doubt, young Saul was one of them. And so he's involved in that whole thing.

And then Stephen is martyred and Saul now leads the persecution against the Christian church. So somehow he has come back, you know, in probably within a year of Jesus dying or something, and he's getting back into the system and becoming known again. And he's working himself up through the ranks.

By now he's in his mid to late 30s. I was trying to figure out who around here and Robert and Chris are both 38 years old. That would be about the same age that Saul was at this time.

So when you think of the intensity of Robert's personality, you get a sense about young Saul. Don't let that calm exterior fool you. There is a tornado going on inside there.

Anyway, why Saul? Why was he the one to lead the persecution? I just think that the years of indoctrination and the intensity of his personality, and I think he had a driving ambition to go to the top. You know, he just had one of those very forceful, Tom Blangiardo personalities that was gonna be at the very pinnacle if it killed him and everyone around him. And I think he had enormous self-righteousness and pride.

You know, he was all in on this Judaism thing. That's what he lived for. And I went over the verses, some of the things he expressed back in one of the early church messages.

I won't go over them now. He talked about being a blasphemer and a persecutor and so on, but I wanna just read this one little passage out of Acts 26. He said, when they were being put to death, meaning the Christians, I cast my vote against them.

So apparently he was now in the Sanhedrin. He had worked his way to the point of actually being in the Sanhedrin. He cast his vote against them.

Kill them. That was the spirit he was in. Kill them all.

And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme. I mean, this is how you have to hear it because that's the spirit he was in. Actually, I can't do it any justice.

I have to go way back to my cop years to try to work it up and I can't. It's just not in me anymore. But he had that intense hatred.

In fact, he goes on to saying, and being furiously enraged at them. This is what he lived in. This is what he lived in.

The spirit that he was in. All right, so let's look now at Acts 9. And I'll be touching on Galatians 1 after a while, but let's look at Acts 9. Pick the story up. We see the spirit he's in right here.

Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest. He went to a Sadducee. He's a Pharisee through and through.

He hates the Sadducees, hates them, disdains them. But he's got to go to this Sadducean high priest because he's the one the Romans have put in control, you know, in authority over the Sanhedrin. So he has to go to him, but they have one thing in common.

They all hate the Christians. By this point, they all hate the Christians, but his hatred is probably more intense than anyone else. So he goes to the high priest 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.

And I had, you know, I thought about that for a second. Can you imagine he and these men that were with him, women, these innocent women, having their hands tied with ropes and being drug along on this 100 plus mile trip back to Jerusalem, you know, like just common criminals. And that's how he saw them.

I'm gonna read this quote from Matthew Henry. His breathing out threatenings and slaughter intimates that it was natural to him and his constant business. You know, in other words, just breathing air in and out, just it's the atmosphere he lived in.

He even breathed in this as in his element. He breathed it out with heat and vehemence. His very breath like that of some venomous creature was pestilential.

Even the weaker sex who in a case of this nature might deserve excuse or pity shall find neither with Saul. He was ordered to bring them all bound to Jerusalem as criminals of the first magnitude, which as it would be the more likely to terrify them, so it would be to magnify Saul. And man, he nailed it there because that is the spirit that this young man was in.

He was so full of himself. I mean, to an extreme degree, you know, every human being is full of himself before he comes to the Lord, but some, you know, they're just even non-believers can say that about some people, right? You know what I'm saying. Some people you just would say it about, just man, that guy's just full of himself.

And that's the way he was. All right, verse three. And by the way, I'm gonna also be pulling in little references from his other two times he shared this story in Acts 22 and Acts 26.

There's just some details, so I'll be including them in as we go here. Anyway, verse three. As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, so apparently he could probably see the city, and there is a place of tradition where they think it happened at.

And suddenly, wasn't that word used in Acts 2? I think it was. When the Holy Spirit came, suddenly, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. All right, in Acts 22, six, Luke, or no, Paul mentions that it was about noontime.

And then in 26, 13, he said that the light was brighter than the sun shining all around me and those who were journeying with me. So it was like this enormous spotlight just came down upon them suddenly. Verse four, and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? And in 26, 14, Paul later said, it came in the Hebrew dialect, and he said, it's hard for you to kick against the goads.

Actually, I think the King James has that in there. It's hard for you to kick against the goads, which most of you would know when they would hook oxes up to carts and, you know, oxes are unruly beasts and they would kick backwards. And so they created these spike things so they wouldn't be so encouraged to do that.

And he's showing something that was going on. There was a deep conviction going on in this young man's heart. And if you trace it back to the end of chapter seven, when Stephen is about to be put to death, what does it say there? That they were gnashing their teeth at him.

In other words, tremendous conviction had come upon these Pharisees who were attacking Stephen. Tremendous conviction came to where they're gnashing their teeth. And it says they stopped up their ears, they covered their ears so they wouldn't have to hear that voice, that voice full of the Lord.

They didn't wanna hear it. And however long this period went on, a year or two, whatever, he is under tremendous conviction and he's trying to stifle it and shut it off. He's fighting against it, resisting what he heard that day.

And what did he hear? Only a voice that no man could possibly have. A voice of, I was gonna say thunder, but I don't think that's the case. I just think tremendous authority.

Tremendous authority from heaven. And yet at the same time, full of love. No human being has ever had that voice and you can't imitate it or come up with it.

People try to, I think. You can't come up with it. But I'll tell you, the further down this path you go and the more that you become conquered by the Lord, the more that quality is in your voice.

And I'm sure that 30 years later, as Paul was in his waning years, I'm sure that people who heard him, could hear that quality of Jesus Christ in his voice. Can't imagine it. Now let me, well, let me read a couple more verses here.

And Paul said to him, Saul said to him, who are you, Lord? I mean, he knows this is the Lord, but he is so instantly confused and bewildered. He doesn't know up from down because his whole life has been geared, he thought on what scripture taught. He was absolutely 100% convinced.

And that's probably what helped him to resist the Holy Spirit. He was so convinced, so indoctrinated in what? This system of religion that had been put onto scripture so that people would look at what the Bible was saying, but look at it through the eyes of the Pharisees. The same exact thing that's going on in the American church today.

That when you and I read scripture, so much of what we see in the scripture is not what is actually there, it's coming through the lens that we have been indoctrinated in. I'm not saying there's, you know, I'm not saying anything weird. All I'm saying is that we have to read the Bible for exactly what it says.

And if it doesn't say, if some teacher is teaching something that doesn't go along with exactly what it said, and they're explaining it away and adding some explanation that changes the meaning of it, be very careful, be very careful. But that is what he grew up in. And all of a sudden, the Lord is there.

Man, who are you Lord? Who are you? He didn't know God from a Baal temple or Zeus or something. He was so far from God. He knew the scriptures, but he didn't know the God of the scriptures, not at all.

Who are you Lord? Jesus said, I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. Think of the rage. Think of the self-righteousness.

Think of the utter selfishness. This man, this young guy lived in, and all of a sudden he sees what he's been doing. And you know, the way Jesus completely identifies with his people here.

It's not my church you're attacking, it's me. I am living in those people who you are torturing into trying to get them to blaspheme me. I live in those people.

He didn't say it like that though. That's the thing about Jesus. His voice, his words are so powerful in their love.

The conviction isn't in some, you know, intense preaching or something. The conviction is in the utter love that Jesus is. And you can't help but see who you are in the midst of it.

But get up and enter the city and it will be told you what you must do. You know, Saul had this whole religious system all worked out and it all came tumbling down that day. It's just, man.

And you know, one good thing to note here, and this will happen other times. He will have a number of other revelations and visions in the years to come. It's so important that he receive the gospel, the

message of this new message, this new system had to come directly from Jesus, not through other men teaching him.

He didn't learn this from Peter and James and the others up in Jerusalem. You know, and we'll get into that in a minute, but he got it directly from the Lord. And he had to, it was so important that his receiving the gospel was direct, that no human intermediary was between the two.

You know what I'm saying? There was no self in there that could contaminate the message. It was pure when it came to him. So important.

The men who traveled with him stood speechless. Something happened to them. Hearing the voice, but seeing no one.

Now, you know, and one of the other, okay, it says it in Acts 22, nine, Paul said later, and those who were with me saw the light to be sure, but did not understand the voice of the one who was speaking to me. So it was probably came across as some enormous thunder. They knew it was something supernatural, but they didn't actually hear the words, something like that.

And there's no evidence that any of these men changed their life. They were in the same spirit. They just weren't as intense or as respected in Judaism as Saul was.

So they were in the same spirit, and apparently they took him to Damascus and maybe stayed in that, I don't know. It's hard to say. Anyway, verse eight, 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. He was going into Damascus in a rage, full of himself, full of pride, the very antithesis of the kingdom of God. He was in that spirit, the spirit of the devil himself, full of the devil.

He was going in there arrogantly, and now he's going in as a broken man, being led by his hand. Wow, praise the Lord. Such a precious thing.

Verse nine, and he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank. He was so devastated. Man, devastated.

I remember what happened to me in 1982, 32 years ago, when I had that gun to my head. And six hours I spent, I don't wanna get sidetracked, but I can tell you I understand a little bit about what that feels like, to have your whole self life. For me, I was a cop, and I was a mean cop.

I was full of my own style of self-righteousness. And to just, within minutes, have your whole world collapse and come crashing down. For Saul, it was years of training and indoctrination, entire system.

Now he realizes it was all wrong. It was a great mistake. You don't think of it.

The only thing I could compare it to is a man who has a doctorate degree in some of the evolutionary sciences, or psychology or something, and comes into a real conversion experience, and in an instant sees that his whole life has been given over to the study of something that's false. And Paul later said in Philippians 3, I count it all loss, everything he had was gone in an instant. Man, that wasn't the worst of it though.

The worst part of what he experienced that day in those three days, three days, he wouldn't even eat or drink. I can't remember, do you remember that? I couldn't, I had, couldn't have not even imagined eating food the day that I went through that six hour thing. For three days for him.

But the hardest part was seeing himself. Can you imagine when he saw what he was like? He had just seen Jesus, the pure one, the holy one, this being completely selfless, full of love for people. He just saw him.

And then he sees himself. His superior, arrogant attitude, how he treated people around him. Can you imagine what he was like to be around? Constantly looking down on everyone around him, no one measured up.

The way he had abused those innocent believers, men and women, he had to face that. The way he had been used by Satan to try to destroy God's work on earth. Satan's willing vessel, it was him.

He was the guilty one. How he had blasphemed that name and forced others to do the same. Everywhere he looked inside, all he could see was the ugliness of selfishness and pride and yuck.

Just nothing but self. And you know, God didn't rush in and rescue him from that. He let him wallow in that for three days.

This is what you are like inside. This is who you are, Saul. You need to get a good look at who you are.

And I believe that he felt the terror of God's wrath resting on him during that three days. Later on, he said to the Romans, for the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness. Exactly what he had been doing ever since the incident with Stephen and probably before that.

And in Romans 2, he says, but because of your stubbornness, talking to the Jews, but because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath for yourself. And that's what he had done and what he was experiencing that three days. In Ephesians 2, when he's talking about the conversion experience, he said, we too all formerly were by nature, children of wrath.

So he had all of that sitting on himself and I'll prove it to you here in a second. Let's continue here with the story. Verse 10, 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. And it's interesting to me that it didn't happen the first day.

It didn't happen when he had the experience. I gotta hurry up and help this guy. I don't want him to fall apart on me.

We need to get some encouragement into him. No, he waited three days. There's nothing like God's timing.

He times things perfectly. As Jeff was saying the other day about his timing, right? Wasn't that you saying that in the message about when they said Lazarus is dying and Jeff was bringing out. Yeah, I'll get there.

God's just got his own timing. Anyway, 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. Now, prayer

wasn't something unknown to Saul.

He knew how to pray. He prayed out in the streets where everyone could see him. He prayed with his phylacteries on.

He prayed thus to himself, I thank the Lord that I'm not like other men. Now his prayers take on a different quality, don't they? Now he is the publican beating his breast saying, God, be merciful to me, the sinner. Wow, what a glorious place to be.

There is no place on earth more glorious than when you're broken by the Lord and in sight of what you are. As painful as it is, it's also at the very same time the most glorious experience you can have because you are all need and God rushes in to fill that need. It is so beautiful of a place to be, but so very painful.

I hope you don't mind me sharing this, Jeff, but I remember when I had to confront Jeff right here, 15 years ago or something, he wasn't doing anything terrible. I could tell he was getting out of whack, and I had to confront him. And I remember him telling me later that he just suddenly was chilled to the bone.

Why? And I've experienced that too. I understand that. When your inner life is opened up and exposed, how do you even put words to it? I know exactly what he meant, because I've experienced it.

You just get chilled to the bone. It's like it's so overwhelming and terrifying in some sense. And that's what he experienced, but he laid in it for three days.

Anyway, Ananias is having this conversation with the Lord like he talks to him every day. So he must have really had some kind of a walk with God, and yet we never hear from him again. So he goes to the house, and in verse 14, let's see, where am I at here? No, in verse, well, I'm gonna just mention this last thing the Lord showed Ananias in verse 16.

For I will show him how much he must suffer for my name's sake. Now, the guy has been living in hell for three days, okay? You would think the Lord would come in with some nice encouraging words. No, that's not the way the Lord works.

He comes in to tell him, okay, this is the beginning. And for the next 30 years, and he didn't say any of this, of course, but he showed him a path of suffering for his name's sake. And let me just read what Matthew Henry said.

Those that bear Christ's name must expect to bear the cross for his name. And those that do most for Christ are often called out to suffer most for him. And I know that's true.

You know, there's more than one kind of suffering. It isn't all in persecution, or there is a suffering that will come out in his life in the years to come as we go through these messages. The suffering of bearing people, and I don't wanna say much about it now, but that's where we're headed.

Verse 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. Now, Paul gives a little more detail on this later in chapter 22, and I'm gonna read 13 through 16 there just to give this detail. Ananias came to him, brother Saul, receive your sight.

And at that very time, I looked up at him, and he said, the God of our fathers has appointed you to know his will and to see the righteous one and to hear an utterance from his mouth, for you will be a witness for him to all men of what you have seen and heard. Now, why do you delay? Get up and be baptized and what? Wash away your sins. Now is when he is released from the burden of feeling the guilt of his sin.

Three days, he bears the enormity of it for three days, and now he gets up and he's set free, praise the Lord. Okay, verse 18, and immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized, and he took food and was strengthened. Now for several days, he was with the disciples who were at Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogue, saying he is the Son of God.

All those hearing him continued to be amazed and were saying, isn't he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who call on this name and who had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests? These guys are just astounded. They can't believe this is the same man. It's just such a complete 180.

We talk about a 180, you know, in the American church, it's more like a 20 degree alteration in course. This was a true 180 here. This man was going completely hell bent in one direction and completely turned in the same fervor went the other direction, praise the Lord.

And they were just absolutely astonished by it. Verse 22, but Paul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Christ. When many days had elapsed, okay, now right there, somewhere in this section here, 21 to 23, there is a passage in Galatians 1. Now I don't have time to read it all, but let me just allude to it.

Verses 16 to 24 fits right into this time period. But the only thing I wanna mention out of this is that he went away to Arabia and spent some amount of time there. Now there's different ideas on how much time.

Some think it wasn't that long. Some believe that he spent most of that three years in Arabia and they're saying that there's no way these Jews in Damascus would have put up with this preaching for three years. So like Albert Barnes believes that he was gone this whole time.

Chuck Smith thinks that he went down to Sinai because he talked later, right in there, he talks about the law at Sinai and had a familiarity with it, it seemed. But anyway, he spent some amount of time out in the wilderness. And I believe that it was God setting him apart.

I tend to believe that he was out there for most of that three years, just away from ministry, away from all the conflict in the Jewish world, just alone with God in the wilderness. And many of the revelations that came to him probably came as he was out there in the wilderness with the Lord. You know, there's some things that you just don't get when you're in the midst of people and activity and so on.

I think something very powerful happened to him out there. Anyway, in verse 22, you see he's growing, increasing in strength. Instead of backsliding right away or losing heart or whatever, he's growing stronger in his convictions.

And that's the side of a real vision because a real vision will intensify as your life goes on. It doesn't wane, it's the opposite. But anyway, he ends up going up to Jerusalem.

We're having to kind of hurry through this a little bit. And in 23, here when many days had elapsed, the Jews basically were gonna do away with him and he had to get let down by a basket. So he comes into the city, you know, a blind man led by the hand and goes out in the basket.

That was just kind of funny. Verse 26, when he came to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples. They were all afraid of him.

They're thinking he's like trying to play some, you know, act and be a spy or something. But they were terrified of this guy. He was full of Satan's hatred.

If you've never seen Satan's hatred in a face, let me tell you something, it is terrifying. And I've seen it a number of times, both as a cop and when I was on the streets one time, especially, it is terrifying. I don't care how big and bad you are when you see that face, man, it just absolutely, like I say, I don't care who you are, how tough you are, you just wilt when you see it.

And I'm sure that that's what they saw in his face was Satan. All right, so the Jews in Jerusalem are very upset with him. And, you know, the story continues on and when he's in Jerusalem, I shared about this in the early church message, one of them where all the problems he caused, remember that? And then in verse 32 or is it 31, where it says, then once they got rid of him, then there was peace, everyone could relax.

Now, man, I love the guy, I'm great, you know, I'm so happy he's with us now, but can you just go away for a while? Because he caused so many problems. But during the final days that he was there in Jerusalem, we don't know how long exactly, but he had a vision that he shared about in Acts 22, when he was sharing a story that the Lord came to him and told him that he was gonna be going to bring the gospel to the Gentiles. So this is when he definitely, if he hadn't gotten his calling for this before, that vision that he had, I think it was in the temple there in Jerusalem, that's when he got that call.

It's in Acts 22, 17 to 21 is where that is at. So let me just say a word before I finish out about Saul's conversion. Because even though his conversion is far more radical than any of us have experienced, the same elements are in place.

Any true salvation, these same elements are always there, you know, to varying degrees. And some people come into these things, you know, gradually, it doesn't necessarily all happen at once, and certainly not with this intensity that he experienced, but there's always a conviction of sin and a great fear of God. Always, when you come to the Lord, there has to be that because there can be no repentance outside of the fear of God, the fear of disobeying him, the fear of the consequences of rebellion, and the conviction of sin that I am doing wrong.

There's not gonna be a repentance. You may join the church movement and all that, but you're not gonna have the life-changing repentance without the conviction of sin. And what we see in the church today, I hate to say it, but it's the truth, people trying to sidestep Calvary and join the church to get the benefits of Christianity, which is heaven, of course, without going through the cross.

And that's why the church is so weak, is because there's so few real conversions. At least that's my perspective of it. So there's a conviction of sin and the fear of God, and then there's a spiritual enlightenment.

These are steps. You know, your eyes are open, you see the light, you experience something to do with the unseen realm, and that there is a God there, there's an enlightenment. But not everyone proceeds past this.

And I covered all this in my book, *The Great Apostasy*. Then you have to make a decision. You are either gonna respond or deny, you know, or you are gonna respond one way or the other.

You're either going to humble yourself and come into that poverty of spirit and truly repent, truly repent of being a sinner, foul, vile in the sight of God, this holy God, like the prodigal son. I have sinned and I am not worthy. That's true repentance, that's a true conversion there.

And then once you've experienced that, that is the rebirth, then there's a transference of faith from self to Christ. That's it, that's the rebirth right there. And then out of that comes sanctification, this lifelong process of being molded into the image of Christ and the fruit of the spirit that comes forth.

And that's what we see in Paul's life. Nothing abnormal, really. You know, it wasn't the vision, and I think that people mostly think it was the vision.

It wasn't the vision that radically changed this man. It was the sight of who he was. Now, I'm sure, you know, the vision played a big part in that and I don't mean to dismiss that, but it's not like, oh God, just give me a vision of heaven or something glorious and then I'll be on fire for God.

You know, experiences of miraculous things, visions and all that, they can be wonderful and glorious if everything else is right in your life, but if your heart isn't right, they're worthless. They don't do you any good. Your heart has to be right.

And this man's, the soil of his heart was perfectly prepared and it was ready for the word of truth to come into it. And he responded with all his heart. When he picked himself up out of that bed after three days of wallowing in the reality of who he was, he turned the world upside down, didn't he? God used him to turn the world upside down.

And that's what God wants to do with all of us. There's no reason, really, for any of us to be used in a lesser extent, I guess I could say. Lord, I thank you for what you did in this man's life.

This young man, probably no older than 40 years old, you got a hold of him, you broke him, devastated him that day and made into him a new creature in Christ. Praise the Lord. Thank you, Lord.

Thank you that you've done that for us as well. We pray, Lord, that you will use this word to encourage your saints and to bring conviction to those who haven't really crossed over like that into your kingdom. In Jesus' name, amen.

God bless you all. God bless you all.

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