***Who Are You, Lord?***

**Summer 2021, Acts 9:1-31 August 22, 2021**

***As [Paul] neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven   
flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him,   
“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked.  
“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied.*Acts 9:3-5 (see also Paul’s accounts in Acts 22:1-21 and Acts 26:1-23)**

**Introduction: The question that answered itself**

**In the way of The Way**

*1 Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest 2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. 3 As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”*

*5 “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked.*

*“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied.*

Acts 9:1-5

1) “The” Way means it’s the only way

2) Paul immediately recognizes the voice of God but never expected to meet that God in Jesus

**Ananias and the man who prays**

10 *In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, “Ananias!” “Yes, Lord,” he answered.*

*11 The Lord told him, “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come . . . .”*

Acts 9:10-11 (and see Spurgeon’s wonderful “Behold, He Prays” sermon)

1) Sometimes God uses two visions

2) This kind of prayer is the evidence of a changed heart (see Luke 18:9-14)

**God’s chosen vessel**

13 *“Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. 14 And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.”*

*15 But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. 16 I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”*

*17 Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” 18 Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, 19 and after taking some food, he regained his strength.*

Acts 9:13-19

1) God takes care of the suffering part (see passages like Philippians 2:17, 3:10)

2) Everything Ananias says and does shows that Saul is now included the The Way

**Saul makes friends (and enemies) in Damascus and Jerusalem**

*19 Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. 20 At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. 21 All those who heard him were astonished and asked, “Isn’t he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn’t he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?” 22 Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ.*

*23 After many days had gone by, the Jews conspired to kill him, 24 but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. 25 But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall.*

*26 When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. 27 But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. 28 So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. 29 He talked and debated with the Grecian Jews, but they tried to kill him. 30 When the brothers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.*

Acts 9:19-30 (see George Whitefield’s message on this part of Saul’s story)

1) The response to Saul moves from astonishment to confusion to murder

2) Once again Barnabas steps up to serve the church at a critical moment

3) Saul’s preparation includes both academy and wilderness (Galatians 1:16-24)

**A bird’s eye view of the church**

31 *Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.*

Acts 9:31 (see other pictures like 4:32-35, 6:7)

1) The path to peace is often through the valley of suffering  
 How am I meeting Jesus I in a season of trial (James 1) or in a season of peace?

2) “Living in the fear of the Lord” is the summary of the Acts 2:42 life of the church.  
 Alexander Maclaren: Godward always precedes forward. How is God strengthening me for the   
 next move forward?

3) Saul’s conversion becomes the conversion narrative in the New Testament church (Acts 9:27).  
 See Philippians 3:1-11; Romans 10:1-4. How does Saul’s story help me understand my own   
 story? the story of the one’s for whom we are praying?

4) God once again initiates the surprise factor.   
Who is that person, who will already have our attention, to whom God is calling us to minister?



**Resources for further studies in Acts**

The Bible Project team has great stuff on Acts at [*https://open.life.church/items/179224-poster-jpg*](https://open.life.church/items/179224-poster-jpg)

Spurgeon has fewer sermons on Acts available than I would hope at [*http://www.romans45.org/spurgeon/index/r\_ac.htm*](http://www.romans45.org/spurgeon/index/r_ac.htm) *.* His “Behold, He Prays” is especially good at  
[*https://www.biblebb.com/files/spurgeon/0016.htm*](https://www.biblebb.com/files/spurgeon/0016.htm)

I really appreciate J.C. Ryle’s essay on conversion in Acts: *https://www.monergism.com/conversion-j-c-ryle*[*https://www.onergism.com/conversion-j-c-ryle*](https://www.onergism.com/conversion-j-c-ryle)

Alexander Maclaren has an especially helpful commentary on Acts available at [*https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/8397/pg8397.html*](https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/8397/pg8397.html)

Deffinbaugh has a helpful introduction at [*https://bible.org/seriespage/unique-contribution-book-acts*](https://bible.org/seriespage/unique-contribution-book-acts )  
His Acts series is at [*https://bible.org/series/studies-book-acts*](https://bible.org/series/studies-book-acts)His sermon on this text is at  
[*https://bible.org/seriespage/14-salvation-saul-acts-91-31*](https://bible.org/seriespage/14-salvation-saul-acts-91-31)

George Whitefield has a sermon on Saul’s conversion at [*https://www.monergism.com/sauls-conversion*](https://www.monergism.com/sauls-conversion)

I have really appreciated John Stott’s *The Spirit, The Church and the World: The Message of Acts* (IVP, 1990) and F. F. Bruce’s work: *New Testament History* (Doubleday, 1980) and *The Book of the Acts* (Eerdmans, 1984). For this passage, I also like Kistemaker’s commentary (Baker Book House, 1990).

Carl Trueman has a good analysis of the world’s opposition in his recent essay “Dogma Drives the Christian Life” at [*https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2021/08/dogma-drives-the-christian-life*](https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2021/08/dogma-drives-the-christian-life)

Carl Trueman’s conclusion in *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* (Crossway, 2020) influenced my thinking on the church. His third point, the importance of proper natural law thinking, is reflected in Kevin DeYoung’s blog at [*https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/gods-good-gift-in-making-us-men-and-women/*](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/gods-good-gift-in-making-us-men-and-women/)

# Acts Timeline (ESV Study Bible)

# Table Description automatically generated

### Alexander Maclaren’s commentary on Acts: at [*https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/8397/pg8397.html*](https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/8397/pg8397.html)

### GRACE TRIUMPHANT

'And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, 2. And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them hound unto Jerusalem. 3. And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: 4. And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me? 5. And he said, Who art Thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks. 6. And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do. 7. And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man. 8. And Saul arose from the earth: and when his eyes were opened, he saw no man: but they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus. 9. And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink. 10. And there was a certain disciple at Damascus, named Ananias; and to him said the Lord in a vision, Ananias. And he said, Behold. I am here, Lord. 11. And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight, and enquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul, of Tarsus; for, behold, he prayeth, 12. And hath seen in a vision a man named Ananias coming in, and putting his hand on him, that he might receive his sight…. 17. And Ananias went his way, and entered Into the house; and putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou earnest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost. 18. And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized. 19. And when he had received meat, he was strengthened. Then was Saul certain days with the disciples which were at Damascus. 20. And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God.'—ACTS ix. 1-12; 17-20.

This chapter begins with 'but,' which contrasts Saul's persistent hatred, which led him to Gentile lands to persecute, with Philip's expansive evangelistic work. Both men were in profound earnest, both went abroad to carry on their work, but the one sought to plant what the other was eager to destroy. If the 'but' in verse 1 contrasts, the 'yet' connects the verse with chapter viii. 3. Saul's fury was no passing outburst, but enduring. Like other indulged passions, it grew with exercise, and had come to be as his very life-breath, and now planned, not only imprisonment, but death, for the heretics.

Not content with carrying his hateful inquisition into the homes of the Christians in Jerusalem, he will follow the fugitives to Damascus. The extension of the persectution was his own thought. He was not the tool of the Sanhedrin, but their mover. They would probably have been content to cleanse Jerusalem, but the young zealot would not rest till he had followed the dispersed poison into every corner where it might have trickled. The high priest would not discourage such useful zeal, however he might smile at its excess.

So Saul got the letters he asked, and some attendants, apparently, to help him in his hunt, and set off for Damascus. Painters have imagined him as riding thither, but more probably he and his people went on foot. It was a journey of some five or six days. The noon of the last day had come, and the groves of Damascus were, perhaps, in sight. No doubt, the young Pharisee's head was busy settling what he was to begin with when he entered the city, and was exulting in the thought of how he would harry the meek Christians, when the sudden light shone.

At all events, the narrative does not warrant the view, often taken now, that there had been any preparatory process in Saul's mind, which had begun to sap his confidence that Jesus was a blasphemer, and himself a warrior for God. That view is largely adopted in order to get rid of the supernatural, and to bolster up the assumption that there are no sudden conversions; but the narrative of Luke, and Paul's own references, are dead against it. At one moment he is 'yet breathing threatening and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord,' and in almost the next he is prone on his face, asking, 'Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?' It was not a case of a landslide suddenly sweeping down, but long prepared for by the gradual percolation of water to the slippery understrata, but the solid earth was shaken, and the mountain crashed down in sudden ruin.

The causes of Saul's conversion are plain in the narrative, even though the shortened form is adopted, which is found in the Revised Version. The received text has probably been filled out by additions from Paul's own account in chapter xxvi. First came the blaze of light outshining the midday sun, even in that land where its beams are like swords. That blinding light 'shone round about him,' enveloping him in its glory. Chapter xxvi. (verse 13) tells that his companions also were wrapped in the lustre, and that all fell to the earth, no doubt in terror.

Saul is not said, either in this or in his own accounts, to have seen Jesus, but I Corinthians xv. 8 establishes that he did so, and Ananias (v. 17) refers to Jesus as having 'appeared.' That appearance, whatever may have been the psychological account of it, was by Paul regarded as being equal in evidential value to the flesh-and-blood vision of the risen Lord which the other Apostles witnessed to, and as placing him in the same line as a witness.

It is to be noted also, that, while the attendants saw the light, they were not blinded, as Saul was; from which it may be inferred that he saw with his bodily eyes the glorified manhood of Jesus, as we are told that one day, when He returns as Judge, 'every eye shall see Him.' Be that as it may,—and we have not material for constructing a theory of the manner of Christ's appearance to Saul,—the overwhelming conviction was flooded into his soul, that the Jesus whom he had thought of as a blasphemer, falsely alleged to have risen from the dead, lived in heavenly glory, amid celestial brightness too dazzling for human eyes.

The words of gentle remonstrance issuing from the flashing glory went still further to shake the foundations of the young Pharisee's life; for they, as with one lightning gleam, laid hare the whole madness and sin of the crusade which he had thought acceptable to God. 'Why persecutest thou Me?' Then the odious heretics were knit by some mysterious bond to this glorious One, so that He bled in their wounds and felt their pains! Then Saul had been, as his old teacher dreaded they of the Sanhedrin might be, fighting against God! How the reasons for Saul's persecution had crumbled away, till there were none left with which to answer Jesus' question! Jesus lived, and was exalted to glory. He was identified with His servants. He had appeared to Saul, and deigned to plead with him.

No wonder that the man who had been planning fresh assaults on the disciples ten minutes before, was crushed and abject as he lay there on the road, and these tremendous new convictions rushed like a cataract over and into his soul! No wonder that the lessons burned in on him in that hour of destiny became the centre-point of all his future teaching! That vision revolutionised his thinking and his life. None can affirm that it was incompetent to do so.

Luke's account here, like Paul's in chapter xxii., represents further instructions from Jesus as postponed till Saul's meeting with Ananias, while Paul's other account in chapter xxvi. omits mention of the latter, and gives the substance of what he said in Damascus as said on the road by Jesus. The one account is more detailed than the other, that is all. The gradual unfolding of the heavenly purpose which our narrative gives is in accord with the divine manner. For the moment enough had been done to convert the persecutor into the servant, to level with the ground his self-righteousness, to reveal to him the glorified Jesus, to bend his will and make it submissive. The rest would be told him in due time.

The attendants had fallen to the ground like him, but seem to have struggled to their feet again, while he lay prostrate. They saw the brightness, but not the Person: they heard the voice, but not the words. Saul staggered by their help to his feet, and then found that with open eyes he was blind. Imagination or hallucination does not play tricks of that sort with the organs of sense.

The supernatural is too closely intertwined with the story to be taken out of it without reducing it to tatters. The greatest of Christian teachers, who has probably exercised more influence than any man who ever lived, was made a Christian by a miracle. That fact is not to be got rid of. But we must remember that once when He speaks of it He points to God's revelation of His Son '*in* Him' as its essential character. The external appearance was the vehicle of the inward revelation. It is to be remembered, too, that the miracle did not take away Saul's power of accepting or rejecting the Christ; for he tells Agrippa that he was 'not disobedient to the heavenly vision.'

What a different entry he made into Damascus from what he expected, and what a different man it was that crawled up to the door of Judas, in the street that is called Straight, from the self-confident young fanatic who had left Jerusalem with the high priest's letters in his bosom and fierce hate in his heart!

Ananias was probably not one of the fugitives, as his language about Saul implies that he knew of his doings only by hearsay. The report of Saul's coming and authority to arrest disciples had reached Damascus before him, with the wonderful quickness with which news travels in the East, nobody knows how. Ananias's fears being quieted, he went to the house where for three days Saul had been lying lonely in the dark, fasting, and revolving many things in his heart. No doubt his Lord had spoken many a word to him, though not by vision, but by whispering to his spirit. Silence and solitude root truth in a soul. After such a shock, absolute seclusion was best.

Ananias discharged his commission with lovely tenderness and power. How sweet and strange to speaker and hearer would that 'Brother Saul' sound! How strong and grateful a confirmation of his vision would Ananias's reference to the appearance of the Lord bring! How humbly would the proud Pharisee bow to receive, laid on his head, the hands that he had thought to bind with chains! What new eyes would look out on a world in which all things had become new, when there fell from them as it had been scales, and as quickly as had come the blinding, so quickly came the restored vision!

Ananias was neither Apostle nor official, yet the laying on of his hands communicated 'the Holy Ghost.' Saul received that gift before baptism, not after or through the ordinance. It was important for his future relations to the Apostles that he should not have been introduced to the Church by them, or owed to them his first human Christian teaching. Therefore he could say that he was 'an Apostle, not from men, neither through man.' It was important for us that in that great instance that divine gift should have been bestowed without the conditions accompanying, which have too often been regarded as necessary for, its possession.

### 'THIS WAY'

'Any of this way.'—ACTS ix. 2

The name of 'Christian' was not applied to themselves by the followers of Jesus before the completion of the New Testament. There were other names in currency before that designation—which owed its origin to the scoffing wits of Antioch—was accepted by the Church. They called themselves 'disciples,' 'believers, 'saints,' 'brethren,' as if feeling about for a title.

Here is a name that had obtained currency for a while, and was afterwards disused. We find it five times in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, never elsewhere; and always, with one exception, it should be rendered, as it is in the Revised Version, not '*this* way,' as if being one amongst many, but '*the* way,' as being the only one.

Now, I have thought that this designation of Christians as 'those of the way' rests upon a very profound and important view of what Christianity is, and may teach us some lessons if we will ponder it; and I ask your attention to two or three of these for a few moments now.

I. First, then, I take this name as being a witness to the conviction that in Christianity we have the only road to God.

There may be some reference in the name to the remarkable words of our Lord Jesus Christ: 'I am the Way. No man cometh to the Father but by Me,'—words of which the audacity is unparalleled and unpardonable, except upon the supposition that He bears an unique relation to God on the one hand, and to all mankind upon the other. In them He claims to be the sole medium of communication between heaven and earth, God and man. And that same exclusiveness is reflected in this name for Christians. It asserts that faith in Jesus Christ, the acceptance of His teaching, mediation and guidance, is the only path that climbs to God, and by it alone do we come into knowledge of, and communion with, our divine Father.

I do not dwell upon the fact that, according to our Lord's own teaching, and according to the whole New Testament, Christ's work of making God known to man did not begin with His Incarnation and earthly life, but that from the beginning that eternal Word was the agent of all divine activity in creation, and in the illumination of mankind. So that, not only all the acts of the self-revealing God were through Him, but that from Him, as from the light of men, came all the light in human hearts, of reason and of conscience, by which there were and are in all men, some dim knowledge of God, and some feeling after, or at the lowest some consciousness of, Him. But the historical facts of Christ's incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension are the source of all solid certitude, and of all clear knowledge of our Father in Heaven. His words are spirit and life; His works are unspoken words; and by both He declares unto His brethren the Name, and is the self-manifestation of, the Father.

Think of the contrast presented by the world's conceptions of Godhead, and the reality as unveiled in Christ! On the one hand you have gods lustful, selfish, passionate, capricious, cruel, angry, vile; or gods remote, indifferent, not only passionless, but heartless, inexorable, unapproachable, whom no man can know, whom no man can love, whom no man can trust. On the other hand, if you look at Christ's tears as the revelation of God; if you look at Christ's ruth and pity as the manifestation of the inmost glory of the divine nature; if you take your stand at the foot of the Cross—a strange place to see 'the power of God and the wisdom of God'!—and look up there at Him dying for the world, and are able to say, 'Lo! this is our God! through all the weary centuries we have waited for Him, and this is He!' then you can understand how true it is that there, and there only, is the good news proclaimed that lifts the burden from every heart, and reveals God the Lover and the Friend of every soul.

And if, further, we consider the difference between the dim 'peradventures,' the doubts and fears, the uncertain conclusions drawn from questionable, and often partial, premises, which confessedly never amount to demonstration, if we consider the contrast between these and the daylight of fact which we meet in Jesus Christ, His love, life, and death, then we can feel how superior in certitude, as in substance, the revelation of God in Jesus is to all these hopes, longings, doubts, and how it alone is worthy to be called the knowledge of God, or is solid enough to abide comparison with the certainties of the most arrogant physical science.

There never was a time in the history of the world when, so clearly and unmistakably, every thinking soul amongst cultivated nations was being brought up to this alternative—Christ, the Revealer of God, or no knowledge of God at all. The old dreams of heathenism are impossible for us; modern agnosticism will make very quick work of a deism which does not cling to the Christ as the Revealer of the Godhead. And I, for my part, believe that there is one thing, and one thing only, which will save modern Europe from absolute godlessness, and that is the coming back to the old truth, 'No man hath seen God' by sense, or intuition, or reason, or conscience, 'at any time. The only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him.'

But it is not merely as bringing to us the only certain knowledge of our Father God that Christianity is 'the way,' but it is also because by it alone we come into fellowship with the God whom it reveals to us. If there rises up before your mind the thought of Him in the Heavens, there will rise up also in your consciousness the sense of your own sin. And that is no delusion nor fancy; it is the most patent fact, that between you and your Father in Heaven, howsoever loving, tender, compassionate, and forgiving, there lies a great gulf. You cannot go to God, my brother, with all that guilt heaped upon your conscience; you cannot come near to Him with all that mass of evil which you know is there, working in your soul. How shall a sinful soul come to a holy God? And there is only one answer—that great Lord, by His blessed death upon the Cross, has cleared away all the mountains of guilt and sin that rise up frowning between each single soul and the Father in Heaven; and through Him, by a new and living way, which He hath opened for us, we have entrance to God, and dwell with Him.

And it is not only that He brings to us the knowledge of God, and that He clears away all obstacles, and makes fellowship between God and us possible for the most polluted and sinful of spirits, but it is also that, by the knowledge of His great love to us, love is kindled in our hearts, and we are drawn into that path which, as a matter of fact, we shall not tread unless we yield to the magnetic attraction of the love of God as revealed 'in the face of Jesus Christ.'

Men do not seek fellowship with God until they are drawn to Him by the love that is revealed upon the Cross. Men do not yield their hearts to Him until their hearts are melted down by the fire of that Infinite divine love which disdained not to be humiliated and refused not to die for their sakes. Practically and really we come to God, when—and I venture upon the narrowness of saying, *only* when—God has come to us in His dear Son. '*The* way' to God is through Christ. Have you trod it, my friend—that new and living way, which leads within the veil, into the secrets of loving communion with your Father in Heaven?

II. Then there is another principle, of which this designation of our text is also the witness, viz., that in Christianity we have the path of conduct and practical life traced out for us all.

The 'way of a man' is, of course, a metaphor for his outward life and conduct. It is connected with the familiar old image which belongs to the poetry of all languages, by which life is looked at as a journey. That metaphor speaks to us of the continual changefulness of our mortal condition; it speaks to us, also, of the effort and the weariness which often attend it. It proclaims also the solemn thought that a man's life is a unity, and that, progressive, it goes some whither, and arrives at a definite goal.

And that idea is taken up in this phrase, '*the* way,' in such a fashion as that there are two things asserted: first, that Christianity provides *a* way, a path for the practical activity, that it moulds our life into a unity, that it prescribes the line of direction which it is to follow, that it has a starting-point, and stages, and an end; also, that Christianity is *the* way for practical life, the only path and mode of conduct which corresponds with all the obligations and nature of a man, and which reason, conscience, and experience will approve. Let us look, just for a moment or two, at these two thoughts: Christianity is *a* way; Christianity is *the* way.

It is a way. These early disciples must have grasped with great clearness and tenacity the practical side of the Gospel, or they would never have adopted this name. If they had thought of it as being only a creed, they would not have done so.

And it is not only a creed. All creed is meant to influence conduct. If I may so say, *credenda*, 'things to be believed,' are meant to underlie the *agenda*, the things to be done. Every doctrine of the New Testament, like the great blocks of concrete that are dropped into a river in order to lay the foundation of a bridge, or the embankment that is run across a valley in order to carry a railway upon it,—every doctrine of the New Testament is meant to influence the conduct, the 'walk and conversation,' and to provide a path on which activity may advance and expatiate.

I cannot, of course, dwell upon this point with sufficient elaboration, or take up one after another the teachings of the New Testament, in order to show how close is their bearing upon practical life. There is plenty of abstract theology in the form of theological systems, skeletons all dried up that have no life in them. There is nothing of that sort in the principles as they lie on the pages of the New Testament. There they are all throbbing with life, and all meant to influence life and conduct.

Remember, my friend, that unless your Christianity is doing that for you, unless it has prescribed a path of life for you, and moulded your steps into a great unity, and drawn you along the road, it is nought,—nought!

But the whole matter may be put into half a dozen sentences. The living heart of Christianity, either considered as a revelation to a man, or as a power within a man, that is to say, either objective or subjective, is love. It is the revelation of the love of God that is the inmost essence of it as revelation. It is love in my heart that is the inmost essence of it as a fact of my nature. And is not love the most powerful of all forces to influence conduct? Is it not 'the fulfilling of the law,' because its one single self includes all commandments, and is the ideal of all duty, and also because it is the power which will secure the keeping of all the law which itself lays down?

But love may be followed out into its two main effects. These are self-surrender and imitation. And I say that a religious system which is, in its inmost heart and essence, love, is thereby shown to be the most practical of all systems, because thereby it is shown to be a great system of self-surrender and imitation.

The deepest word of the Gospel is, 'Yield yourselves to God.' Bring your wills and bow them before Him, and say, 'Here am I; take me, and use me as a pawn on Thy great chessboard, to be put where Thou wilt.' When once a man's will is absorbed into the divine will, as a drop of water is into the ocean, he is free, and has happiness and peace, and is master and lord of himself and of the universe. That system which proclaims love as its heart sets in action self-surrender as the most practical of all the powers of life.

Love is imitation. And Jesus Christ's life is set before us as the pattern for all our conduct. We are to follow In His footsteps. These mark our path. We are to follow Him, as a traveller who knows not his way will carefully tread in the steps of his guide. We are to imitate Him, as a scholar who is learning to draw will copy every touch of the master's pencil.

Strange that that short life, fragmentarily reported in four little tracts, full of unapproachable peculiarities, and having no part in many of the relationships which make so large a portion of most lives, is yet so transparently under the influence of the purest and broadest principles of righteousness and morality as that every age and each sex, and men of all professions, idiosyncrasies, temperaments, and positions, all stages of civilisation and culture, of every period, and of every country, may find in it the all-sufficient pattern for them!

Thus in Christianity we have a way. It prescribes a line of direction for the life, and brings all its power to bear in marking the course which we should pursue and in making us willing and able to pursue it.

How different, how superior to all other systems which aspire to regulate the outward life that system is! It is superior, in its applicability to all conditions. It is a very difficult thing for any man to apply the generalities of moral law and righteousness to the individual cases in his life. The stars are very bright, but they do not show me which street to turn up when I am at a loss; but Christ's example comes very near to us, and guides us, not indeed in regard to questions of prudence or expediency, but in regard to all questions of right or wrong. It is superior, in the help it gives to a soul struggling with temptation. It is very hard to keep law or duty clearly before our eyes at such a moment, when it is most needful to do so. The lighthouse is lost in the fog, but the example of Jesus Christ dissipates many mists of temptation to the heart that loves Him; and 'they that follow Him shall not walk in darkness.'

It is superior in this, further, that patterns fail because they are only patterns, and cannot get themselves executed, and laws fail because they are only laws and cannot get themselves obeyed. What is the use of a signpost to a man who is lame, or who does not want to go down the road, though he knows it well enough? But Christianity brings both the commandment and the motive that keeps the commandment.

And so it is *the* path along which we can travel. It is the only road that corresponds to all our necessities, and capacities, and obligations.

It is the only path, my brother, that will be approved by reason, conscience, and experience. The greatest of our English mystics says somewhere—I do not profess to quote with verbal accuracy—'There are two questions which put an end to all the vain projects and designs of human life. The one is, "What for?" the other, "What good will the aim do you if attained?"'

If we look at 'all the ways of men' calmly, and with due regard to the wants of their souls, reason cannot but say that they are 'vain and melancholy.' If we consult our own experience we cannot but confess that whatsoever we have had or enjoyed, apart from God, has either proved disappointing in the very moment of its possession, or has been followed by a bitter taste on the tongue; or in a little while has faded, and left us standing with the stalk in our hands from which the bloom has dropped. Generation after generation has sighed its 'Amen!' to the stern old word: 'Vanity of vanities; all is vanity!' And here to-day, in the midst of the boasted progress of this generation, we find cultured men amongst us, lapped in material comfort, and with all the light of this century blazing upon them, preaching again the old Buddhist doctrine that annihilation is the only heaven, and proclaiming that life is not worth living, and that 'it were better not to be.'

Dear brother, one path, and one path only, leads to what all men desire—peace and happiness. One path, and one path only, leads to what all men know they ought to seek—purity and godliness. We are like men in the backwoods, our paths go circling round and round, we have lost our way. 'The labour of the foolish wearieth every one of them, for he knoweth not how to come to the city.' Jesus Christ has cut a path through the forest. Tread you in it, and you will find that it is 'the way of pleasantness' and 'the path of peace.'

III. And now, one last word. This remarkable designation seems to me to be a witness also to another truth, viz. that in Christianity we have the only way home.

The only way home! All other modes and courses of life and conduct stop at the edge of a great gulf, like some path that goes down an incline to the edge of a precipice, and the heedless traveller that has been going on, not knowing whither it led, tilts over when he comes there. Every other way that men can follow is broken short off by death. And if there were no other reason to allege, that is enough to condemn them. What is a man to do in another world if all his life long he has only cultivated tastes which want this world for their gratification? What is the sensualist to do when he gets there? What is the shrewd man of business in Manchester to do when he comes into a world where there are no bargains, and he cannot go on 'Change on Tuesdays and Fridays? What will he do with himself? What does he do with himself now, when he goes away from home for a month, and does not get his ordinary work and surroundings? What will he do then? What will a young lady do in an other world, who spends her days here in reading trashy novels and magazines? What will any of us do who have set our affections and our tastes upon this poor, perishing, miserable world? Would you think it was common sense in a young man who was going to be a doctor, and took no interest in anything but farming? Is it not as stupid a thing for men and women to train themselves for a condition which is transient, and not to train themselves for the condition into which they are certainly going?

And, on the other hand, the path that Christ makes runs clear on, without a break, across the gulf, like some daring railway bridge thrown across a mountain gorge, and goes straight on on the other side without a curve, only with an upward gradient. The manner of work may change; the spirit of the work and the principles of it will remain. Self-surrender will be the law of Heaven, and 'they shall follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth.' Better to begin here as we mean to end yonder! Better to begin here what we can carry with us, in essence though not in form, into the other life; and so, through all the changes of life, and through the great change of death, to keep one unbroken straight course! 'They go from strength to strength; every one of them in Zion appeareth before God'.

We live in an else trackless waste, but across the desert Jesus Christ has thrown a way; too high for ravenous beasts to spring on or raging foes to storm; too firm for tempest to overthrow or make impair able; too plain for simple hearts to mistake. We may all journey on it, if we will, and 'come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon our heads.'

Christ is the Way. O brother I trust thy sinful soul to His blood and mediation, and thy sins will be forgiven. And then, loving Him, follow Him. 'This is the way; walk ye in it.'

### A BIRD'S-EYE VIEW OF THE EARLY CHURCH

'So the Church throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria had peace, being edified; and, walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, was multiplied.'—ACTS ix. 31 (R.V.).

A man climbing a hill stops every now and then to take breath and look about him; and in the earlier part of this Book of the Acts of the Apostles there are a number of such landing-places where the writer suspends the course of his narrative, in order to give a general notion of the condition of the Church at the moment. We have in this verse one of the shortest, but perhaps the most significant, of these resting-places. The original and proper reading, instead of 'the Churches,' as our Version has it, reads 'the Church' as a whole—the whole body of believers in the three districts named—Judaea, Galilee, and Samaria—being in the same circumstances and passing through like experiences. The several small communities of disciples formed a whole. They were 'churches' individually; they were collectively 'the Church.' Christ's order of expansion, given in chapter i., had been thus far followed, and the sequence here sums up the progress which the Acts has thus far recorded. Galilee had been the cradle of the Church, but the onward march of the Gospel had begun at Jerusalem. Before Luke goes on to tell how the last part of our Lord's programme—'to the uttermost parts of the earth'—began to be carried into execution by the conversion of Cornelius, he gives us this bird's-eye view. To its significant items I desire to draw your attention now.

There are three of them: outward rest, inward progress, outward increase.

I. Outward rest.

'Then had the Church rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria.'

The principal persecutor had just been converted, and that would somewhat damp the zeal of his followers. Saul having gone over to the enemy, it would be difficult to go on harrying the Church with the same spirit, when the chief actor was turned traitor. And besides that, historians tell us that there were political complications which gave both Romans and Jews quite enough to do to watch one another, instead of persecuting this little community of Christians. I have nothing to do with these, but this one point I desire to make, that the condition of security and tranquillity in which the Church found itself conduced to spiritual good and growth. This has not always been the case. As one of our quaint divines says, 'as in cities where ground is scarce men build high up, so in times of straitness and persecution the Christian community, and the individuals who compose it, are often raised to a higher level of devotion than in easier and quieter times.' But these primitive Christians utilised this breathing-space in order to grow, and having a moment of lull and stillness in the storm, turned it to the highest and best uses. Is that what you and I do with our quiet times? None of us have any occasion to fear persecution or annoyance of that sort, but there are other thorns in our pillows besides these, and other rough places in our beds, and we are often disturbed in our nests. When there does come a quiet time in which no outward circumstances fret us, do we seize it as coming from God, in order that, with undistracted energies, we may cast ourselves altogether into the work of growing like our Master and doing His will more fully? How many of us, dear brethren, have misused both our adversity and our prosperity by making the one an occasion for deeper worldliness, and the other a reason for forgetting Him in the darkness as in the light? To be absorbed by earthly things, whether by the enjoyment of their possession or by the bitter pain and misery of their withdrawal, is fatal to all our spiritual progress, and only they use things prosperous and things adverse aright, who take them both as means by which they may be wafted nearer to their God. Whatsoever forces act upon us, if we put the helm right and trim the sails as we ought, they will carry us to our haven. And whatsoever forces act upon us, if we neglect the sailor's skill and duty, we shall be washed backwards and forwards in the trough of the sea, and make no progress in the voyage. 'Then had the Church rest'—and grew lazy? 'Then had the Church rest'—and grew worldly? Then was I happy and prosperous and peaceful in my home and in my business, and I said, 'I shall never be moved,' and I forgot my God? 'Then had the Church rest, and was edified.'

Now, in the next place, note the

II. Inward progress.

There are difficulties about the exact relation of the clauses here to one another, the discussion of which would be fitter for a lecture-room than for a pulpit. I do not mean to trouble you with these, but it seems to me that we may perhaps best understand the writer's intention if we throw together the clauses which stand in the middle of this verse, and take them as being a description of the inward progress, being 'edified' and 'walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost.' There are two things, then—the being 'edified' and 'walking'; and I wish to say a word or two about each of them.

Now that word 'edified' and the cognate one 'edification' have been enfeebled in signification so as to mean very much less than they did to Luke. When we speak of 'being edified,' what do we mean? Little more than that we have been instructed, and especially that we have been comforted. And what is the instrument of edification in our ordinary religious parlance? Good words, wise teaching, or pious speech. But the New Testament means vastly more than this by the word, and looks not so much to other people's utterances as to a man's own strenuous efforts, as the means of edification. Much misunderstanding would have been avoided if our translators had really translated, instead of putting us off with a Latinised word which to many readers conveys little meaning and none of the significant metaphor of the original. 'Being edified' sounds very theological and far away from daily life. Would it not sound more real if we read 'being built up'? That is the emblem of the process that ought to go on, not only in the Christian community as a whole, but in every individual member of it. Each Christian is bound to build himself up and to help to build up other Christians; and God builds them all up by His Spirit. We have brought before us the picture of the rising of some stately fabric upon a firm foundation, course by course, stone by stone, each laid by a separate act of the builder's hand, and carefully bedded in its place until the whole is complete.

That is one emblem of the growth of the Christian community and of the Christian individual, and the other clause that is coupled with it in the text seems to me to give the same idea under a slightly different figure. The rising of a stately building and the advance on a given path suggest substantially the same notion of progress.

And of these two metaphors, I would dwell chiefly on the former, because it is the less familiar of the two to modern readers, and because it is of some consequence to restore it to its weight and true significance in the popular mind. Edification, then, is the building up of Christian character, and it involves four things: a foundation, a continuous progress, a patient, persistent effort, and a completion.

Now, Christian men and women, this is our office for ourselves, and, according to our faculty and opportunities, for the Churches with which we may stand connected, that on the foundation which is Jesus Christ—'and other foundation can no man lay'—we all should slowly, carefully, unceasingly be at our building work; each day's attainment, like the course of stones laid in some great temple, becoming the basis upon which to-morrow's work is to be piled, and each having in it the toil of the builder and being a result and monument of his strenuous effort, and each being built in, according to the plan that the great Architect has given, and each tending a little nearer to the roof-tree, and the time that 'the top stone shall be brought forth with the shout of rejoicing.' Is that a transcript of my life and yours? Do we make a business of the cultivation of Christian character thus? Do we rest the whole structure of our lives upon Jesus Christ? And then, do we, hour by hour, moment by moment, lay the fair stones, until

  'Firm and fair the building rise,  
    A temple to His praise.'

The old worn metaphor, which we have vulgarised and degraded into a synonym for a comfortable condition produced by a brother's words, carries in it the solemnest teaching as to what the duty and privilege of all Christian souls is-to 'build themselves up for an habitation of God through the Spirit.'

But note further the elements of which this progress consists. May we not suppose that both metaphors refer to the clauses that follow, and that 'the fear of the Lord' and 'the comfort of the Holy Ghost' are the particulars in which the Christian is built up and walks?

'The fear of the Lord' is eminently an Old Testament expression, and occurs only once or twice in the New. But its meaning is thoroughly in accordance with the loftiest teaching of the new revelation. 'The fear of the Lord' is that reverential awe of Him, by which we are ever conscious of His presence with us, and ever seek, as our supreme aim and end, to submit our wills to His commandment, and to do the things that are pleasing in His sight. Are you and I building ourselves up in that? Do we feel more thrillingly and gladly to-day than we did yesterday, that God is beside us? And do we submit ourselves more loyally, more easily, more joyously to His will, in blessed obedience, now than ever before? Have we learned, and are we learning, moment by moment, more of that 'secret of the Lord' which 'is with them that fear Him,' and of that 'covenant' which 'He will show' to them? Unless we do, our growth in Christian character is a very doubtful thing. And are we advancing, too, in that other element which so beautifully completes and softens the notion of the fear of the Lord, 'the encouragement' which the divine Spirit gives us? Are we bolder to-day than we were yesterday? Are we ready to meet with more undaunted confidence whatever we may have to face? Do we feel ever increasing within us the full blessedness and inspiration of that divine visitant? And do these sweet communications take all the 'torment' away from 'fear,' and leave only the bliss of reverential love? They who walk in the fear of the Lord, and who with the fear have the courage that the divine Spirit gives, will 'have rest,' like the first Christians, whatsoever storms may howl around them, and whatsoever enemies may threaten to disturb their peace.

And so, lastly, note

III. The outward growth.

Thus building themselves up, and thus growing, the Church 'was multiplied.' Of course it was. Christian men and women that are spiritually alive, and who, because they are alive, grow, and grow in these things, the manifest reverence of God, and the manifest 'comfort' of the divine Spirit's giving, will commend their gospel to a blind world. They will be an attractive force in the midst of men, and their inward growth will make them eager to hold forth the word of life, and will give them 'a mouth and wisdom' which nothing but genuine spiritual experience can give.

And so, dear friends, especially those of you who set yourselves to any of the many forms of Christian work which prevail in this day, learn the lesson of my text, and make sure of '*a*' before you go on to '*b*,' and see to it that before you set yourselves to try to multiply the Church, you set yourselves to build up yourselves in your most holy faith.

We hear a great deal nowadays about 'forward movements,' and I sympathise with all that is said in favour of them. But I would remind you that the precursor of every genuine forward movement is a Godward movement, and that it is worse than useless to talk about lengthening the cords unless you begin with strengthening the stakes. The little prop that holds up the bell-tent that will contain half-a-dozen soldiers will be all too weak for the great one that will cover a company. And the fault of some Christian people is that they set themselves to work upon others without remembering that the first requisite is a deepened and growing godliness and devotion in their own souls. Dear friends, begin at home, and remember that whilst what the world calls eloquence may draw people, and oddities *will* draw them, and all sorts of lower attractions will gather multitudes for a little while, the one solid power which Christian men and women can exercise for the numerical increase of the Church is rooted in, and only tenable through, their own personal increase day by day in consecration and likeness to the Saviour, in possession of the Spirit, and in loving fear of the Lord.

# The Salvation of Saul (Acts 9:1-31)

# Deffinbaugh at [*https://bible.org/seriespage/14-salvation-saul-acts-91-31*](https://bible.org/seriespage/14-salvation-saul-acts-91-31)

### Introduction[2](https://bible.org/seriespage/14-salvation-saul-acts-91-31" \l "P16_5021)

When I study a passage, my first task is to read it over and over until I know what questions need to be answered. Then I continue to read the text and a few commentaries, meditate, and discuss it with others until the answers to my questions become clear. Our text in [Acts 9](javascript:%7b%7d) describes the conversion of Saul, who will eventually become known as Paul the Apostle. Luke has already recorded the conversion of a number of people in the Book of Acts, but no conversion account is as prominent as that of Saul. What is different about Saul’s conversion is that it is recorded three times in Acts, and in considerable detail. Noting this, I was able to articulate the questions which I needed to answer in order to adequately understand and explain this text. The questions are:

1. Why is the conversion of Saul so important that it is repeated three times in Acts?

2. What is unique about this conversion account?

3. What does Saul’s conversion have to do with people today?

Of all the miracles recorded in the Book of Acts, the conversion of Saul is one of the most spectacular and one of the most significant. Let us look to the Holy Spirit, who was at work in the early church and who is likewise at work today, to enlighten our minds so that we might understand and apply this text which He inspired.

#### Stopping Saul in His Tracks [Acts 9:1-9](javascript:%7b%7d)

1 Meanwhile Saul, still breathing out threats to murder the Lord’s disciples, went to the high priest 2 and requested letters from him to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, either men or women, he could bring them as prisoners to Jerusalem. 3 As he was going along, approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” 5 So he said, “Who are you, Lord?” He replied, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting! 6 But stand up and enter the city and you will be told what you must do.” 7 (Now the men who were traveling with him stood there speechless, because they heard the voice but saw no one.) 8 So Saul got up from the ground, but although his eyes were open, he could see nothing. Leading him by the hand, his companions brought him into Damascus. 9 For three days he could not see, and he neither ate nor drank anything ([Acts 9:1-9](javascript:%7b%7d)).

If Saul appears to be merely standing by when Stephen is stoned ([Acts 7:58](javascript:%7b%7d)), this impression is quickly corrected as the Book of Acts unfolds. Just a few verses later, we read,

But Saul was trying to destroy the church; entering one house after another, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison ([Acts 8:3](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Now we read that Saul is “**still breathing out threats to murder the Lord’s disciples**” ([Acts 9:1](javascript:%7b%7d)). Saul is not merely threatening murder, he is participating in it; indeed, he is instigating it. Saul appears to be the ringleader of the opposition to the church:

“I persecuted this Way even to the point of death, tying up both men and women and putting them in prison” ([Acts 22:4](javascript:%7b%7d)).

“And that is what I did in Jerusalem: Not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons by the authority I received from the chief priests, but I also cast my vote against them when they were sentenced to death” ([Acts 26:10](javascript:%7b%7d)).

The word “**still**” ([Acts 9:1](javascript:%7b%7d)) is significant. It indicates that Saul has been “**breathing out threats to murder**” for some time. It indicates that Stephen’s death did not slow Saul down at all. Instead, it would appear that it fueled the “fire” of his zeal to crush Christianity. As I have said earlier, I believe that Saul is the ringleader, the driving force behind the persecution that has arisen against the saints.[3](https://bible.org/seriespage/14-salvation-saul-acts-91-31" \l "P30_9290)

Initially, Saul’s activities seem to have been limited to Jerusalem,[4](https://bible.org/seriespage/14-salvation-saul-acts-91-31" \l "P32_9471) but as the church scattered, Saul’s activities became “international.” He received letters from the high priest which authorized him to go to the synagogues of other (foreign) countries:

I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to force them to blaspheme. Because I was so furiously enraged at them, I went to persecute them even in foreign cities ([Acts 26:11](javascript:%7b%7d)).

One such “foreign country” was Syria, with Damascus as its capital city. There was a large congregation of Jews living there, and the high priest’s letter seemed to give Saul the authority of extradition, so that he could arrest Christian Jews and take them back to Jerusalem for punishment. The journey to Damascus was approximately 150 miles, which shows how serious Saul was in his opposition to Christianity.

Paul was traveling to Damascus when he was divinely intercepted. It was high noon, but he was smitten by a light far brighter than the sun ([Acts 26:13](javascript:%7b%7d)). It drove Saul and his companions to their knees ([Acts 26:14](javascript:%7b%7d)). All saw the light and heard the voice, but they did not understand it ([Acts 22:9](javascript:%7b%7d)); only Saul understood. Luke gives more detail in chapter 26:

13 “About noon along the road, Your Majesty, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining everywhere around me and those traveling with me. 14 When we had all fallen to the ground, **I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic**, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? You are hurting yourself by kicking against the goads’” ([Acts 26:13](javascript:%7b%7d), emphasis mine).

One thing is clear to me: God was not seeking to save anyone but Saul here. All saw the light, but only Saul saw our Lord. All heard the voice, but only Saul understood it ([Acts 9:7](javascript:%7b%7d)). And what was said was addressed specifically to Saul, and not to the rest. It is clear that our Lord intercepted Saul to save him, and this He did.

In this account, Saul asked but one question:[5](https://bible.org/seriespage/14-salvation-saul-acts-91-31" \l "P39_11424) “**Who are you, Lord**?” ([Acts 9:5](javascript:%7b%7d)) You can imagine the impact of the words spoken in answer to this question: “**I am Jesus whom you are persecuting!**” ([Acts 9:5](javascript:%7b%7d)) Our Lord then instructs Saul to enter the city, where he will be told what he should do. How ironic that Saul is now being led to Damascus by others, just as he must have led believers to their trial and their death in Jerusalem. Saul is being led to Damascus, when he had planned to lead others out of Damascus. The letters in Saul’s hand no longer have any authority. Now he is following orders from Jesus.

Saul got up from the ground, but without his sight. He had been blinded by the great light. He was led into Damascus, where he must have been met by someone appointed by the Lord (see [Acts 9:6](javascript:%7b%7d)). He was taken to the house of Judas (see verse 11), where he neither ate nor drank (nor saw anything) for three days. I believe this was a very significant time for Saul. He had been well trained in Judaism. He knew the Old Testament well, and he thought he was serving God by persecuting the church. Now he knew that the One whom he opposed, the One he thought to be dead, was alive. Saul likewise learned that his persecution of the church was really persecuting Jesus.

Saul had a great deal of knowledge, but this encounter with Jesus changed everything. Saul had been wrong on one crucial point: Jesus was not a heretic or a revolutionary; Jesus was Israel’s Messiah. This one fact forced him to rethink and to rearrange all of his theology.

Let me attempt to illustrate it this way. Suppose that I had made a map. On it, I had the names of various countries, cities, rivers, and so on. As I was following this map to a certain destination, I got lost, and then someone pointed out that I had reversed north and south. This would require me to rearrange everything on the map. That is the way it was with Saul. For those three days, he had to rethink his understanding of the Old Testament and of the preaching he had heard from men like Stephen. If Jesus was the Messiah and He had risen from the dead, Paul had been completely wrong, and he must now set aside his religious beliefs for something very different (and yet based upon the same Old Testament facts).

#### Two Visions[6](https://bible.org/seriespage/14-salvation-saul-acts-91-31" \l "P44_13761) [Acts 9:10-19](javascript:%7b%7d)a

10 Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias,” and he replied, “Here I am, Lord.” 11 Then the Lord told him, “Get up and go to the street called ‘Straight,’ and at Judas’ house look for a man from Tarsus named Saul. For he is praying, 12 and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and place his hands on him so that he may see again.” 13 But Ananias replied, “Lord, I have heard from many people about this man, how much harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem, 14 and here he has authority from the chief priests to imprison all who call on your name!” 15 But the Lord said to him, “Go, because this man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before Gentiles and kings and the people of Israel. 16 For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” 17 So Ananias departed and entered the house, placed his hands on Saul and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came here, has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” 18 Immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, 19 and after taking some food, his strength returned ([Acts 9:10-19](javascript:%7b%7d)a).

We find Saul at the home of a man named Judas. Was Judas one of those Saul intended to arrest? I would think that Ananias must have been a target. Ananias was a highly respected Jew, but he was also one who believed in Jesus as the Messiah. Luke describes the process by which our Lord brought Ananias and Saul together. Once again, it is clear that our Lord is specifically seeking out Saul.

The Lord spoke to Ananias in a vision, instructing him to go to the house of a man named Judas, where he would find Saul of Tarsus.[7](https://bible.org/seriespage/14-salvation-saul-acts-91-31" \l "P48_15779) Ananias was told that Saul was praying and that he had been given a vision that a man named Ananias would come and restore his sight. Ananias was a good and godly man, but it seemed inconceivable to him that Saul could ever be converted to faith in Jesus. And so he reminded the Lord that Saul was a man who had done great harm to the saints in Jerusalem. He was also aware that Saul had come with authority from the chief priests to seize Christians and take them back to Jerusalem.

The Lord’s answer to these concerns was to indicate that Saul’s conversion would literally turn his life upside-down. Saul was God’s “**chosen instrument**.” He would carry the name of Jesus to Gentiles, to kings, and to the people of Israel. How much more radically could Saul’s life change? From being a persecutor of the church to becoming a preacher of the gospel, that is what our Lord had in store for Saul. But there was more. The one who had brought so much suffering to the saints would himself suffer greatly for the name of Jesus.

This was enough to convince Ananias. He left to go to the house of Judas, where he found Saul just as the Lord had indicated. Placing his hands on Saul, Ananias told him that he had been sent to restore his sight and to bestow the Spirit on him. At that moment, the scale-like impediments to his sight fell away, so that Saul could see again. Saul got up, was baptized, and then ate to regain his strength.

#### Preaching in Damascus and the First Fruits of Opposition [Acts 9:19](javascript:%7b%7d)b-25

For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, 20 and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “This man is the Son of God.” 21 All who heard him were amazed and were saying, “Is this not the man who in Jerusalem was ravaging those who call on this name, and who had come here to bring them as prisoners to the chief priests?” 22 But Saul became more and more capable, and was causing consternation among the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ. 23 Now after some days had passed, the Jews plotted together to kill him, 24 but Saul learned of their plot against him. They were also watching the city gates day and night so that they could kill him. 25 But his disciples took him at night and let him down through an opening in the wall by lowering him in a basket.

What an amazing time this must have been, with Saul enjoying the fellowship of other believers in Damascus. And remember, these are the very ones he had intended to identify, arrest, and carry off to Jerusalem. This is surely a miracle, and it is followed up with yet another miracle: Saul immediately went to the synagogues and began to preach that Jesus is the Son of God. These synagogues were expecting Saul – expecting him to come and rid them of those troublesome followers of Jesus. Instead, Saul came as a follower of Jesus, and he preached it. No wonder folks were amazed at what they heard. Paul’s reputation preceded him, so that they knew who he was and why he had come.

It wasn’t long before some unbelieving Jews had heard enough of Saul’s teaching. After a few days, they plotted together to kill Saul. But Saul heard of their plot and knew that they were waiting for him to leave the city so that they could capture him. Saul already had some “disciples,” some who had come to faith as a result of his preaching. These disciples took Saul in the cover of darkness and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall, so that he escaped.

#### Journey to Jerusalem [Acts 9:26-30](javascript:%7b%7d)

26 When he arrived in Jerusalem, he attempted to associate with the disciples, and they were all afraid of him, because they did not believe that he was a disciple. 27 But Barnabas took Saul, brought him to the apostles, and related to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus. 28 So he was staying with them, associating openly with them in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord. 29 He was speaking and debating with the Greek-speaking Jews, but they were trying to kill him. 30 When the brothers found out about this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus ([Acts 9:26-30](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Initially, I supposed that when Saul arrived in Jerusalem he attempted to meet with the twelve, but the term “disciple” is not used of the apostles in Acts. These “disciples” are the new believers in Jerusalem, the kind of folks that Saul sought to arrest and to kill. No wonder they were apprehensive about welcoming Saul into their fellowship. Saul’s efforts to meet with them had all the earmarks of a trap, the kind of trap Saul would have used before his conversion.

To my knowledge, Barnabas and Saul had never met until now. Barnabas is a man who is true to his character, as described in [Acts 11](javascript:%7b%7d):

20 But there were some men from Cyprus and Cyrene among them who came to Antioch and began to speak to the Greeks too, proclaiming the good news of the Lord Jesus. 21 The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. 22 A report about them came to the attention of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 23 When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with devoted hearts, 24 because he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith, and a significant number of people were brought to the Lord. 25 Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to look for Saul ([Acts 11:20-25](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Barnabas was a man who was both “**full of the Holy Spirit**” and full **“of faith**.” He had the faith to believe that Saul could be saved. And so when Saul arrived in Jerusalem, somehow the paths of these two believers crossed. He not only knew the story of Saul’s conversion, but also had heard the reports of how Saul had boldly proclaimed Jesus in Damascus. (Had some of the saints in Damascus accompanied Saul back to Jerusalem?) From this point on, Saul was welcomed into the fellowship of the saints in Jerusalem. He also began to proclaim Jesus and was engaged in debate by the Greek-speaking Jews (who seem to have taken over the cause of opposing Christianity). Soon, these unbelieving, Greek-speaking Jews were seeking to kill Saul. It was the only way they could silence him! His fellow-believers learned of those who were seeking to kill Saul. They took Saul to Caesarea and sent him from there to Tarsus, his home town, where he would be safe.

#### Peace [Acts 9:31](javascript:%7b%7d)

Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria experienced peace and thus was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the encouragement of the Holy Spirit, the church increased in numbers ([Acts 9:31](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Here is another one of Luke’s “progress reports” in the Book of Acts. What makes it interesting is that it immediately follows the account of Saul’s conversion, not to mention his retreat to Tarsus. Two questions come to mind. First, “What is the connection between Saul’s conversion and the peace Luke describes in Judea, Galilee, and Samaria?” The second is, “What is the relationship between Saul’s conversion and his retreat to Tarsus and the continued growth of the church?”

I don’t mean this unkindly, but in Acts, I don’t see much peace when Paul is present. He is something like a burning match at a fuel spill. This was certainly true when Saul was opposing the church as an unbeliever. He would go from place to place, seizing saints and dragging them off to Jerusalem for trial and punishment ([Acts 22:4; 26:10-11](javascript:%7b%7d)). When Saul was converted, this was undoubtedly a massive blow to those Jews who opposed Christianity, for Saul seemed to be their inspirational leader. But Saul was just as aggressive in bearing witness to Jesus as Messiah as he was in opposing Him. Thus, he was forced to flee from Damascus ([Acts 9:20-25](javascript:%7b%7d)) and then from Jerusalem ([Acts 9:28-30](javascript:%7b%7d)). The truth is that peace came only after Paul’s departure from a certain city. It is true in our text, and it is true elsewhere as well (see [Acts 13:50; 14:5-6](javascript:%7b%7d), 19; 17:10, 14; 19:20—20:1). Saul’s conversion resulted in a period of exile,[8](https://bible.org/seriespage/14-salvation-saul-acts-91-31" \l "P65_24095) and this contributed greatly to the peace which returned to Judea, Galilee, and Samaria.

### Conclusion

Having studied our text, we must now return to the questions which we raised at the beginning of this message:

1. Why is the conversion of Saul so important that it is repeated three times in Acts?

2. What is unique about this conversion account?

3. What does Saul’s conversion have to do with people today?

*We will begin by addressing the first two of these questions together.*

*(1) First of all, this is a dramatic conversion.*I’ve heard many wonderful testimonies as to how our Lord has drawn an unbeliever to faith, but none can match the incredible sequence of events surrounding Saul’s conversion. How many Christians can claim that they were saved as the result of a face-to-face confrontation with the risen Lord Jesus?

*(2) The conversion of Saul depicts the elements of conversion that are common to every believer.* Consider, for example, the obvious fact that Saul was not seeking God but was actively opposing Him. Salvation is not the result of lost men seeking God, but of God seeking lost men:

“**No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him,** and I will raise him up at the last day” ([John 6:44](javascript:%7b%7d), emphasis mine).

“**You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit**, fruit that remains, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he will give you” ([John 15:16](javascript:%7b%7d), emphasis mine).

9 What then? Are we better off? Certainly not, for we have already charged that Jews and Greeks alike are all under sin, 10 just as it is written:

“There is no one righteous,   
not even one,   
11 there is no one who understands,  **there is no one who seeks God**.   
12 All have turned away,   
together they have become worthless;   
there is no one who shows kindness, not even one”  
([Romans 3:9-12](javascript:%7b%7d), emphasis mine).

1 And although you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you formerly lived according to this world’s present path, according to the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the ruler of the spirit that is now energizing the sons of disobedience, 3 among whom all of us also formerly lived out our lives in the cravings of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath even as the rest… 4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of his great love with which he loved us, 5 even though we were dead in transgressions, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you are saved! – 6 and he raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, 7 to demonstrate in the coming ages the surpassing wealth of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you are saved through faith, and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9 it is not from works, so that no one can boast ([Ephesians 2:1-9](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Saul’s salvation was not the result of his religious striving, but the result of being sought and subdued by the saving grace of God:

1 Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord! To write this again is no trouble to me, and it is a safeguard for you. 2 Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh! 3 For we are the circumcision, the ones who worship by the Spirit of God, exult in Christ Jesus, and do not rely on human credentials 4 – though mine too are significant. If someone thinks he has good reasons to put confidence in human credentials, I have more: 5 I was circumcised on the eighth day, from the people of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews. I lived according to the law as a Pharisee. 6 In my zeal for God I persecuted the church. According to the righteousness stipulated in the law I was blameless. 7 But these assets I have come to regard as liabilities because of Christ. 8 More than that, I now regard all things as liabilities compared to the far greater value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things – indeed, I regard them as dung! – that I may gain Christ, 9 and be found in him, not because I have my own righteousness derived from the law, but because I have the righteousness that comes by way of Christ’s faithfulness – a righteousness from God that is in fact based on Christ’s faithfulness ([Philippians 3:1-9](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Saul’s conversion was not the result of his seeking or striving; instead, it was the sovereign work of God, so that He might display His wondrous mercy and grace:

12 I am grateful to the one who has strengthened me, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he considered me faithful in putting me into ministry, 13 even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor, and an arrogant man. But I was treated with mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief, 14 and our Lord’s grace was abundant, bringing faith and love in Christ Jesus. 15 This saying is trustworthy and deserves full acceptance: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” – and I am the worst of them! 16 But here is why I was treated with mercy: so that in me as the worst, Christ Jesus could demonstrate his utmost patience, as an example for those who are going to believe in him for eternal life. 17 Now to the eternal king, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever! Amen ([1 Timothy 1:12-17](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Saul’s conversion, like that of every believer, is a dramatic change of mind with regard to the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. Salvation is all about Jesus:

Jesus replied, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” ([John 14:6](javascript:%7b%7d)).

10 (The one who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself; the one who does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has testified concerning his Son.) 11 And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his [Son. 12](javascript:%7b%7d) The one who has the Son has this eternal life; the one who does not have the Son of God does not have this eternal life ([1 John 5:10-12](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Saul was confronted by our Lord Jesus. He learned that his opposition to the church was ultimately opposition to Jesus. He learned that Jesus was God, and that He had been raised from the dead. He was convinced that Jesus was the promised Messiah, God’s only provision for eternal life. That is what every person must acknowledge who comes to saving faith:

8 But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we preach), 9 because if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes and thus has righteousness and with the mouth one confesses and thus has salvation ([Romans 10:8-10](javascript:%7b%7d)).

My point in all this is that while Saul’s conversion was spectacular, it was not really unique. It served to dramatically illustrate what happens whenever anyone is drawn to faith in the Lord Jesus.

*(3) Saul’s conversion is a strong message and object lesson to unbelieving Jews (as well as to unbelieving Gentiles).*Paul’s account of his conversion in Acts confronts unbelieving Jews with the gospel, the same message which they must embrace if they are to enter into the blessings promised to Abraham and his descendants. Paul was as Jewish as one could get, and yet he was not saved. His Jewish zeal did not and could not save him. He would later write:

9:30 What shall we say then? – that the Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness obtained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith, 31 but Israel even though pursuing a law of righteousness did not attain it. 32 Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but (as if it were possible) by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone, 33 just as it is written, “Look, I am laying in Zion a stone that will cause people to stumble and a rock that will make them fall, yet the one who believes in him will not be put to shame.”

10:1 Brothers and sisters, my heart’s desire and prayer to God on behalf of my fellow Israelites is for their salvation. 2 For I can testify that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not in line with the truth. 3 For ignoring the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking instead to establish their own righteousness, they did not submit to God’s righteousness. 4 For Christ is the end of the law, with the result that there is righteousness for everyone who believes. 5 For Moses writes about the righteousness that is by the law: “The one who does these things will live by them.” 6 But the righteousness that is by faith says: “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down) 7 or “Who will descend into the abyss?” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). 8 But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we preach), 9 because if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes and thus has righteousness and with the mouth one confesses and thus has salvation. 11 For the scripture says, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.” 12 For there is no distinction between the Jew and the Greek, for the same Lord is Lord of all, who richly blesses all who call on him.

The only true Jew is the Jew who embraces Jesus as the Messiah, by faith receiving the salvation He accomplished at Calvary:

“For I tell you, unless your righteousness goes beyond that of the experts in the law and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” ([Matthew 5:20](javascript:%7b%7d)).

13 For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would inherit the world was not fulfilled through the law, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. 14 **For if they become heirs by the law, faith is empty and the promise is nullified**. 15 For the law brings wrath, because where there is no law there is no transgression either. 16 **For this reason it is by faith so that it may be by grace, with the result that the promise may be certain to all the descendants – not only to those who are under the law, but also to those who have the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all** 17 (as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”). He is our father in the presence of God whom he believed – the God who makes the dead alive and summons the things that do not yet exist as though they already do. 18 Against hope Abraham believed in hope with the result that he became the father of many nations according to the pronouncement, “so will your descendants be.” 19 Without being weak in faith, he considered his own body as dead (because he was about one hundred years old) and the deadness of Sarah’s womb. 20 He did not waver in unbelief about the promise of God but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God. 21 He was fully convinced that what God promised he was also able to do. 22 So indeed it was credited to Abraham as righteousness. 23 **But the statement it was credited to him was not written only for Abraham’s sake, 24 but also for our sake, to whom it will be credited, those who believe in the one who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. 25 He was given over because of our transgressions and was raised for the sake of our justification** ([Romans 4:13-25](javascript:%7b%7d), emphasis mine).

*(4) Saul’s conversion is the basis of his apostleship.*You will remember that when the apostles chose a replacement for Judas, they required that this person must have seen the risen Lord ([Acts 1:21-22](javascript:%7b%7d)). Saul’s conversion experience on the road to Damascus was his encounter with the risen Lord:

7 Then **he appeared to James, then to all the apostles**. 8 Last of all, as though to one born at the wrong time, **he appeared to me also**. 9 For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me has not been in vain. In fact, I worked harder than all of them – yet not I, but the grace of God with me. 11 Whether then it was I or they, this is the way we preach and this is the way you believed ([1 Corinthians 15:7-11](javascript:%7b%7d), emphasis mine).

It is important to note that in his conversion experience, Saul not only saw the risen Lord, he was given a very specific commission. You might call it Saul’s “Great Commission”:

15 But the Lord said to him, “Go, because this man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before Gentiles and kings and the people of Israel. 16 For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name” ([Acts 9:15-16](javascript:%7b%7d)).

12 A man named Ananias, a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who live there, 13 came to me and stood beside me and said to me, ‘Brother Saul, regain your sight!’ And at that very moment I looked up and saw him. 14 Then he said, ‘The God of our ancestors has already chosen you to know his will, to see the Righteous One, and to hear a command from his mouth, 15 because you will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard ([Acts 22:12-15](javascript:%7b%7d)).

15 So I said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And the Lord replied, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. 16 But get up and stand on your feet, for I have appeared to you for this reason, to designate you in advance as a servant and witness to the things you have seen and to the things in which I will appear to you. 17 I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you 18 to open their eyes so that they turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a share among those who are sanctified by faith in me’” ([Acts 26:15-18](javascript:%7b%7d)).

*(5) Saul’s conversion is yet another witness to the fact of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.*Jesus spoke to Saul, and he spoke to Jesus. Jesus was (and is) alive; His body was not decaying in a Jerusalem tomb (see [Acts 2:24-36](javascript:%7b%7d)). Those with Saul could testify that something unusual, even supernatural, took place, but they were not privileged to see all that he saw. They did not see the risen Lord Jesus.

*(6) The conversion of Saul is a turning point in the Book of Acts and in the history of the church.*Things would never be the same after Saul came to faith. In Acts, Saul (Paul) is the key figure in the evangelization of the Gentiles. In the epistles, Paul is the key New Testament author to explain God’s purpose for the evangelization of the Gentiles (see, for example, [Romans 9-11](javascript:%7b%7d); [Ephesians 2:11-22](javascript:%7b%7d)).

*(7) Saul’s conversion is a key to understanding Paul’s theology in the New Testament.*F.F. Bruce has written:

“Few of Saul’s distinctive insights into the significance of the gospel cannot be traced back to the Damascus-road event, or to the outworking of that event in his life and thought.”[9](https://bible.org/seriespage/14-salvation-saul-acts-91-31" \l "P105_39158)

Paul writes not only from a deep and profound knowledge of God’s grace, but also from a deep and profound experience of God’s grace. When you read Paul’s teaching on divine election (see [Ephesians 1](javascript:%7b%7d) or [Romans 9](javascript:%7b%7d)), or the miracle of being transported out of death and into eternal life ([Ephesians 2:1-10](javascript:%7b%7d)), you can see how his conversion illustrates these truths.

Saul’s conversion is a watershed event in the New Testament. No wonder we find three different accounts of his conversion in the Book of Acts. One can hardly overestimate the impact Paul has had on Christianity.

*The final question which I raised at the beginning of this lesson is this: “How does Saul’s conversion relate to evangelism today?”* Let me suggest some ways in which Saul’s conversion in our text should impact Christians today.

*Saul’s conversion should serve to greatly encourage Christians today to evangelize.* What an encouragement for us to pray for the salvation of the lost! To press this even further, our text should prompt us to diligently pray for those who seem least likely to be saved. Would you not admit that many of us have a certain number of people whom we consider “least likely to be saved”? It may be a relative, an associate at work, or a friend to whom we have witnessed over a long period of time, but seemingly in vain. Paul was hopelessly lost. He not only rejected Christ, he actively opposed Him. But God intercepted Saul and stopped him in his tracks, dramatically saving him and radically transforming his life. God can do that to anyone. The more impossible a particular person’s salvation appears to be, the greater the glory that goes to God when that person is saved. Ultimately, it is not our logic or our persuasiveness that saves men, but God’s Spirit who drives the truth of the Word home, convicting sinners of their sin, and opening their darkened eyes to see the truth in Jesus:

8 “And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong concerning sin and righteousness and judgment – 9 concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; 10 concerning righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; 11 and concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned” ([John 16:8-11](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Salvation is “**of the Lord**” (see [Jonah 2:9](javascript:%7b%7d); [Psalm 3:8](javascript:%7b%7d)). It is ultimately His doing. We do not have to move men’s hearts or to out-argue them. We need only petition the God who finds no pleasure in the destruction of the lost, but delights in the salvation of lost sinners.

1 First of all, then, I urge that requests, prayers, intercessions, and thanks be offered on behalf of all people, 2 even for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. 3 Such prayer for all is good and welcomed before God our Savior, 4 since he wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth ([1 Timothy 2:1-4](javascript:%7b%7d)).

The Lord is not slow concerning his promise, as some regard slowness, but is being patient toward you, because he does not wish for any to perish but for all to come to repentance ([2 Peter 3:9](javascript:%7b%7d)).

We must pray much more for the salvation of the lost, and then ask that He will use us as He draws sinners to faith.

The account of the conversion of Saul is a great text for those who have not yet come to faith in the Lord Jesus. We read that Saul came face-to-face with Jesus of Nazareth. Someday every unbeliever will come face-to-face with Jesus as their Judge:

42 “He commanded us to preach to the people and to warn them that he is the one appointed by God as judge of the living and the dead. 43 About him all the prophets testify, that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” ([Acts 10:42-43](javascript:%7b%7d)).

30 Therefore, although God has overlooked such times of ignorance, he now commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 because he has set a day on which he is going to judge the world in righteousness, by a man whom he designated, having provided proof to everyone by raising him from the dead” ([Acts 17:30-31](javascript:%7b%7d), emphasis mine).

And just as people are appointed to die once, and then to face judgment ([Hebrews 9:27](javascript:%7b%7d)).

3 For the time that has passed was sufficient for you to do what the non-Christians desire. You lived then in debauchery, evil desires, drunkenness, carousing, drinking bouts, and wanton idolatries. 4 So they are astonished when you do not rush with them into the same flood of wickedness, and they vilify you. 5 **They will face a reckoning before Jesus Christ who stands ready to judge the living and the dead** ([1 Peter 4:3-5](javascript:%7b%7d), emphasis mine).

When He returns to this earth, our Lord will judge those who have persecuted His saints:

3 We ought to thank God always for you, brothers and sisters, and rightly so, because your faith flourishes more and more and the love of each one of you all for one another is ever greater. 4 As a result we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and afflictions you are enduring. 5 This is evidence of God’s righteous judgment, to make you worthy of the kingdom of God, for which in fact you are suffering. 6 For it is right for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, 7 and to you who are being afflicted to give rest together with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels. 8 With flaming fire he will mete out punishment on those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. 9 They will undergo the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his strength, 10 when he comes to be glorified among his saints and admired on that day among all who have believed – and you did in fact believe our testimony ([2 Thessalonians 1:3-10](javascript:%7b%7d)).

The difference is that when Saul stood before our Lord, it was so that he might be saved from judgment. When men stand before our Lord at His second coming, there will no longer be an opportunity for salvation, but only for judgment.

7 For the hidden power of lawlessness is already at work. However, the one who holds him back will do so until he is taken out of the way, 8 and then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will destroy by the breath of his mouth and wipe out by the manifestation of his arrival. 9 The arrival of the lawless one will be by Satan’s working with all kinds of miracles and signs and false wonders, 10 and with every kind of evil deception directed against those who are perishing, because they found no place in their hearts for the truth so as to be saved. 11 Consequently God sends on them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false. 12 And so all of them who have not believed the truth but have delighted in evil will be condemned ([2 Thessalonians 2:7-12](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Do not wait until it is too late, my friend. Trust in Jesus today. In this way – and this way only – you will find the forgiveness of your sins and the gift of eternal life.

1 Now because we are fellow workers, we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain. 2 For he says, “I heard you at the acceptable time, and in the day of salvation I helped you.” Look, now is the acceptable time; look, now is the day of salvation! ([2 Corinthians 6:1-2](javascript:%7b%7d))

If you think you are too good to need salvation, remember that Saul was zealous for his religious faith, but he was terribly lost and in need of salvation. Being good, apart from God, is really being bad. If you think you are too wicked to be saved, once again think of Saul, who tells us that he was the “**chief of sinners**”:

15 This saying is trustworthy and deserves full acceptance: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” – and I am the worst of them! 16 But here is why I was treated with mercy: so that in me as the worst, Christ Jesus could demonstrate his utmost patience, as an example for those who are going to believe in him for eternal life ([1 Timothy 1:15-16](javascript:%7b%7d)).

When God saved Saul, He saved the worst of sinners, so that every other sinner would know God’s offer of salvation applies to him. Trust Him today.

[1](https://bible.org/seriespage/14-salvation-saul-acts-91-31" \l "P14_4118) Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the NET Bible. The NEW ENGLISH TRANSLATION, also known as THE NET BIBLE, is a completely new translation of the Bible, not a revision or an update of a previous English version. It was completed by more than twenty biblical scholars who worked directly from the best currently available Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts. The translation project originally started as an attempt to provide an electronic version of a modern translation for electronic distribution over the Internet and on CD (compact disk). Anyone anywhere in the world with an Internet connection will be able to use and print out the NET Bible without cost for personal study. In addition, anyone who wants to share the Bible with others can print unlimited copies and give them away free to others. It is available on the Internet at: [www.netbible.org](http://www.netbible.org).

[2](https://bible.org/seriespage/14-salvation-saul-acts-91-31" \l "P16_5022) Copyright © 2006 by Community Bible Chapel, 418 E. Main Street, Richardson, TX 75081. This is the edited manuscript of Lesson 14 in the *Studies in the Book of Acts* series prepared by Robert L. Deffinbaugh on February 5, 2006. Anyone is at liberty to use this lesson for educational purposes only, with or without credit. The Chapel believes the material presented herein to be true to the teaching of Scripture, and desires to further, not restrict, its potential use as an aid in the study of God’s Word. The publication of this material is a grace ministry of Community Bible Chapel.

[3](https://bible.org/seriespage/14-salvation-saul-acts-91-31" \l "P30_9291) Saul does not appear to have taken the advice of his teacher and mentor, Gamaliel (see [Acts 5:34-40; 22:3](javascript:%7b%7d)).

[4](https://bible.org/seriespage/14-salvation-saul-acts-91-31" \l "P32_9472) For Paul’s activities in Jerusalem, see [Acts 9:13, 21, 26](javascript:%7b%7d).

[5](https://bible.org/seriespage/14-salvation-saul-acts-91-31" \l "P39_11425) In [Acts 22:10](javascript:%7b%7d), we learn that Saul also asked, “**What shall I do, Lord?**”

[6](https://bible.org/seriespage/14-salvation-saul-acts-91-31" \l "P44_13762) It has been observed that there are some interesting parallels between the “two visions” of Ananias and Saul in our text and the visions of Cornelius and Peter in [Acts 10](javascript:%7b%7d). This may be worth further investigation.

[7](https://bible.org/seriespage/14-salvation-saul-acts-91-31" \l "P48_15780) Giving Ananias this specific information made this an exercise of faith for him. He knew all too well who Saul was, and what he had come to do.

[8](https://bible.org/seriespage/14-salvation-saul-acts-91-31" \l "P65_24096) We learn from Paul’s words in [Galatians 1:15-24](javascript:%7b%7d) that his absence from Jerusalem and Judea was not an unfruitful one. This was undoubtedly a time of spiritual instruction and growth for him.

[9](https://bible.org/seriespage/14-salvation-saul-acts-91-31" \l "P105_39159) F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, Revised Edition (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), p. 113.

**“BEHOLD, HE PRAYS” NO. 1860**

**A SERMON**

**DELIVERED ON LORD’S-DAY MORNING, SEPTEMBER 20, 1885,**

***BY C. H. SPURGEON,***

**AT**

***“Inquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul, of Tarsus: for, behold, he prays.”***

***Acts 9:11.***

THESE words are the hallmark of genuine conversion. “Behold, he prays” is a surer witness of a

man’s conversion than, “Behold, he sings,” or, “Behold, he reads the Scripture,” or, “Behold, he

preaches.” These things may be admirably done by men who are not regenerate, but if, in God’s sense of

the term, a man really *prays,* we may know for sure that he has passed from death unto life. True prayer

is a sure evidence of spiritual quickening. The Holy Ghost has put spiritual life into the heart of the man

who prays, for prayer is the breath of heavenly life. Prayer is the outcome of that sense of need which

arises from the new life, a man would not pray to God if he did not feel that he had urgent need of

blessings which only the Lord can bestow.

While expressing his sense of need, and appealing to God for help, the praying man gives evidence

of being at peace with his Lord, and cured of his natural alienation. He who prays trusts, and thus reveals

the faith which saves. Some forms of prayer display great faith, but all real prayer is the working of

faith, either little or great. Will a man cry to God for mercy if he does not believe in Him? Will he plead

at the mercy seat if he does not expect to obtain his desire? Thus, dear friends, prayer of the true kind is

a voucher for the existence of spiritual life in its consciousness of need, in its turning towards God, and

in its faith in Him. Prayer is the autograph of the Holy Ghost upon the renewed heart.

Prayer is also an admirable form of communion with God, and as the carnal mind can have no

fellowship with God, it becomes the token of regeneration, the evidence of adoption. He that prays has

some knowledge of God, some acquaintance with the great Invisible. The habit of private prayer and the

constant practice of heart-fellowship with the Most High are the surest indicators of the work of the

Holy Spirit upon the heart. When it can be said of a man, “Behold, he prays,” the seal of the great King

is upon him, he bears the endorsement of the Searcher of hearts. Hence the Lord gave to Ananias this

sure indication that Saul of Tarsus was a converted man, by saying to him, “Behold, he prays.”

In Saul’s case, this indication was very especially remarkable, “Behold, he prays” had a peculiar

meaning in relation to this conversed Pharisee. I shall have to show you this at length. It was thought a

great wonder that king Saul, of the Old Testament, prophesied. So unexpected and singular was the

event that it became a proverb, “Is Saul also among the prophets?” But it was an equal marvel when this

more modern Saul was seen to pray. Is Saul of Tarsus among those who pray to Jesus for mercy? The

Lord from heaven Himself mentions it as a prodigy! He points to it as a thing to be beheld and wondered

at, for He says to His servant Ananias, “Behold, he prays.”

**I.** We will begin our discourse with the following observation, this expression concerning Saul of

Tarsus is remarkable, for IT IMPLIES THAT HE HAD NEVER PRAYED BEFORE. “Behold, he

prays” could hardly be spoken of one who had been accustomed to pray in former days.

This is very striking, for Saul was a Pharisee, and therefore a man who habitually repeated prayers.

Pharisees boasted of the regularity, number, and length of their prayers. Perhaps there had never been a

day in Saul’s life from the time in which he was conscious in which he had not gone through his prayers.

Many devout Jews spent nine hours a day in prayer, for they occupied an hour in actual supplication,

and sat still for an hour before and an hour after prayer, and this was done three times a day. Pharisees

offered prayer, not only in the temple and in the synagogue, but even at the corners of the streets where

they could be seen of men. Whatever the quality of their praying might be, there was plenty of it in

quantity. If any fact was in public evidence so that nobody could deny it, it was that Saul of Tarsus had

been much in prayer, and therefore it is the more striking that the Lord Himself should say to Ananias

concerning this constantly devout Pharisee, “Behold, he prays.”

Behold how the Lord revises the judgments of men. In the opinion of all who knew Saul of Tarsus,

the disciple of Gamaliel, he was much given to prayer, but He who searches the hearts, and knew Saul

well, and knew truthfully what prayer is, here declares that now at length he begins to pray. Despite all

his former superfluity of ostentatious devotion, Saul all his life, had never prayed at all, and what his

friends would have put down as a great mass of prayer, the Lord here makes nothing of. Until the first

broken-hearted confession of sin came from the poor blinded persecutor of Jesus, the Lord considered

that he had never prayed.

I want to push this fact home upon some who are present with us this morning, I mean those who in

a formal manner have always prayed and yet have never spiritually prayed. Your mother taught you a

form of prayer, this form you repeated all through your childhood and your youth, at this moment you

are most regular in bowing the knee, both morning and evening, and yet no single prayer may ever have

risen from your heart to the heart of God. You go constantly to your place of worship, you are diligently

observant of every Christian ordinance, you join in the responses, or you bow your head and listen in

silence to the extemporary utterance of your minister, and therefore you suppose that you pray, and yet it

may be a vain supposition. If anyone were to say that you had not prayed, you would be very angry, and

yet it is possible that such a statement would be strictly true.

How much I long that today, for the first time, you may in real earnest cry unto the Lord God, and

cause Him to bear witness that now indeed you pray! You will then think little of all your heartless

repetitions of prayers, and you will cry to God for the Holy Spirit who helps our infirmities, since we

know not what we should pray for as we ought.

I have told you that the Pharisees were noted for their prayers, and therefore it seems the more

singular that the Lord should announce that Saul of Tarsus had now begun to pray. Yet it was so, he was

now offering his first *real* prayer. That prayer of the Pharisee which we read just now from the

eighteenth chapter of Luke, was meant for prayer, but there is not a particle of prayer in it. He did not

ask for anything, he did not confess a necessity, nor plead a promise, he did not seek mercy, nor mention

propitiation. His formal thanksgiving was stained with proud self-esteem, and it was more the boast of

vanity than the request of humility. Much of what is called prayer is the husk, and not the kernel of

prayer. Suppose you take the best form that was ever written, and you go through that in the most

orderly style, you may do that, and continue to do it, throughout a life of seventy years, and yet you may

never have sought God in real earnest.

If you prefer to compose your own prayers you may do so throughout life, and you may make

prayers which shall be excellent in language, and you may even make a new one every morning and

every evening, and yet there may not have been a single atom of true supplication in the whole round of

pious effusions. What if your first prayer has yet to be prayed? What a solemn suggestion to you who

have been nursed in the lap of piety, and wrapped in the garments of religion! I do not wonder that it

cuts you to the quick. This heart-searching inquiry ought not to be thrust aside as if it did not concern

you. Unless your heart speaks to God, unless your soul comes into spiritual contact with the great Father

of Spirits, your form of prayer, whether it is liturgical or extemporaneous, is little worth. God is not the

God of the dead, but of the living, and this applies to prayers as well as men—

***“God abhors the sacrifice***

***Where not the heart is found.”***

One sentence of true heart-pleading, such as, “God be merciful to me a sinner,” is worth volumes of

mere lip-service.

Real prayer must be *spiritual,* and Saul’s prayers had not been such before. Words are but the body

of devotion, the confession of sin, the longing for mercy, the groaning for grace—these are the soul and

spirit of prayer. A man may have repeated the choicest words, and these may have been the outward

embodiment of true prayer, because his heart went with them, but on the other hand, he may have used

equally select expressions, and may not have prayed at all, for there may have been in him no stirring of

the heart towards God. A man may utter no word whatever, he may sit in absolute silence, and he may

be praying most effectually.

Moses cried aloud when he said not a word, and Hannah was heard in the temple when she made no

sound, but only her lips moved. I reckon that those prayers which cannot be expressed in language are

often the most deep and fervent. When desires are so weighty, that they burden our words and even

crush them down, then, are they most prevalent with God. There is power in that solemn silence which

is “frost of the mouth, but thaw of the mind,” when the soul flows with strong current in a deep and

hidden bed till it reaches the heart of God, and prevails with Him.

Anyhow, that prayer which is not spiritual is not reckoned of the Lord to be prayer at all, for “God is

a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.” You may, if you like, praise

God with organs, as the English do, or you may pray to God with windmills, as the Tartars do—the

things are very much alike, as I believe—but your praising and your praying will not be measured by the

heaving of the bellows, nor by the revolution of the sails, they will be measured only by the heart work

which was in them. If the spirit does not commune with God, there has been no prayer, there may have

been music and oratory, but there has been no prayer if the spiritual nature has not spoken with the

Father of Spirits. Notice, then, that we only begin to pray when we begin to live spiritual lives.

Next to this, Saul had never prayed a single *right* prayer of the kind which the Lord can accept. Saul,

hitherto had not known the Lord Jesus, and therefore he did not know the way of access to the Father

through His Son, whom He has appointed Mediator. Saul knew the letter of the truth according to the

ceremonial law, but he did not know the spirit of it as it is embodied in Jesus. He had been going about

to establish his own righteousness, but he had not submitted himself to the righteousness of Christ, and

therefore in his prayer he had not been traversing the road which led to the heart of God.

If a man were using his rifle at Wimbledon in a contest for a prize, if he were told, “It is not that

target on the right, but this upon the left which must be aimed at,” if he would continue to shoot towards

the right, even though he should make a center, yet he would not have scored, inasmuch as that was not

the target appointed in the competition, his best shots would count for nothing.

When a man does not pray in the Lord’s appointed way, nor through Jesus Christ, nor in dependence

upon the Holy Spirit, he does not pray at all. However fine his prayer, it is only a splendid sin. If you

employ a servant to do a work, and he obstinately persists in doing another thing, he will not earn his

wages. However industriously he works at what you have never set him to do, he will receive nothing at

your hands. So if you pray to God in a way which God has never ordained; if you refuse to use the name

which He has appointed; if you neglect the cultivation of that holy and humble spirit which the Lord will

alone accept, you may pray till your tongue cleaves to the roof of your mouth, but in God’s judgement

you have not prayed at all, and you will not receive anything of the Lord.

It is certain, too, that Saul of Tarsus had never made mention of *the name of Jesus* in his prayers, and

therefore God reckoned that he had not prayed. He had heard of Jesus, but he had rejected His claims

and hated His people. Our heavenly Father never turns a deaf ear to the name of Jesus when it is

honestly pleaded, but He will not hear us if we despise that ever-blessed name. There is none other name

under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved, there is none other name by which we can

hopefully approach the mercy seat. Saul had rejected that name, and had come in his own name, and

therefore he had not prayed at all.

Suppose a king should make a rule that every petition that was presented to him should bear a certain

stamp, which his representative would freely put upon it, then if a man neglected or refused to have his

petition thus endorsed, he could not wonder if his petitions were treated as impertinences and returned

unanswered. Virtually, such a man has sent in no petition whatever, since he has declined to comply

with the regulation without which no petition can be received.

Friends, let us see to it that we most humbly and heartily in our prayers plead the precious blood of

the Lord Jesus Christ, for the force of prayer lies mainly in our pleading the name and work of the well beloved Son of God. We must set ourselves on one side, and hide ourselves behind the Lord Jesus, for

we and our prayers can only be accepted in the Beloved, through the person, the merit, the sacrifice, the

ever-living intercession of the Lord Jesus Christ. If we have not prayed in the name of Jesus, we have

not prayed at all.

Furthermore, I should like you to notice that real prayer cannot come from men whose *characters*

are contrary to the mind of God. He whose character contradicts his prayer has not prayed, his life has

effectually pleaded against his lips. Saul of Tarsus was opposed to the Son of God, how could he be in

favor with God Himself? He did not believe the Gospel, though the seal of God was on it, how, then,

could God receive his prayer? How shall the Lord listen to us if we will not listen to Him? How shall

God accept us if we will not accept His Son? If we set ourselves in opposition to His Gospel, do we not

shut the door of mercy in our own faces? While we pretend to be knocking at heaven’s gate, we are

turning the key against ourselves.

Saul had been more than an opposer, he had become a persecutor, can persecutors enjoy the favor of

God? Can we hope for God’s blessing while we are cursing God’s people? How can a persecutor pray?

Saul of Tarsus was evidently full of hate and cruelty, how could he pray? Love is the element of the

children of God, “Every one that loves is born of God,” but Saul had conceived such an intense disgust

against the followers of the Crucified, that he hauled them to prison and voted for their death.

Brothers, we have no right to persecute any man for his religion or his irreligion, whether he be

Catholic, Jew, Turk, or Infidel, we must do nothing wrong towards him, nor rob him of any of his rights,

however erroneous his views may be. We are bound to be just and right towards all men as men,

whatever their religions convictions, or irreligious notions. Injustice is no friend to truth. We must not

fight God’s battles with the weapons of ill will. For us to hate those who are in error, and talk of them

with contempt or wish them ill, or do them wrong, is not according to the Spirit of Christ.

You cannot cast out Satan by Satan, nor correct error by violence, nor overcome hate by hate. The

conquering weapon of the Christian is love, and if Paul had sought to overthrow what he thought to be

an error by love, although he had been mistaken, he would not have been so guilty. Whoever they might

be, whether righteous or wicked, men or women, he would compel them to blaspheme the name of

Jesus, whom he judged to be an impostor. He seeks to domineer over their consciences, and to oppress

them for their belief, how, then, can God hear his prayer?

If you have the spirit of hate in you, it nullifies your devotions, and makes your prayer to be no

prayer. In love lies the essence of prayer and prayer ought to be the flower and crown of love. If I go

through the world hating my fellow men because they differ from me, and determining to force my own

doctrines upon others with an iron hand, I cannot lift that hand in prayer. A malicious heart pollutes the

sacrifice which it offers. When I come before God in prayer, I may be offending Him when I dream that

I am pleasing Him.

Friend, if you are living an ungodly life, I do not care how regularly you bend your knee in seeming

devotion, there is nothing in it. If you are not living as a Christian should do, your prayers prove

nothing, your matins and your vespers, your family prayers and your prayer meetings are the mimicry of

prayer, and nothing more. You may have been baptized, and you may have frequented the communion,

but it is all mockery, the caricature of godliness, and nothing more, unless you strive after holiness, and

labor to conform your life to the will of God. God will hear *us* when we hear *Him,* He will do our will

when we do His will, but persistence in known sin and especially indulgence in enmity and hatred, are

so destructive to prayer, that till we are free from them we do not pray. Be at peace with all men, or talk

not of prayer, lay aside all opposition to the Gospel of the Lord Jesus or you can no more pray than a

fiend of the pit.

Yet again, Saul with all his prayers had never truly prayed, because *humility* was absent from his

devotions. What a test this is! Saul had gone about the world feeling that he was a righteous man. Did he

not wear texts of Scripture between his eyes? What a pious man he was! Had he not broad borders to his

garments—borders of blue? What a saint he was! Did he not fast thrice in the week, and pay tithes of

mint and anise and cummin? There was not a better man in all the dominions of Caesar than this Saul in

his own judgment.

When he prayed, there was a high flavor of self-righteousness in his religious exercises, and this

made them disgusting to the Most High. The Lord delights in humble and contrite spirits, but the proud

He knows afar off. There was no confession of sin, no crying for mercy through a propitiation, his

prayer was the expression of thankfulness that Saul of Tarsus was a Hebrew of the Hebrews, as touching

the law blameless. In the courts above, where outward appearances are nothing and God looks at the

heart, his pious harangues were not reckoned to be prayers at all.

If you feel quite content with your own prayers, permit me to suggest that you do not pray, for few

who pray aright are ever content with their own petitions. Those who dream themselves to belong to the

Good-enough family will find themselves bad enough, and the Too-goods will find themselves shut out

of heaven. If you have a righteousness made out of your prayers, throw it to the dogs. Self-righteousness

is a leaven which the Lord commands us to put away, for He abhors it and considers that it pollutes His

Passover. If you pray as a deserving person, pleading your own good deeds, there is such a lie at the

bottom of your prayers that you have not prayed at all.

I say again this makes terrible work of a great many persons who have been brought up in outward

religion. Dear friend, be not vexed or angry if this should seem to come home to you. If before your eyes

the whole heap upon your threshing floor should be blown away like chaff, thank God that it has been

blown away so soon, while there is time to gather the true wheat. It is better for you to make the sad

discovery now than to make it when you come to die, or to wake up in another world where there will be

no hope of rectifying the error. Do let this thought come to every professor of religion this morning, that,

you may have been a praying man or woman for years, you may have come like Saul of Tarsus to the

fullness of your age, and have abounded in the appearance of devotion, and yet you may have to pray to

God for the first time.

**II.** This brings me to my second reflection, and that is, IT IS IMPLIED IN THE TEXT THAT IT

WAS A REMARKABLE THING FOR SUCH A PERSON TO NOW PRAY.

It is put with an ecce, a mark of admiration, “Behold, he prays!” It is a very difficult thing, a very

marvelous thing, for a man to truly pray who has been all his lifetime praying in a false way. It is a

miracle of grace to bring a proud Pharisee to plead for mercy like a penitent publican. It is not half so

wonderful that an irreligious man should begin to pray as that a vainglorious professor should begin to

pray. The most remarkable conversion that could take place here today would not be that of Elymas the

sorcerer, but of Saul the Pharisee. The most remarkable conversion in the apostolic age was that of a

man who from his youth up had been plunged in self-righteousness, and in the self-content which comes

of attention to ritual, and ceremony, and the form of godliness. “Behold *he* prays.”

It is hard for him to pray, because he is a person who has been a formalist for a long time, is so

rooted in the *habit* of formal devotion, and so contented with it, that it is extremely difficult to bring him

to attend to spiritual things. The letter kills in more senses than one, and the man so killed has no life for

the things of the spirit. If he goes up to his chamber at the hour of prayer, he runs along the old trams

without the least feeling and heart. He repeats the words, but he might as well be reading an unknown

language. The tendency is to say the same thing over and over again till the lips move mechanically, and

the soul is in a deep slumber. The Bible is read, but the mind is dozing. The sermon is heard, but the

heart is wandering. Where is the good of this? Yet how hard it is to get men out of it! It is easier to

attend a thousand masses, or to go to church every day in the week, than to offer one true prayer. It is

very difficult for you who are rich in nominal devotion to enter the kingdom of heaven. It is hard to get

the robe of Christ’s righteousness upon that man’s back who believes that his own coat is as good as it

needs to be, he has worn his own rags so long that they cling to him. He is too proud to beg, for he has

lived so long like a gentleman on his own income. He has been so long rich and increased in goods, and

in need of nothing, and he has grown so used to his way of external and superficial religion, that you

cannot get him, without a miracle of grace, to seek after that which is deep and true.

Again, *self-righteousness* is a very great hindrance to coming to Christ in prayer. In Christ’s day, the

publicans and harlots entered the kingdom before the Pharisees, who were self-righteous. It is a great

thing to conquer sinful self, but it is a greater thing to overcome righteous self. The man who is

downright bad and feels it, asks for mercy, but these people are bad at heart, and do *not* feel it, therefore

they will not seek the Lord. They think that they have done everything they ought to have done,

wrapping themselves about in their shoddy righteousness they imagine themselves to be quite fit to enter

into the royal feast without putting on the wedding garment of the king’s providing. It costs a selfrighteous man a great effort to stoop to prayer. If he did but know that his righteousness is only a part of his filthiness, he would change his note. The Scripture says, “All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags.” When we see them to be such, we are glad to be rid of them, for they are loathsome in themselves, and the foul disease of pride poisons every thread.

The man that has been accustomed to pray without his heart, and to be pious without being

converted, is very hard to be made to pray because he is *prejudiced* against the way of grace. He has

made up his mind that he will not see the light of God because he believes in his own light. You talk to

him about salvation by grace, redemption by the precious blood, and justification by faith alone, but he

cannot endure such themes, they may suit the wicked, but he is of another breed. He is overshadowed

with the glory of his own self, and therefore he cannot see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

The habit of superficial external religion once formed is as hard to break as for the Ethiopian to change

his skin. A man hugs his self-righteousness as he hugs his life. Skin for skin, yea, all that a man has, will

he give for his legal life, the life of self.

Besides, a self-righteous man knows that everybody thinks him to be right, and therefore he cannot

demean himself by such prayers and confessions as might suit a common sinner. If you talk to him about

being converted, why, dear sir, he needs no conversion. He was born good. He has always been a

Christian, he needs no change, you don’t know what a fine gentleman he is! He never cries in the

bitterness of his soul, “God be merciful to me, a sinner.” Why should he? His mother and father were

extremely good people, and he was born again at the font, and has since been confirmed. What do you

want more? Washed in the blood of Jesus! Well, perhaps he needs this as others do, but there is no

special sin in him, nothing certainly for which he could be condemned. Persons who are of this order are

seldom brought to pray. They may be called reprobate silver, for the Lord has rejected them. If ever such

as these are saved, it will astonish men and angels, and the Lord Himself will cry, “Behold, he prays.”

Even religious intensity and fervor may become a hindrance to a man’s conversion when that ardor

is for a false faith. The earnest formalist is encased in steel, and the arrows of the Gospel glance off him.

Some worship every nail of the church door and every tile of the chancel, if such a thing as a priest

should cross the road, they are ready to kiss the ground he treads upon. How can these be brought to the

simplicity of the faith?

Among Dissenters are there not persons who are obstinate for trifles, conservative for old methods,

hide-bound with habit, ferocious for externals, and yet devoid of spiritual life? Those who have none of

the inward and spiritual grace are often the more fierce for the outward and visible sign. The man who

has no money is a great stickler for a respectable appearance, the fact being that if he does not keep that

up, he will soon be in the *Gazette*. A sincerely gracious Christian is tempted rather to think too little of

externals than too much of them; he sets the highest value upon the inner life and faith in the Lord Jesus.

I say again, brethren, it is such a wonderful thing that the externally-religious man ever should begin to

pray in earnest that it is recorded as a wonder. “Behold, he prays.”

See what was needed in Saul’s case to make him pray—the Lord Jesus must Himself appear and

bring him to his knees. Nothing less than a light shining from heaven could show him his vileness. Oh

that such a light would break upon all self-righteous souls! The proud man must fall to the earth, cast

down from his high places. Until he lies low he will still glory in his flesh. He must be struck with

blindness, that he may be ready to accept the sight of faith. Three days he must neither eat nor drink, to

wean him from earth and make him feed on the bread of heaven. Great must be the agony of his spirit,

for he that has been so intensely self-righteous cannot be brought to Christ without a wrench. He that has

rested in himself so completely and so long needs to be torn up by the roots ere he will quit his carnal

confidences. It takes, as it were, a special interposition of grace to bring a religious professor to pray in

spirit and in truth.

**III.** And now I want you to notice, in the third place, that albeit it was a great wonder that Saul

prayed, yet IT IS DIVINELY DECREED IN THE TEXT THAT HE DID.

One would have liked to have heard Saul of Tarsus pray. See at him now! This fine, good man! How

humble, how lowly he is! His prayer began with a full and grievous confession of sin. He offered neither

excuse nor extenuation. He looked to Him whom he had pierced and mourned for Him. He owned that

he was the chief of sinners—“Because I persecuted the church of God.” The only thing he could say by

way of apology was, “I did it ignorantly, in unbelief.”

See there, alone in his chamber, with his eyes opened and yet blinded, He weeps, and cries, and

groans, and humbles himself before the Lord. Indeed he prays. The other day as he rode along to

Damascus everybody looked upon him as a saint, but now by his own confession he is a sinner of the

blackest sort. Hear how he defames himself. He repents in dust and ashes. He prays for mercy, he begs

to be forgiven his scarlet sins. He owns that if he were sent to hell it would be no more than just, but he

begs that for the Savior’s sake he may be spared and permitted to see the light of God’s countenance. I

think I hear him making this sad confession. Behold, he prays now!

Now you will find him acknowledging his great need. Why he says, “Lord, I need everything. It is

not one thing that I am devoid of, but everything is gone that is worth having. I need a new heart and a

right spirit, I need truth in the hidden parts, and that in the inward parts I may be made to know

wisdom.” He had nothing to boast of, he had turned from a boastful millionaire into a beggar. He would

cry, “Lord, give me my sight again, but specially grant me my spiritual sight. Take away the scales from

my heart as well as from my eyes. Help me to see Jesus as my Savior! Help me to live to His glory, as

before I have lived to persecute Him.” He prayed this time, and none could doubt it.

I think I can see mingled with that prayer the lowliest adoration. How he would worship Jesus of

Nazareth as his God now that he was conquered by Him! How he would cry, “My Lord, my Lord, have I

been persecuting You? Are *You* the Messiah whom all the twelve tribes expected, and have I rejected

You? Did I sit to see Your servant Stephen stoned, and keep the garments of those that stoned him, and I

have been breathing out threatenings against You, my Lord?” Surely the deep homage of his chastened

spirit must have come up sweetly before the exalted Lord as Saul bowed himself in the dust before Him,

and said again and again, “God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

“Behold, he prays!”

Consider what pleas he had. Did it ever strike you how Saul must have pleaded? Pleading is the

truest and strongest part of prayer. Now, how did Saul of Tarsus plead? Assuredly he urged the promise,

“Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return unto the Lord,

and He will have mercy upon him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.” He knew the Old

Testament Scriptures better than we do, and he would be sure to use them in his prayer. I hear him

crying, “O Lord, You have said, ‘Come, now, and let us reason together, says the Lord; though your sins

be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.’”

Surely, he also went over that fifty-first Psalm, every bit of it, it suited him exactly. “Deliver me from

blood-guiltiness, O God, you God of my salvation: and my tongue shall sing aloud of your

righteousness.”

Do you not think that when he had gone over those promises he would then plead the types of the

ceremonial law concerning Christ? How the fifty-third of Isaiah must have flashed in his mind! He was

blinded, but what a light must have flamed up in his spirit as he saw the Man of sorrows the

acquaintance of grief, and heard the prophet say, “Surely he has borne our griefs, and carried our

sorrows…The chastisement of our peace was upon him.” How Saul would begin to cry to Jesus, “Oh,

Son of God, be my scapegoat, be my sin offering, be my morning and evening sacrifice! Be to me the

blood of sprinkling and the Paschal Lamb!” Knowing, as he did, all the types of the Jewish law, he must

have found them rich in comfort now that, in beholding Jesus, he had found the key of them all.

And, beloved, all this must have been steeped in a wonderful fervor. If we could have stood outside

the door and listened, we should have understood why the Lord said, “Behold, he prays.” Before, you

might have heard him repeating words, but now he uttered groans, and cries, and sobs, and tears. Before,

you might have said to yourself, “He is saying his prayers,” but this time it was as when a man wrestles

for his life, and is in bitterness for his only son. All previous prayer was sham, but this was real; all the

rest was but a performance, but now he did real business with the Most High. “Behold, he prays.” Now

he is a real Israel, and lo, he comes off more than conqueror through Him that has taught him to pray.

**IV.** Lastly, we see that as soon as he did pray, IT WAS EVIDENT THAT THE LORD ACCEPTED

HIS PRAYER.

How do I know this from the text, “Behold, he prays”? Well, I know it from the text first, because

here is God *bearing witness* that he did pray. Might not the Lord stand in a prayer meeting and hear a

dozen of us talk our piece and never say, “Behold, he prays”? But if a voice from heaven were to say

concerning someone, “Behold, he prays,” we should know that the man was accepted of the Lord. So

was it with Saul. The first time he prayed, God heard him. Try it, my friend, try it, if this is your first

prayer this morning, breathe it to God with humble faith and He will hear you.

We know that God had accepted this first prayer, for He was *about to answer it*. He had Ananias in

readiness to go and comfort the poor blinded penitent. God is about to answer your prayer, my dear

brother, this morning if you have cried to Him. Perhaps the man is present in the Tabernacle who will

speak to you before you leave these walls, or somebody will soon call to tell you the way of peace more

perfectly. If now you quit the way of self-righteousness and formal devotion, and begin to cry out for the

living God, that God will meet you.

Moreover, we are sure that God accepted this first prayer because He *called attention to it* by a

“Behold.” It is as if God said to angels, to men, to everybody, “Behold, he prays.” We have heard of the

seven wonders of the world, and of other marvels concerning which men cry, “Behold,” but that which

strikes God most is a praying man, a sinner praying. God does not say, “Behold Herod on his throne,” or

“Behold Caesar in his palace,” but He does say, “Behold, he prays,” as if He would make the praying

man the center of observation, the focus of regard. “Behold, he prays,”

The heart of God is delighted with true prayer. The arch-enemy notices true prayer, and trembles

when a man falls on his knees. And God would have all His saints on earth, and His saints in heaven,

look down upon a man in prayer. To the great Father’s heart, it is a prodigal returning. He cries,

“Behold, he prays,” but He means, “Behold, he is coming home! Behold, he seeks his Father’s face!

Behold, I have found my son which I had lost!” Prayer is God’s delight, God’s admiration.

Beloved, has this ever been the case with you, that you could draw the attention of the great God to

yourself? I am afraid there are many of whom it would have to be said, “Behold, he never prays!” What

a sight upon earth!—a man created by his Maker who never worships his Creator, a man who is daily

fed by God’s bounty, but never worships Him! Sir, you are a monster, you are a creature among men

most loathsome. A man that lives without prayer ought not to live. It is a wonder that the earth does not

open her mouth and swallow up such a wretch. And yet when he does pray, God makes a wonder of it.

It is his first prayer this morning. I see him, the sermon is over, and he has reached home. He has

gone up to his room, he is afraid somebody will come in and disturb him, he is turning the key. He is

kneeling by the side of that bed on which he has slept so often without prayer, and he cries, “O God, I do

not know what to say, but be merciful to me, a sinner, and forgive my sins.”

I hear the rustling wings of angels as they gather around the sacred spot. Anon they fly upward

crying, “Behold, he prays.” Years shall pass on with you, young man, and you shall come to middle life

and be exposed to sharp temptation, what will you do then? Good spirits watch you, fearing lest you

should go astray, and devils watch for your halting. You will then remember that day in the middle of

September when you first prayed, and you will say to yourself, “I will again cry unto God, as I have

often done.” You go upstairs and say, “Lord, many days have passed since first I cried to You, and I

have not ceased to cry, but now I am in special trouble. I beseech You, deliver me!” God will help you.

The great wheel of providence will revolve for you. Meanwhile, both angels and devils have spied you

out, the angels sing and the devils mutter, “Behold, he prays.”

A few years have passed, the young man has grown old, and the time is come that he must die. He

has gone up to the same room for the last time, and there are those about him who weep and watch.

Mark the sweet serenity of the departing soul! He is looking into eternity without fear. He knows whom

he has believed, and he is ready to depart. What is he doing in his expiring moments? “Behold, he

prays.” Prayer, which has long been his vital breath and native air, is now—

***“His watchword at the gates of death;***

***He enters heaven with prayer.”***

Demons that gather about our last hour shall flee away as bats fly out of a cavern scared by a torch,

they shall flee when they hear the voice, “Behold, he prays.” The shining ones shall gladly meet the soul

that is on Jordan’s bank when they hear the voice, “Behold, he prays.” They shall meet the praying spirit

on the hither side of the river, and shall smile while the prayer of earth melts into the praise of heaven.

Soon shall we be forever with the Lord. God grant it may be so, for His name’s sake. Amen.

# Saul's Conversion

### by George Whitefield

***Acts 9:22 - "But Saul increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ."***

It is an undoubted truth, however paradoxical it may seem to natural men, that "whosoever will live godly in Christ Jesus, shall suffer persecution." And therefore it is very remarkable, that our blessed Lord, in his glorious sermon on the mount, after he had been pronouncing those blessed, who were poor in spirit, meek, pure in heart, and such like, immediately adds (and spends no less than three verses in this beatitude "Blessed are they who are persecuted for righteousness sake." No one ever was, or ever will be endowed with the forementioned graces in any degree, but he will be persuaded for it in a measure. There is an irreconcilable enmity between the seed of the woman, and the seed of the serpent. And if we are not of the world, but show by our fruits that we are of the number of those whom Jesus Christ has chosen out of this world, for that very reason the world will hate us. As this is true of every particular Christian, so it is true of every Christian church in general. For some years past we have heard but little of a public persecution: Why? Because but little of the power of godliness has prevailed amongst all denominations. The strong man armed has had full possession of most professors hearts, and therefore he has let them rest in a false peace. But we may assure ourselves, when Jesus Christ begins to gather in his elect in any remarkable manner, and opens an effectual door for preaching the everlasting gospel, persecution will flame out, and Satan and his emissaries will do their utmost (though all in vain) to stop the work of God. Thus it was in the first ages, thus it is in our days, and thus it will be, till time shall be no more.

Christians and Christian churches must then expect enemies. Our chief concern should be, to learn how to behave towards them in a Christian manner: For, unless we make good heed to ourselves, we shall embitter our spirits, and act unbecoming the followers of that Lord, "who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, threatened not; and, as a lamb before his shearers is dumb, so opened he not his mouth." But what motive shall we make use of to bring ourselves to this blessed lamb-like temper? Next to the immediate operation of the Holy Spirit upon our hearts, I know of no consideration more conducive to teach us long-suffering towards our most bitter persecutors, than this, "That, for all we know to the contrary, some of those very persons, who are now persecuting, may be chosen from all eternity by God, and hereafter called in time, to edify and build up the church of Christ."

The persecutor Saul, mentioned in the words of the text, (and whose conversion, God willing, I propose to treat on in the following discourse) is a noble instance of this kind.

I say, a persecutor, and that a bloody one. For see how he is introduced in the beginning of this chapter; "And Saul yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of our Lord, went unto the high priest, and desired of him letters to Damascus tot he synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem."

"And Saul yet breathing out." This implies that he had been a persecutor before. To prove which, we need only look back to the 7th chapter, where we shall find him so very remarkably active at Stephen's death, that "the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul." He seems, though young, to be in some authority. Perhaps, for his seal against the Christians, he was preferred in the church, and was allowed to sit in the great council or Sanhedrin: For we are told, chap. 8, ver. 1, "That Saul was consenting unto his death;" and again, at ver. 3, he is brought in as exceeding all in his opposition; for thus speaks the evangelist, "As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women, committed them to prison." One would have imagined, that this should have satisfied, at least abated the fury of this young zealot. No: being exceedingly mad against them, as he himself informs Agrippa, and having made havoc of all in Jerusalem, he now is resolved to persecute the disciples of the Lord, even to strange cities; and therefore yet breathing out threatenings. "Breathing out." The words are very emphatical, and expressive of his bitter enmity. It was as natural to him now to threaten the Christians, as it was for him to breathe: he could scarce speak, but it was some threatenings against them. Nay, he not only breathed out threatenings, but slaughters also (and those who threaten, would also slaughter, if it were in their power) against the disciples of the Lord. Insatiable therefore as hell, finding he could not confute or stop the Christians by force of argument, he is resolved to do it by force of arms; and therefore went to the high priest (for there never was a persecution yet without a high priest at the head of it) and desired of him letters, issued out of his spiritual court, to the synagogues or ecclesiastical courts at Damascus, giving him authority, "that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem," I suppose, there to be arraigned and condemned in the high priest's court. Observe how he speaks of the Christians. Luke, who wrote the Acts, calls them "disciples of the Lord," and Saul stiles them "Men and women of this way." I doubt not but he represented them as a company of upstart enthusiasts, that had lately gotten into a new method or way of living; that would not be content with the temple-service, but they must be righteous over-much, and have their private meetings or conventicles, and break bread, as they called it, from house to house, to the great disturbance of the established clergy, and to the utter subversion of all order and decency. I do not hear that the high priest makes any objection: no, he was as willing to grant letters, as Saul was to ask them; and wonderfully pleased within himself, to find he had such an active zealot to employ against the Christians.

Well then, a judicial process is immediately issued out, with the high priest's seal affixed to it. And now methinks I see the young persecutor finely equipped, and pleasing himself with thoughts, how triumphantly he should ride back with the "men and women of this way," dragging them after him to Jerusalem.

What a condition may we imagine the poor disciples at Damascus were in at this time! No doubt they had heard of Saul's imprisoning and making havoc of the saints at Jerusalem, and we may well suppose they were apprised of his design against them. I am persuaded this was a growing, because a trying time with these dear people. O how did they wrestle with God in prayer, beseeching him either to deliver them from, or give them grace sufficient to enable them to bear up under, the fury of their persecutors? The high priest doubtless with the rest of his reverend brethren, flattered themselves, that they should now put an effectual stop to this growing heresy, and waited with impatience for Saul's return.

But "He that sitteth in heaven laughs them to scorn, the Lord has them in derision." And therefore, ver. 3, "As Saul journeyed, and came even near unto Damascus," perhaps to the very gates, (our Lord permitting this, to try the faith of his disciples, and more conspicuously to baffle the designs of his enemies) "suddenly (at mid-day, as he acquaints Agrippa) there shined round about him a light from heaven," a light brighter than the sun; "and he fell to the earth (why not into hell?) and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me/" The word is doubled, "Saul, Saul:" Like that of our Lord to Martha: "Martha, Martha;" or the prophet, O earth, earth, earth!" Perhaps these words came like thunder to his soul. That they were spoken audibly, we are assured from verse 7, "His companions heard the voice." Our Lord now arrests the persecuting zealot, calling him by name; for the word never does us good, till we find it spoken to us in particular. "Saul, Saul, Why persecutest thou Me?" Put the emphasis upon the word WHY, what evil have I done? Put it upon the word PERSECUTEST, why persecutest? I suppose Saul thought he was not persecuting; no, he was only putting the laws of the ecclesiastical court into execution; but Jesus, whose eyes are as a flame of fire, saw through the hypocrisy of his heart, that, notwithstanding his specious pretenses, all this proceeded from a persecuting spirit, and secret enmity of heart against God; and therefore says, "Why persecutest thou me?" Put the emphasis upon the word ME, why persecutest thou me? alas! Saul was not persecuting Christ, was he? He was only taking care to prevent innovations in the church, and bringing a company of enthusiasts to justice, who otherwise would overturn the established constitution. But Jesus says, "Why persecutest thou me?" For what is done to Christ's disciples, he takes as done to himself, whether it be good, or whether it be evil. He that touches Christ's disciples, touches the apple of his eye; and they who persecute the followers of our Lord, would persecute our Lord himself, was he again to come and tabernacle amongst us.

I do not find that Saul gives any reason why he did persecute; no, he was struck dumb; as every persecutor will be, when Jesus Christ puts this same question to them at the terrible day of judgment. But being pricked at the heart, no doubt with a sense not only of this, but of all his other offenses against the great God, he said, ver. 5, "Who art thou, Lord?" See how soon God can change the heart and voice of his most bitter enemies. Not many days ago, Saul was not only blaspheming Christ himself, but, as much as in him lay, compelling others to blaspheme also: but not, he, who before was an impostor; is called Lord; "Who art thou; Lord?" This admirably points out the way in which God's Spirit works upon the heart: it first powerfully convinces of sin, and of our damnable state; and then puts us upon inquiring after Jesus Christ. Saul being struck to the ground, or pricked to the heart, cries out after Jesus, "Who art thou, Lord?" As many of you that were never so far made sensible of your damnable state, as to be made feelingly to seek after Jesus Christ, were never yet truly convicted by, much less converted to, God. May the Lord, who struck Saul, effectually now strike all my Christless hearers, and set them upon inquiring after Jesus, as their all in all! Saul said, "Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus, whom thou persecutest." Never did any one inquire truly after Jesus Christ, but Christ made a saving discovery of himself, to his soul. It should seem, our Lord appeared to him in person; for Ananias, afterwards, says, "The Lord who appeared to thee in the way which thou camest;" though this may only imply Christ's meeting him in the way; it is not much matter: it is plain Christ here speaks to him, and says, "I am Jesus, whom thou persecutest." It is remarkable, how our Lord takes to himself the name of Jesus; for it is a name in which he delights: I am Jesus, a Savior of my people, both from the guilt and power of their sins; "a Jesus, whom thou persecutest." This seems to be spoken to convince Saul more and more of his sin; and I doubt not, but every word was sharper than a two-edged sword, and came like so many daggers to his heart; O how did these words affect him! a Jesus! A Savior! And yet I am persecuting him! this strikes him with horror; but then the word Jesus, though he was a persecutor, might give him some hope. However, our dear Lord, to convince Saul that he was to be saved by grace, and that he was not afraid of his power and enmity, tells him, "It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks." As much as to say, though he was persecuting, yet he could not overthrow the church of Christ: for he would sit as King upon his holy hill of Zion; the malice of men or devils should never be able to prevail against him.

Ver. 6, "And he, trembling and astonished, said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" Those, who think Saul had a discovery of Jesus made to his heart before, think that this question is the result of his faith, and that he now desires to know what he shall do, out of gratitude, for what the Lord had done for his soul; in this sense it may be understood; "and I have made use of it as an instance to prove, that faith will work by love; but perhaps it may be more agreeable to the context, if we suppose, that Saul had only some distant discovery of Christ made to him, and not o full assurance of faith: for we are told, "he trembling and astonished," trembling at the thoughts of his persecuting a Jesus, and astonished at his own vileness, and the infinite condescension of this Jesus, cries out, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" Persons under soul-trouble, and sore conviction, would be glad to do any thing, or comply on any terms, to get peace with God. "Arise, (says our Lord) and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou shalt do."

And here we will leave Saul a while, and see what is become of his companions. But what shall we say? God is a sovereign agent; his sacred Spirit bloweth when and where it listeth; "he will have mercy on whom he will have mercy." Saul is taken, but, as far as we know to the contrary, his fellow-travelers are left to perish in their sins: for we are told, ver. 7, "That the men who journeyed with him stood, indeed, speechless, and hearing a confused voice;" I say, a confused voice, for so the word signifies, and must be so interpreted, in order to reconcile it with chap. 22, ver. 9, where Saul, giving an account of these men, tells Agrippa, "They heard not the voice f hi that spake to me." They heard a voice, a confused noise, but not the articulate voice of him that spake to Saul, and therefore remained unconverted. For what are all ordinances, all, even the ;most extraordinary dispensations of providence, without Christ speaks to the soul in them? Thus it is now under the word preached: many, like Saul's companions, are sometimes so struck with the outgoings of God appearing in the sanctuary, that they even stand speechless; they hear the preacher's voice, but not the voice of the Son of God, who, perhaps, at the same time is speaking effectually to many other hearts; this I have known often; and what shall we say to these things? O the depth of the sovereignty of God! It is past finding out. Lord, I desire to adore what I cannot comprehend. "Even so, Father, for so it seemeth good in thy sight!"

But to return to Saul: the Lord bids him, "arise and go into the city;" and we are told, ver. 8, that "Saul arose from the earth; and when his eyes were opened, (he was so overpowered with the greatness of the light that shone upon them, that) he saw no man; but they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus," that very city which was to be the place of his executing or imprisoning the disciples of the Lord. "And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink." But who can tell what horrors of conscience, what convulsions of soul, what deep and pungent convictions of sin he underwent during these three long days? It was this took away his appetite (for who can eat or drink when under a sense of the wrath of God for sin?) and, being to be greatly employed hereafter, he must be greatly humbled now; therefore, the Lord leaves him three days groaning under the spirit of bondage, and buffeted, no doubt, with the fiery darts of the devil, that, being tempted like unto his brethren, he might be able hereafter to succor those that were tempted. Had Saul applied to any of the blind guides of the Jewish church, under these circumstances, they would have said, he was mad, or going besides himself; as many carnal teachers and blind Pharisees now deal with, and so more and more distress, poor souls laboring under awakening convictions of their damnable state. But God often at our first awakenings, visits us with sore trials, especially those who are, like Saul, to shine in the church, and to be used as instruments in bringing many sons to glory: those who are to be highly exalted, must first be deeply humbled; and this I speak for the comfort of such, who may be now groaning under the spirit of bondage, and perhaps, like Saul, can neither eat nor drink; for I have generally observed, that those who have had the deepest convictions, have afterwards been favored with the most precious communications, and enjoyed most of the divine presence in their souls. This was after wards remarkably exemplified in Saul, who was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink.

But will the Lord leave his poor servant in this distress? No; his Jesus (though Saul persecuted him) promised (and he will perform) that "it should be told him what he must do. And there was a certain disciple at Damascus, named Ananias; and unto him, said the Lord, in a vision, Ananias; and he said, Behold, I am here, Lord." What a holy familiarity is there between Jesus Christ and regenerate souls! Ananias had been used to such love-visits, and therefore knew the voice of his beloved. The Lord says, "Ananias;" Ananias says, "Behold, I am here, Lord." Thus it is that Christ now, as well as formerly, often talks with his children at sundry times and after divers manners, as a man talketh with his friend. But what has the Lord to say to Ananias?

Ver. 11, "And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the street, which is called Straight, and inquire in the house of Judas, for one called Saul of Tarsus;" (See here for your comfort, O children of the most high God, what notice Jesus Christ takes of the street and the hose where his own dear servants lodge) "for behold, he prayeth;" but why is this ushered in with the word behold? What, was it such a wonder, to hear that Saul was praying? Why, Saul was a Pharisee, and therefore, no doubt, tasted and made long prayers: and, since we are told that he profited above many of his equals, I doubt not but he was taken notice of for his gift in prayer; and yet it seems, that before these three days, Saul never prayed in his life; and why? Because, before these three days, he never felt himself a condemned creature: he was alive in his own opinion, because without a knowledge of the spiritual meaning of the law; he felt not a want of, and therefore, before now, cried not after a Jesus; and consequently, though he might have said or made a prayer (as many Pharisees do now a-days) he never prayed a prayer; but now, "behold! He prayed indeed;" and this was urged as one reason why he was converted. None of God's children, as one observes, comes into the world still-born; prayer is the very breath of the new creature: and therefore, if we are prayerless, we are Christless; if we never had the spirit of supplication, it is a sad sign that we never had the spirit of grace in our souls: and you may be assured you never did pray, unless you have felt yourselves sinners, and seen the want of Jesus to be your Savior. May the Lord, whom I serve in the gospel of his dear Son, prick you all to the heart, and may it be said of you all, as it was of Saul, behold, they pray!

The Lord goes on to encourage Ananias to go to Saul: says he, ver. 12, "For he hath seen in a vision a man named Ananias, coming in, and putting his hand on him, that he might receive his sight." So that though Christ converted Saul immediately by himself, yet he will carry on the work, thus begun, by a minister. Happy they, who under soul-troubles have such experienced guides, and as well acquainted with Jesus Christ as Ananias was; you that have such, make much of and be thankful for them; and you who have them not, trust in God; he will carry on his own work without them.

Doubtless, Ananias was a good man; but shall I commend him for his answer to our Lord? I commend him not: for says he, ver 13, "Lord, I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he hath done to they saints at Jerusalem: And here, he hath authority from the chief priests to bind all that call upon thy name." I fear this answer proceeded from some relics of self-righteousness, as well as infidelity, that lay undiscovered in the heart of Ananias. "Arise, (said our Lord) and go into the street, which is called Straight, and inquire in the hose of Judas, for one called Saul of Tarsus; for behold, he prayeth!" One would think this was sufficient to satisfy him; but says Ananias, "Lord, I have heart by many of this man (he seems to speak of him with much contempt; for even good men are apt to think too contemptuously of those who are yet in their sins) how much evil he hath done to thy saints in Jerusalem: And here, he hath authority from the chief priests to bind all that call upon Christ's name, should bind him also, if he went unto him; but the Lord silences all objections, with a "Go thy way, for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake." Here God stops his mouth immediately, by asserting his sovereignty, and preaching to him the doctrine of election. And the frequent conversion of notorious sinners to God, to me is one great proof, amongst a thousand others, of that precious, but too much exploded and sadly misrepresented, doctrine of God's electing love; for whence is it that such are taken, whilst thousands, not near so vile, die senseless and stupid? All the answer that can be given, is, they are chosen vessels; "Go thy way, (says God) for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel: For I will show him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake." Observe what a close connection there is between doing and suffering for Christ. If any of my brethren in the ministry are present, let them bear what preferment we must expect, if we are called out to work remarkably for God: not great prebendaries or bishopricks, but great sufferings for our Lord's name sake; these are the fruits of our labor: and he that will not contentedly suffer great things for preaching Christ, is not worthy of him. Suffering will be found to be the best preferment, when w are called to give an account of our ministry at the great day.

I do not hear, that Ananias quarreled with God concerning the doctrine of election; no, (O that all good men would, in this, learn of him!) "He went his way, and entered into the house; and put his hands on him, and said, Brother Saul;" just now, it was THIS MAN; now it is BROTHER SAUL: it is not matter what a man has been, if he be now a Christian; the same should be our brother, our sister and mother; God blots our every convert's transgressions as with a thick cloud, and so should we; the more vile a man has been, the more should we love him when believing in Christ, because Christ will be more glorified on his behalf. I doubt not, but Ananias was wonderfully delighted to hear that so remarkable a persecutor was brought home to God: I am persuaded he felt his soul immediately united to him by love, and therefore addresses him not with, thou persecutor, thou murderer, that camest to butcher me and my friends; but, "brother Saul." It is remarkable that the primitive Christians much used the word brother and brethren; I know it is a term now much in reproach; but those who despise it, I believe, would be glad to be of our brotherhood, when they see us sitting at the right-hand of the Majesty on high. "Brother Saul, the Lord (even Jesus that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest) hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost." At this time, we may suppose, he laid his hands upon him. See the consequences.

Ver. 18, "Immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales, and he received sight forthwith;" not only bodily, but spiritual sight; he emerged as it were into a new world; he saw, and felt too, things unutterable: he felt a union of soul with God; he received the spirit of adoption; he could now, with a full assurance of faith, cry, "Abba, Father." Now was he filled with the Holy Ghost; and had the love of God shed abroad in his heart; now were the days of his mourning ended; now was Christ formed in his soul; now he could give men and devils the challenge, ,knowing that Christ had justified him; now he saw the excellencies of Christ, and esteemed him the fairest among ten thousand. You only know how to sympathize with the apostle in his joy, who, after a long night of bondage, have been set free by the Spirit, and have received joy in the Holy Ghost. May all that are now mourning, as Saul was, be comforted in like manner!

The scales are now removed from the eyes of Saul's mind; Ananias has done that for him, under God: he must now do another office, baptize him, and so receive him into the visible church of Christ; a good proof to me of the necessity of baptism where it may he had: for I find here, as well as elsewhere, that baptism is administered even to those who had received the Holy Ghost; Saul was convinced of this, and therefore arose and was baptized; and now it is time for him to recruit the outward man, which, by three days abstinence and spiritual conflicts, had been much impaired; we are therefore told, (ver. 19), "when he had received meat, he was strengthened."

But O, with what comfort did the apostle now eat his food? I am sure it was with singleness, I am persuaded also with gladness of heart; and why? He knew that he was reconciled to God; and, for my own part, did I not know how blind and flinty our hearts are by nature, I should wonder how any one could eat even his common food with any satisfaction, who has not some well-grounded hope of his being reconciled to God. Our Lord intimates thus much to us: for in his glorious prayer, after he has taught us to pray for our daily bread, immediately adds that petition, "Forgive us our trespasses;" as though our daily bread would do us no service, unless we were sensible of having the forgiveness of our sins.

To proceed; Saul hath received meat, an is strengthened; and whither will he go now? To see the brethren; "then was Saul certain days with the disciples that were at Damascus." If we know and love Christ, we shall also love and desire to be acquainted with the brethren of Christ: we may generally know a man by his company. And though all are not saints that associate with saints, (for tares will be always springing up amongst the wheat till the time of harvest) yet, if we never keep company, but are shy and ashamed of the despised children of God, it is a certain sign we have not yet experimentally learned Jesus, or received him into our hearts. My dear friends, be not deceived; if we are friends to the Bridegroom, we shall be friends to the children of the Bridegroom. Saul, as soon as he was filled with the Holy Ghost, "was certain days with the disciples that were at Damascus."

But who can tell what joy these disciples felt when Saul came amongst them! I suppose holy Ananias introduced him. Methinks I see the once persecuting zealot, when they came to salute him with a holy kiss, throwing himself upon each of their necks, weeping over them with floods of tears, and saying, "" my brother, O my sister, Can you forgive me? Can you give such a wretch as I the right-hand of fellowship, who intended to drag you behind me bound unto Jerusalem!" Thus, I say, we may suppose Saul addressed himself to his fellow-disciples; and I doubt not but they were as ready to forgive and forget as Ananias was, and saluted him with the endearing title of "brother Saul." Lovely was this meeting; so lovely, that it seemed Saul continued certain days with them, to communicate experiences, and to learn the way of God more perfectly; to pray for a blessing on his future ministry, and to praise Christ Jesus for what he had done for their souls. Saul, perhaps, had sat certain years at the feet of Gamaliel, but undoubtedly learned more these certain days, than he had learned before in all his life. It pleases me to think how this great scholar is transformed by the renewing of his mind. What a mighty change was here! That so great a man as Saul was, both as to his station in life, and internal qualifications, and such a bitter enemy to the Christians; for him, I say, to go and be certain days with the people of THIS mad way, and to sit quietly, and be taught of illiterate men, as many of these disciples we may be sure were; what a substantial proof was this of the reality of his conversion!

What a hurry and confusion may we suppose the chief priests were now in! I warrant they were ready to cry out, What! Is he also deceived? As for the common people, who knew not the law, and are accursed, for them to be carried away, is no such wonder; but for a man bred up at the feet of Gamaliel, for such a scholar, such an enemy to the cause as Saul; for him to be led away with a company of silly, deceived men and women, surely it is impossible: we cannot believe it. But Saul soon convinces them of the reality of his becoming a fool for Christ's sake: for straightway, instead of going to deliver the letters from the high priests, as they expected, in order to bring the disciples that were at Damascus bound to Jerusalem, "he preached Christ n the synagogues, that he is the Son of God." This is another proof of his being converted. He not only conversed with Christians in private, but he preached Christ publicly in the synagogues; especially, he insisted on the divinity of our Lord, proving, notwithstanding his state of humiliation, that he was really the Son of God.

But why did Saul preach Christ thus? Because he had felt the power of Christ upon his own soul. And here is the reason why Christ is so seldom preached, and his divinity so slightly insisted on in our synagogues: because the generality of those that pretend to preach him, never felt a saving work of conversion upon their own souls. How can they preach, unless they are first taught of, and then sent by God? Saul did not preach Christ before he knew him; no more should any one else. An unconverted minister, though he could speak with the tongues of men and angels, will be but as a sounding brass and tinkling cymbal to those whose senses are exercised to discern spiritual things. Ministers that are unconverted, may talk and declaim of Christ, and prove from books that he is the Son of God; but they cannot preach with the demonstration of the Spirit and with power, unless they preach from experience, and have had a proof of his divinity, by a work of grace wrought upon their own souls. God forgive those, who lay hands on an unconverted man, knowing that he is such: I would not do it for a thousand worlds, Lord Jesus, keep thy own faithful servants pure, and let them not be partakers of other men's sins!

Such an instance as was Saul's conversion, we may be assured, must make a great deal of noise; and, therefore, no wonder we are told, ver. 21, "But all that heard him were amazed, and said, Is not this he that destroyed them who called on this name in Jerusalem, and came hither for that intent, that he might bring them bound to the chief priests."

Thus it will be with all that appear publicly for Jesus Christ; and it is as impossible for a true Christian to be hid, as a city built upon a hill. Brethren, if you are faithful to, you must be reproached and have remarks made on you for Christ; especially of you have been remarkably wicked before your conversion. Your friends will say, is not this he, or she, who a little while ago would run to as great an excess of riot and vanity as the worst of us all? What has turned your brain? — Or if you have been close, false, formal hypocrites, as Saul was, they will wonder that you should be so deceived, as to think you were not in a safe state before. No doubt, numbers were surprised to hear Saul, who was touching the law blameless, affirm that he was in a damnable condition (as in all probability he did) a few days before.

Brethren, you must expect to meet with many such difficulties as these. The scourge of the tongue, is generally the first cross we are called to bear for the sake of Christ. Let not, therefore, this move you: It did not intimidate, no, it rather encouraged Saul: says the text, "But Saul increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ." Opposition never yet did, or ever will hurt a sincere convert: Nothing like opposition to make the man of God perfect. None but a hireling, who careth not for the sheep, will be affrighted at the approach or barking of wolves. Christ's ministers are as bold as lions: it is not for such men as they to flee.

And therefore (that I may draw towards a conclusion() let the ministers and disciples of Christ learn from Saul, not to fear men or their revilings; but, like him, increase in strength, the more wicked men endeavor to weaken their hands. We cannot be Christians without being opposed: no; disciples in general must suffer; ministers in particular must suffer great things. But let not this move any of us from our steadfastness in the gospel: He that stood by and strengthened Saul, will also stand by and strengthen us: He is a God mighty to save all that put their trust in him. If we look up with an eye of faith, we, as well as the first martyr Stephen, may see Jesus standing at the right hand of God, ready to assist and protect us. Though the Lord' seat is in heaven, yet he has respect to his saints in an especial manner, when suffering here on earth: then the Spirit of Christ and of glory rests upon their souls. And, if I may speak my own experience, I never enjoy more rich communications from God than when despised and rejected of men for the sake of Jesus Christ." However little they may design it, my enemies are my greatest friends. What I most fear, is a calm; but the enmity which is in the hearts of natural men against Christ, will not suffer them to be quiet long; No; as I hope the work of God will increase, so the rags of men and devils will increase also. Let us put on, therefore, the whole armor of God: let us not fear the face of men: "Let us fear him only, who can destroy both body and soul in hell." I say unto you let us fear him alone. You see how soon God can stop the fury of his enemies.

You have just now heard of a proud, powerful zealot stopped in his full career, struck down to the earth with a light from heaven, converted by the almighty power of efficacious grace, and thereupon zealously promoting, nay, resolutely suffering for, the faith, which once with threatenings and slaughters he endeavored to destroy. Let his teach us to pity and pray for our Lord's most inveterate enemies. Who knows, but in answer thereunto, our Lord may give them repentance unto life? Most think, that Christ had respect to Stephen's prayer, when he converted Saul. Perhaps for this reason God suffers his adversaries to go on, that his goodness and power may shine more bright in their conversion.,

But let not the persecutors of Christ take encouragement from this to continue in their opposition. Remember, though Saul was converted, yet the high-priest, and Saul's companions, were left dead in trespasses and sins. And, if this should be your case, you will of all men be most miserable: for persecutors have the lowest place in hell. And, if Saul was struck to the earth by a light from heaven, how will you be able to stand before Jesus Christ, when he comes in terrible majesty to take vengeance on all those who have persecuted his gospel? Then the question, "Why persecutest thou me?" will cut you through and through. The secret enmity of your hearts shall be then detected before men and angels, and you shall be doomed to dwell in the blackness of darkness for evermore. Kiss the Son, therefore, lest he be angry: for even you may yet find mercy, if you believe on the Son of God: though you persecute him, yet he will be your Jesus. I cannot despair of any of you, when I find a Saul among the disciples at ?Damascus. What though your sins are as scarlet, the blood of Christ shall wash them as white as snow. Having much to be forgiven, despair not; only believe, and like Saul, of whom I have now been speaking, love much. He counted himself the chiefest sinner of all, and therefore labored more abundantly than all.

Who is there among you fearing the Lord? Whose hearts hath the Lord now opened to hearken to the voice of his poor unworthy servant? Surely, the Lord will not let me preach in vain. Who is the happy soul that is this day to be washed in the blood of the Lamb? Will no poor sinner take encouragement from Saul to come to Jesus Christ? You are all thronging round, but which of you will touch the Lord Jesus? What a comfort will it be to Saul, and to your own souls, when you meet him in heaven, to tell him, that hearing of his, was a means, under God, of your conversion! Doubtless it was written for the encouragement of all poor, returning sinners; he himself tells us so: for "in me God showed all long-suffering, that I might be an example to them that should hereafter believe." Was Saul here himself, he would tell you so, indeed he would; but being dead, by this account of his conversion he yet speaketh. O that God may speak by it to your hearts! O that the arrows of God might this day stick fast in your souls, and you made to cry out, "Who art thou, Lord?" Are there any such amongst you? Methinks I feel something of what this Saul felt, when he said, "I travail in birth again for you, till Christ be formed again in your hearts." O come, come away to Jesus, in whom Saul believed; and then I care not if the high-priests issue out never so many writs, or injuriously drag me to a prison. The thoughts of being instrumental in saving you, will make me sing praises even at midnight. And I know you will be my joy and crown of rejoicing, when I am delivered from this earthly prison, and meet you in the kingdom of God hereafter.