

THE CONVERSION OF PAUL:  
CAN PEOPLE REALLY CHANGE?  
ACTS 9:1-9

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

John Perkins grew up in Mississippi. His mother died when he was seven months old. His father disappeared. He showed up four years later. John describes what happened: **"He arrived late one Friday night. ... He woke me up, and I saw him in the glow of the lamp. ... He hugged me in strong arms. And he talked to me. My daddy! ... The joy of belonging, of being loved, was almost more than my heart could hold."** The next afternoon, **"when he said he would be going ... There was only one thing on my mind: I would go with him. ... I saw he was heading toward town and started following him."**

Then came disaster. Daddy Perkins **"turned and saw me following. ... I followed, but at a careful distance behind. ... He came back ... And whipped me with a switch from a tree. ... 'Please, Daddy! Take me with you. Don't leave me alone again.' ... I could only stand there and cry. ... I looked back once but Daddy was already gone. And with him went my newfound joy in belonging, in being loved, in being somebody for just a little while."** (John Perkins, *Let Justice Roll Down*)

Thus John grew up without a father and with a lot of anger. At age 12 he worked all day hauling hay and expected to be paid \$1.50 or \$2, typical pay for a day. Instead, a white man paid him 15 cents. John later wrote, **"I had learned to hate all the white people in Mississippi. I hated their control over our lives."** What kind of hope is there for a young man like that who comes from such a hard background, who grows up without a father? Can people really change?

Down through history Christians have claimed that transformation is possible in Jesus. Many of us have experienced such a change. Others have questioned the explanation that change has resulted from a supernatural encounter. Probably the greatest of all such transformations and the most challenged of all such transformations was the conversion of the Apostle Paul. Historian Paul Johnson says, **"He was the first and greatest Christian personality; he has always been the most argued about, and the most often misunderstood."** (Johnson, *A History of Christianity*, p. 35) The New Testament portrays Paul as the human being most responsible for bringing the gospel of Christ to the various parts of the Roman Empire. This former persecutor of the church wrote half of the books of the New Testament.

Yet the German philosopher and skeptic Nietzsche also objected: **"Paul embodies the very opposite type to that of Jesus, the bringer of good news: he is a genius in hatred, in the vision of hate, in the ruthless logic of hate. What has not their nefarious evangelist sacrificed to his hatred! He sacrificed first and foremost his**

**saviour, he crucified him on his cross.... A god who died for our sins: redemption by faith: resurrection after death---all these things are falsifications of true Christianity, for which that morbid crank must be made responsible."**

Can people really change? Is there a God who supernaturally transforms the lives of people? Can our lives be changed? Can the lives of others around us be changed? If so, how does that happen? We want to consider some of these questions this morning as we consider the conversion to Christianity of the Apostle Paul.

I.

Let's look first at PAUL'S BACKGROUND. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. PAUL'S BACKGROUND) According to information that Paul himself gives us in the New Testament he was a descendant of the tribe of Benjamin. His Hebrew name Saul was no doubt given in regard to the most famous member of his tribe, King Saul. Paul was his Roman name.

An early church tradition says that his family came originally from Galilee. (TARSUS) Paul says that he was from Tarsus, which was a significant city in Asia Minor in the Roman province of Cilicia near the border of Syria. There is some evidence that his family was taken there by the Romans as a result of a Jewish rebellion. Tarsus had the best university in Asia Minor. Paul would have had exposure to Greek culture and philosophy in that city. Paul was also born a Roman citizen. As a Roman citizen Paul would enjoy legal rights and privileges that the vast majority of people in the eastern Mediterranean region did not. (PROJECTOR OFF)

At some point Paul went to Jerusalem to receive a religious education. He was eventually educated under Gamaliel, the most famous rabbi of that generation. Gamaliel and Paul were Pharisees, which meant, as we have seen, that they were legalists. The Pharisees had added many rules and laws to the original Hebrew Scriptures. Their concern in life was holy behavior that stemmed from observance of the Old Testament law and the rabbinic traditions.

Back at the end of #7 we saw that Paul was present at the stoning of Stephen. The first verse of the next chapter says that Paul was in hearty agreement with the decision to put him to death. Then in v. 3 of #8 the author Luke implies that Paul took a leadership role in the persecution that began against the Hellenistic, or Greek-speaking, Jews in Jerusalem. Acts 7:58 labels him as a "young man." (PROJECTOR ON--- GALATIANS 1:14) Paul in Galatians #1 v. 14 adds the explanatory note: **"And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers."**

Paul was well-suited to be a leader of the early church, to be the pioneer evangelist of the church, to be the apostle to the Gentiles, to be the author of much of the New Testament. He knew both the Hebrew and Greek cultures. (PROJECTOR OFF) He was fluent in both Greek and Hebrew. Because he was a Roman citizen, he would have

special opportunities and rights that would help him in his missionary travels. He had training as a tentmaker, which would provide a means of financial support at times during his travels. As a former persecutor of Christians he would understand thoroughly the thinking of the Jewish opponents he would encounter in his preaching. As one who had previously opposed Christ and imprisoned and perhaps killed Christians, he also would have humility that would limit the natural temptation he might have toward pride. As a zealous, educated, visionary, persistent individual he also had leadership qualities that would serve him well in his role in the early church. In retrospect we can see the wisdom of God in choosing this man as an instrument for bringing the gospel of grace to the Roman world.

We have looked at the command of Jesus in Acts 1:8 where he told His disciples to be witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and eventually the rest of the world. We have seen thus far in our study that this witness has been brought to Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria. The rest of the Book of Acts is going to focus on the witness that is brought to the rest of the world. Paul is going to have the leading role in accomplishing that.

## II.

Let's consider, then, PAUL'S CONVERSION as recorded for us in vv. 1-9 of #9. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. PAUL'S CONVERSION) The first two verses indicate that Paul still has a leading role in the opposition to the Christians. He goes to the high priest seeking letters from him so that he can bring back members of the Way to Jerusalem from Damascus.

Notice what term Luke uses to describe the Christians: the Way. This is a reference to Jesus' statement in John 14:6 that He is the way, the truth, and the life. Right from the beginning of the church Christians staked a claim for possession of absolute truth. They claimed to be in possession of the only way to God. Their opponents didn't like to use that term for the Christians. They frequently referred to them as the "sect of the Nazarenes." In a similar way today enemies of the gospel in Latin America often refer to evangelicals as belonging to "the sects." The term "sect" has a negative connotation.

(DAMASCUS) Damascus was about 150 miles from Jerusalem. In the first century there was a significant Jewish population there. The Jewish historian Josephus says that there were over 10,000 Jews killed in the city in the Jewish revolt that began in the year 66 AD. Apparently some of the Hellenistic Jewish Christians who fled Jerusalem in the persecution that followed the execution of Stephen ended up in Damascus. They probably witnessed for Christ in the synagogues of that city. Paul wanted to return them to Jerusalem for punishment.

The high priest and the Sanhedrin had religious authority over synagogues throughout the world. But Damascus was in another Roman province, and we might wonder how the high priest would have legal authority to bring people from another province or country to Jerusalem for legal judgment.

It seems that the Romans gave many of the countries which they conquered certain rights characteristic of independent nations. When the Jews rebelled against the Greeks in 142 BC the Romans were supportive of this rebellion. They granted the Jews certain favors; for they were also opposed to the Greeks. When Pompey finally occupied the land of Israel in 63 BC, he continued some of these favors. The Sanhedrin and the high priest were allowed to retain certain powers typical of leaders of a country. Among them was the right of extradition. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In the Jewish book of First Maccabees (xv.10), written before the time of Christ, the letter of a Roman ambassador to the ruler of Egypt is quoted. The Roman speaks about some Jews, saying, **“If any pestilent men have fled to you from their own country, hand them over to Simon the high priest, so that he may punish them according to their law.”** It appears that this right of extradition continued into the time of Paul.

Why was Paul so intense in his opposition to the Christians? There were hopes in the first century that the Messiah was coming. The rabbis taught that the keeping of the law by the Jewish people was essential if the Messiah was going to come. This growing Christian movement was a threat to that keeping of the Law. Paul regarded these Jewish Christians as heretics. How could the Messiah come if Jews were increasingly being caught up by this heretical movement? Jesus obviously was not the Messiah. He did not follow the tradition of the Pharisees. The resurrection that these Christians talked about had to be false. The disciples must have stolen his body from the tomb. These guys had to be deceivers.

Harsh measures were appropriate. Paul was no doubt familiar with the statement in 2 Maccabees (vi. 13), **“It is a mark of great kindness when the impious are not let alone for a long time, but punished at once.”** One of the documents from the Dead Sea Scrolls reflects the thinking of a Jewish sect called the Essenes in this general time period. (1 QS 9.22) It says that the righteous man **“bears unremitting hatred toward all men of ill repute.”** Paul may not have been familiar with that Essene document, but it reflects the mindset of religious Jews of that time. It also reflects the attitude of radical Muslims today.

Paul also had heroes in the Old Testament whom he could use as models for his own aggressive tactics. Elijah had received God’s approval for killing the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. The Levites had been blessed for killing fellow Jews who worshipped the golden calf at Mt. Sinai. Phinehas was commended by the Lord for killing a countryman who was consorting with a pagan Moabite. In more recent Jewish history Mattathias had been commended for killing apostates in the Maccabean revolt. So Paul was able to justify his violent behavior by thinking that he was doing it in the name of, and with the approval of, the Lord. But he was about to have an encounter that would change his thinking.

Verses 3 & 4 tell us, **“Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me.’”** It was a

five or six day journey to Damascus by foot. There were other men who came along with him to bring Jewish Christians back to Jerusalem. They may have been temple police.

As they were nearing Damascus--- perhaps as they crossed over the last ridge with Damascus in the green valley below them--- a bright light flashed around them. Paul says in Acts 22 & 26 that it was about noon. Last week in #8 the angel of the Lord appeared to Philip and told him to show up for a divine appointment with the Ethiopian eunuch at noon. Next week in #10 we will see that Peter has a divine vision at noon. Now in #9 the Lord also appears to Paul at noon.

The later accounts in Acts say that the light was brighter than the sun. They also indicate that the Lord Jesus Himself appeared to Paul in this encounter. The others also saw the light and heard the voice of Jesus. But for some reason they were not able to understand the words. We just have a brief summary of those words in this passage. The accounts in chapters 22 & 26 are more complete.

These first few brief words must have had a tremendous effect on Paul: **“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”** Paul was well aware that he was persecuting Christians. But now this supernatural, divine being or person was asking why Paul was persecuting Him. This simple question pointed toward the fact that this divine being was united in some way with the Christians. There was an implied organic unity between them and Him. Perhaps Paul’s understanding of the body of Christ began right here. Perhaps this initial question was the beginning of his understanding that Jesus had an intimate identification and unity with His followers.

According to Paul’s account recorded by Luke in #26 Jesus also made a statement to Paul, **“It is hard for you to kick against the goads.”** This was a proverb common in the Greek culture. (GOAD) A goad was a stick used to prod oxen to go faster. Sometimes when oxen were goaded, they would try to kick against the prod. Usually they only hurt themselves. Jesus is indicating that He has been goading Paul. He has been providing evidence of the truth of the gospel. Paul has seen and heard the testimonies of Christians. He has witnessed the martyrdom of Stephen. But he has denied the claims of Christ. He has resisted Him, and he has only hurt himself. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Paul must have been in a state of emotional shock and humility in v. 5 when he blurted out, **“Who art Thou, Lord?”** I suspect that he was using more than a polite term of address that one might use with any stranger. Paul realized that he was dealing with some kind of divine manifestation. The Lord responds, **“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”** That was a significant choice of title. He could have said, “I am the Messiah.” Paul believed in the coming Messiah. He could have said, “I am YHWH, the God of Israel.” Paul believed in Him. But the Lord said simply, **“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”**

It was clear to Paul that this was a divine encounter. The shock to him was that Jesus was the one behind this encounter. Jesus was God. He was the Messiah. The message of Stephen and the message of the other Christians was true. He had risen from the dead. He had ascended into heaven.

The Lord also did not say only, "I am Jesus." He said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." The first issue that has to be dealt with if anyone is going to enter into a relationship with God is the sin issue. Paul's sin was great. He had been actively and violently and aggressively opposing the work of God.

Acts 22:10 says that the initial response of Paul to this was: **"What shall I do Lord?"** In this simple question much also was communicated. Paul is, in effect, admitting his sin. He is submitting himself to the Lord. According to #26 vv. 16-18 Jesus told Paul, **"But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me."**

Our passage records only the brief instructions in v. 6: **"But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."** Verse 7 describes the reaction of the other men who were present. Luke says, **"The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one."** These guys saw the bright light, but they didn't see Jesus. They also heard a voice, or a noise at least. But they didn't understand what was said. Clearly they were shaken by what they had witnessed.

Verse 8 adds, **"Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus."** The temporary blindness that Paul experienced may have been related to the brightness of light associated with this appearance of Christ. Later Paul will make reference to his "thorn in the flesh," which seems to be a physical malady. Some have speculated that this physical problem may have involved his eyes, and the problem can be traced back to this encounter with Jesus. His physical eyes were blinded, but his spiritual eyes were opened.

So Paul went storming up the road to Damascus to persecute Christians. But now he is led into the city by the hand to become one of them. He is a changed man. A final note appears in v. 9: **"And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank."** It seems that Paul did some fasting. He had a lot to think about and digest. He perhaps did some repenting. He probably did some praying. He maybe did some rereading of Scriptures in his mind.

Those with an anti-supernatural bias have sought to explain away the conversion of Paul. Some have suggested that he had an epileptic fit on the road to Damascus.

Others have suggested that Paul had a gradual change in his thinking that came to a climax on his trip to Damascus. Many have promoted the theory that Paul was experiencing an intense inner struggle as a result of his exposure to Christians and his reevaluation of the Scriptures. This came to fruition in a religious and psychological about-face on the road to Damascus. Some have theorized that Paul's zealous opposition to the Christians was a psychological attempt to quench his own spiritual doubts.

All of these theories deny Paul's own testimony. To lie about his conversion would be to go against a central ethical belief of his Christian system. Paul made numerous statements about the importance of honesty and the evil of lying. Other observers give no hint of seeing any struggle or doubts about Paul's persecution of Christians. Most importantly Paul himself says that he had no qualms about his persecution of Christians. He attributes his change to a supernatural encounter with the living Son of God on the road to Damascus.

It is not as if there is doubt about the circumstances of his conversion either because of a brief, passing reference to it. For Paul the Damascus road experience was foundational for his new direction in life. He makes many references to it in his own writings. Here in Acts alone there are three separate accounts of this conversion event. In fact there is more space given to the Damascus road conversion in the New Testament than to any other event except the crucifixion of Jesus.

### III.

So what are we to get out of the conversion of Paul? Let's consider for a few moments PAUL'S CONVERSION SIGNIFICANCE. (PROJECTOR ON--- PAUL'S CONVERSION SIGNIFICANCE) There are three things that I would like for us to notice about the dramatic conversion of Paul the Apostle.

#### A.

The first is that IT LED TO THE DYNAMIC GROWTH OF THE CHURCH. (III. A. IT L TO THE DYNAMIC GROWTH...) In human terms Paul's conversion to Christianity had more impact on the spread of early Christianity than the conversion of any other individual. It was Paul who would bring the gospel to the far reaches of the Roman Empire. It was Paul who would become the leading missionary to the Gentiles. It was Paul who would become the most prominent and gifted spokesman for Christianity to both the secular and religious world. It was Paul who would leave more inspired doctrine in written form than anyone else. Luke recognized these contributions. That is why the remainder of the Book of Acts will focus on his exploits.

#### B.

Secondly, THE CONVERSION OF PAUL WOULD BECOME A LASTING TESTIMONY TO THE POWER OF CHRIST. (III.B. THE CONVERSION OF PAUL WOULD...) It has had apologetic value in the history of the church from the first century until this day. For a rising star in Judaism, for the leading persecutor of Christians to suddenly become a follower of Jesus was an incredible catch for the early church.

The story of his conversion would have a powerful effect in his own outreach. As a person who had gained prominence in Jewish circles, his life was not unknown to Jewish leaders. Paul was to have many opportunities to present that story in synagogues throughout the Roman Empire and even to leaders of the Sanhedrin itself. But with his education, his communication ability, his knowledge of Greek and Roman culture, he would also be a powerful spokesman to the Gentile world.

Down through history his testimony has continued to have a lasting impact. Lord George Lyttleton, was a British lawyer, member of Parliament, and later chancellor of the exchequer in the 1700s. He was by no means a Christian. One day he and a fellow barrister by the name of Gilbert West were talking about the Christian faith and about what an unstable foundation it was built upon. They reflected upon the notion that the two main supports of Christianity were the resurrection of Christ and the conversion of Paul of Tarsus. The two of them decided to write books disproving these two claims. West agreed to write a book disproving the resurrection of Christ. Lyttleton agreed to write a book showing that the conversion of Paul was a fraud.

When the two of them got back together, they discovered that they each had become convinced of the opposite conclusion. West wrote a book showing that the resurrection of Jesus had to be true. Lyttleton in 1747 at age 38 wrote *Observations on the Conversion and Apostleship of St. Paul*. Lord Lyttleton became an evangelical Christian because of the convincing evidence that Paul had been changed because he had a genuine encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus.

The personal conversion stories of us Christians can also have an impact. We need to be prepared to share them. The point is to simply share what we were like before our conversion, what we are like after our conversion, and how the transformation came about. If we have a reasonably consistent Christian life that backs up our words, that life story can have a powerful effect, especially among people who have regular contact with us. It is difficult to deny or argue against a changed life.

C.

The third and final lesson that I would like to talk about is that PEOPLE CAN CHANGE. (III. A. B. C. PEOPLE CAN CHANGE) Imagine what Christians in Jerusalem must have thought about Paul. This guy was an enemy of the faith. He had a vendetta against the church. He was locking believers up. He may have even helped to get some of them killed. Paul was not just a hopeless cause, he was downright evil.

I wonder if any Christians in Jerusalem imagined that Paul could ever become one of them. I wonder if any Christians prayed for him. I wonder if any went out of their way in an attempt to win him for Christ.

Despite the seemingly hopeless cause Paul may have seemed to be to the Christian community, he was converted. The transformation was the result of the power of God. He had the same basic personality traits. He still had zeal. He still had communication



abilities. He still had persistence. He still was a natural leader. But he had been humbled. The hatred toward enemies was replaced by love. This guy would preach that Christians should love their enemies, not persecute them. He would talk about the need for people to trust in the grace of God rather than upon their own efforts to achieve God's righteousness. Most importantly he would preach the need for commitment to the person He used to persecute.

The greatest force for change in people's lives is not self-effort. It is not counseling. It is not fear. It is not even religion. It is the power of God. Notice also that it is God who initiated the process. Paul wasn't looking for change. By all the evidence we have he was content with the direction of his life. There was nothing in him deserving of favor from God. Paul was persecuting the followers of Jesus. He was an enemy to the truth. But the Lord sought him out.

It is the same with us. (JOHN 6:44) Jesus said in John #6 v. 44, **"No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent me draws him."** But, you see, there is reason for hope from this. If God is the initiator in this transformation process and if he initiates His work in individuals apart from whether there is anything about them deserving of grace, there is cause for hope that he may change those around us who seem to be the most resistant to spiritual change, including fathers who seem to be clueless about their basic responsibilities. (PROJECTOR OFF)

John Perkins, the angry young man whose father deserted him, moved to California in 1947. He was drafted into the army. He served in Korea. In 1951 he got married. He had a son. When Spencer was three or four, his parents sent him to a Vacation Bible School. Spencer came home singing that Jesus loves all the children of the world. John decided to check out that church. He was warmly received. He read the Bible. He became a Christian. His life was dramatically changed. He became a good father. He learned to love even white people. Worst of all he became a Baptist minister. He moved back to Mississippi. He became a Civil Rights leader who promoted nonviolence. (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN PERKINS) At age 94 he is still going strong.

People can change. But the biggest changes come about only as a result of people coming into a personal relationship with Christ. While God is the initiator in the process, he has also chosen to use human means to accomplish His will. While occasionally He confronts a Paul directly and supernaturally, more often he uses the witness of faithful Christians and the prayers of His saints to touch the lives of unbelievers. So we need to pray, and we need to be witnesses.

The fact that people can change also means that there is hope for us. For the same power of God that transformed him is available to us today. (PHILIPPIANS 1:6) The Apostle Paul later wrote in Philippians #1 v. 6, **"...I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."** He also wrote in 2 Corinthians 3:18 (2 CORINTHIANS 3:18), **"And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image [the**

image of Christ] **from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.**"

People can change. People around us can be changed, and we can be changed. The issue is whether we will pray to the Lord about those others to be changed, and whether we will depend upon Him to change us.