

“RECEIVING THE ENEMY AS A BROTHER”

ACTS 9:1-19

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Acts 9:1-19. ¹Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³ Now as he was going along and 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 do you persecute me?"

⁵ He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." ⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. ⁸ Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹ For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

¹⁰ Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." ¹¹ The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, ¹² and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight."

¹³ But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; ¹⁴ and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." ¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; ¹⁶ I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

¹⁷ So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, ¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus. (NRSV)

A. Introduction

Today we read a story about the conversion of Saul (Paul). The story begins and ends with a reference about suffering. The story begins with Saul determined to make Christians suffer and then, shockingly, the story ends with Saul himself ready to suffer for Jesus. It is a story of transformation and conversion.

The passage is familiar to many Christians. But it is largely misunderstood. Some people believe the story is about how Paul's guilt ridden conscience motivates him to convert. Others think that the Damascus road experience is a model for all conversions. Both notions are not supported by the story. We need to stick to the story and let the story shape our understandings.

1. Dramatic conversion stories

One of the first things we should note is where Luke places this story. He could have put it in a different place (e.g., chapter 11 just before Paul's mission begins).

However, Luke puts Paul's conversion story here in chapter 9. Why?

The story of Saul fits within the larger narrative about dramatic conversions:

- In Acts 8:4 we read about the conversion of the enemies of the Jews, the dreaded Samaritans.
- In Acts 8:26 we read about the conversion of the Ethiopian, who was an outsider, an African, and who was turned away from worshipping at the Temple because he was a eunuch.
- Now, in Acts 9:1, we read about Saul, who was on a search and destroy mission against the church.
- After this story, in Acts 10, we read about the conversion of Cornelius, a military commander for the Romans who occupied and oppressed the Jewish people.

Luke leaves no doubt. We are reading *stories about enemies* of the early followers of Jesus. And they all converted to Christ!

2. The greatest enemy of the church

Let's look at Saul for a moment—the greatest enemy of the early Christian movement. We met Saul in Acts 7:58. Luke tells us Saul was a certain young man who had watched the garments of these who stoned Stephen (7:58). Saul approved Stephen's execution (8:1).

Moreover, after the execution Saul went on a violent, house-to-house search for Christians to put them in jail (8:2-3).

Saul is put in sharp contrast to the other characters in the narrative. For example, Saul's murderous activity is in sharp contrast to Stephen, who says, "Do not hold this sin against them" (7:60); Saul murders, Stephen forgives.

Or again, the Samaritans eagerly listen to Philip and then convert (8:10-13). In contrast, Saul wants to silence Christians.

In this way, Luke set the stage for "the most dramatic conversions of all—the conversion of *the most notorious enemy of the church*, a man named Saul."¹

3. Three accounts of Saul's conversion

Acts 9:1-19 is one of three accounts of Saul's conversion. Saul's conversion was so important to the early church that Luke recounts the story three times—Acts 9:1-19, Acts 22:5-11, and Acts 26:12-18.²

Luke is concerned that the readers understand the gravity of Saul's conversion and how God deals with enemies. What happens to the chief enemy of the church? In answer, Luke tells a story in four scenes.

¹ Willimon, *Acts, Interpretation*, 1988: 74.

² What's interesting is that each retelling of the story is similar, yet different. There are some discrepancies. For example, Acts 9:7 says that Saul's companions *heard the voice, but didn't see anyone*. In contrast, Acts 22:9 says that they *saw the light, but didn't hear the voice*. Faw says, "Probably they hear a sound but not the words expressed, and, if so, both statements are true." Chalmer E. Faw, *Acts*, BCBC, 1993: 110-11.

B. Saul persecutes Christians (9:1-2)

In scene one, Saul is on a search and destroy mission against the church. He not only persecutes Christians in Jerusalem (8:2-3), he also gets authorization from the high priest to chase Christians who have gone to Damascus, which was a city of about 10,000 Jews.³

It is clear that Saul is portrayed as the “number one enemy” of the church. Saul wants to destroy the messianic movement, known as “the way” (9:2).⁴

C. Saul encounters Jesus (9:3-9)

In scene two, Saul is *on the way* to Damascus when there is an abrupt event. Paul and his companions experience a tremendous bright light—at noontime, they experience something brighter than the sun (22:6; 26:13)—and a sound or voice, and they fall to the ground.

1. Divine manifestation (9:3)

It’s a theophany, a divine manifestation. The bright light, the falling to the ground, tell us that something extraordinary is happening.

Like theophanies in the OT, Saul is addressed with the double vocative: “Saul, Saul,” just as God addressed other noteworthy figures: “Abraham, Abraham” (Gen 22:11), “Jacob, Jacob” (Gen 26:2), and “Moses, Moses” (Exod 3:4).

2. Why do you persecute me? (9:4)

Notice what the Voice asks: “Why do you persecute me?” Saul thinks he has been persecuting Christians. But the Voice makes it clear Someone else is being persecuted. To persecute a follower of Jesus is to persecute Jesus himself. As Luke 10:16 says, “He who rejects you, rejects me.”

Think of madman hurting someone’s child. Hurting the child hurts the parent. The same is true for Christ and his followers.

There is a warning here. If someone criticizes, undermines, or otherwise harms a Christian trying to do Christ’s work, it is tantamount to criticizing, undermining, and harming Christ. That’s a grave offense whether the target is Jerry Falwell (on the right) or Jim Wallis (on the left) or Bishop Spong (who’s off the hook).

There is also encouragement. When you have been belittled (disparaged or snubbed) for your Christian faith, when your efforts to imitate Jesus have been scoffed at, either in person or by our culture, you are suffering with Christ. You are participating in the divine life. And that gives you some terrific insight into God.

3. Who are you? (9:5)

³ Josephus, *War* 2.20.2 gives the number at 10,000; *Ant.* 14.10.20-21 states that the high priests jurisdiction include communities outside Jerusalem.

⁴ The “way” is used to describe believers six times, including Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22, plus Acts 16:17 mentions “a way of salvation” and Acts 18:25 refers to “the way of the Lord/God.”

Saul's response is ironic. He says, "Who are you?" Ironically, Saul is a zealot for God, but he doesn't know the Divine Light even when it strikes him blind.

Saul was an ancient jihadist. Saul thinks he is doing God's work—protecting his religion from messianic madness—so he must kill people.

Saul is wrong. Saul had extremely strong religious convictions. He had sincere religious beliefs combined with decisive action. But that doesn't matter. Religious sincerity doesn't count. Zealotry doesn't count. What matters is truth—God's truth.

But if we, as human beings, think we have the truth ... that we possess it completely and absolutely... we play God, and we'll probably miss the truth.

That was Saul. He thought he had the truth. He had a ridged and arrogant set of religious beliefs. He murdered people in the name his religious convictions. That tells you something is wrong.

Saul was extremely stubborn. So God Himself had to shatter his dangerous, little religious world. God Himself had to blind him and knock him to the ground.

Sometimes God has to blind us to get our attention. Sometimes God allows us to feel confused and disoriented and morally and spiritually blind. That's an alarm clock saying, "Hey, you need to wake up. You can't see. You need God!" And just like Paul needed someone to lead him by the hand, you need to let somebody take you by the hand. We all need that sometimes. Let someone help you.

Other times God knocks us to the ground. Some of us are running in the wrong direction. And we've been running in the wrong direction so long, we don't know which way is up or down. We can't tell heaven from hell. We're off running to Damascus to kill something. We're destroying people—people that God likes. So God knocks us down—we lose a job, we lose face, we lose friends, we lose something important—God take something away from us. He knocks us down, so we won't hurt any else. Saul was hurting people. God had to stop him.

Now notice what else Paul says. He says, "Who are you, Lord?"— When Paul says, "Lord," it signals a crucial turning point. Lord can mean *sir* or *master*, but it can also mean the *Lord God*. Paul thought he had all the answers. He didn't. Now he's realizing it. He's helpless. He can't see and he can't walk anywhere, but his mind is opening. And he's asking questions. Is that you, God?

D. Ananias encounters Jesus (9:10-16)

In scene three, Ananias encounters Jesus. Heroically, Ananias is going to help the very person (Saul) who is coming to kill him and his fellow brothers and sisters.

Christ comes to Ananias in a vision and Ananias responses with "Here I am" (cf. Gen 22:1; 1 Sam 3:6, 8). He doesn't run away or hide. He's ready to do God's work, even though he's also skeptical.

The Voice doesn't argue with Ananias objections about Saul, but tells him, "Go". Then comes the bombshell. The Voice says that Saul is a "chosen vessel or instrument" (*skeuos eklogēs*) (9:15).

A *skeuos* is an object or thing, like a container or vessel or a dish. What is shocking is that the Voice says that Saul is a chosen vessel (*skeuos eklogēs*). The word "chosen" (*eklogēs*) refers to something that is selected because it is preferred over other things.⁵ Saul is a preferred vessel!

The Voice says that Saul will "carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and sons of Israel" (9:15). So, the one who persecuted people who "invoked the name" (9:14), will now go forth and "carry the name" (9:15).

The image is Saul is that he is a container or vessel. And Jesus' name is poured into Saul. He carries that name within him wherever he goes. Saul carries the name of Jesus and serves it people who need the Name. What does it mean to carry the Name within you?

E. Saul is "Brother Saul" (9:17-19)

In scene four, Ananias does exactly what he's told. He goes to the house where the dreaded enemy is staying—it could be a trap—but he goes out of obedience. Despite fear, he obeys God.

When Ananias sees Saul, he says an amazing thing: He calls Saul, "Brother." Saul is not a Christian yet, but Ananias calls him a Christian brother, because he trusted the Voice.

Then Ananias lays hands on Saul. Saul receives the Holy Spirit and is healed and is then baptized. Saul eats food (*trophē*)—they break bread together! (9:19). Saul's conversion is complete.

F. Conclusions

What conclusions can we draw?

1. People change through divine and human encounter

The story is not about the inner turmoil of Saul, agonizing over a guilty conscience. The story tells us nothing about the inner, psychological workings of Paul.

This story of conversion has to do with someone (Saul) being approached by God and God's representatives (Ananias) and being changed in the process.⁶ People change through divine and human encounter, not through tormented introspection and self-denigration.

2. Conversion is not something we do

⁵ Louw-Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the NT*.

⁶ Willimon, 78.

Conversion is not something we do. What did Saul do? Nothing. The radical change that Saul underwent was something Christ did, not Saul.

We might wonder why God picked Saul as a “chosen instrument,” but we are not told. The choices are God’s. Saul was a murderer. From the Christian perspective, he was a blasphemer and beyond hope. But God redeemed him. And that gives us all hope.

3. Saul’s conversion was tough journey

Saul’s conversion was a tough journey. God had to blind him and knock him down. He had to experience helplessness, blindness, confusion, and child-like dependence to prepare him for receiving Christ and entering the community of faith.

4. The church accepts whoever God calls to be part of the family

Amazingly, Saul is welcomed, baptized, and shares table fellowship with the church. The dreaded enemy becomes a valued brother. The church, in the person of Ananias, risked its life for the sake of the enemy. The church, in the person of Ananias, cared for and nurtured the enemy into the family.

5. Saul’s conversion is not necessarily normative for every Christian

Saul’s conversion is often taken as the model for all conversions. Evangelists often create the impression that everyone must come to Christ in some dramatic way. This is a mistake.

There is no one pattern of conversion in the NT. For example, there are mass conversions and baptisms at Pentecost (2:37-41); there’s the single, joyful conversion of the Ethiopian (8:36-38); the case of Timothy being nurtured in the faith from early childhood on (2 Tim 3:10-17); the dramatic falling of the Spirit on Cornelius (10:44-48).

Summary: This story is about conversion, specifically the conversion of an enemy. The story began with Saul on the way to Damascus to kill Christians. The story ends with Saul on the way with Jesus ready to die for Christ. The story is about how God converts the enemy, but also about how a Christian receives the enemy as a brother. Who are our enemies? How shall we be a catalyst for their conversion? How can we be Ananias and risk our security for the sake of the enemy, and for the sake of Christ?