

The Continuing Acts of Jesus: Saving the Worst Sinner Ever

Acts 9:1-19

August 27, 2017

Dan Hoffman

In 30AD Jesus died on the cross. His enemies thought this was the last of Him, but then, three days later He rose from the dead. After spending 40 days with His disciples He ascended back to heaven. 10 days after that His Spirit fell on the apostles, filling them with power, purpose and a plan to extend His kingdom to the ends of the earth. And with this the church was born.

With the Holy Spirit all over him Peter started preaching and thousands gave their lives to Christ. Transformed by what they experienced they began living in such radical community that the city of Jerusalem began to be turned right-side-up.

But numerical growth brought tension with it as well. From inside, the church struggled to overcome old barriers like race and social standing. Others wrestled with attempting to look more spiritual than they were, and some lied about how much money they were giving to God.

From outside, opposition quickly escalated to persecution. At first the apostles were harassed and arrested. And then, when a godly man named Stephen refused to stop speaking about how the Old Testament pointed to Jesus, the religious leaders were enraged and stoned him to death. He became the first person to die because he was living for Jesus.

Following Stephen's murder persecution in Jerusalem erupted, and all the Jesus loving non-residents of the city fled for their lives. A man named Philip was among those who fled and ended up in Samaria. But instead of going into hiding, he started proclaiming "the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus"¹ and Samaria came to Christ.

Jesus' prophecy that once His Spirit came upon His people they would become His witnesses from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth was coming true.

...

Today we are in Acts chapter 9. Please grab the Bible from the pew in front of you, or open the one on your device as The Continuing Acts of Jesus carry on.

Now in Acts 9 we get perhaps the greatest conversion story in Scripture. Saul of Tarsus is transformed from a hunting, arresting, murdering hater of Jesus into one of the greatest Jesus-followers of all time.

But before we dig into Acts 9, keep your finger there, please flip forward to 1st Timothy chapter 1 (page 839 in the pew Bible). I want to start by looking at a text where Paul talks about his conversion and what it accomplished. 1 Timothy 1, starting in verse 12:

¹ Acts 8:12

[Read 1 Timothy 1:12-14]

Over the last couple weeks we've been looking at Acts 8 and the aftermath of Stephen's murder. And what we saw was that Saul, full of rage, began to destroy the church like a wild animal tears apart its prey.

And that is what Paul is telling Timothy about in this passage. And he starts by telling him how thankful he is that, given his history, Christ considered him trustworthy enough to play a role in the increase of the kingdom. And so he remembers back to where he has come from – he was a blasphemer and a violent man, and so it was only by God's incredible grace that he is blessed to be part of what Jesus is doing.

Now Paul could have left it there, but he doesn't. Instead he goes on to make a profound connection between his salvation and your own. Look at verse 15:

[Read 1 Timothy 1:15-16]

What Paul says here is incredible. He starts out by saying here is a trustworthy saying that all of us should believe about ourselves – Jesus came to save sinners, and I'm the worst.

Let me just camp there for a second. Are you the worst sinner you know? Seriously. Are you the worst sinner you know, or do you know lots of people who are worse than you?

Now Paul had done some terrible things – certainly overseeing Stephen's murder was pretty bad. But he hadn't actually thrown any stones. He just held the coats. And we all know some pretty heinous sinners. Think of those white supremacists in Charlottesville, or think of Hitler or Mussolini or maybe one of your in-laws. Really Paul, are you the worst sinner?

...

To get our heads around what Paul is saying here requires that we look at sin through the eyes of God's economy instead of our own. So throughout Scripture the one message we get loud and clear is that there is no one righteous, not even one.² And if you really examine the Greek on that verse you realize the "not even one" there includes even me and perhaps you.

But it isn't just us. The Scriptures labour to show this same thing about all the heroes of the faith. So think murdering and adultery committing David, or cowardly wife endangering Abraham, or foot in his mouth bumbling idiot Peter. These are the best guys in the pile and they are terrible sinners – and not just before they meet God – but all along. And Paul fits into this crowd pretty well. He's certainly one of the heroes, but he is anything but a perfect man.

² Romans 3:10

So the reason God chose to work through people like David and Abraham and Paul was not because they were particularly godly men, but because of the way they saw their need for God and reveled in the promise of God's gracious forgiveness in spite of their wickedness.

Now I could give examples from all these guys lives, but just consider David. In Psalm 32 he writes:

Blessed is the one
 whose transgressions are forgiven,
 whose sins are covered.
 Blessed is the one
 whose sin the LORD does not count against them
 and in whose spirit is no deceit.

David's talking about himself, and he says there is no deceit in him. But that isn't because he hasn't done anything wrong, it's because he isn't trying to lie to God about not having done anything wrong. David knows he is the worst sinner ever. He continues:

When I kept silent,
 my bones wasted away
 through my groaning all day long.
 For day and night
 Your hand was heavy on me;
 my strength was sapped
 as in the heat of summer.
 Then I acknowledged my sin to You
 and did not cover up my iniquity.
 I said, "I will confess
 my transgressions to the LORD."
 And You forgave
 the guilt of my sin.

Can you feel David's burden lifting, and the joy of God's salvation pouring into him? Not because he's been a saint, but because he is a forgiven sinner. He's found that God has no time for people who minimize their sin and keep silent. But He is full of undeserved forgiveness for people who know they need it. And so David finishes:

Therefore let all the faithful pray to You
 while You may be found...
 Many are the woes of the wicked,
 but the LORD's unfailing love
 surrounds the one who trusts in Him.
 Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous;
 sing, all you who are upright in heart! (Psalm 32)

Here is David and Paul's point: if you aren't the worst sinner you know then you don't understand God's grace at all – maybe you aren't even saved. You see people who aren't the worst sinner they know look down their noses at the people around them in judgment. At least I don't do that. At least I'm not messed up like him. At least I haven't stooped as low as she has.

But Jesus tells a parable about these kinds of people. They are like a servant who owes his master millions of dollars, and then gets forgiven when he can't pay. But right after this, when he meets someone who owes him a few bucks he can't pass the forgiveness he's received forward and goes ballistic in judgment.

And then Jesus says things don't turn out well for this guy. While he starts out having his debt forgiven, he ends up thrown into jail to be tortured until he can pay back his infinite debt all on his own.³ Any guesses on how long that's going to take? I'm not sure what you think, but I don't think that's a picture of going to heaven. Jesus' point is saved people recognize how much they've been saved from. And then it's only people like this who are able to treat those around them with the grace they've received.

...

So Paul says "Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst." Paul knows he was dead in his sin when Jesus extended His grace and forgave him.

But the second thing we see in this passage is that Jesus saved Paul for us. Look at verse 16. Paul says Jesus showed him mercy in order to make an example for those who would believe in Him and receive eternal life – that's us. God saved Saul, and made him Paul, for you!

And it's on that note that I want to look at Saul's conversion account in Acts 9, so please flip back there with me now. As we look through this text I want to outline three ways that Saul's salvation is for us. And when I say this what I mean is that God's design in converting Saul was to give you hope for yourself and the people you want to see saved. Do you need some of that encouragement today?

Look with me at verse 1

³ Matthew 18:21-35

[Read Acts 9:1-2]

Before Jesus followers were called “Christians” they were called people of “the Way.” And Saul was hunting these early believers. So Luke goes out of his way to stress that Saul is an enemy of Christ when this chapter starts. This wasn’t just a bad day for Saul, this was who he was. Saul was a zealot. He believed he knew what God wanted, and he figured that murder was justified by this end. And he thought that by living like this he was earning God’s favor. And Saul was good at what he did. He was a Pharisee. These men were incredibly strict with themselves. They followed the letter of God’s law right down to the dot on the “i”. On top of all this Saul had an incredibly brilliant mind, and an incredibly dedicated personality.

And so when he encountered the doctrines associated with following Jesus he realized right away what the implications were. A system built on the idea that salvation from God is by grace alone not attached to our works, was going to destroy everything he had believed and worked for. And so he worked to destroy it.

...

Now maybe you’ve met someone who isn’t a Christians but would make great one if they would just believe – do you know anyone like that? Maybe it’s your neighbour or someone in your family who genuinely cares about other people. They don’t love Jesus, but they are kind and thoughtful and generous. And you say to yourself “Man, if only that person would come to faith they would make a great Christian. Have you ever said that? I have.

But Saul isn’t that guy. He was angry. Luke says he “was still breathing out murderous threats.” He was evangelistic in his rejection of Christ. So think of self-proclaimed militant atheist like Richard Dawkins. He isn’t just a brilliant atheist, he’s evangelistic. He has given himself to trying to convince as many people as he can to become atheists. Imagine Dawkins coming to Christ – isn’t that totally improbable? Saul was this kind of guy. No one expected him to come to Christ. And yet he did.

...

It is possible that you are here today and wondering whether God could really save you. You have no problem identifying the brokenness within yourself – that’s easy. But the thought that God could both know you and want anything to do with you, is impossible for you to fathom. If that’s you, Saul’s salvation is for you.

Or perhaps you are looking out at the life of someone you love and feeling hopeless. Maybe a family member has walked away from God into depravity, and the possibility of return seems ever more improbable the more time passes. If that’s your story Saul’s salvation is for you.

You see God ordained that Saul would be saved to encourage you that Jesus can win the most unlikely people to Himself. God’s grace is an ocean deeper than any rebellious heart. And the evidence to support this is that the worst sinner ever came to Christ.

So be encouraged; you, or the person you love, has not run so far from God that His grace can't overwhelm.

...

The second way Saul's conversion is for us is that it encourages us not to despair for those who show no signs of coming to Christ. And it encourages us this way because seconds before Jesus revealed Himself to Saul he was bent on devouring everyone who claimed the name of Christ. Look at verse 3.

[Read Acts 9:3-6]

Damascus is about 250 KM's northwest of Jerusalem, so that would be a trip of about 9 days traveling by horse or something equivalent. And Luke says as they were approaching Damascus this encounter happened. So what Luke is describing is the 11th hour. Saul has been meditating and brooding and seething with contempt for Christ for most of the trip. He isn't feeling guilty about murdering Stephen. He isn't pondering Christian apologetics and slowly being won over. He is salivating over the opportunity to devour anyone who belonged to the Way. But then, all of a sudden, revelation occurs. There was no process here.

Now this doesn't mean there is no process when everyone comes to Christ. In fact most of the time there is a process. And so in Corinthians Paul says:

I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. (1 Corinthians 3:6)

This verse describes a process. But here in Acts we see that God isn't bound to the process. Rather His grace can ravage a heart without warning.

...

In March of 2013 CBN News aired a story about a man named Abdu who grew up Muslim. But at the age of 16 he decided to leave Islam and follow Jesus. His journey of faith began with an unexpected visit.

"I was sleeping," Abdu says, "and Jesus woke me up, and it was like a dream or a revelation. After this I borrowed a Bible from someone and gave my life to Christ."

For Abdu conversion was virtually instantaneous and came out of nowhere. But it wasn't the same for the rest of his family. His parents were greatly troubled by their son's faith so much so that his father tried to kill him. When he failed, Abdu fled his home and moved to a nearby village where he got a job working as a security guard at a church.

Neither of his parents contacted him for 6 years. But then his mother's heart began to soften and she began sneaking out to visit him. 4 years later, after watching her son live a Jesus exalting life, she came to faith.

This of course put her in a precarious position with her husband. Semira, Abdu's mother said of this time "But I still decided to follow Jesus and tried to bring [my husband] to Christ. We showed big love to him and big changes in our character. This influenced him."

About a year after Semira came to Christ her husband followed. And after him the rest of the family, about 40 of them, came to Christ.⁴ Christ won Abdu to Himself in a second, but for the rest of the family the process was drawn out over 11 years.

...

The encouragement here for us is that while most people are slowly won to Christ, this isn't the case for everyone. So do not to lose heart and stop praying for those in your life who you long to meet Jesus. Even if their hearts continue to harden, keep praying because at any moment God can show up and give them the gift of faith. Be encouraged, Saul's conversion was for you.

...

A third way that Saul's conversion is for us is that it is absolutely a work of sovereign grace. Saul doesn't earn anything here. In fact Saul is warring against Christ up to the second he encounters Him, and then any resistance he might have been able to put up is overwhelmed by Jesus' plan to give Saul grace.

So Jesus blinds Saul, giving him a powerful sign of the darkness he was living in. And then in verse 6 notice that He doesn't ask Saul if he wants to believe. Jesus just tells him what's next: "get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

And then in verses 10 through 14 Jesus appears in a dream to Ananias and tells him to go pray for Saul that he may be healed. And Ananias balks. He knows who Saul is and is pretty sure Jesus is making a mistake. But Jesus responds, verse 15:

[Read Acts 9:15-16]

So Jesus chose Saul. Saul didn't choose Jesus. And this is encouraging for us because an understanding of faith that doesn't start with God's sovereignty over our election leads to works salvation that ultimately results in condemnation.

...

As I was studying for this message I came across a Mormon sermon on the topic of salvation, and so I decided to check it out. The title of the message was "Am I Good Enough? Will I Make It?" This seemed pretty depressing to me, so I figured I'd check it out. And it didn't disappoint. The speaker was apparently quite high up in the Mormon church, and the tag line he kept coming back to was, quote: "If you will *really* try and will not rationalize or rebel – repenting *often* and pleading for grace – you positively are going to be 'good enough.'" Talk about trying to build assurance on top of a completely tentative foundation.

⁴ Story taken from <http://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/world/2013/March/Unexpected-Visit-A-Muslim-Boys-Journey-to-Faith> (Accessed August 25, 2017)

But then half way through the message he really hit things home by admitting, quote: “None of us could ever ‘earn’ or ‘deserve’ our salvation, but it is normal to wonder if we are acceptable before the Lord.”⁵

And that was certainly the question I wanted answered as I kept reading. After all I know myself. I know how prone to wander my heart is. I know how easy it is to grow distracted. I know I am the chief of sinners. And so the haunting question I had as I was reading his message was “How would I know whether I was really trying hard enough, and keeping my rationalization to a small enough minimum. And repenting and pleading for grace often enough. How could I possibly know? It was depressing. But praise be to God the Scriptures don’t agree with this Mormon. They affirm:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.
(Ephesians 2:8-9)

And friends, Saul’s salvation shows us this incredible truth. Saul encountered God’s grace after doing nothing at all to deserve it. It was poured out completely free of charge, and totally in spite of himself. Saul didn’t even want it the second before he was saved. So his salvation was 100% achieved on the basis of God’s grace, and it had nothing to do with anything he did.

...

Now of course if you know Saul’s story you know that his name was changed to Paul and he became one of the hardest working men of God the church has ever seen. But this is totally in line with the way grace works. And we’ve talked of this before.

Grace always starts with God and is extended to us free of charge. The vertical relationship we have with God is something totally achieved by Jesus. And that’s because the standard of perfection God demands from us is sinlessness holiness, and that is as difficult for us to obtain as it would be for us to build a bridge from earth to the sun. It’s not a matter of trying really hard, it’s impossible. The only way the bridge over the chasm between us and God can be spanned is if God spans it Himself. Which of course He does in Jesus.

But then when a person encounters the sweetness of God’s grace, and is transformed by it, they begin working out their salvation⁶ in the horizontal realm. So because God loved us, and sent Christ to die for us while we were yet the worst sinners ever,⁷ we respond by living our lives to the glory of God among those He has placed us beside. And so the way we live in the horizontal realm does not earn our salvation, but it is the evidence as to whether or not we have received it.

⁵ <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2016/10/am-i-good-enough-will-i-make-it?lang=eng> (Accessed August 26, 2017)

⁶ Philippians 2:12

⁷ Romans 5:8

If you're wondering what this looks like practically there are all sorts of signs, but the biggest test to determine whether you are saved is to look at yourself and see whether you are becoming a radical forgiver – not whether you've arrived, sanctification is a life-long process, but you are becoming a radical forgiver. So ask yourself, "when I get hurt, and it is totally the other person's fault, am I becoming quick to forgive and pursue restoration?"

This might not seem overly complex, but this is the greatest test of our own salvation that Jesus gives us. In the Sermon on the Mount He says:

For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. (Matthew 6:14-15)

It's pretty straight forward. It's the parable of the unmerciful servant in brief. But here is the essential qualifying note: we aren't saved because we try really hard to forgive when we are wronged. Rather we are becoming radical forgivers because we have received a radical forgiveness and been saved. Salvation starts with God not us.

So brothers and sisters, be encouraged. God is in the business of saving sinners. This means if you are the worst one you know then you are in line to received the best Christ has for you. He loves to pour out His unmerited forgiveness on those who know they need it.

And even if there are people in your life who don't know they need God's grace, or are rejecting this notion with everything in them, be encouraged that God is sovereign and keep praying for them because their salvation is foremost dependent on God not them.

And God is so passionate about saving sinners that He ordained Saul, the worst sinner ever, to be saved to give "an example for [all] those who would believe in [Jesus] and receive eternal life." Friends, God had us in mind when He saved Saul.

So, because this is true be encouraged and thankful like Paul, that He has extended the opportunity to you to be used in the building of His kingdom. And give yourself, and let's give ourselves as a church, to working out the salvation we have so graciously received.

I love you. Let me pray for us.