

Acts 9:1-43 - Saul's Conversion & Gospel Growth

In the book of Acts, God's gospel not only overcomes formidable ethnic and geographical barriers but also breaks through the most formidable barrier of all: human sin. Saul learns firsthand how closely Jesus identifies with his church, here described as "the Way." In persecuting those of the Way, Saul was persecuting Christ himself. In response to the question, "Who are you?" Saul would have preferred any response to the one he receives: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." In opposing God's people, Saul has opposed God himself (cf. 5:38–39).

Saul is blinded by the magnificence of this appearance of Christ, and his physical blindness allows him to see himself truly. He finally recognizes his own powerlessness and weakness, and accepts his blindness in humility. Before commissioning Saul to take the gospel to the Gentiles, God tears down his reliance on his religious zeal. Only after being brought to a position of abject humility is Saul ready for the uplifting gospel of Jesus Christ. "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6).

Saul was at his worst, overseeing the murder of men and women in the church, with no sign of repentance, when Jesus met him on the Damascus road. Here again we are admonished against condemning anyone as lost beyond hope, and this includes ourselves. God will reach to his farthest-out enemies, he will defeat the uttermost human rebellion, but in doing so he does not crush these rebels but loves and converts them into chosen instruments of the good news (Acts 9:15). In Saul we see a rebel against God, an enemy of the long-promised Messiah. Yet Saul is reconciled to God through Jesus and is called God's ambassador, through whom God makes his appeal to the entire world (2 Cor. 5:20).

After recounting God's marvelous, saving work in Saul's life, Luke highlights a wonderful truth: through the preaching of the gospel, the church was built up and strengthened. As the church walked in the fear of the Lord and the power of the Holy Spirit, it knew peace and grew in number (v 31). This verse displays the progressive fulfillment of Christ's promise in 1:8: the church would be Christ's witness from Jerusalem to Judea, to Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth. Christ's church was multiplying and the gates of hell were not prevailing (Matthew 16:18). The mission of the church was marching on, and now the greatest and most unlikely missionary ever known was helping to lead the charge. That mission continues still, and though you and I have not been converted in the manner Saul was, nor called to be the missionary to the Gentiles as he was, we have nevertheless been converted by the power of the living God to serve the living God by proclaiming the gospel of the living God. And if Saul's conversion teaches us nothing else, it is that no one is beyond the reach of the gospel of God, and thus we should see that it is always worth our every effort to share it with everyone.

Acts 10:19-33 - Peter's Vision

The expression "the heavens opened" (v. 11) would have reminded readers of other significant communications from God, such as the baptism of Jesus (Luke 3:21) and, in this same book of Acts, Stephen's vision of the exalted Christ just before his martyrdom (Acts 7:56). In Peter's vision, a key word is "all": God shows him "all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air" (10:12). This would clearly have included animals forbidden in the Old Testament dietary regulations

(Leviticus 11; Deuteronomy 14), yet God tells Peter to “kill and eat” (Acts 10:13). As a faithful Jew, Peter reacts with horror at the prospect of eating “unclean” foods. The vision initially confuses him, but when the God-fearing Cornelius sends for Peter, he makes the connection. God is using a buffet of foods to show that he is able to make anyone clean, and he has chosen to bring cleansing and salvation through Christ to all the nations. Peter now understands that he “should not call any person common or unclean” (v. 28). Once again, salvation extends beyond a significant boundary, this time beyond the borders of Israel and into the Gentile world.

That this vision, and its connection to Cornelius, is highly significant is made clear by several indicators. The vision is given by God three times (v. 16). The command in the vision to “kill and eat” is concise and direct (v. 13). The Spirit speaks directly to Peter (vv. 19–20). And finally, an angel speaks directly to Cornelius (vv. 30–32). Why is Luke so intent to relate these specifics regarding the importance of the vision and its effects on different persons? In part, to show that God intends to save both individuals and people groups. Up to this time individual Gentiles have been saved (from Ruth and Rahab in the Old Testament to the Ethiopian in this book of Acts). But Cornelius has a household with him, and it is apparent that others outside his household are aware of this new kind of mercy as well (v. 24). The gospel will spread not only to individuals but to entire people groups, who will repent and be grafted into God’s people. And, of course, it is important to note that these groups now extend to those formerly considered unclean. The gospel knows no ethnic boundaries.

Acts 10:34-48 - The Gospel to the Gentiles

In his gospel presentation, Peter does not quote the Old Testament as on previous occasions, but his message remains consistent: Jesus lived, died, and was raised; he has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead; and everyone is called to repent and believe, to receive forgiveness of sins through the name of Jesus. This is the culmination of God’s redemptive plan.

God shows no partiality, but freely receives all who believe in his Son, Jesus Christ. Both Jew and Gentile receive forgiveness through Jesus. The cross of Christ is the great equalizer: we are all humbled as we grasp the magnitude of our sin and guilt; yet at the cross, the offer of forgiveness is made to all without distinction. Because Jesus is Lord of all (10:36), his gospel is available to all.

The Jewish believers with Peter are shocked that the Holy Spirit is poured out even on the Gentiles (v. 45). They probably thought that Gentiles should become Jewish proselytes first, but they knew the Holy Spirit fell on the Gentiles when they began speaking in tongues and praising God (v. 46). Peter later uses this incident to answer the challenge of the Jerusalem church that a believer in Jesus had to first be a Jewish proselyte (11:15–17). Therefore, there was nothing to prevent the Gentiles from being baptized as Christians.

Acts 10:47 quotes Peter as saying that they “have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.” The reference to Acts 2 is obvious. The same Holy Spirit who had been poured out on Jews had also been poured out on Gentiles. God can make all things clean. The conclusion embraced by Peter and by the Jerusalem church was that these Gentiles were fellow believers. Repentance and salvation had been granted even to those who had not been under the Mosaic covenant.

Questions for Group Discussion

1. Think back through Saul's incredible conversion. It was totally unexpected by the Christian community at the time. Do you expect the unexpected from God? What difference does that make (or would that make) to your life?
2. How are lives changed in Acts 9, and by what means? How should God's sovereign power in converting people encourage us in our own prayers and witness?
3. Since food restrictions are no longer one of the boundary markers between God's people and everyone else, what (if any) are the boundary markers today, do you think?
4. Some believe the story of Cornelius' in Acts 10 suggests that "all religions lead to God" or even that all religions are basically the same. What evidence is there in the episode that neither Cornelius nor Peter would agree with such a viewpoint?
5. How can the events of Acts 10 give us great hope and conviction in our evangelism?