

Transformation

(Acts Session 15—July 5, 2026)

Acts 9:1-3a

- 1 Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest.
- 2 and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.
- 3 As he journeyed he came near Damascus...

“Breathing threats and murder” Those words give us an indication of the intensity of Saul’s hatred for Christians.

I remember one time Chris and I took our girls out to Kings Smorgasbord, remember that place? It was many years ago, when our daughters were still in grade school.

Well, eating out was a rare treat for us back then. So when we did splurge and go out, I wanted it to be a nice time.

Well, as luck would have it, an older couple chose the table right next to ours. And they were having a rather loud conversation.

Well, not exactly a conversation. The wife was talking, but the husband wasn’t saying a whole lot back. After a few minutes of this rather one-sided monologue, we heard this woman say the following words to her husband. **“You’re disgusting.”** Only she didn’t say it like that. Here’s exactly how it sounded:

“You’re Disssgussstingggg.”

She put every ounce of vitriol she could possibly muster into those two words.

Well, that’s what Saul is like that here in chapter 9. He wasn’t just working against the church. He was deeply emotional about stamping it out.

Breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.

His hatred for the church, and his resistance to the message of Christ was so great that he wasn’t content just wreaking havoc on the church in Jerusalem.

He expanded his efforts beyond that, looking far and wide in hopes of finding other Christians to persecute.

Here was a man with a single-minded mission. And His hate was eating him alive.

Picture the worst serial killer you can imagine. The same dark spiritual powers twisting those kinds of minds were hard at work within the heart of this man Saul.

By his own admission—and I should add that he was speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit at the time—Saul said he was ***the chief of sinners***.

Now let point out what excellent news that is for anyone here who thinks they have sinned away the day of grace. Very few men in history have gone further down that dark road of rage than Saul.

So I don’t care what it is that you’ve done. As bad as you’ve been, you can’t hold a candle to Saul. He was the chief of sinners.

You think you’ve been bad? He was worse, by far. So cheer up—if God can turn the life of a man like Saul, He can handle whatever baggage from your past that you might be dragging along behind you.

There is no sin too big for the Lord to forgive. But before that can happen, Jesus has to get a person’s attention. And He’s pretty good at doing that.

Acts 9:3-5a

3 As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven.

4 Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

5 And he said, "Who are You, Lord..."

So here's the chief of sinners—on his way to carry out his nefarious mission. Why he chose the city of Damascus is not made clear. It was a Roman town, not a part of Israel.

It had perhaps twice the population of our own Yuba City, with a sizeable Jewish minority of around 15 thousand. That made it worth Saul's time, presenting an opportune target.

But if you ask me, there is more to that story. In fact, there is a strong likelihood that Saul didn't choose this city entirely on his own. There may have been some, shall we say, outside influence nudging him in the direction of Damascus.

For God was silently working in the background, as He always does. And there was a man of God living in Damascus that Saul would need to meet.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's read on.

Acts 9:5a

And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. *It is hard for you to kick against the goads.*"

"Who are You, Lord?" I can't help but think that Saul had a sneaking suspicion exactly who it was that was speaking to him here. And he was probably thinking, *"Please, please, please don't be Jesus."*

Because Saul had been going at this persecution of the church with everything he had. And how embarrassing for him to find out he had been wrong all along.

I mentioned a moment ago that there were dark spiritual powers at work within Saul's mind. But thankfully, there had been other forces at work as well. Something was eating at him, countering the murderous urges that were raging in his heart.

This is indisputable, because of what Jesus said—*"It is hard for you to kick against the goads."* Now I'm guessing you have heard the phrase that someone was *"goaded into doing"* this or that. But what exactly is a goad?

In Bible times a goad was a spear-like device that a man driving a yoke of oxen could use to keep the oxen on track.

It is pointy, and sharp, and highly irritating. It's what keeps the oxen moving in the direction that the driver wants them to go.

And it would appear that something has been goading Saul for some time now. Nothing physical, as with the oxen. But rather something on the order of mental duress. Something that was keeping him headed towards his destiny.

The most likely source of that mental duress was the behavior of the Christians who were being persecuted. The faith and the grace that possessed the souls of these people was hard to ignore.

Take Stephen for instance. Saul had to be asking, *"How could anyone behave in the gracious way that he did?"* It had make him lose some sleep.

And there were other Christians too—men and women like Stephen. Christians that Saul had arrested, and subjected to beatings in an attempt to get them to deny Christ.

Some did deny, but many of them held fast to their confession of faith. Where did that tenacity come from? Did they know something that Saul didn't?

No, he couldn't let those kinds of thoughts creep in. So at first he just keeps hunting down the Christians.

Now even though Saul was a very bad man, he also happened to be a gourmet thinker. Having been blessed with a brilliant mind, it wasn't long before that mind of his started connecting some of the dots.

A question was slowly forming way back in his mind. What if there actually **was** something to what they were saying about Jesus?

These were uncomfortable thoughts. He did what he could to choke down the nagging doubts, but they keep cropping up.

He redoubles his efforts to persecute the church, and thinks maybe a trip out of town would clear his thinking. And so it is in the middle of this internal conflict that we find Saul on the road to Damascus.

What a long and lonesome road it has been. Resisting God is always like that. Because you just can't run from your own thoughts.

God troubles us in our thoughts when we resist Him. There is no peace. And no joy.

And it is at this point that Saul has finally been adequately prepared and positioned for the final blow to be struck in the war for his soul. He is about to be converted, through a personal encounter with Jesus.

Acts 9:5a

And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

I know this sounds just like a rebuke. But it is more than that. Much more. Believe it or not, in Saul's case, this is the gospel. And I say that for this reason: what is the gospel, but the revelation to a person's soul regarding who Jesus really is.

It's just a start, but it's the real thing. The gospel—which means the good news—is that Jesus is everything Saul believed he was not. It's not just good news. It's great news. Because it's true.

*(A word of explanation—**Ringers** is the factory where Andrew worked.)*

There was a single card-carrying Communist employed at Ringers', a short, stout woman whose close-cropped gray hair stood up on her head like a brush.

She had a standard pronouncement on everything from our wages ("slave") to the Queen (an "oppressor"). My evangelistic efforts, when she detected them, pushed the button in her which released such statements as: "God-is-the-invention-of-the-exploiter-class."

Being an utterly humorless person herself, she never realized that people were laughing at her. In twenty years at the factory she had not made a single convert.

I found her a pathetic, rather than a laughable, figure and at lunchtime would often go to the table where she sat alone. The day I left Ringers' I stopped by the bench where she worked to say goodbye.

"You're getting rid of me at last!" I said, hoping at least to keep our parting friendly.

"But not of the lies you've told!" she flared back at me. "You've hypnotized these people with your talk of salvation and pie-in-the-sky! You've blinded them with. . . ."

I sighed and settled myself for the opiate-of-the-people lecture, But to my surprise, the angry voice faltered.

“Of course, they believed you,” she went on less certainly. “They’re untrained. They haven’t been taught dialectical argument. They think just what they want to think.

“After all”—her voice was so low I could scarcely hear—“if you could choose, who wouldn’t choose, well God—and all that.”

I glanced at her swiftly and thought I saw the unthinkable: I thought I saw tears in her eyes.

Finding out you have believed a lie is fantastic news, just as long as you find out in time to correct your mistake. And Saul is finding out about Jesus in time.

Oh, it had to sting, that’s a fact. But he found out the truth. And many wonderful things are about to happen to him because he’s responding to the truth about Jesus in exactly the way he should.

Acts 9:6

So he, trembling and astonished, said, “Lord, what do You want me to do?” Then the Lord *said* to him, “Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

And just in case you haven’t understood it before, let me make it as plain as I possibly can. The gospel doesn’t just bring freedom from the *penalty* of sin, it brings freedom from the *power* of sin. It has the power to bring about transformation in an individual’s life.

And the way we know this is by the way a particular word is used in this verse. It is the word “*do*”.

First usage:

“Lord, what do You want me to do?”

Second usage:

“You will be told what you must do.”

In both cases, the power to perform God’s will for his life is assumed. To do what the Lord wants. To do what must be done. Both are within the realm of possibility, when they were beyond Saul’s reach just a moment earlier.

Why? Because he just got saved. Saul didn’t pray the sinner’s prayer. He didn’t agree to the four spiritual laws. And he didn’t embrace any other specific doctrine other than the fact that Jesus is the risen, living Messiah.

But having believed that, Saul now submits to the Lordship of Christ. Done deal. It’s just that fast, and it’s just that simple.

And just like that, it’s time to move on to the next phase of Saul’s new life in Christ.

Acts 9:7-12

7 And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one.

8 Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought *him* into Damascus.

9 And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.”

10 Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, “Ananias.”

And he said, “Here I am, Lord.”

11 So the Lord *said* to him, “Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for *one* called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying.

12 And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting *his* hand on him, so that he might receive his sight.”

The problem was, Ananias already knew about Saul of Tarsus. The man was famous, and every Christian knew that he was big trouble.

Acts 9:13-14

13 Then Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many 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 bind all who call on Your name.”

No one can blame Ananias for his reluctance here. But that reluctance was based some old information. Ananias didn't know what the Lord had just done in Saul's life.

The lesson for us here is to never lose sight of the fact that the Lord is better informed than we are. He doesn't need us to fill Him in on why what He's asking us to do won't work. All that Jesus wants and needs from us is simple obedience that springs from faith.

But He goes ahead and gives Ananias a little more info, just to help him move forward with confidence.

Acts 9:15-18

15 But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel.

16 For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake.”

17 And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

18 Immediately there fell from his eyes *something* like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized.

Now we need to pay very close attention to a couple of details here, because some important doctrinal positions hinge on the precise wording of this passage.

Ananias calls Saul “**Brother Saul**.” This clearly indicates that Saul is a genuine believer already.

He got saved out there on the road, when he said “**Yes**” to Jesus. So he is ‘**Brother Saul**’. And now—three days later in this house— Saul is about to receive a couple of things.

First of all, he is going to get his sight back.

“Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight...”

Now Saul knew in advance that this healing was coming because of the vision he had.

But there is no indication that Saul knew what would be coming next. Ananias informs Saul that he is going to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

And even though we are given no details regarding what that looked like, we must assume that it took place during this visit.

And so, once again, here is this recurring event in the book of Acts—being filled with the Holy Spirit.

And in Saul's case, it is very clear that this experience occurred apart from and subsequent to his salvation.

Beyond that, no other details are given. But enough information is there to give many people pause. To consider whether or not the subject of being filled with the Holy Spirit has been properly represented to them.

Acts 9:19

So when he had received food, he was strengthened. Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus.

And so we have here the account of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. The vast majority of the remaining part of the book of Acts will have to do with his life and ministry as the Apostle Paul.

But for today our take away will be found in the ministry of Ananias.

For the day is coming and may be here already, when the Lord Jesus will need to tap you to play the role of Ananias in someone else's life. To function as a conduit for the truth to flow into their situation, and move them forward in their life for Christ.

To be a Christian in the mold of Ananias is to experience the great privilege of partnering with Jesus.

A partnership that is centered in the glorious work of the gospel.

And although you will view yourself as just an ordinary Christian—have the extraordinary privilege of being a link to God, bridging the gap between someone's human frailty, and His transforming power.

Transformation for a life that is headed in the wrong direction—that is the desperate need of our age. And that is precisely the nature of salvation. A salvation that is available to anyone who will embrace the truth about Jesus.

Saul of Tarsus. A bad man. A very bad man indeed. Changed in a moment's time, because he heard from Jesus.

That is the Lord's part. He gets ahold of a person's heart. Generally, it's not in as dramatic a fashion as was the case with Saul of Tarsus. But it every bit as real.

But as far as you go—don't think that these things are beyond you. Just like Ananias, you have a part to play in this ongoing drama of changed lives.

Do not hesitate to pray to that end. In fact, pray specifically for that, offering yourself to God as a link in the lives of others. To play a part in someone else's transformation.