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If you were to make a list of the vilest people in the world, who would you include? One poll added the likes of Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, Pol Pot, Ivan the Terrible, Attila the Hun, Nero, and Vlad Dracula (Vlad the Impaler).

Linkedin vitals: Dracula means "little devil" and was the prince of Romanian country. By some accounts, Vlad ordered people to be poisoned, blinded, strangled, hanged, decapitated, stabbed, disemboweled, skinned, exposed to extreme elements and animals, hacked, dismembered, burned, boiled, scalped, roasted, nailed in the head, and buried alive.

*If we were sincere, these are the people we believe deserve a special place in Hell.* And we are ok with this eternal outcome. The Gospel paints a miraculous hopeful narrative for the vilest people. Christianity is the most hopeful message in the entire world. That even for these enemies of God, Jesus died.

We are continuing a series in the book of Acts entitled the "Model Church." In Acts 9, one reads about an enemy of God, persecuting the church, and killing anyone who claims the name of Jesus. And yet, for even a man like this, there is hope!

**Big Idea: You are never beyond the reach or redemption of Jesus Christ**

## **[A Sight for Sore Eyes Acts 9:1-9; 17-18]**

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**A Rebel (9:1-3)** We first encounter a man named Saul waiting in the background of Acts 6:9. The Gospel is changing lives, and Stephen meets opposition in the local synagogue from Freeman from Cilicia. At this point in history, the most famous city in Cilicia was Tarsus, the home town of Saul. Next, we find Saul watching over the garments of those who killed Stephen. Now we read that Saul is breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. It is as if the very air that Saul needs to live is his vitriolic hatred against anything or anyone who trust in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. **His life = hatred towards the Way of the cross.**

**The life of Saul will forever be linked to the death of Stephen.** Both men realized the profound truth that the *new order and the old were incompatible*. Stephen was willing to give his life for the Messiah. Saul determined to take breath. In these two men, we find the only *two options* in response to the cross and resurrection. You are either a follower of the Way or living in rebellion.

Saul knew that those who followed *Jesus Christ would forever be a threat to the rebellious*. He was not content in driving followers from Jerusalem; they must be pursued and rooted out wherever they fled! Even more astonishing is that Saul doubtless believed he was following godly religious precedents in rooted out these dangerous factions. If anything Saul's life shows us that *religious zeal does not lessen holy rebellion, it only inflames it!*

**What had Saul enraged?** Two words: the Way. This was the term **used by early followers** of Messiah to denote their movement as both the Way of life and Way of salvation. **If Jesus is your Way, you live by His Way.** **The rebellious hate the Way because they live with sore eyes!**

**A Road (9:2-3)** Because of intense persecution and death of Stephen, the early church scattered from Jerusalem. Saul does the most logical thing in his zealous mind, ***stamp out this blasphemous movement that proclaimed you could not earn your salvation (Saul spent his entire life trying to earn God's favor)***. He would take the perpetrators back to Jerusalem, the religious epicenter.

**Damascus** is the first city outside the land of Israel to be noted as having Christians and was a good **six-day** journey by foot from Jerusalem. The location was a prosperous commercial center in the Roman province of Syria, with a sizeable Jewish population, a legitimate breeding ground for the "new way."

On his Way to destroy "the way," something tragically beautiful occurs, a light from heaven flashed. The light must have been intense for the time of the occurrence was around **mid-day noon**. The light was enough to blind the rebel.

**Saul Saul.** The divine voice addressed him personally, even using his Hebrew name twice. ***Did you know that the Lord knows your name? (no matter the road you are traveling at the moment)*** You are not a # to your creator; you are a person created in His image to know Him and experience His love.

**What Saul thought a healthy religious existence was holy persecution.** **The self-sustaining life is the savior-persecuting life.** **Persecute means to run with hostile purpose or in the sense of driving out.** When you pursue your interests, you run with hostility against a God who loves you.

Jesus closely identifies with His own. To persecute the Way is to persecute Jesus. The people of God are forever linked with their Father. You cannot be of the Way and not part of the Way. **Messiah identifies with His people in their struggle.**

Who are you, Lord? When the Lord became personal, something broke in Saul's Spirit. Adequately understood, Saul's question would challenge his whole belief system and pattern of his life. Like Stephen, Saul, at this moment, knew that the new order of Christ was utterly incompatible with the old self. **Has Jesus become personal for you?** From this point on, Saul said *nothing*; he was utterly broken. **My what a road.**

**A Redeemer (9:3-9; 18-20)** What happens next is so radical that Luke give three distinct retellings of this story in Acts. The English word conversion comes from the Latin *convertere* meaning "to turn around." (Saul's life turns, but he continued on the road). And this was nothing short of a miraculous turnaround. When Saul came to his senses, he was commanded to get up and go. **Something was holding him back; he was blind.**

The miracle was not a punitive one. Instead, the picture is of Saul in his brokenness and helplessness. **God used physical blindness to reveal spiritual blindness.** **Maybe you are walking through a blind spot today. Are you frustrated, hopeless, or discouraged?** Is God revealing to your heart your spiritual blindness? We all have blind spots.

After three days, and knowing his complete and utter dependency on Jesus Christ, the **scales fell** from his eyes, and he regained his sight. **Spiritual sight always precedes** physical sight. **1 Cor. 4:6** For God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ.

In this redemption, Paul was made new. He had new sight. And **with new sight came new obedience** (Baptism on June 23) to the Father in baptism. He regained his strength and was renewed. He acquired a new message. The heavenly calling has trumped the original earthly message.

**The Damascus road serves as a reminder; God is still in the life change business.**

Here is **C.S. Lewis: militant atheist**, Oxford don. The last thing he wants is to be converted. God sneaks up on him, and Lewis is "surprised by joy," and he says, **"I am dragged kicking and screaming--the most reluctant convert in all the world--into the Kingdom."**

Or here is **John Wesley**: fanatical son of a minister, a missionary to America, a great theological mind, but a **total failure as a human being and a minister**. One day he sits in

the chapel in England, a failure as a missionary, and his "heart is strangely warmed." He becomes an excellent fountain for life. John Wesley becomes converted.

Or Saint Augustine, the monk with a mistress, who is struggling with his soul, sitting under a tree, saying, "O Lord, make me pure, but not yet." One day God gets him, and Augustine becomes Saint Augustine. *Three unique roads—yet one Way*

**If anyone deserved Hell, it would have been Saul.** In his own words, Paul made his most sinful list. 1 Tim 1:15 This saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners," and I am the worst of them. 16 But I received mercy for this reason, so that in me, the worst of them, Christ Jesus might demonstrate his extraordinary patience as an example to those who would believe in him for eternal life. **We make lists to compare ourselves**

Here is a profound truth: **I am Saul. I am the persecutor. I am the rebel.** I was the one running from the One who loves me more than anyone else. Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?

**Who are you, Lord?** When the Lord became **personal**, something broke in Saul's Spirit. **Are you willing to get personal today?** **9** If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

**What is the name of your road?** Happy Lane. Last year I drove the kids by my old house to reminiscence. Much to my astonishment, the road of my childhood neighbor changed. It was not Happy Lane but CR 13455. I remember thinking: *I can't believe they changed the name of my street!*

And as I read Acts 9, I wonder how Paul reflects on this road. I bet he would say with tears of overwhelming joy: **Jesus changed the name of my street and my life!** Will you go back to that road today, and think deeply about the moment Jesus redeemed you? Paul went to that road often.

Are you walking a path of destruction or hurt today? Ask Jesus to reveal your persecuting blind spots. Are your eyes sore?

***The powerful message of the Gospel is this; no one is beyond the reach of redemption! Get personal with Jesus the Redeemer, what a sight for sore eyes***

28% of the NT was written by the Apostle Paul

, an encounter with Jesus changes the name of your road. How did Paul talk of the Damascus Road? Bitter? Indignant that his itinerary was interrupted? No, with Joy that Jesus gave him an eternal vision.

### **Why will Jesus be standing for you?**

**8** For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift—

**Do you need to received eternal life today?**

**Do you need to return to the radical life altering lip glorifying faith? I want to live a life taking a stand for Christ, who will one day stand and say “well done, good and faithful servant.”**

## Conclusion

**How does this all end?** 31 When they had prayed, the place where they were assembled was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God boldly.

Are you ready and willing to let Jesus Christ shake your life?

## Conclusion (Head-Heart-Hands)

It has been said that **Christianity is Christ**. Peter's message at Pentecost give us an

# Notes

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The life of Saul will be forever linked with the death of Stephen. And now, in this most likely conversion, we find a reoccurring emphasis in Acts. So necessary is the conversion of Saul that Luke gives three versions of it (Acts 22:3-21; 26:9-18).

Both Stephen and Saul had realized that the new order and the old were incompatible (NIV, 295).

The English word conversion comes from the Latin *convertere*, meaning “to turn around.”

**Acts 9:1** Now Saul was still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. He went to the high priest **2** and requested letters from him to the synagogues in Damascus so that if he found any men or women who belonged to the Way, he might bring them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

## Threats

He was not content with driving them from Jerusalem; they must be pursued and rooted out wherever they fled, not only within the frontiers of the land of Israel but beyond them as well (Bruce, 180).

Saul doubtless believed that he was following godly precedents in rooting out these dangerous schismatic (Peterson, 301).

## The Way

A term used by the early followers of Jesus to denote their movement as the Way of life or the Way of salvation (Bruce, 181).

Paul paradoxically joins the Way because of what happens to him when he is 'on the way' to persecute Christians in Damascus (Peterson, 303).

This phrase occurs six times in Acts, and it is worthy of note that the Qumran community also referred to itself using this phrase (BW3, 316).

The Way not only refers to a type of behavior but also those who exhibit it.

**3** As he traveled and was nearing Damascus, a light from heaven suddenly flashed around him. **4** Falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”

## Damascus

Damascus was a good six-day foot journey from Jerusalem (NAC, 234).

This is the first city outside the land of Israel to be noted as having Christians (ECNT, 355).

It is a prosperous commercial center in the Roman province of Syria, with a large Jewish population and several synagogues (Peterson, 302).

## Light

The light must have been intense, for the time of the occurrence was 'around midday' (cf. 22:6; 26:13).

Saul is forced by the Messiah's light to recognize his blindness and to receive his sight through him' (Peterson, 303).

## Persecute

Jesus closely identifies with his own. To persecute the Way is to persecute Jesus (ECNT, 357).

Those who are united to Christ by faith suffer as he did, and he identifies with them in their struggle (Peterson, 304).

**1377. διωκω dioko;** from a prol., caus. form of a prim. vb. **διω** (*to flee*); *to put to flight, to pursue, by impl. to persecute:* —persecute(10), persecuted(13), persecuting(7), persecutor(1), practicing(m)(1), press on(2), pursue(7), pursuing(2), run after(1), seek after(1).

## Saul Saul

The divine voice addressed him personally, using his Hebrew name twice. Properly understood, this question would challenge his whole belief system and pattern of life (Peterson, 304).

**Acts 9:5** "Who are you, Lord?" Saul said. "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting," he replied. **6,** "But get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

## Lord

Could have overtones of divinity or at least a supernatural being, but Saul does not yet know who it is (BW3, 317).

Eternal life is not so much everlasting life as personal knowledge of the Everlasting One (D.A. Carson).

From this point on, Paul said nothing. He was utterly broken (NAC, 234).

**Acts 9:7** The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the sound but seeing no one. **8** Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing. So they took him by the hand and led him into Damascus. **9** He was unable to see for three days and did not eat or drink.

## Eyes

The miracle was not a punitive one. Instead, the picture is of Paul in his brokenness and helplessness (NAC, 235).

**1 Cor. 4:6** For God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of God’s glory in the face of Jesus Christ.

**Acts 9:18** At once, something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he got up and was baptized. **19** And after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul was with the disciples in Damascus for some time. **20** Immediately he began proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues: “He is the Son of God.”

## Scales

The term lepis is used by medical writers, but Luke is using only an analogy here, 'something like scales/flakes.' The use of the term is consistent with the view that Luke was a physician who knew the technical language (BW3, 319).

The heavenly calling has trumped the original earthly mission (ECNT, 358).

# Illustrations

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There is not a "type" for sudden conversion. The Bible tells us that all of us have this opportunity. Consider these classic cases:

Here is C.S. Lewis: militant atheist, Oxford don. The last thing he wants is to be converted. God sneaks up on him, and Lewis is "surprised by joy," and he says, "I am dragged kicking and screaming--the most reluctant convert in all the world--into the Kingdom."

Or here is John Wesley: fanatical son of a minister, a missionary to America, a great theological mind, but a total failure as a human being and a minister. One day he sits in the chapel in England, a failure as a missionary, and his "heart is strangely warmed." He becomes an excellent fountain for life. John Wesley becomes converted.

Or here's Bill Stringfellow in our generation, the most brilliant lawyer in his class at Yale Law School, who sits in his room quietly and reads the Bible. God gets ahold of him, and Bill Stringfellow begins his ministry in Harlem in New York. You know the story of Bill Stringfellow.

Or my neighbor in Sanibel Island before I came here. I had a neighbor in his eighties who had been a vice-president for McGraw-Hill, one of the great publishing firms of our land. He was a brilliant businessman. He was a senior vestryman in the Episcopal church, on the city council in Sanibel, respected, and loved by all. One weekend, he went off to a Cursillo Movement conference with a bunch of lay people who began praying with him and talking about Jesus. This handsome man comes home transformed and says to his neighbors and friends, "I met Jesus."

"What happened to you?"

He says, "I don't know. I fell in love."

"He's always been a good man," his neighbors said, "but now he's a new man." You see, there's no single type that conversion happens to.

Or there's a missionary, such as Frank Laubach in the Philippines, who because of his bitterness and all at age 45 becomes the man who invents the system of learning that has taught millions and millions of people in the world to read.

Or Saint Augustine, the monk with a mistress, who is struggling with his soul, sitting under a tree, saying, "O Lord, make me pure, but not yet." One day God gets him, and Augustine becomes Saint Augustine. But you know the story.

There's William Booth, a very unlikely, rough-cut man, who says over a hundred years ago, "Nobody in London cares about the poor, the drunks, the winos." He invented the Salvation Army. One day he said, "Lord, I give you everything there is in this man William Booth. Do with me what

you will." A movement starts that changes the lives of tens and hundreds of thousands of people because one man is suddenly converted.

# Application

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The most useful members of a church are usually those who would be doing harm if they were not doing good. --Spurgeon