

## **ReStart Week 5: Transformed Acts 9:1-16**

### **David Bawks - Pathway Community Church (April 4, 2021)**

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Good morning Pathway! He is risen! Welcome to our service today. It is so wonderful to see you here, and for those online we are also so glad you are worshipping with us. This is a great milestone for us as a church and we're so grateful to be indoors again.

Today as we celebrate Easter we're continuing through our ReStart series. As we move through 2021, we're praying and seeing God's guidance as to how we can restart and revamp what we're doing this year. We're going through the book of Acts to learn about how the disciples wrestled with the legacy of their Jewish faith and the law to figure out what to keep and what needed to be removed to enable their mission of making disciples of all nations.

Last week we explored a major episode in that transition, when Peter had a vision about food that was previously considered unclean, and realized that these rules were no longer in effect, and that the faith was opening up to all people. He visited the Roman centurion Cornelius and shared with him this insight that everyone could now be baptized and receive the Holy Spirit.

Today we are moving back one chapter from chapter 10 to chapter 9. Today we are looking at another important leader in the early church named Saul. Please read with me from verse 1 to verse 12.

Acts 9 <sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest <sup>2</sup> and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup> As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. <sup>4</sup> He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

<sup>5</sup> "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. <sup>6</sup> "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

<sup>7</sup> The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. <sup>8</sup> Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. <sup>9</sup> For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

<sup>10</sup> In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"

"Yes, Lord," he answered.

<sup>11</sup> The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. <sup>12</sup> In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

<sup>13</sup>“Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup>And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.”

<sup>15</sup>But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. <sup>16</sup>I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”

Saul of Tarsus is one of the most prominent figures of the New Testament and the early church. The first time we meet him is at the end of chapter 7, when Stephen is being stoned to death. The people killing Stephen put their coats at Saul’s feet.

Saul is so concerned by the threat of this new movement called The Way that he devoted himself to chasing down its members. Saul sees this new movement as being an existential threat to the existing structures of Jewish faith, and believes this new way must be exterminated. He gets permission from the priest to go to Damascus to bring back whoever he can find as prisoners. It was 140 miles from Jerusalem to Damascus and would have taken him several days to make the trip.

Saul was approaching Damascus when all of a sudden he is overwhelmed by a light from heaven. He also hears a voice speaking to him, calling his name and saying “Saul, Saul.” The voice asks him a question, “Why are you persecuting me?” Saul is confused, and asks “Who are you, Lord?” He recognizes that he is hearing from God, but needs to understand who is talking to him. The response is shocking to him – “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” Jesus? But how can Jesus be talking to me? Jesus died!

One of the most basic tenets of the Jewish faith is monotheism – there is one God, and only one God. Saul, and others who rejected the message of Jesus, understood the worship of Jesus to be blasphemy, setting up a man to be God. That is why Saul was so opposed to the followers of the Way, and wanted to end their new ministry once and for all.

There has been some debate over Saul’s state of mind, if he was conflicted about persecuting Christians or if he wholeheartedly believed he was being faithful to God in getting rid of a theological heresy. We don’t know for sure, but all the indications we have are that he was being sincere, and thought he was serving God. But then he hears from Jesus himself, which means that Jesus is alive, and is who he claimed to be.

This means that somehow Jesus is God, and is worthy of worship, as Paul would go on to spend the rest of the life explaining and teaching throughout the Roman world. Jesus tells Saul that he is not attacking and persecuting rogue and wayward people, but instead is actually persecuting Jesus himself. As I’ve read the story, there are two things that stand out.

### **1) No one is beyond the reach of God’s transformation.**

If Saul can be saved by God, and changed from being a terrorist and murderer fighting against the church to becoming the Apostle Paul, then none of us is beyond the reach of God’s power and God’s transformation. In his later writing, Paul was unsparing in how he described himself. This is what he wrote in his first letter to Timothy:

“<sup>15</sup> Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. <sup>16</sup> But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life. <sup>17</sup> Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

This story is meant as an example for us so that we would believe in him and receive eternal life. That means deliverance from death and the eternal judgement of hell. The reason this is meant as an example for us is that many times we disqualify ourselves from God's grace. We think that God couldn't still love me after I've failed like that. God couldn't save me now, or maybe he could, but why would he want to?

Today is when we celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus. Easter is a story of hope for all mankind, and the reminder that death has been defeated. The transformation of Saul, and the transformation offered to all of us, is made possible by the sinless life of Jesus Christ, and by his death on the cross. In Colossians, it is described this way:

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailed it to the cross. And disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. (Col 2:13-15)

Earlier Amy shared an amazing story of how her life has been changed by God. She experienced God and was changed forever. Thank you for sharing that Amy, and I hope that we can all be challenged and encouraged by her story.

After Saul sees a light from heaven and fell to the ground, Jesus told him to get up and go into the city, and he would be told what to do. Saul was blinded and did not eat or drink for three days. Turning away from Saul's past and into his new life with God was a difficult and painful process. Turning away from our life of sin and into God's new life is worth it, but it is not easy. Now the scene moves to Damascus, and someone else named Ananias enters this story. Here's the second thing that has struck me from Acts 9.

## **2) Let's welcome those transformed by God.**

Imagine with me if Osama Bin Laden was still alive, and had an encounter with Jesus like Saul did. If he had heard from Jesus and been converted to faith, and then wanted to come to preach at Pathway as a guest speaker, how would we respond? Do you think you would be able to listen to his message, or would you keep thinking about him as a terrorist mastermind? What kind of evidence would we look for as proof of a changed life?

This is the situation that Ananias was faced with. God came to him in a vision, and told him to go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. Ananias knew who he was, and he knew why he had come to Damascus. He replied, "I have heard many reports about this

man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.”

But God was clear – “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”

We always remember Saul, or Paul as he came to be known, but how often do we remember Ananias? Ananias is a forgotten hero of the faith, and played a huge role in Saul’s journey to become an apostle and leader of the early church.

Many of us do not have the experience of Saul, and we did not have a former life as an atheist or criminal or anything like that. That is not my story, and I know that for many of us we also did not experience the same kind of change as Saul or Amy did. But our role may be closer to that of Ananias, as someone God has prepared to walk with new believers and to help them grow in faith. We need both!

If God asked me to welcome and meet with a brand-new believer who was until three days before had been a well-known terrorist coming to arrest me, I would probably want to give him some time to make sure his conversion would stick. Let’s give him six months or a year to make sure he doesn’t change his mind again. But Ananias obeyed right away. He went to see him and the first thing he said was “Brother Saul.” He accepted him immediately as a child of God, and a brother in the faith. He is living out the Christian value of forgiveness and grace.

He said, ““Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” The scales on Saul’s eyes fell away, and he was baptized.

In Acts 26, Paul has an audience with King Agrippa, and tells him the story of his conversion and encounter with Jesus. Paul adds some more detail from what is included in our passage from earlier as he recounts what Jesus said when Jesus appeared to him in the light on the road:

“<sup>16</sup> Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me. <sup>17</sup> I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them <sup>18</sup> to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’

Paul isn’t here to tell us that message in person, but this message and that invitation remains true and remains open for us today. As we close, I’d like to invite anyone here who has never accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and savior to take that step today.

William Barclay writes that a Christian is someone “who has ceased to do what he wants to do and who has begun to do what Jesus Christ wants him to do” (*The Acts of the Apostles*, 73). That is a choice open to all of us today – who will be our Lord? Whose voice will we listen to, and who will we obey? If

you're online, there should be a link on your screen to take this step, and if you're here in person I'll ask you to pray with me.

Please stand and let's pray as we close.

We'll go out through the doors at the back where we came in, through the foyer. Have a wonderful Sunday! Please join us again next week both in person and online.