

*** The Heights Baptist Church * Series: Change ***
*** Topic: Paul: A Story of Change * Acts 9:1-19 * 1/5/25 ***

MAIN POINT

Everyone who embraces the gospel message and accepts Jesus into their lives is forever changed. This radical change occurs since God has the power to completely change us and the course of our lives.

INTRODUCTION

What is something on which your views have radically changed from what you held in the past? (A few ideas include political affiliations, how to raise kids, the role of the church, etc.)

How has this shift in your thinking directly impacted any of your relationships or changed the way people view you, for better or worse? Explain.

The dictionary defines metamorphosis as a change of the form or nature of a something or someone into something completely different. Every Christian has experienced metamorphosis. We all have a story to tell because we have been powerfully transformed from being spiritually dead to becoming spiritually alive in Christ. There aren't many transformation stories more drastic than that of Saul on the road to Damascus. God intervened to transform Saul from a persecutor of the church to one of its greatest champions.

This is how Pastor Randy introduces the new sermon series based on Paul's life entitled "Change".

"The start of a new year has most of us thinking about change. We all have some things we'd like to be different: our weight, our health, our habits, our time, our money, our relationships, our job, our skills or lack of, or even our walk with God. For some, thoughts of change are just a passing fancy that comes with this time of year. For others, it may be more serious, more significant. They may be feeling like they have one more shot to make a change, or else. Wherever we are in our thoughts on change, so many have little confidence in themselves to achieve real, lasting change. And that makes it hard to change, when the change gets hard. So, we settle or just try to survive the consequences. But God . . . "

"God has a plan for you that makes it so possible for there to be real and lasting change. The change you need in your life can happen in 2025! We are going to look at one of the Bible's great characters and the change that happened in his life, from terrorist to minister, from hate to love, and so much more. It is not a story of perfection. He's a real person, with real struggles, and real feelings of just not being able to do it; but God. The life we are talking about is Paul. We will look first at the big picture, a changed life. Then we will look at the real drivers of change: confidence, purpose, attitude, and desires. We will not learn about Paul, but God, and how He will do what is needed to bring change in your life. Join us January 5, 2025!"

UNDERSTANDING

We'll start this series by reviewing Paul's miraculous conversion. Over the next several weeks, we'll follow this up by looking at some of the specific ways God changed Paul.

ASK VOLUNTEERS TO READ ACTS 8:1-3 AND ACTS 9:1-9

What was Saul's overall attitude toward Christianity before his conversion?

Armed with the authority of the high priest, Saul intended to stamp out the Christian movement. Saul's desire to go to Damascus reveals the extent of his hatred. His earlier activity against believers had been directed primarily against those in and around Jerusalem, but a zealous persecutor, Saul would not stop until he had stopped the spread of the gospel.

What did Jesus' statements to Paul reveal about His close identification with His followers?

How did Saul's companions respond to what happened to him?

Why do you think Saul was struck blind? What might God have been trying to teach him through blindness?

How do you think Saul felt when confronted by Jesus? Given his previous activities, what might he have been thinking about during those three days of blindness and fasting (v. 9)?

Jesus asked Saul why he was persecuting Him personally. Christ so identifies with His followers that to attack them is to attack Him. Jesus revealed Himself to Saul and gave him further instructions, and Saul's response was immediate. His fasting and blindness were not a punishment, but an appropriate response to the intensity of his encounter with Jesus. This encounter with Jesus resulted in a dramatic transformation in the life of this proud, Christian-hating Pharisee.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ 1 TIMOTHY 1:15

Why do you think Jesus chose one of Christianity's worst enemies of the time to be a follower? Why is this good news for us? What does it tell us about God?

If God can save Saul, He can save anyone! We see here that salvation is a gift of God, not something we earn.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ ACTS 9:10-19

How do you think Ananias must have felt when the Lord asked him to go take care of Saul?

Probably concern about approaching a person who has been leading the effort to place Christians in prison, and also participated in the activities involving the stoning of Stephen.

What does Ananias' response to Jesus' directions reveal about his own life and obedience?

He seems willing to obey Christ, whatever the cost.

What plans did the Lord have for Saul? How might this have differed from Ananias' expectations?

Ananias' response of "Here I am, Lord" revealed a heart that was eager to please the Lord and obey Him. This incident shows us clearly that God's assessment of people is often radically different than our own. Where most Christians would have looked at Saul with warranted fear and trepidation, God saw a "chosen instrument" that He would use to carry the gospel to the known world.

Why did the Lord send Ananias to Saul to restore his sight? Why didn't the Lord restore Saul's sight without Ananias's involvement? What does this tell us about how God desires for spiritual growth to happen?

How did Ananias address Saul? What does this reflect about the change in Saul's life? How did Saul respond after his physical healing?

Ananias followed directions and went to Saul. God could have healed Saul without the personal interaction with another believer, but God has never intended anyone do the Christian life alone. Ananias addressed Saul as brother, which reflects the familial relationships that exist in the family of faith.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ GALATIANS 1:11—2:1

What happened to Paul when he received Christ? How did his life change?

Why did Paul make a distinction between the gospel he preached and man's gospel? Describe these two gospels and their differences.

Paul made the distinction between the two gospels because there were teachers in Galatia accusing him of trying to please men. Paul was making it clear he only preached the gospel that he received directly from Jesus Christ. Paul transformed from a persecutor of the church to a missionary to the Gentiles. We see Jesus as the source of Paul's transformation in Acts 9.

What did Paul consider his new purpose to be? Could he have discovered this purpose through any other means? Why or why not?

What influence did Paul's life before Christ have on the way he lived as a changed man?

Paul changed from a persecutor of the gospel to a preacher of the gospel, however people still remembered his treacherous past. Paul did not let this stop him, instead he used it to show the power of the gospel and the change that Christ brings.

"I was one way and now I'm completely different. And the thing that happened in between - was Him."
Mary Magdalene character in "The Chosen" streaming series

"I don't think he's waiting for us to be holy. I think he's here because we can't be holy without him".
Mary Magdalene character in "The Chosen" streaming series

Note to study leader: It is difficult to be certain about the exact timeline of events in Paul's life between his conversion and his being sent out on his first missionary journey. Here is one possibility.

AD 33

1. Conversion on the Road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-9)
2. Goes to Damascus a short time (Acts 9:10-19)
3. Travels to Arabia and is disciplined by Christ for three years (Gal. 1:15-16)

AD 36-44

1. Returns to Damascus and flees for safety (Acts 9:20-25, Gal. 1:17-18, 2 Cor. 11:32-33)
2. Goes to Jerusalem and meets with Peter and James (Acts 9:26-29, Gal. 1:18-21)
3. Goes back to Tarshish (Acts 9:30)

AD 44-47

1. Ministers with Barnabas in Antioch (Acts 11:25-26)
2. Second Visit to Jerusalem; time of famine (Acts 11:27-30, Galatians 2:1-10)

AD 48

1. Leaves with Barnabas on his first missionary journey (Acts 13:1-3)

APPLICATION

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ ACTS 26:1-23

How does Saul's story show us that God can change the hardest of hearts?

What in your past makes it hard for you to feel worthy of serving God? How does the gospel impact those feelings?

On more than one occasion, Paul shares the story of his conversion in the book of Acts. How could you share your testimony this week with someone who has not yet come to Christ?

Ananias and Barnabas play an important role in discipling Paul. Who in your life could you take the time to disciple?

PRAYER

Thank God for using the most unlikely people for His kingdom. Praise God for His grace in your life that transformed you into a new person living for Jesus. Pray that God would use our individual stories to bring Him glory and to expand His kingdom.

COMMENTARY

Acts 9:1-19

9:1-2. As the word of God spread and the number of disciples increased, the church met strong opposition. Saul, who had held the clothing of those who had stoned Stephen, was intent on destroying the church. This persecution was the most severe threat believers had faced to this point in the church's brief history. Saul was breathing out threats against the disciples. The verb translated breathing out also means "inhaling" or "being bent on" some activity. Threats and murder had become the very breath Saul breathed. Saul's hostile mission was to place believers under arrest, whether men or women, and bring them as prisoners to Jerusalem. There they would stand trial before the Sanhedrin. Saul clearly demonstrated himself an enemy of Christ and His people.

9:3-5. This persecution was the most severe threat believers had faced to this point in the church's brief history. Saul's hostile mission was to place believers under arrest, whether men or women, and bring them as prisoners to Jerusalem. There they would stand trial before the Sanhedrin. Saul clearly showed himself to be an enemy of Christ and His people.

As Saul and those traveling with him neared the completion of their journey to Damascus, God supernaturally intervened in Saul's life. Saul encountered the resurrected and exalted Christ. A blinding light flashed around him, and he heard a voice. The question Saul heard was succinct and accusatory. Saul was on a mission of hate to persecute Jesus' followers. The resurrected Christ, however, so identified with His people that He said the persecution was against Him personally. When Saul inquired about the identity of the One speaking to him, he used the title, Lord. Saul quickly learned the Lord's identity and soon learned the deeper significance of the lordship of Christ in his life.

9:6-7. After revealing His identity as the risen Christ, Jesus commanded Saul to go into Damascus and await further instructions. Saul was not told at this point what his mission or purpose was. That was reserved for when he encountered Ananias later in the city of Damascus. This stepwise introduction to his future kept him from being overwhelmed all at once with the changes Jesus had initiated in his life, and it also allowed the Christians in Damascus to meet and accept the one whom they feared. This is the first of three accounts of Saul's conversion that appear in the Book of Acts (Acts 22:6-11; 26:12-18).

9:8-9. Saul's encounter with Jesus also impacted him physically. He was unable to see when he got up from the ground. His traveling companions had to lead him by the hand into Damascus. For three days Saul was blind, and did not eat or drink anything. Certainly his meeting with Jesus had been a traumatic experience. His life would be changed radically by this encounter with the resurrected Christ.

9:10-12 Ananias received no special identification here other than that he was a disciple in Damascus. The Lord spoke to him in a vision and informed Ananias that he was to go to Saul and place his hands on him so that Saul's sight would be restored. As is clear from verse 17, the designation Lord refers to Jesus. The Lord Jesus informed Ananias that He was at work in the lives of both persons involved in the situation. The Lord had given Saul a vision of Ananias coming to him.

9:13-14. Ananias was reluctant to obey the Lord's command for he was aware of the havoc Saul had caused among the Christian community in Jerusalem. Although Luke did not record a detailed account of Saul's activity in Jerusalem, it is obvious from reading Acts 8:1-3 that his persecution had dealt a serious blow to the Jerusalem church. Reports of the intense persecution in Jerusalem already had reached the Christian community in Damascus. The Christians in Damascus also were aware that Saul had come to their city to arrest believers. Naturally Ananias was reluctant to place himself in what he viewed as jeopardy. He knew Saul's reputation and thus protested the Lord's call. Ananias's honest response helps to emphasize the radical transformation that had occurred in Saul's life.

9:15-16. Ananias eventually followed the Lord's command but he did so only after the Lord assured him that He had chosen Saul. The risen Christ referred to Saul as my chosen instrument. To further encourage Ananias, the Lord briefly outlined Saul's future as a believer: he would carry the gospel to a broad cross section of the population in the Roman world of the first century. Both Gentiles and Jews would be among those to whom Saul would proclaim the message. The Lord also told Ananias that Saul himself would be called to suffer for Jesus' name. Saul, who had persecuted Christ's followers, would experience as a believer the same kind of suffering he had inflicted on others. We are not to understand this message as one of divine retaliation for what Saul had done prior to his conversion. Rather, the Lord's words to Ananias were a prophecy about a privilege Saul would experience as he followed the Lord.

9:17-19. Saul became a follower of Jesus Christ. Immediately afterward, Saul stayed in Damascus for some days, maybe becoming oriented in the basics of his new faith even as he began proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues. He gave priority to the synagogues throughout his ministry, which may be because Jesus directed his disciples to start in Jerusalem, and then in all Judea and Samaria, and (then) to the ends of the earth. God allowed Israel to reject their Messiah before taking the message to the Gentiles (Matt. 10:5-6, Acts 1:8, and Rom. 11:28-36). Another reason may be that while most of the people in these Gentile areas were pagans, and by starting in the Synagogues, Paul was starting with people with whom he had common ground, to gain a foothold with the gospel message before taking it to the rest of the city.