

## THE CONVERSION OF SAUL OF TARSUS

We have much to be thankful for, don't we? Notice on your outline **Psalm 40:5** "**Many**, O Lord my God, are thy **wonderful works** which thou hast done, and **thy thoughts** which are to us-ward: **they cannot be reckoned up in order unto thee**: if I would declare and speak of them, they are **more than can be numbered**."

I've shared with you on more than one occasion that my "take" on this verse is this: If you were **given a piece of paper** and told to "count your blessings"—**in the order** in which they occurred in your life—you could not do it! They could not be "reckoned up in order" because as soon as you wrote down **the first three**, you would remember other ones that came between **blessing one and two**—or between **blessing two and three**. And after you corrected the order, you would soon realize that you have to **correct your list again** because you would remember more wonderful things God had done for you!

What a blessing—to have so many blessings that you can't **put them in order**—and they are "more than can be numbered!" But...if you were to put them in order of **importance**, the **very first thing** that should be listed by **every** born-again, blood-bought child of God **would** be—or at least **should** be—that Jesus **died to save us!**

What about **you**? Are you thankful for **your** salvation? **Many songwriters were**—and as a result we have a number of wonderful hymns! Many of these songwriters shared a common theme: **an amazement** that God personally **loved them**—and their recognition that **they were not worthy** of that love! Examples:  
1) "Amazing grace! how sweet the sound, **that saved a wretch like me!** I once was lost, but now am found; was blind but now I see!"  
2) Here's another: "**How can it be?** How can it be? That God should **love a soul like me**, O how can it be?"  
3) And here's a third: "Alas, and did my Savior bleed? And did my Sovereign die? Would He devote that sacred head for such a **worm** as I?"

**Songwriters** weren't the only ones that were amazed and appreciative of God's love for them—so were **Scripture writers!** And one of them happens to be the **apostle Paul**—the persecutor-turned-preacher that we talked about last week. So this morning—rather than **depart** from learning about Saul to focus on **just** "Thanksgiving," we are going to **combine Saul and** "Thanksgiving" by looking at how he was converted—and how thankful he was that Christ saved him!

Please take your Bibles and turn to Acts 9 and follow along as I read verses 1-9. Rather than do a verse-by-verse explanation of the passage, I want to highlight **three** important truths that it teaches.

This first one is so obvious that it is easy to overlook—or at least not think about as much as we should.

### **1. Jesus is alive—and knows everything about us!**

**Who** spoke to Saul? Jesus! How do **we know?** Vs 5 "I am Jesus..."

**Where** was Jesus when He spoke these words? In heaven! We see that at the end of vs 3.

**What** did Jesus know about Saul? We know from vs 4 that He obviously knew **Saul's name!** But...Jesus knew much more than that! I want to point out just two things.

First, A. Jesus knew what Saul was doing

**What** was Saul doing? **Persecuting** believers, right?

Turn back to Acts 7 and notice again some of the verses we looked at last week.

--Acts 7:55-56. The "he" is Stephen—and Stephen **sees the resurrected Jesus** in heaven. And the resurrected Jesus obviously **sees Stephen** and is encouraging him and waiting to welcome him into heaven!

--But... Jesus also **sees Saul** because Saul is there! We see that in vs 58. Jesus knows Saul is a persecutor.

--Look at Acts 8:3. Jesus knew that Saul was hunting down and arresting those that believed in Christ.

--Back to Acts 9, look at verse 1. Jesus knew why Saul had come to Damascus.

--Now Acts 9:4. "Saul, Saul, why **persecutest** thou me?"

How could Saul be **persecuting Jesus** if Jesus was **in heaven**—and Saul was **on earth**?

We know the answer, right? Because what Saul was doing to Jesus' *followers*, he was doing to *Jesus Himself!* Jesus taught that truth in Matthew 25:40 "...Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." So Jesus knew what Saul was doing.

That's not all. B. Jesus knew what Saul was feeling

--We see that in the end of vs 5: "...it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks."

Jesus here is using a metaphor that first century Jews would have understood well. A "prick"—some translations have "goad"—was a *sharp pointed stick* that was used to poke or prod an animal to move. I've also heard it explained as a piece of wood—with sharp "spikes" sticking out—that was *between the oxen* doing the pulling—and *the plow* that was being pulled! If the oxen didn't want to pull—and started kicking at the plow—they would be kicking against the board with sharp pricks. And the *harder they kicked*, the more it hurt!

Was Saul literally *hooked up to a plow*? Obviously not! But Saul was kicking against—he was fighting and resisting—what God was doing in *his heart*.

Saul was there and heard Stephen *boldly preach* about Jesus. Saul *witnessed the calm* of Stephen as he faced death—and *the joy* in which he proclaimed, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God!" And Saul saw Stephen—as he *was being stoned to death*—kneel down *and pray for those* who were killing him: "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge!"

And I believe Saul was *haunted by these* things; he was fighting against what God was doing in *his heart*. And it wouldn't go away! Why? Because he had reminders—possibly daily—that the followers of Jesus would rather *go to prison—and possibly die*—than renounce their faith in Jesus!

It's also possible that in Saul's mind, he kept "hearing" the words of Gamaliel who had warned them earlier to be careful lest they find themselves "fighting against God!"

So Jesus knew Saul's name...and what Saul *was doing*—and what Saul *was feeling*.

What about us? Does Jesus know *our name*? Yes, He does! He even knows the *number of the hairs on our head* the Bible says in Mt 10:30 and Luke 12:7!

Does Jesus know what we *are doing*? Yes, He does! He knows what we have done *in the past*—and what we are *doing now*. And—if we do not receive Him in this life as *our Savior*—we will stand before Jesus and be *judged by Him!* Revelation 20:12 says, "... and the *dead were judged* out of those things which were written in the books, according to *their works*."

And—just like Jesus knew what was going on in *Saul's heart*—He knows what is going *in your heart!* Jesus knew what Saul was counting on to get into heaven—and He knows what you and I are counting on, too!

And that leads us to a 2<sup>nd</sup> truth we see in this passage: **2. Salvation is found in a relationship—not a religion!**

A. Saul was outwardly religious

How do we know Saul was outwardly religious? Because we looked at it last week, right? Notice on your outline **Philippians 3:6** "...touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless."

Was Saul *claiming to be sin free*/sinless because he perfectly kept the law? No; he wasn't saying that at all! What he was saying was that he followed the *letter* of the law—meaning the law of Moses—to a "t."

He kept every *dietary* rule...and every *sabbath* rule...and every rule *about offerings and sacrifices and tithes*. He kept all the rules about *cup* washing...and *hand* washing...and *platter* washing. And he kept the rules about *praying* and observing all the special *Jewish feast days*—like the Passover!

So he was *not saying* he was perfect, but... he was a *perfect keeper* of the rules! And—as mentioned last week—the Bible says the same of the parents of John the Baptist in Luke 1:6 "And they were both *righteous before God*, walking in *all the commandments and ordinances* of the Lord *blameless*."

Saul wasn't just outwardly good, though. B. Saul's "religion" was partly based on the Bible.

We know from Philippians 3:5 that Saul was a *Pharisee*. As a Pharisee, Saul would have been taught—and presumably believed—some *correct doctrine*. He would have believed in the resurrection, rewards and punishments for individuals, and the existence of angels and demons in a spiritual realm.

But...the Pharisees also had some “*not-so-good*” doctrine. They believed that *oral traditions*—added interpretations and applications to the law of Moses—were *just as authoritative* as what God Himself taught through Moses! Jesus *condemned the Pharisees for this* a number of times. One example is found in **Mark 7:7-9** “Howbeit in vain do they worship me, **teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.** <sup>8</sup> For **laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men**, as the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do. <sup>9</sup> And He said unto them, Full well ye **reject the commandment of God**, that ye may keep **your own tradition.**”

Can’t spend a lot of time on this, but the point Jesus was making is fairly obvious: there are commandments and traditions *of men*—and there are the commandments *of God*. Jesus is also saying that you are *not obeying God* if you choose the commandments *of men* over the commandments *of God*!

Back to Saul. He was *not an atheist*—and he did not belong to a cult. He *feared* God—and much of what He believed came from what *God’s Word said*. But...he belonged to a group who believed that God’s Word was *not enough* and needed to be *added to*.

But people *don’t do that* anymore, do they? That practice *ended long ago*, right? I’m being facetious, of course! Sadly, many *main-stream* “Christian” denominations teach that the Bible is *not enough*—and so they *add to it*. And what they add—in their minds—carries *just as much weight* as what God’s Word says!

They study books...and creeds...and councils...and church history. And they watch videos! But rarely do they read the Book! *God* has declared unto us *His thoughts* (Psalm 33:11 and Amos 4:13)—why are people so enamored with the *opinions and thoughts and words* of men—or women?

Saul was outwardly religious—and Saul’s “religion” was partly based on the Bible. But being outward religious wouldn’t get his sins forgiven and get him into heaven!

#### C. Saul needed the right view of Jesus

Why did a man like Saul—who believed in the resurrection—*refuse to believe* that Jesus rose again? We’re not told, but probably for the same reason many people *now refuse* to believe—they are *blinded by pride*!

Notice **Romans 10:1-4**: “Brethren, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved. <sup>2</sup> For I bear them record that they have a **zeal of God**, but not according to knowledge. <sup>3</sup> For they being **ignorant of God’s righteousness**, and going about to establish **their own righteousness**, have not **submitted themselves** unto the righteousness of God. <sup>4</sup> For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth.”

I can’t help but think that when God led Paul to *write these words* to the Christians in Rome, Paul *saw himself* in what he said about his fellow Israelites!

--*He had a zeal* of God—but not according to knowledge!

--*He was ignorant* of God’s way to become forgiven—and was trying to establish his own way!

--*And he would not submit* himself to God’s way to become righteous.

But when Saul met Jesus on his way to Damascus, that all changed! Jesus not only showed Saul that *He was alive*—He revealed to Him the truth about *who* He was. We aren’t given the details of that, but in Acts 9:20, we see Saul preaching that Christ is “the Son of God.”

And last week we looked at some of what Paul said in his first recorded sermon in **Acts 13:38-39** “Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto **you the forgiveness of sins**: <sup>39</sup> **And by Him all that believe** are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses.” So Saul needed the right view of Jesus—and Jesus gave him that view!

One more thought from this passage before we look at Paul’s thanksgiving and it is this: **3. Jesus knocks us off our “high horse” because He loves us!** Spurgeon wrote: “Paul was a great man, and I have no doubt that on the way to Damascus he rode a very high horse.... How soon God brought him down!” (Wiersbe, Be Dynamic, pg 109)

--What happened to the *hunter*? He became the *hunted*!

--What happened to the *“arrestor?”* He became the *arrested*!

Did Jesus appear to Saul...and knock him off his horse...and blind him for 3 days because **He hated him?**

No; Jesus did it because He **loved him!** Jesus used the proverbial “2x4” to get Saul’s attention—and to convict him of his sin and his need of a Savior!

What about us now? Is Jesus going to **blind us** with a bright light—and speak to us in a voice that we can hear from heaven? No! But if you don’t listen when **He gently speaks** to your heart, He may “knock you off your horse” by bringing something **painful into your life** to get your attention! Why? Because He **hates** you? No, because He **loves** you!

Take your Bibles now and turn to I Timothy 1, please follow along as I read verses 12-16.

Here we see... **4. Paul’s thanksgiving for his salvation**

We obviously can’t spend a lot of time on this, but here are a few thoughts.

A. Paul tells Timothy what he was

--Vs 13. “Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious”—meaning violent

B. Paul tells Timothy what he is now

Notice vs 15. **What** does Paul call himself? The “chief of sinners.”

**When** was Paul the chief of sinners? Was it before he was saved, when he was a blasphemer and a persecutor and injurious? **No!** He was telling Timothy that **at the time** he was writing this letter—when he was roughly 58 years old and had been serving Christ for 25 plus years—that he was—**then**—the chief of sinners! **Why** did Paul write that? Was he calling himself that out of **false humility?**

Not at all! Paul was **not** “putting on a show.” He was not **pretending** to be something he wasn’t. And he was not looking for Timothy **to write back** and say, ‘Paul, you are **not** the chief of sinners!’

**Steven Cole** accurately put it like this: “The closer a person walks with God, the more he is aware of the **depths of his sinful nature**, which in turn drives him into a **deeper appreciation** of the grace of God.”

Lastly, let’s notice... C. Paul tells Timothy what he received

--In vs 13 and 16, Paul told Timothy “...I obtained mercy...”

--First, let’s consider the word “obtained.” To be rather blunt, “obtained” is not the **best translation**. Why do I say that? Because “obtained” means “to get something, especially by asking for it, buying it, or working for it.”

Did Paul **receive mercy** because he “asked for it, bought it, or worked for it?” Not at all! The Greek word that “obtained” comes from means “show compassion, to be merciful.”

The thought, then, is that Paul was **shown mercy** by God. God extended it to Paul **without Paul asking** for it—and certainly not because Paul bought it or earned it!

Next, let’s consider the word “mercy.” **What** is mercy? Mercy is the withholding of deserved judgment!

Did Paul **deserve judgment?** Yes, he did—and so **do we!**

Did Paul **need mercy?** Yes, he did—and so **do we!**

But why do **we deserve judgement**—and why do **we need mercy?** After all, we’ve never been a persecutor of Christians like Saul was! **Here’s why** you and I **deserve judgment**—and **here’s why** you and I **need mercy!**

Notice again a verse I gave you earlier: Revelation 20:12 “... and the **dead were judged** out of those things which were written in the books, according to **their works.**” That means...

--Every arrogant thought...and hateful thought...and jealous thought...and lustful thought has been written down

--And it means every time you’ve cursed...and gossiped...and lied...and said hurtful things...and taken God’s name in vain, it’s been written down

--And every time you cheated...or disobeyed your parents...or laughed at the wrong jokes...or looked at the wrong kind of things...or stole something, it’s been written down

--And it means every time you chose your way over God’s way...and disobeyed God...and doubted God...and loved yourself more than God and been ungrateful to God, it’s been written down!

I could go on, but I think you get the picture!

We deserve judgement—and we **need mercy!**

But what is the **basis** of mercy? Does God just forget about our sins and sweep them under the rug like they don't exist? **On what grounds** can God forgive us and show mercy to us?

In a word... “grace.” And it isn't just grace; “exceeding abundant grace” is what Paul calls it in vs 14.

What is grace? Grace—according to vs 15—is “Christ Jesus coming into the world to save sinners!”

Paul was awed by...and humbled by...and thankful for God's grace and mercy. Are you? The only way you can be is if you are a **recipient** of grace and mercy. You can't just **intellectually know about it**—you need to personally receive it for yourself.

Did Paul know the moment he received mercy and grace? He did, didn't he? As already mentioned, we are not going to have the same experience Saul did on the road to Damascus.

But...shouldn't we be able to point back to a time in our life when God convinced us of our lostness—and our need to repent? And shouldn't we be able to point back to a time in our life when we “called upon the name of the Lord?”

So what would God have us do in light of what we've heard this morning?

1. First and foremost, are you a **recipient** of God's grace and mercy? You can be! How? By agreeing with God about your sinfulness...and need for a Savior...and trusting in Jesus to be your Savior. You can “call upon the name of the Lord” right now—before you leave this auditorium!

“For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

2. Second—if you are a child of God—are you awed and humbled and thankful that God saved a wretch and worm like you? You ought to be! And if you **aren't** “growing in humility,” you **are** growing in pride!

And that is not the kind of growth you want to have!

3. Lastly, don't give up on praying for people that seem “too hard to reach.” God can break the hardest of hearts—just like he broke the heart of Saul!