

THE BIG IDEA: Conversion leads to a new version of us.

The Take-Off

A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away we started a journey through the book of Acts called re|ACTS.

Ok, it wasn't THAT long ago, but in the fall of last year we did start walking through the history of the early church

because we realized that we have a lot in common with them:

- they had 120; we have about the same
- they were in a small town; we are, too
- they were just starting out as a church; we're taking our first steps as a church, as well

Finally, we thought we'd ask one simple question: Will God do today what he did then if we do today what they did then?

This isn't a series as much as an investigation, and to this point we've seen some striking similarities between them and us

If you want to catch up on what we've learned to this point, you can go to the current teaching page on the website and download all the previous teaching. Trust me, it's worth your time to watch the messages.

But for today, I'm just going to try to hit the highlights of the timeline in Acts in order to get us up to chapter 9, which will be our focus today.

So, to this point in Acts:

- Jesus left
- the Holy Spirit came
- the Church was born
- the Church got power
- the Church got persecuted
- the Church got scattered
- the Church got stronger
- and today, in Acts 9, the church is going to get a new leader who is going to take them in a new direction.

Of course, it all starts with conversion, and that's exactly what we find taking place in the first nineteen verses of Acts chapter 9.

The plan today then, is to walk through Saul's conversion and see if we can find the basic ingredients that we should find in everyone's conversion when they make the decision to follow Jesus.

The first common piece is point one:

1. Life before meeting Jesus

Let's take a quick snapshot of Saul before he encountered Jesus

- "Meanwhile...he was still..."
- Saul is continuing to do what he'd always done: ravage the church with a vengeance
- Many believe that seeing Stephen's death (back in Acts 7) had fueled Saul's rage even more
- He was persecuting disciples of Jesus as fast as he could find them
- vv. 1-2 here only give a general view of the persecution, but Acts 22:4 and 26:10-11 show specifics: imprisonment and death
- Saul was so bent on destroying the church, he was almost crazy. In his words (Acts 26:11), he was "obsessed."
- And so here we find him traveling to Damascus to continue the blood bath
 - Damascus is full of Jews and Gentile converts; tons of targets for Saul's rage
 - 130 NE of Jerusalem, it was as far as from here to the VA state line as the crow flies in a NE direction

What's the picture of Saul before he met Jesus?

He was full of rage, bent on destroying as many followers of Jesus as he possibly could and not worried about anyone he hurt along the way.

Basically, he was just like us.

Romans 1:18-32 paints a disgustingly real picture of our lives before meeting Jesus

- we were fighting against the truth just like Saul (v. 18)
- we were running as fast as we possibly could away from Jesus just like Saul (vv. 21-31)
- we were just as cold about the fate of others as Saul was (v. 32)

Fill in the blank: Before I met Jesus, I was _____.

2. Life while meeting Jesus

Just as Damascus was coming into view, Saul's life ran smack into Jesus

Some of you know what this is like, don't you? Sometimes it feels like we are almost too far gone, too evil, even for God to redeem, but the great news of the gospel is that Saul never got to Damascus!

- Psalm 139:7
- Isaiah 59:1

Know this: no one in this room or anywhere on this planet is beyond the saving reach of our God.

If you're breathing, you're redeemable.

What was Saul's conversion like?

- It was unexpected - "suddenly" (v. 3)
 - Jesus is always the best choice, but he doesn't always seem like the most convenient choice.
 - Saul was going somewhere and Jesus interrupted him.
 - Is it possible that the very things that are frustrating you now are actually trying to point you to Jesus?
 - My pastor's daughter and her battle with leukemia
- It was undeniable (v. 3)
 - Acts 9 doesn't say what time this happened, but Acts 22:6 says it was about noon
 - The point here is that the light shone during the daytime, not the nighttime
 - At night, they could have said it was any number of things, but in the day it could only be one
- It was humbling (v. 4)
 - Saul fell to the ground
 - From a horse? From walking? The point is that he ended up lower than he was before he met Jesus.
- It was public (vv. 4-7)
 - The men saw him fall, they heard the sound, they saw the light
 - All of this took place in full view of those Saul was leading
 - All of this was a far cry from the "eyes closed, heads bowed" altar calls we give today

So, what about you?

Looking back over the way Saul was converted, how does it compare with how you were converted? Have you been converted?

If you've experienced the conversion to faith in Jesus, what part of Saul's conversion can you relate to the most?

3. Life after meeting Jesus

For Saul, everything changed:

- he looked for disciples everywhere, now he couldn't see at all (v. 8)
- he led men in violence, now he is being led in weakness (v. 8)
- he moved in chaos, now he waited in silence (v. 9)
- he used instruments of death, now he is an instrument of life (v. 15)

In a word, life after meeting Jesus was different

And the obvious question to each one of us has to be: is ours?

See, the true test of conversion is change.

Today's Big Idea says it all: **Conversion leads to a new version of you.**

Not a better version of you, but a brand new version of you.

2 Corinthians 5:17 - you and I are new creations when we meet Jesus

Let me be very clear: if our hearts have not changed - and our actions along with them - then we have not met and chosen to follow Jesus. IT IS NOT POSSIBLE TO MEET JESUS AND STAY THE SAME.

It is the outward change that forces the skeptic to consider the inward conversion.

Look quickly at Acts 9:26. The disciples didn't want to believe that Saul had changed until Barnabas brought him and told them how Saul had changed (v. 27).

People either followed him or walked from him.

You and I will do one of those as well.

Fill in the blank: Since meeting Jesus, I am _____.

The Landing

As we start to bring this to a close, let's make some observations from the text:

- Sometimes God gets our attention in ways that aren't comfortable. He knocked Saul down but didn't leave him down.
- The best testimonies show very real change. "Was blind, but now I see."
- There is value in waiting. So many times we are converted and we want to jump right into ministry before getting clear direction from Jesus. Saul waited.
- We are not converted to live lives of comfort. We are converted to live lives of surrender. (Acts 9:16)
- Conversion happens in community. Faith is personal, but never private.

There are always areas where we are still being made perfect.

Sometimes we follow Jesus well, and other times we fall very, very short.

But remember that conversion leads to a new version of you.

ILL: How my life has changed and Wendy can't imagine me the way I used to be.

It is very much a journey with ups and downs, but to borrow a very popular phrase, the life of a follower of Jesus is always trending upward.

Is yours? Do you look a little more like Jesus today than you did yesterday? Do your friends see it? Your neighbors? Your family?

If not, you need to do some soul searching right now.