

## TRANSFORMED BY HIS LIFE

### Acts 9: 1-19

*Please review this week's catechism question.*

#### INTRODUCTION

Have you ever changed? If so, describe how that change came about.

Change is hard. It is hard for lots of reasons; the main one being that we don't really want to change. We are doing what we do because we like it, because we get something out of it that pleases us. Real change requires not merely a change in action but more importantly a change in what I think, what I believe, what I love. Jesus Christ came into the world to change people. By his life, death, resurrection and ascension he aims to perform the most radical transformation in the universe.

His aim is to transform humans who hate God and love sin into humans that love God and hate sin. What makes the transformation of humans so miraculous is that no human naturally believes they need this change. We are going to examine perhaps the most radically changed life in the whole history of the world. We are going to examine that moment in time when Saul of Tarsus, hater of Christ and Christians became the Apostle Paul, lover of Christ and his church. We are going to see how God makes a wolf into a sheep. Our goal in examining the conversion of Saul, is to identify how it is that the resurrected Jesus changes people. Our aim is that by observing the ways in which Jesus transformed this one life we will experience that same miracle of transformation in our own lives.

#### STUDY

1. Review Acts 6:8-8:3 & 9:1-3, Phil. 3:4b-6. What do we find out about Saul? What are the things that Saul witnessed and that he did? How did he feel?

*He was raised in an orthodox, Jewish home. He was trained in the best of Jewish theological schools. He knew the OT backwards and forwards. He was zealous in his devotion to Yahweh and determined to honor the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob by keeping the law as perfectly as possible.*

*There was no argument for or against the truthfulness of the Jewish faith of which he was not aware. He knew without question that God had chosen the Jewish nation to be his people. He knew there was only one way to worship God and all other ways were wrong.*

*We don't know if he ever saw or heard Jesus teach prior to Jesus' death. We do know that he was in Jerusalem during the months following Jesus' ascension. He was present in Jerusalem as thousands of Jewish men and women professed faith in Jesus Christ as the Messiah, the Son of God and the Savior of the world. We know that he was present when Stephan, a leader in the early church in Jerusalem, was seized and dragged before the same Jewish ruling council that had condemned Jesus to death. He listened as Stephan was falsely accused of speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God. He heard Stephan's defense as it is recorded in Acts 7. He was present at the end of that defense when Stephan accused the Sanhedrin of being stiff necked and of resisting the Holy Spirit and of having killed the Messiah, Jesus. Saul witnessed how the entire ruling council became enraged and dragged Stephan outside of Jerusalem and stoned him to death as he cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." Saul did not only witness his death but approved of it.*

*Following Stephan's martyrdom he began conducting a house-to-house search of Jerusalem in order to discover and arrest and punish these depraved people. As a result of his aggressive persecution of the church in Jerusalem many of these Jewish believers in Jesus fled from Jerusalem to surrounding cities and countries. One of the places to which they fled was the foreign city of Damascus, some 150 miles northeast of Jerusalem. In the opening verses of chapter 9 we find Paul, breathing out threat and murder against the disciples of Jesus, obtaining letters authorizing him to go to Damascus and to arrest any followers of the Way that he might find among the Jewish synagogues, whether men or women. What Saul was doing was a government sanctioned, legal action. This phrase, "breathing out murderous threats" is a poetic way of saying that Saul was consumed with destroying the church. He was plotting and planning ways to destroy the church with every breath that he took. He lived to destroy the church. The mention of women is significant. He cared nothing about families or children. He had no sympathy for anyone who claimed to be a follower of Christ. He aimed to stamp out this vile and deadly cult like New Yorkers seek to wipe out the rats that infest their city.*

2. What are some reasons Saul would be so opposed to "the Lord's disciples"? How did he view what he was doing?

He was absolutely convinced that Stephan's claim that the Jewish people had murdered their Messiah was ludicrous. He rejected the claim of Jesus and his apostles that the Jewish people, especially the sect of the Pharisees of which he was a part, were lawbreakers. He viewed this teaching that the crucified impostor, Jesus was raised from the dead and thus the divine Son of God, to be a wicked and evil perversion. Saul viewed the followers of Christ, who at this time were mostly Jewish, as traitors to the one God. He believed they were breaking the first commandment; "you shall have no other gods before me." Saul viewed this new sect of Judaism who followed the martyred Jesus the same way we view terrorists. They were wrong and if allowed to flourish would bring destruction to the Jewish culture and religion. He thought of himself as a modern Elijah killing the prophets of Baal or King Josiah who destroyed the places of false worship and killed the Jewish men and women who were conducting worship services on the high places.

**3.** What sorts of reasons could be used to convince Saul to stop persecuting Christians and become one himself? How effective would they be?

Saul was oblivious to any and every argument that could be made to prove that Jesus is the Messiah. He was indifferent to the patient endurance exhibited by those he arrested. Stephan praying that God would forgive those who stoned him did not make him wonder if Jesus might be real but further enraged him. You could no more reason with Saul as he marched to Damascus than you could have reasoned with one of the 9/11 terrorists as they flew jetliners towards New York or Washington, D.C. He was as impervious to every plea for mercy as a suicide bomber laden with explosives standing at a bus stop in Israel or Iraq. Here was a man who was convinced beyond any doubt that he was serving God, he was doing God's will, that he was one of the good guys in his fierce opposition to Christ and his followers.

**4.** What happened on the road to Damascus and now did Saul respond to it? What might be some reasons he did not eat or drink?

He was almost to Damascus when suddenly a bright light out of heaven flashed around him. The light was so overpowering that he immediately fell to the ground. Then he heard a voice speaking to him. Then the Lord Christ commanded him to get up and go into the city of Damascus where he would receive further instructions on what he was to do. The men traveling with Saul heard the sound of the voice but did not see anyone. They helped Saul to his feet at which time he discovers that he is now blind and must be led by

his companions into Damascus. He remains blind for three days and does not eat or drink anything during those three days but spends his time in prayer.

In a moment, Saul's entire world has been turned upside down. His going without food or water is not merely a religious response to this crisis but the physiological response of the human organism to profound shock. I have observed this sort of indifference to eating and drinking in a man whose fiancé broke the engagement, in a man whose wife told him she wanted a divorce, in parents when their child was profoundly injured in an accident. When we are the subjects of life altering, fear producing events we lose our appetite and if we are religious people, we pray.

**5.** What would have been some of the "shocks" that Saul received as a result of Jesus' appearance to him?

First, Saul is forced to see that he was wrong about Jesus being dead. He had heard the claims of Christians that Christ had raised from the dead and had been seen by hundreds of his followers. He had scoffed at such a claim and ridiculed it. But he was wrong because Jesus was clearly alive, he had spoken to Saul. Second, he was not only wrong about Jesus being alive, but in viewing Jesus as merely a man. The form of Jesus' speech and the presence of this light were just like so many of Yahweh's appearances to men in the OT. Saul was forced to see that Jesus was the Son of God. In other words, while Saul sincerely believed that he was serving God by opposing Christ, he was actually fighting against God. My guess is that this more than anything else was the greatest shock to Saul and the source of his greatest terror. You could not have found a more religiously sincere person than Saul of Tarsus. Yet you could not have found a person more wrong and blameworthy for being wrong. We know that Saul is blameworthy because of the question the resurrected Jesus asked him. "Why are you persecuting me?" The question obviously implies that Saul had no reason for persecuting Christians. He should have known better. Sincerity of belief will be no defense before the judgment seat of God. Saul knows this and is terrified to discover how wrong he had been.

The third thing that Saul is confronted with as a result of his encounter with the risen Christ is the identity of the people of God. One of the things that motivated him to so violently oppose the followers of Christ was his love of the nation of Israel. He was devoted to the preservation and purity of the people of God. He was arresting Christians to protect God's people from this destructive lie. Yet, what he has discovered is that he has been actually

persecuting the very people he believed he was protecting. In the OT God regularly identified himself with the people of Israel. He regularly said that attacking Israel was attacking him. He lived with and among his people and so how anyone treated Israel was how they were treating Yahweh. The risen Christ twice told him that by persecuting Christians he was persecuting the divine Son of God. Saul knows now that he has attacked the ones whom God loves and thus exposed himself to the same judgment as that God brought upon all of Israel's enemies in the OT.

The final thing that Saul is confronted with as a result of his encounter with the resurrected Christ is that all of his good deeds are worthless. His entire conception of himself and of how God related to human beings has been shown to be nothing but a pile of manure as he says in another place. He is not good and his righteous deeds are as filthy rags before God. He has presumed that God was pleased with him because of all his righteous law abiding work. However, he discovers in a moment as he says in his letter to the Philippian church that "whatever was to my profit I now consider loss." Everything that he had built his life upon and around was shown to be a house of cards in the brilliance of the glory of Christ shown to him on that road.

In one brilliant moment Saul discovers that he is wrong in every way that it is possible for a human being to be wrong. He has built his life on a lie. All the good that he believed he was doing turns out to be the very work of the devil. He is overcome with guilt and fear and shame. He waits as men wait on death row as the hour of their execution approaches for the word of pardon to come. He knows that he does not deserve clemency and yet he knows that because he is still alive there is yet hope of mercy. The encounter on the road to Damascus could have been, should have been, an encounter with his judge and executioner. So he waits for further word from the God whom he has sought to kill, praying for mercy while he waits.

**6.** What does Christ's confrontation with Saul and Saul's response tell us about how Jesus changes us?

God is out to do this same work in every human life because every human being, while not expressing our opposition to God in the same way as Saul, is just as naturally opposed to him. Jesus' confrontation with Saul is an example of the merciful confrontation he aims at in all of our lives. We all naturally and sincerely believe we are right in what we believe and how we live. It requires regular confrontation by the risen Christ to reveal to us how wrong we are and how much we need to change. It begins with our

conversion but continues throughout the course of our life. The resurrected Christ, through his word and by his Spirit and through the circumstances and people in our lives is regularly revealing to us how we need to change. He seeks to regularly bring us into this state of shock so that we are prepared to hear his word of forgiveness as we now observe coming to blind, fasting and praying Saul.

**7.** Describe times and ways that Christ has confronted you with your sin and error.

**The resurrected Christ transforms people by convincing people they need to change.**

**8.** What is the next thing that Jesus does in the process of converting Saul?

While Saul waits in blindness and fear and hope of receiving the word of pardon the risen Christ pays a visit in a vision to another man in the city of Damascus, a disciple named Ananias. Jesus tells him that he is to go the house of Judas on Straight St. where he will find a man named Saul praying. He tells him that this Saul has had a vision in which he has seen Ananias visiting him and laying his hands on him so that he can regain his sight.

**9.** How does Ananias respond to Jesus' command at first? What might be some reasons as to why he says this?

He tells the risen Christ that this is the man who has been harming the saints of Christ in Jerusalem and who has come to Damascus for the very same reason. I think it is quite humorous that Ananias feels the need to inform the Lord Christ of who Saul is when Jesus knows exactly where Saul is and what he is doing at this moment. The Son of God is in control of everything happening here and yet Ananias seems to think that he needs to have things explained to him. Why does he do this? I think there are a couple of reasons. First, he is afraid. Essentially he is asking Jesus, why would you send me to the hangman? What reason could you have for sending me on an errand that will only lead to my death? Second, and related to his concern for his personal safety is the more fundamental unbelief that he has. Why would God have anything to do with someone as vile and perverse as Saul? He is killing Christians. That Saul, this wolf, could become one of Christ's sheep is beyond anything that Ananias could ever imagine. There is no one beyond the reach of God's grace. Salvation, as Paul says in Romans 9 "does

*not depend upon man's desire or effort but on God's mercy." God has mercy upon whomever he wants to have mercy, including violent persecutors like Saul. Ananias needs to be reminded of that.*

**10.** How does Jesus answer his objection? What do we discover about Saul's conversion from what he says?

*He tells him that he decided before the world began that Saul, contrary to what he deserves, would not only become one of his sheep but that he would become one of his primary shepherds. It was God's plan from all of eternity to overcome all of the resistance in Saul's heart to Christ and to grant him to not only believe in Christ but to also suffer for Christ. It was God's sovereign plan to turn one of the principle enemies of the church into one of its foremost defenders. There can be no question, when Saul becomes a Christian and then becomes Christ's chief spokesperson to the Gentiles and the author of half of the NT that he is what he is by the grace of God. Saul becomes, as he says dozens of times in his letters, the number one example that salvation is a work of divine, sovereign grace from beginning to end. No one deserves to be saved. No one has any interest in being saved. No one is able to do anything to contribute to his or her salvation, just like Saul as he comes to Damascus to destroy Christ's church. People become Christians because God chooses them, freely without any consideration of anything in them, to become Christians. If Saul's conversion teaches us one thing it is this, we are not in control of salvation, God is. He saves whom he will according to the pleasure of his own will and not due to anything in any human being.*

**11.** What happens next? What does Ananias do and what does Saul do?

*Ananias obeys God and goes to Saul. He addresses him as a brother as he believes what God has said; this wolf is becoming a sheep. He tells Saul, while laying his hands upon him, that Jesus, whom Saul saw on the road to Damascus, has sent him so that he might see again and that he might receive the Holy Spirit. Immediately something like scales fall from Saul's eyes so that he could see again. Then Ananias baptizes him as a disciple of Jesus Christ. With his receiving the word of pardon from his judge, his appetite now returns and he eats. Then this one who came to destroy the church lives with the church and immediately begins to defend the church.*

**12.** What did Saul do get his sight back and to receive the filling of the Holy Spirit? (NOTE: What might be some of the symbolism in Saul's blindness and being healed?)

*Saul did nothing to regain his sight or to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Being able to see and receiving the Holy Spirit were both gifts given to him by Christ through Ananias. Saul's physical blindness is a metaphor of his spiritual condition and his being able to see at the time he receives the Holy Spirit is a graphic picture of what happens to him at his conversion. He was blind to the glory of Christ but now he sees the glory of Christ. Compare with John 9, especially vv. 35-41 & 2 Cor. 4:3-6 & 1 Cor. 2:6-16. Saul didn't decide to be healed. He was healed. He didn't decide to receive the HS. He was filled with the Holy Spirit.*

**13.** Why does Jesus send Ananias to heal him and give him the HS, instead of doing it directly himself?

*First, this promotes humility in Saul. One of those whom he so recently despised is now the agent of his salvation. If he is going to be a follower of Christ he must permit Ananias to pray for him, lay his hands upon him and baptize him. We submit to Christ by submitting to his church.*

*A second reason for Christ's sending Ananias is so that Saul and we can learn that just because a human person is talking to us doesn't mean that the resurrected Christ is not talking to us. The blind Saul is given sight and the Holy Spirit and baptized into his body by the risen Christ through the instrument of a disciple of Christ. This goes right back to what Jesus said to Saul when he struck him blind on the road, "Why are you persecuting me?" We are Christ on earth. Jesus is speaking and doing his work on the earth through his people. The ordinary means by which the resurrected Jesus reveals himself to people is through his people. His sovereign power is exercised through the preaching of the gospel by the members of his body. He is giving sight to the blind, filling people with his Holy Spirit, incorporating people into his body through the work of Christians.*

**14.** Describe times you have "seen" the glory of Christ in fresh ways. Describe times you have been able to "see" the glory of Christ through the life and words of another Christian.

**The resurrected Christ transforms people by the power of his sovereign grace given through his people.**