



The Cost of Conversion

Acts 9:19-31

1. Persecution in Damascus (verses 19-25)

2. Persecution in Jerusalem (verses 26-31)

One of the books that I read on my sabbatical last summer is entitled, "The Insanity of Obedience" by Nik Ripken. The subtitle of the book is this: Walking with Jesus in Tough Places." It's a book about missions. It's a book about our call to obey the missionary call of God to go to reach those without the gospel. It's a book about the incredible sacrifices that believers in other nations have experienced as a result of their faith in Jesus.

Ripken spent more than 30 years overseas as a long-time missionary. He visited more than 70 countries where Christians were persecuted. For more than a dozen years, he conducted in-depth interviews with more than 600 believers who faced persecution as a result of their obedience to Jesus. The book is a compilation of what he learned, of how we in the Christian cultured west can reach those in other lands.

Much of Ripken's insight begins with understanding what it means to become a Christian in a Muslim or Hindu or Buddhist society. Because it is so different than in our land. In America, when people become Christians, there is often very little sacrifice. When children are young, many parents are glad when their children become Christians. This is often the very thing that parents have prayed for. When older Americans come to Christ, it's often out of a crisis of some sort, drugs or marriage problems or financial problems. Coming to Christ often helps to clean up their lives. Others around the new converts are often happy for their new-found faith. "Good for you" is often heard from others.

But this is not the case in Muslim or Hindu or Buddhist societies. Often, new believers find themselves in very difficult circumstances in their homelands. Persecution comes from their family. Persecution comes from their society. It's because believing in Jesus is often seen as a rejection of their family and society. Christianity is often not a path to a better life in these cultures. It's often received by others as a criticism of their own culture. This especially comes after the moment of baptism. Ripkin writes this.

Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims will all directly associate baptism with salvation. The act of baptism itself will bear witness to faith in Jesus. In Islam in particular, baptism is seen as 'the point of no return.' A person being baptized is, in effect, saying, 'I will die for my faith.' Persecution soars at baptism and those baptized need to know clearly the cost of their decision to follow Jesus, especially through baptism.^[1]

This is especially complicated when Western missionaries are involved. Because they see their new "converts" rejected by their home communities and want to help them, especially financially. But their association with the missionaries is often a cause of greater persecution, as they associate themselves with people from the west, not their home.

Ripkin tells of what happened in Somalia, a country that is 99.9% Muslim. In 1991, there were approximately 150 native believers in the country. Many of these people were martyred as a result of their faith. By 1998, there were only four of those people were still alive and in Somalia. Most of these deaths happened as a result of their connection with western missionaries. Some were murdered because they were employed by Christian relief agencies headquartered in the west. Others were killed because they worshiped regularly and spent much time with the western missionaries, invoking the hostility of their fellow citizens.^[2]

All to say this: Conversion can be costly, especially in foreign lands, where Christianity is in the far minority. We will see this in our text this morning: Acts 9:19-31. We will see the apostle Paul, (who is called "Saul" in this text). We will see him face the inherent difficulties in coming to faith in Jesus. Saul paid quite a cost to follow Christ. He was rejected by the Jews, who tried to kill him. He was doubted by the Christians, who had difficulty believing that he was really a changed man. Saul was caught in the middle. He was hated by the Jews for rejecting his heritage and preaching a heresy. He was questioned by the Christians, who suspected him to be a fraud. But such is the cost of conversion.

Now, none of this should have caught Saul by surprised. Before his baptism, Jesus said to him through Ananias, "I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (Acts 9:16). Saul suffered greatly for Christ. As we work our way through the book of Acts, we will see Saul "stoned in Lystra and left for dead, beaten and imprisoned in Philippi, [at] the centre of a public riot in Ephesus, arrested and imprisoned in Jerusalem, shipwrecked in the Mediterranean, and finally held in custody in Rome."^[3] His suffering all began the moment he was baptized, and identified himself as a follower of Jesus.

The title of my message this morning is "The Cost of Conversion." It comes from Acts 9:19-31. Let's read, beginning with verse 18,

Acts 9:18-31

And immediately [that is, immediately after Ananias came and laid his hands upon him,] something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; and taking food, he was strengthened. For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus. And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." And all who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who

called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?" But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ. When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, Acts 9:24 but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him, but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.

And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus. So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him. And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.

My first point is this:

1. Persecution in Damascus (verses 19-25)

Saul initially came to Damascus on a quest to persecute Christians in that city. He came with letters from the high priests to grant him authority to arrest any Christians he found in the city. He then planned to bring them back to Jerusalem, bound as prisoners, to face punishment as heretics. But this all changed on the road to the city that we looked at last week. Shortly before arriving at the city, a great light from heaven shone around him (Acts 9:3). and he was struck blind (Acts 9:8). Jesus spoke to him, "Why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 9:4). When Saul could give no answer, Jesus told him to enter the city and wait (Acts 9:6). For three days he waited, he ate and drank nothing (Acts 9:9). he spent his days in prayer (Acts 9:11). Finally, a man named Ananias came along, laid his hand on him, and granted him sight (Acts 9:12). And that's where we pick up the story in verse 18.

Acts 9:18-19a

And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; and taking food, he was strengthened.

I would have loved to hear Saul's baptism testimony. that is, the story how he came to faith in Jesus. But I would suspect that it would be similar to the two other times in the book of Acts that he gives his testimony (in chapters 22 and 26). Listen to what he said in chapter 22 to the Jewish crowds in the temple.

Acts 22:3-16

I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished. "As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me. And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' And I answered, 'Who are you, Lord?' And he said to me, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.' Now those who were with me saw the light but did not understand the voice of the one who was speaking to me. And I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord said to me, 'Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do.' And since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me, and came into Damascus. "And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, came to me, and standing by me said to me, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight.' And at that very hour I received my sight and saw him. And he said, 'The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard. And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.'"

With such a testimony, Saul was baptized. Soon after, followers of Christ in Damascus received him. Look at verse 19.

Acts 9:19

For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus.

We can only imagine the sort of fellowship that they experienced. I bet that Saul told his story again and again, telling them things like this:

"I wasn't seeking Jesus. Jesus was seeking me."

"The light was so bright that I couldn't see anything. It blinded me!"

"Yes, I heard an audible voice! As clear as I'm talking with you, this voice was talking with me."

"It was Jesus! In a moment, he showed me the error of my ways! I was zealous for God, but I was wrongly zealous!"

"I regret my former actions. They were wrong and sinful."

"I'm thankful for the forgiveness of Jesus. That he would forgive me of my sins!"

"I'm looking forward, now, to serving Jesus! I don't know where it's going to take me, but I do trust him!"

Surely, those in Damascus marveled, that Saul, the persecutor, was now their friend and fellow laborer in the gospel. Surely, they also rejoiced at the working of God, who saved such a one from being an enemy of the church, to being a supporter of the church.

We don't know exactly how long he was with those in Damascus, other than verse 19 says that it was for "some days." that simply means "a few days," like maybe two or three days. Maybe a week in Damascus? we can't know for sure. But we do know what he was doing. He was preaching in the synagogue. It seems as if he began preaching immediately after being baptized and refreshed with some food (verse 19). We read in verse 20, ...

Acts 9:20

And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."

It's not usually advisable for those who have just been saved to be placed in the pulpit to preach the gospel. Many have been ruined by this practice, as the instant position of authority has made them conceited (1 Tim. 3:6). This is why Paul later tells Timothy not to lay hands on anyone to quickly (1 Timothy 5:22). Yet, this is different. Saul, here, wasn't speaking to a Christian congregation as a Christian leader. He was speaking in the synagogues, where he had much credibility, as a prominent Rabbi from Jerusalem.

In Judaism, it was the custom for visiting Rabbi's to have an opportunity to speak. In Acts 13, we will read of Paul traveling into Psidian Antioch and showing up at the Sabbath service in the synagogue. "After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to [Paul and his traveling companion, Barnabas], saying 'Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it'" (Acts 13:15). Paul then arose and preached the gospel in the synagogue in Psidian-Antioch. I'm sure that something like this took place in Damascus. The leaders of the synagogue knew that Saul, the mighty Pharisee had arrived. So, they gave him a platform to speak. "Do you have anything to say?" And Saul was ready.

I have heard it said before that every Christian needs to be ready to do three things on a moment's notice. Every Christians must be ready to pray, to preach and to die. Are you ready for these things? Are you ready to pray? Are you ready to put your hands on someone's shoulders right here after our church service and pray for them because they are hurting? Are you ready to preach? Are you ready to speak with a non-believing friend about Jesus? This is the call of the book of Acts, to be a witness for Jesus? Are you ready to die? Do you know that your sins are forgiven through Jesus Christ? If you would die today on your way home from church, would it be well with your soul? These are the three things that you all need to be able to do on a moment's notice: pray, preach and die.

The great Rabbi, Saul, who taught many in Israel, was certainly ready to speak. Saul spoke what they were not expecting to hear. Perhaps they were expecting a message from the law or the prophets, to tell them how to live as good Jews. But this isn't what they heard. His message was simple: "He is the Son of God."

Now, this isn't some obscure, theological point. This is the issue of Jesus. Is he the Son of God? Or is he not? Is Jesus the one sent from heaven? The Messiah? Or was he simply some man, who gained a deluded following, that is haunting us to this day? Paul was saying that Jesus was no deluded man, but indeed, he was the Son of God, sent as Savior to the people of Israel. Holding (and preaching) such a view in those days, was dangerous. It could get you killed! It got Jesus put on a cross!

Do you remember the question that high priest asked Jesus after a long night of trial? The high priest said to Jesus, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." Jesus said, "You have said so" (Matthew 26:64). When Jesus said that, The high priest tore his robe and said, "He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy" (Matthew 26:65). Then, turning to Matthew 26:66 What is your judgement?" They answered, "He deserves death." (Matthew 26:65-66). (See Matthew 26:63-66).

From that moment on, the abuse of Jesus began. They began to spit in the face of Jesus They slapped him. They began to strike with rods, mocking him saying, "Prophecy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck you" (Matthew 26:69). Eventually the abuse led Jesus to the cross, Ending only when Jesus breathed his last.

So for Saul to enter into this Jewish synagogue in Damascus and proclaim these things wasn't safe. Yet, that's what Saul did. He did so "immediately" after being strengthened with some food (verse 20).

When speaking to the synagogue, I would suspect that Saul would have related to them of his experiences along the road, of how he had been blinded by the light, of how he had heard the voice of Jesus, of how his sight was restored. and how, now, his views have been changed. He no longer sees Jesus as the heretical leader of a false cult. But that he now believes that Jesus is the Son of God, the one who came to save Israel from their sins. Surely, he was also demonstrating this from Old Testament Scripture that was fulfilled in Jesus. As Paul was preaching these things, ...

Acts 9:21

And all who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?"

The simply answer to this question is, "Yes." "Yes, this is the same Saul who was ravaging the church in Jerusalem" (Acts 8:3). "Yes, this is the same Saul who came to Damascus with the intent of entering house after house to drag off men and women bound to bring back to Jerusalem as heretics." Yes, but this "was" Saul. This no longer "is" Saul. Saul was changed!

This is what God does in conversion. He changes people. Yes, Saul was the one who did all of those terrible things. But the Lord changed him. Now, he, the one preaching to the synagogue in Damascus, was a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). The old Saul passed away. Now it is the new Saul. To use Paul's own words in Galatians 1:23, "He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy."

This is the reality of conversion. It changes us. The question rightly comes: are you converted? Have you been changed? Do you have a testimony to tell? Could you stand at a moment's notice and tell of your faith in Christ?

The changed Saul preached in the synagogue "immediately" after his conversion (verse 20). And that's what he continued to do in Damascus.

Acts 9:22

But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.

Surely, Saul was coming to see the Scriptures in a new light. Never before did he see that Jesus was the fulfillment of so many Old Testament Scriptures. And I can just picture Saul, Day after day, he was in the synagogue and speaking with the Jews about the Scriptures. And night after night, he would return to the place where he was staying, and dig into the Old Testament. And what he saw, he would bring to the synagogue the next day.

By night, Saul would read in Deuteronomy 18 of the prophet that Moses foretold would come. Saul would read in Psalm 22 of the suffering of the Messiah that David foretold. Saul would read in Isaiah 53 of the suffering servant. Saul would read in 2 Samuel 7 of the Davidic king, who would sit on the throne forever. Saul would read in Micah 5 of the humble birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem. Saul would read in Zechariah 9 of the humble entrance of the king on a donkey. Saul would read in Psalm 118 of the rejected cornerstone. Saul would read in Genesis 3:15 of the first preaching of the gospel. Saul would have read in Genesis 12:1-3, of the promise to Abraham that would be a world-wide blessing through the Messiah. By day, Saul would speak of these things in the synagogue.

As Saul spoke, the Jews were "confounded" by his wisdom (verse 22). But even with all of his intellect, and all of his insight, he was unable to persuade the Jews. Look at verse 23.

Acts 9:23

When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him,

This ought to be hugely comforting for all of us. You can talk with your friends and your family until you are blue in your face, but all of the intellect in the world won't persuade them. They will only be persuaded when the Lord opens their hearts, as he did with Paul on the road to Damascus. Unless the Lord breaks through the heart of stone, those you know who you are talking with about Christ will be hardened to the gospel. And at some point, their politeness may turn to hostility as they plotted a scheme to kill Saul (verse 23). At some point, the Jews had enough of this Rabbi turned Messianic zealot. And they were ready to murder Saul. But such is the cost of conversion. It compels us to speak of what we have seen and heard. It brings persecution.

Now, in the life of Saul, this danger meant that his life was in danger. For us, it may mean other things. Damaged relationships. Loss of business opportunities. Scorn from friends. Ridicule from our believing family. But such is the cost of following Jesus. This comes after you are converted to Christ! when you begin to speak of the ways that God has changed you. when you begin to tell others of what Jesus has done for your soul. But others liked your old self better than your new self. They liked binge drinking with you. They liked doing drugs with you. They liked telling the dirty jokes with you. They liked hanging out to the wee hours of the night on Saturday evening. And they don't like the change. And they didn't like the change in Saul.

And so, they plotted to murder him.

Acts 9:24-25

but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him, but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.

What an escape! The only way that Saul could escape with his life was to go out the back way when nobody was watching. The escape was successful. Nobody saw Saul leave the city. He went off to safety.

One thing that this shows is that it's OK to flee persecution when it comes. This is what Saul did. This is what Jesus did. There were times when the Jews were seeking to kill Jesus, and he simply disappeared from their midst (Luke 4:30; John 8:59). However, when his hour came, Jesus was willing to submit to the persecution to the point of death. But this wasn't always his stance. He fled on several occasions. As we work our way through Acts, we will see Saul/Paul doing so on several occasions.

But the point is this: conversion comes with a cost. It comes with the cost of persecution. We see this with Saul in Damascus. Next, we see this with Saul in Jerusalem. This is my second point:

2. Persecution in Jerusalem (verses 26-31)

Acts 9:26

And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple.

This is a totally understandable reaction of those in Jerusalem. Saul was a well-known Pharisee in Jerusalem. From best we can tell, he was there in Jerusalem during the trial of Jesus. He was there at the stoning of Stephen. He was "ravaging the church" (Acts 8:3). Followers of Christ knew to avoid this man, lest he take them off to prison! Those in Jerusalem knew that they could be beaten and stoned for their faith like Stephen was.

It's understandable that the early disciples didn't believe that Saul had joined their ranks. It took some doing to convince them. It was not an easy task. But Barnabas pulled it off. Barnabas stepped in as the peace-maker.

Acts 9:27

But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus.

Somehow, Barnabas heard of what took place in Saul's life. He heard of his conversion on the road. He heard of how Saul was preaching Jesus in Damascus. And he believed that Saul's conversion was genuine. So, he was the guy who verified Saul's character to the apostles in Jerusalem.

Convincing the apostles of this was not an easy task. But Barnabas was well-known among the apostles, as a man of encouragement. In fact, his given name was "Joseph" (Acts 4:36), but they called him "Barnabas," which means, "son of encouragement." He was a believer in people (we will see this in Acts 15, when he believed in Mark, when others didn't). We also know Barnabas to be a man of generosity. In Acts 4, we see him selling a field that he owned and giving the money to meet the needs of the people. This gave him the credibility to speak into the lives of the apostles. Indeed, Barnabas was the peace-maker. Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers" (Matthew 5:9).

The actions of Barnabas allowed Saul to work freely in Jerusalem.

Acts 9:28

So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord.

But all was not so well in Jerusalem. Saul faced his usual trials.

Acts 9:29-30

And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him. And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

Again, Saul had to make another escape. It seemed almost against his will. It seems as if the brothers knew and understood more about his danger than he realized himself. At any rate, Paul consented, and left, to Caesarea by the sea, then continued on to Tarsus, in the north, his hometown.

Now, as I bring my message this morning to a close, I feel the need to speak a bit about chronology and the book of Acts. Luke, the author of Acts, makes it look here in our passage that Saul was converted and remained in Damascus for "many days." Then, next, after he escaped he traveled straight to Jerusalem, almost right after he was in Damascus. But when you read Galatians, chapter 1, Paul/Saul fills in a few more details.

In that chapter, Paul tells of his conversion on the road to Damascus. But he didn't stay in Damascus the whole time. He went away to Arabia, which wasn't so far from Damascus. Then, he returned again to Damascus. Perhaps this is Luke's reference to the "many days" (verse 23). After Damascus, Paul/Saul says that it was three years before he went to Jerusalem. Then, he adds that he was there for only 15 days, before he left again.

All that to say that Acts isn't a detailed summary of all that happened in the early church. That would be impossible to tell. Nor is it an exact itinerary of everyone's travel logs. Luke leaves things out, because they aren't important to his story. The story that Luke is trying to tell here in Acts 9 is that "conversion is costly." In Saul's life, he had to flee for his life, not once but twice. That's why verse 31 comes as such a joy.

Acts 9:31

So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on May 30, 2021 by Steve Brandon.

For more information see www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org.

[1] Nik Ripken, *The Insanity of Obedience* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 207.

[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 210ff.

[3] John Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), 179.