

## The Story of Saul

Today we get to look at one of the most dramatic and compelling stories of personal transformation from the entire New Testament. If you've been tracking with us the past couple weeks, we've heard the story of the very first martyr of the church: Stephen. Then, last week, we heard the story of two very different responses to the good news of Jesus shared by Philip. And today, we get to hear the story of Saul – the man who would eventually be credited with writing nearly half of the very New Testament that tells his story. But that's not where the story of Saul starts. In fact, we need to go back to the tail end of the story of Stephen the martyr to understand where the story of Saul begins. Where, at the end of Acts 7, once the religious mob reached its boiling point of anger and accusation toward Stephen, we read this, in verses 57-58:

***At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at [Stephen], dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.***

***Acts 7:57-58***

Saul of Tarsus was born into a devout, and likely wealthy, Jewish family from one of the largest trading centres on the Mediterranean coast – the city of Tarsus – which was especially known for its academy, making it one of the most influential cities in Asia Minor. While it's likely Saul received a high-end Roman education, he was also thoroughly trained in the most devout sect of the Jewish religion – the way of the Pharisees – under the tutelage of the most renowned Pharisee, Gamaliel. To add to his privilege and influence, Saul was a fully-fledged Roman citizen, holding a distinct honour with both his Jewish peers as well as the authorities of his day. And as the story of Stephen came to its tragic end, we first meet Saul as a young man presiding over Stephen's stoning, bringing affirmation and approval to the crowd that they were doing exactly what God wanted them to do by stamping out the Jesus movement.

And stamping out the Jesus movement had become Saul's number one priority.

***Saul was one of the witnesses, and he agreed completely with the killing of Stephen...***

***Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul was going everywhere to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.***

***Acts 8:1-3***

As the church scattered for fear of persecution, Saul had become public enemy number one – hunting down those who claimed to follow Jesus and throwing them in prison to make clear that come hell or highwater he was going to put an end to this heretical movement that claimed Jesus of Nazareth was Lord – was Messiah. And then by the time we get to Acts 9, on the other side of Philip’s story, Saul’s disdain was reaching its fever pitch, where it says:

***Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples.***

***Acts 9:1***

Friends, Saul was seething at the thought of the Jesus movement advancing. And so, he was increasingly taking matters into his own hands to put a stop to it, whatever the cost.

Now before we make any judgments of Saul, we need to know that Saul was absolutely convinced he was doing the right, and perhaps even moral, thing. I mean, there wasn’t a person in all Jerusalem who was as well-versed in the Hebrew scriptures as he was. And through his knowledge and education, absolutely nothing about this crucified carpenter from Nazareth – let alone his rag-tag group of disciples – lined up with Saul’s theology. And so, in order to protect the Jewish faith – and God’s own reputation! – Saul was increasingly willing to do whatever it took to shut this movement down, one “Story of Stephen” at a time.

To that end, since it had been reported that the Jesus movement was growing beyond Jerusalem, Saul then requested special letters from the high priests to go to the synagogues in Damascus – one of the most important cities in the Decapolis – and if he found any followers of the Jesus-Way there, that he could take them as prisoners back to Jerusalem.

A journey for Saul that was about to change his story forever. Let’s pick it up in 9:3:

***As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"***

***"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.***

***"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."***

***The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.***

**Acts 9:3-9**

Picture this: as Saul neared his destination in Damascus, warrants in hand and convinced that he was zealously fulfilling the will of God, a blinding light suddenly knocked him to his feet. And then out of the light, a voice, saying: "*Why do you persecute me?*"

Saul was stunned. Because those he was persecuting were heretics. They were traitors. Deceivers. Sinners. Turning the entire Jewish religion and way of life – the way of God! – upside down. And yet a voice from the light claimed to be the one being persecuted. So in his disorientation, Saul asked, "*Who are you, Lord?*" – in this case, *Lord* being more like *Sir* – still startled and unsure of what or who on earth – or in heaven – could be speaking to him. Until the voice made a story-changing claim: "*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.*"

In that moment, all that Saul had known or believed began spiraling into uncertainty. Beyond not being able to see clearly in his mind, once he got up from the encounter, Saul found himself physically blinded, needing to be guided by the hand into Damascus where he didn't eat or drink for three days. Three days, beginning an unexpected death to all he had ever known and had ever been. But a death that set the stage for the miracle of resurrection.

The story of Saul continues with the entry of another character in Acts 9:10, saying:

***In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"***

***“Yes, Lord,” he answered.***

***The Lord told him, “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.”***

***“Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.”***

***But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”***

***Acts 9:10-16***

While Saul was trying to find his existential bearings, we’re told of another divine encounter with a local disciple named Ananias, who the Lord called and told to go find Saul and place his hands on Saul so his sight could be restored. But Saul’s reputation had preceded him, and Ananias wasn’t so keen on the visit at first. But the Lord assured Ananias that Saul’s story was about to change forever, so Ananias responded faithfully. In verse 17:

***Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.***

***Acts 9:17-19***

This was the second defining moment of Saul’s story-changing encounter with Jesus. Initiated by the overwhelming but gracious greeting on the road to Damascus when he heard the words *“I am Jesus”*, this was now the moment the word became flesh for Saul, when Ananias gently placed his hands on Saul and graciously said, *“Brother Saul.”* It was the moment the one being hunted said to the hunter, *“Brother Saul”*, that the love of Jesus, that can make siblings out of enemies, became forever game-changing in the story of Saul. It was the moment that, like Stephen, a couple stories ago, Ananias became the embodiment of the person of Jesus by healing Saul’s blindness and opening his eyes and life to a better way.

***At once [Saul] began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.***

**Acts 9:20-22**

Within days of arriving in Damascus with arrest warrants in hand, dead set on capturing – or even killing, if necessary – the very disciples of this Way that claims Jesus is Lord, Saul now found himself in the local synagogues preaching the very message he had set out to destroy. Because of how much the people in Damascus had already heard of Saul's story and his murderous mission to bring an end to the Jesus movement, they could hardly believe what he was preaching, and yet, were in complete awe of his passion to declare that Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified at the hands of the Romans was in fact the world-saving Messiah Israel had been waiting for and who's forgiveness and salvation was for everyone.

And as they say with a good story: the rest is history. As, after spending some more time in Damascus, as well as a season of deeper soul-searching in the desert, Saul then returned to Jerusalem, now on the side of the Jesus-movement, wanting to strengthen the apostles while living out his own role in the mission. However, Saul's initial reception in Jerusalem was mixed to say the least, both in suspicion from the Jesus followers he had once persecuted, but then more intensely from the Jewish leaders he once represented. And rather quickly on the heels of his new found faith, Saul now found himself facing the same murderous threats he once uttered himself. But as the threats on his life intensified, so did his commitment to Jesus. That by the time he found himself fleeing Jerusalem, he was now living the true story of his life as God's chosen instrument of the message of Jesus particularly to the Gentiles throughout the Roman empire, having experienced such a dramatic conversion and now living with such a dedicated devotion that he eventually began to be known by his Roman name, Paul – the Apostle Paul who went on to write 13 books of our New Testament!

Friends, that is the story of Saul – or as many of us may know of him better today, Paul – the story of his dramatic encounter with Jesus that changed his story forever and set the stage for us seeing and hearing far more of his story in the pages of Acts still to come.

And that leaves us with the question this morning: What can the story of Saul change in our own stories? How could our stories today potentially be transformed by the life-changing, if not, history-changing story of Saul? And with that in mind, as I've reflected on this story, I want to share two encouragements for your story today.

The first is that, from the story of Saul, I think we can clearly see that: **The message of Jesus *changes everything*.**

And I mean, everything! Because the story of Saul is a story of a zealous religious expert – the leading expert of his day – who was so convinced he knew the ways of God, so much so that he agreed completely with the murder of followers of Jesus and made it his life's mission to hunt down disciples and stamp out the Jesus movement whatever the cost. Only to have a life- and story-altering encounter with Jesus, *and*, with Jesus' message of love come to life through Ananias, that utterly transformed Saul into the greatest messenger of the good news of Jesus in all church history – and most powerfully through the power of his story.

And if the message of Jesus can change that much in Saul's story, what might the message of Jesus be capable of changing – or even, needing to change – in your story? Perhaps, as in, what do you currently agree with completely that the message of Jesus may actually need to turn upside down? Or what way of thinking, or living, or behaving, or way of seeing other people does Jesus want to dramatically change in your life in order to change your story and change your history for his sake? And most specific to *this* story, what about how see those you most disagree with, or believe to be the opposition or even your enemy, could the love-for-enemy message of Jesus change in order to see them as a sibling – like Ananias saying to Saul, "*Brother Saul*" – because the message of Jesus changes everything.

And then, second, I think what we can see in the story of Saul, is that: **The mission of Jesus chooses everyone.**

Because, before Saul of Tarsus, the presider over the stoning of Stephen and the threat-breathing hunter of Christians became the good-news-sharing Apostle Paul of the New Testament, no one would've thought Jesus could've – or probably, *should have* – used this person for his purposes. That even if Saul eventually experienced the saving grace of Christ, how could such a person ever deserve to become God's chosen instrument of that grace? In fact, Paul sometimes wondered that himself, writing to his protégé Timothy (1:15):

***Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.***

Though Paul – *or Saul* – may have considered himself *the worst*, not only did his past not disqualify him, his past actually made him perfect for Jesus's call on him. And so, what about your story? What about your past? What part of your story have you believed is unredeemable? Unusable? And how might the mission of Jesus actually be choosing you? In fact, like Paul, how might your past actually become the most powerful part of your story? The most meaningful part of your mission? Because the mission of Jesus chooses everyone.

And one more thought on this – especially if you feel you don't have a *dramatic* past or *compelling* story. In the story of Saul, do not miss Jesus' choosing of Ananias. That as some commentators say, without the faithful and obedient story of Ananias – that also came with risk – we may never have had the story of Saul who became the Apostle Paul. Though we have 13 books of New Testament written by Paul, without the 8 verses of the story of Ananias, perhaps none of this story would be known. Ananias who was quietly faithful and obedient, saying “Yes, Lord” to Jesus. A quietness Paul also encourages in a life of faith, writing to the Thessalonians (4:11), saying: ***Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life.***

So where has your life or your story felt too plain? Too average? Too quiet? Too un compelling or undramatic? And how might Jesus be choosing you today for his mission by simply inviting you to say, “*Yes, Lord*”, to your faithful next step? Because the mission of Jesus chooses everyone.

Friends, that is the story of Saul from Acts chapter 9. A story of Jesus’ message changing everything and Jesus’ mission choosing everyone in a way that is just as true and just as possible for our stories today.

So may we, like Saul, respond to the message and mission of Jesus by declaring, “*He is the Messiah*” – in our lives and with our stories. And in whatever Jesus might be calling you to today or asking of you this morning, may we, like Ananias, say “*Yes, Lord.*” Knowing that whatever our past, whatever our story, the message and mission of Jesus is for us!