

A Story We Think We Know: Rediscovering the Astonishing Grace Behind Paul's Conversion

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Some stories become so familiar that we stop hearing them. We nod along, we know the beats, and we forget how shocking they really are. The conversion of Saul—whom we later know as the Apostle Paul—is one of those stories. It's told three times in the book of Acts, echoed throughout Paul's letters, and woven deeply into the imagination of the church. Yet its sheer wonder can slip past us.

Acts 9 opens with a man breathing threats and murder. Saul isn't merely irritated by Christians; he is ravaging the church. He approves of Stephen's execution. He drags men and women from their homes and throws them into prison. And when persecution scatters believers beyond Jerusalem, Saul simply expands his hunt. He secures authorization to travel to Damascus, determined to track down followers of "the Way" and haul them back in chains.

This is the man God chooses.

A Light, a Voice, and a Fall to the Ground

On the road to Damascus, everything changes. A light from heaven flashes. Saul collapses. A voice calls his name twice — "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" — and the persecutor suddenly finds himself the one confronted.

"Who are you, Lord?" he asks.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."

In an instant, Saul's world is undone. The Jesus he thought dead is alive. The people he hunted belong to Him. And the mission Saul believed was righteous is revealed as rebellion.

Blinded, he is led by the hand into Damascus, where he waits in darkness for three days.

Ananias: The Reluctant Messenger

Meanwhile, God speaks to a disciple named Ananias. His assignment is simple: go to the house where Saul is staying, lay hands on him, and restore his sight.

Ananias responds the way any of us might: Lord...are you sure? He has heard the stories. He knows Saul's reputation. This is the man who has torn families apart, who has imprisoned friends, who has authority to do the same in Damascus.

But God insists. Saul is His chosen instrument—chosen not because he sought God, but because God sought him.

So Ananias goes. And when he enters the room, he doesn't greet Saul with suspicion or fear. He calls him "Brother Saul." Grace has already begun its work.

Something like scales fall from Saul's eyes. He rises, is baptized, eats, regains strength, and immediately begins proclaiming that Jesus is the Son of God. The transformation is so dramatic that the people who hear him are stunned. Isn't this the same man who wreaked havoc in Jerusalem? Didn't he come here to arrest believers?

Grace has a way of confounding expectations.

It's easy to overlook the courage of the early Christians who embraced Saul. Some of them had likely lost friends or relatives to his persecution. Yet they receive him, protect him, and even help him escape when a plot against his life emerges. The man who once hunted disciples now has disciples of his own — believers who lower him through an opening in the city wall in a basket so he can flee to safety.

Only grace can do that.

Two Reflections for Today

First, for those who follow Christ:

We all have someone in our lives who feels "too far gone"—a friend, a relative, a colleague, a professor who seems too hardened, too intellectual, too hostile, too wounded, or too lost. Saul's story reminds us that no one is beyond the

reach of God's mercy. If God can take a man breathing murderous threats and turn him into an apostle, He can certainly reach the person you're praying for.

Second, for those who are not yet Christians:

Perhaps you feel like Saul—running, resisting, avoiding. Maybe you were dragged to church by a friend. Maybe you assume God could never forgive someone like you. If only people knew what you've done, how you've lived, what you carry.

But the One who comes after you does so in love. He is not hunting you down to punish you. He is pursuing you to save you.

Saul wasn't seeking God. God sought Saul. That is the heart of grace.

And yes—if you're wondering—it does sound a bit like predestination.

When Grace Offends Our Sense of Fairness: Wrestling With God's Sovereignty in Salvation

If Saul's conversion shows us anything, it's that God's grace is not merely surprising—it's sovereign. And once you begin noticing that theme in Acts, you see it everywhere.

When Paul (formerly Saul) begins preaching to the Gentiles in Acts 13, Luke doesn't say the crowds believed because they were smarter, more spiritually sensitive, or more morally inclined. Instead, he writes, "as many as were appointed to eternal life believed." Later, in Acts 16, when Paul meets a group of women praying by the river in Philippi, one of them—Lydia—responds to the gospel. Why her? Luke gives the answer with disarming simplicity: "The Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul."

God saves us. That is the consistent refrain.

A Doctrine I Knew by Heart but Not by Experience

I grew up Presbyterian. I memorized the catechism. I heard about predestination and the sovereignty of God all my life. But I didn't wrestle with it until college, when friends from other Christian traditions teased me: "Oh, you're a Presbyterian—you believe in predestination."

I wasn't sure I believed it. I was fairly sure I didn't like it.

But the more I studied Scripture, the more unavoidable it became. I even kept a blank page at the front of my Bible where I wrote down every reference I found. Before long, the page was full. I couldn't escape the conclusion: the Bible teaches this.

Yet accepting the doctrine didn't immediately resolve my questions. And over the years as a pastor, I've learned that many people struggle with the same two questions I did.

Question One: "If God Chooses Some, Isn't That Unfair?"

This is the instinctive reaction. If God saves some and passes by others, doesn't that violate our sense of fairness?

But Scripture reframes the question entirely.

Paul writes in Ephesians 1 that God "chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world... In love He predestined us... to the praise of His glorious grace." Romans 1–3 reminds us that all humanity—Jew and Gentile alike—is under sin. We are not spiritually sick; we are spiritually dead. As Paul says in Ephesians 2, "even when we were dead in our trespasses, God made us alive."

Dead people don't seek God. Dead people don't call out for help. As one teenager once told me—his father was a doctor — "A dead person can't even call for the doctor." Exactly.

Jesus says in John 3 that the Spirit must give new birth. Our cry of faith doesn't cause our spiritual birth; it proves it has already happened.

So when Paul anticipates the fairness objection in Romans 9 — "Is there injustice with God?"—he answers with a firm, "Absolutely not." God declares, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy." Mercy, by definition, is never owed. If God were strictly fair, where would we all go? Scripture's answer is sobering.

The astonishing truth is not that God judges sinners. The astonishing truth is that He saves any of us at all.

Grace is not less than fair. It is more than fair. It is, as D. James Kennedy once put it, "super-fair."

What This Doctrine Produces: Not Arrogance, but Praise

Far from making Paul cold or fatalistic, this truth ignited worship in him. After three chapters wrestling with Israel's unbelief, he erupts in doxology: "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever."

Paul knew he owed everything to God's mercy. And so do we.

Question Two: "If God Is Sovereign, Why Evangelize?"

This is the second common concern. If God saves, why bother with missions or evangelism?

Because God not only ordains the ends—He ordains the means. And the means He has chosen is us. He didn't have to. He could have written the gospel across the sky in starlight if He wished. But in His grace, He chose to use ordinary people, ordinary conversations, ordinary sermons, ordinary friendships.

God saves us.

And God uses us to bring that salvation to others.

That is not a contradiction. It is a privilege.

If God is the one who saves, does that mean our efforts don't matter? Does it drain our zeal for evangelism? That was my second big question. If God will reach His people, won't He simply use someone else if I stay silent?

In one sense, yes. God will not fail to gather His own. But that truth is never meant to quench our zeal. It didn't quench Paul's. The apostle who spoke more about predestination than anyone else in the New Testament was also the most tireless evangelist the world has ever known.

In fact, Paul says this doctrine fueled his passion. Writing from prison in 2 Timothy 2:10, he explains why he endures hardship, beatings, and chains: "I endure everything for the sake of the elect." He didn't know who they were. Neither do we. So he preached the same gospel to everyone—Christ crucified for sinners, freely offered to all. "Whosoever will may come." And when they did come, Paul didn't pat them on the back for being wise enough to choose Christ. He praised God for opening their hearts.

Far from discouraging evangelism, God's sovereignty gives us confidence. The person who seems farthest from the kingdom—the skeptic, the cynic, the prodigal, the intellectual, the hardened—may be tomorrow's Lydia or Paul. If God could convert Saul, and if He could convert you and me, He can convert anyone.

Where Christians Already Agree

J. I. Packer once made a brilliant observation. Christians may debate predestination in classrooms and coffee shops, but there is one place where we all agree: on our knees. When we pray for a friend or a child or a spouse to come to Christ, we don't say, "Lord, I sure hope they're smart enough to choose You." We ask God to work in their hearts. We ask Him to open their eyes. We ask Him to save.

Instinctively, we pray like people who believe God is sovereign in salvation.

A few weekends ago, I attended the 30th anniversary of a prayer breakfast I had helped start years earlier. One of the testimonies that morning came from a man who had shown up at the very first breakfast as a joke—hungover, skeptical, and curious only because he knew the guys who organized it from high school. But that morning, he heard the gospel. And God opened his heart.

Now, three decades later, he stood at the podium telling his story. As he spoke, several men in the room—men who had once mocked the Christians in their high school—began to weep. "We made fun of you," they said. "We thought you were strange. But we saw something in you. And now we're here because of it."

They had no idea their witness mattered. But it did.

The Hidden Fruit of Faithfulness

We rarely see the full impact of our obedience. Stephen never lived to see Saul become Paul. The believers Saul imprisoned never knew how their courage shaped him. The Sunday school teacher, the missionary supporter, the quiet encourager—none of them see the whole story.

Years ago, driving from Macon to Orlando, I heard a song on the radio that captured this truth so powerfully I had to pull over because I couldn't see through the tears. It was Ray Boltz's "Thank You," a song about heaven, grace, and the surprising ways God uses ordinary people. I won't quote the whole song here, but its refrain still moves me: lives changed because someone gave, someone prayed, someone taught, someone loved.

That is the mystery and the beauty of God's grace.

He saves us.

And He uses us.

Not because He needs us, but because He delights to work through us—through our words, our prayers, our generosity, our faithfulness, our quiet acts of love that no one notices on earth but heaven celebrates.

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