



**Acts – Can I get a Witness?**  
**Wk. 27 Learning how to Die... (Palm Sunday Revisited)**  
**By Pastor Jody May 04/02/2023**

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## **Acts 9:1-9 ESV**

### **The Conversion of Saul**

**9** But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest <sup>2</sup>and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup>Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. <sup>4</sup>And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" <sup>5</sup>And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. <sup>6</sup>But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." <sup>7</sup>The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. <sup>8</sup>Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. <sup>9</sup>And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

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**[ILLUSTRATION] – “Fly you fools”<sup>1</sup> – “Dying to one’s wants, dying to one’s vision for the future, dying to self is the path to a righteous life.**

### **[INTRODUCTION]**

This Sunday in the Christian calendar marks the day in history that 2,000 years ago a man named Jesus of Nazareth, rode in on a colt, into Jerusalem. This procession, what we call Palm Sunday, was to be a sign according to the prophet Zechariah, that the Messiah, the rightful eternal king, had finally come home to rule.

## **Zechariah 9:9-10 ESV**

### **The Coming King of Zion**

<sup>9</sup> Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!  
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!  
Behold, your king is coming to you;

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.polygon.com/lord-of-the-rings/22296103/gandalf-death-powers-origin-explained>



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righteous and having salvation is he,  
humble and mounted on a **donkey**,  
on a colt, the foal of a **donkey**.

- <sup>10</sup> I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim  
and the war horse from Jerusalem;  
and the battle bow shall be cut off,  
and he shall speak **peace** to the nations;  
his **rule** shall be from sea to sea,  
and from the River to the **ends of the earth**.

What he would do is to bring peace for Jerusalem, a peace that extends past the boundaries of Israel, that would include the Gentile nations going to the **ends of the earth**. He does it; He conquers sin. To do so though, He takes on the hatred of the Jewish government, He receives the slap in the face of his so-called followers when they call for Barabbas, He allows them to arrest Him, to beat Him, to torture Him, and in return for their sin, He then takes on the wrath of God towards sin, in the action of substitutionary atonement on a cross. Yes, He brought peace, but at such a great cost. **And ALL before that HE perfected dying to self in the Garden of Eden, "Not my will but thine be done."**

The fruit of His work was the birth of His church, His people, made up of Jewish acolytes that left traditional Judaism behind, and accepted the yoke of their new master Jesus, their **Risen Savior**. They left behind the tedious tradition of living under the requirements of the law as a Jew, under the condemnation of it, and the constant pressure of hoping their life would add up to being good enough. They now embraced what the law intended to teach, a **total commitment to loving God and others**, whereby shortcomings in the pursuit of this **new way**, had also been covered once and for all by their Lord. In essence, they no longer lived to save themselves (by law) they now lived in the state of being "saved" (from the law). They were dying to this world and had been raised now to love freely.

No one understands this truth at first when they hear the Gospel and even then, only a few will ever really "see" it. People can hear the Gospel a hundred times and still not get it, but the 101<sup>st</sup> if God so deems it, could make all the



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difference in the world. The difference between the 100<sup>th</sup> and the 101<sup>st</sup> relies on **two things**: **1<sup>st</sup>** - the initiating move by the HS to open your eyes to the truth, and **2<sup>nd</sup>** - the individual sees the fruitless life of trying to love self above all else.

This brings us to this point where every Christian knows there is no way around it. Everyone that follows Jesus long enough understands that the calling to be reconciled, that the drawing unto the Son, the irresistible pull of the HS to be included in the family, means - **you must DIE to self**. You must die to loving yourself more than God, you must die to loving self more than loving others, you must surrender your rights to preserve your life, and you must embrace as Jesus did the **call to come and die...**

That illustration ("**Fly you fools**") provided by Tolkien was meant to paint a picture that all Christians go through, a sacrifice of oneself to embrace a new calling.

In Acts up to this point we have seen sacrifice after sacrifice, but **we have not seen a dying to self yet**. We have seen the Apostles take persecution, imprisonment, and beatings all to preach in Jesus' name. We have seen Phillip leave all behind to take the Gospel outside Jerusalem to preach Jesus' name. We have even seen Stephen die because he wouldn't stop preaching Jesus' name. BUT with Saul of Tarsus, this is our first example of a man dying to Himself so that He could get the honor of preaching in Jesus' name.

**Saul will die** and will be **reborn as Paul**. After these next three sermons we won't see Saul again until chapter 13 when they begin to call him Paul. The Apostle Paul goes on to become the main bringer of the Gospel to the Gentile World. He was born a Jew, raised to be a Pharisee of Pharisees, lived as a Roman Citizen, and educated as a Greek, ALL for the purpose to bring the Gospel to all nations. His letters to the churches in the ancient world were preserved composing the majority of the NT. It is in his workings that Paul summarizes and exposes the **Biblical Doctrine** of a **Sovereign God that saves sinners according to His will alone**. We owe much to Paul but none of it would have come to pass if God had not called Paul to come and die for Him.



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If God had not worked against the will of Paul, my friends, we would not be here now.

That may be an issue for you today, **that God works against the will of an individual to save them**. A choosing to die to self does not happen by the good of a person's heart. No one wants to die to self so God may gain, no one chooses to follow God out of the goodness of their hearts. If God does not rescue Saul this day against his will, we don't have the explanation of the Gospel, if God doesn't show Saul his depravity he has no passion for the church, and if God does not call **US** out of darkness first, then you can have no part of the Kingdom of God.

**John 3:3 ESV**

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is **born again** he cannot **see** the kingdom of God." - **Jesus**

Being called to a new life means you must die to yourself, a new birth in the Spirit must happen, there is no other way. And unless God initiates that birth, the premise of John 3, it won't happen because no one really wants to worship a God outside of themselves. Paul commented on this from first-hand experience:

**Romans 3:10-12 ESV**

<sup>10</sup> as it is written:

"None is righteous, no, not one;

<sup>11</sup> no one understands;  
no one seeks for God.

<sup>12</sup> All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;  
no one does good,  
not even one."

**[MAIN POINT]**

Paul knows it, Jesus declared it, and we all need to accept it.

**The path to Salvation lies through learning how to die to self.**



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In our narrative today Luke shows us what it looks like this calling to die to self (wants, desires, and goals contrary to the Kingdom), and while situations may differ from individual to individual the way God moves is the same: Divine Appointment (God orchestrated events leading to one's Regeneration), Divine Encounter (the meeting you can't avoid), Divine Affliction (painful discipline to heal and correct):

**1. A Divine Appointment.**

**9** But Saul, **still breathing** threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest <sup>2</sup>and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the **Way**, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

**[BACKGROUND]**

Saul is **breathing threats and murder**, that's a vivid picture; it's the image to say that what is coming out of Saul, his life's breath, the core of his desires, was to kill Jesus' church. Saul believes this is what he has been bred for, this is his moment to shine, finally he will be able to pursue his goals of glorifying God with abandonment, he will be able to immerse himself totally in his work!

You see for Paul, when his persecution of Stephen was allowed and he was not hindered as the chief executioner officer, he most likely took that as his actions being righteous. **There is a lot of things a person can do really bad when they believe they are in the right.** Our whole political and business world in our nation right now seems to believe the *ends justifies the means*, again that is extremely dangerous if you think that way.

The question is how did Saul get this way, so to help us understand him, let's look at his background:<sup>2</sup>

Saul's home was in Tarsus, a city of Asia Minor right on the Syrian border. Today, it would be on the border of Syria and Turkey. It was a very distinguished city for its

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/44-31/the-astounding-conversion-of-paul>



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university, one of the three great universities in the ancient world. The other great universities were in Athens and in Alexandria in Egypt, so Tarsus belonged to the ancient world's Ivy League.

Saul's father is a Roman citizen and a Jew which is how his son inherited certain rights. It is believed that his father was also a Pharisee and Saul, therefore, inherited his Pharisaic tradition. Saul was so very Jewish that he could say in the testimony that he gives – remarkable testimony in Philippians, chapter 3 – these words: *"I was circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin – " an extremely noble tribe by the way " – a Hebrew of Hebrews – " that means completely devoted to the traditions " – as to the law, a Pharisee."* In keeping with the Jewish tradition, every young boy had to learn a trade, and young Saul was taught to weave cloth out of black goat's hair and fashion it into strips that could be assembled together, sewn together, to make tents. This was a common industry in Tarsus.

At about 13, when a Jewish boy would become officially a son of the law, it is very likely that at that time, Saul was packed off to Jerusalem to study Judaism at the highest level, and the highest level was to study under a teacher named Gamaliel. Gamaliel was actually called the beauty of the law. That was to say that the law was never more beautiful than when it was articulated by Gamaliel. So Saul would sit under the teaching of Gamaliel. This would include years of memorizing the Old Testament, years of intense question and answer, arguing and debating back-and-forth on the law of the Old Testament. He would become expert in Judaism, expert in the Old Testament.

Saul would have eventually returned to Tarsus to become a critical member of the Pharisaic form of religion in the city of Tarsus, helping lead the synagogue for there were many Jews in Tarsus.

*However, by the time of Stephen, he's back in Jerusalem. We don't know what brought him back, but he is highly agitated. And why is he so angry? Because he is a Hellenistic Jew. He is a Jew from outside Israel. And this man, Stephen, has been circulating among the Hellenistic synagogues in Jerusalem and preaching Jesus Christ.*

For Saul's life work leading him to become the **destroyer of the church** didn't happen overnight. Him getting Stephen killed was rooted in a man, that had grown up to love God, that had been taught that all his earthly privileges were birthed out of God's favor toward his family for earned righteousness



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(Phariseeism). Saul thought that his behavior earned him favor with God, and he had accumulated a lot of favor.

He was ivy league rich graduate, that was self- sustaining, living the best life among Jews and Gentiles alike, and Stephen was a threat to that. Stephen had merely challenged him that his blessings were to help those (widows) that needed help AND that Jesus taught this whom Stephen believed to be a better teacher than the teachers of Tarsus and even Gamaliel himself. It seems that the church is a direct threat to Saul and how he has become accustomed to living.

Saul, blinded by traditions, blinded by anger, blinded by blessings, not only gets Stephen killed but he is going to make it a personal quest to eradicate **"The WAY"** (*hodos*; name of the road and the name for the ancient church)<sup>3</sup>. Paul is going to tear down the road the JB prepared, He is going to sweep away the path that Jesus rode into Jerusalem, he is going to shut down the roads that take the Gospel to other towns, he is hell bent on removing **the way** to heaven.

This was no accident, it was not bad timing that Saul was born this way, this was the **plan of God**, to get Saul so riled up it would force him to take action against the church. It would be how God would save him and use him.

**Galatians 1:11-16 ESV**

**<sup>11</sup>For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. <sup>12</sup>For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.**

Paul knew his life was to show people that only the **revelation of Jesus Christ** and who he is can make a man, that thought he was SO RIGHT, but was SO WRONG, stop in his tracks and die to SELF...

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<sup>3</sup> Litke, A. W. (2014). [Journey](#). D. Mangum, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, & R. Hurst (Eds.), *Lexham Theological Wordbook*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press. - ὁδός (*hodos*). n. fem. **road, way**. Refers to a road or way, and figuratively refers either to a person's conduct or to the new Christian sect.





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<sup>13</sup> For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. <sup>14</sup> And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. <sup>15</sup> But when he who had **set me apart before I was born**, and who **called me by his grace**, <sup>16</sup> was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone;

Paul is like it was a set up! I was led into a life that led me directly into the saving arms of Jesus, **conceived before time against my will!**

**[CHALLENGE + APPLICATION]**

That right there is many of our stories. You are raised to believe in the way you are pursuing your personal righteousness is the right way. You become a Zealot for the wrong things hurting bystanders; Yes, even the way you believe sometimes hurts other people.

Guys you were taught to build identity in your work, or your **ACCOMPLISHMENTS**, and yet it is our work so often that keeps us from building our identity in Christ and keeps us from leading our families well.

Ladies you were taught to build your identity in home building using **ATTRACTIVENESS** using whatever you had the most of: charm, looks, skills, or smarts. Perhaps relying on those things got you neglecting the people you were to be building it for, and then your worries have driven you away from those you were to love.

ALL of US in here have been allowed to first try and find our own way to God, because God knows you need to get to the end of that matter, before you EVER see your need for Him. AND that's ok because God's love is BIG enough to forgive all of that! Learning from our PAST, is all part of **the way**:

**The path to Salvation lies through learning how to die to self.**





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Paul learned his past was all to bring glory to God, according to Galatians, he was trained by God himself through his schooling and parental upbringing, and that's your story too. Nothing in your past will be wasted, all of life was a gift, **all your paths pre-planned**, to establish the work that was set and prepared before time by the FATHER to do (Ephesians 2:10).

## **2. A Divine Encounter.**

<sup>3</sup>Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. <sup>4</sup>And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" <sup>5</sup>And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "**I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.**" <sup>6</sup>But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."

First why Damascus?<sup>4</sup>

Damascus was a very beautiful city. It was situated about 2,200 feet above sea level, 60 miles inland from the coast, about 160 miles northeast of Jerusalem, I'd guess. It was such a beautiful area that one of the Oriental writers said that "Damascus was like a handful of pearls in a goblet of emerald," which will give you a little idea – lush, green and a beautiful white city. In fact, the historians called it "the paradise of the earth."

It was also an ancient city. It was the capital city of Syria, and it was very old. In fact, if you go back into Genesis, you'll find that Abraham had a servant who came from Damascus, which means that Damascus predated Abraham. So, it's an old, old city, and yet it still remained, and now with a great Jewish population.

There were probably 150,000, minimum, people in Damascus. At least 20,000 were Jews. We know that because it wasn't too long after this that Damascus was sacked and about 20,000 Jews were massacred. So, there had to be at least that many there. So there's a LARGE Jewish community in this place called Damascus.

Saul has heard that **the Way** has made it to Damascus with a heavy population of Jews ripe for the tainting. Damascus is almost due north of Jerusalem, and I can only imagine that Saul would have had to pass Samaria along the way. Imagine him getting even more mad as he hears about the Apostles coming

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., John MacArthur Sermon.



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down and giving the Spirit to these people. It would seem that God is adding to his angst, he is going to make this meeting memorable!

So, they get near, they can see their goal in sight, and BAM! Bright Light, and they know this is not good, and Saul gets the question, **“Why are you persecuting me?”** **Two things** in the answer: **1<sup>st</sup>** Saul never answers the question. You know what that means to me, he was **CONVICTED!** He knew this was a heavenly experience, and that his heart he could not hide. You see with the dying of self God will call into question why you have thought you have been right your whole life? As he said to Job dress yourself and stand up if you can.... **2<sup>nd</sup>** Paul calls him Lord κύριος (*kyrios*). n. masc. **lord, master, Lord.**<sup>5</sup> Paul recognizes with the title for authority that this person already knows and has judged rightly. He needs mercy. So, he asks who it is? I think he already knows don't you.

***“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”***

Bless my soul! 7 of the best words we could ever hear! It may not happen now, but everyday all the persecution we go through, guess who stands with us? That is how we can know with confidence that one day all will be held accountable as to how they treated the Lord's church. From godless politicians and those in authority over us, to moral deprived media, to those that do the actual committing of violence - when you persecute the church you persecute JESUS HIMSELF, and you will have to give an answer for it!

You can't hide from this, either. Paul elaborates more on this encounter further on in Acts:

**Acts 26:13-14 ESV**

**<sup>13</sup>At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me. <sup>14</sup>And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’**

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<sup>5</sup> Lo, J. (2014). [Deity](#). D. Mangum, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, & R. Hurst (Eds.), *Lexham Theological Wordbook*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.



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Paul is in the mid-day sun confronted with light that is even brighter, Jesus is going to make sure that Paul knows, that he WILL see in this revelation it is JESUS! Jesus asks him **why are you kicking against the goads?** That is a prodding tool used for cattle, Saul why have you not listened to Stephen, why did you shut yourself off to the OT teachings about me, why did you push back on the spirit of conviction, you knew exactly what was going on!

This Divine Encounter never says, **that's ok you didn't know better.** The Gospel never says you are not culpable for sin, even if you had a bad upbringing! Divine encounters help you see your need for Christ. Then, I love this, before Saul can say anything, look what happens. Jesus speaks first.

**6**“But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”

**Go to your room...** The text displays a command stemming from ownership. You need a time out, and oh yeah, when I come back, **I will tell you** what you are going to do, no more guessing, no more planning your own way, today Saul, you are **no longer** trying to **destroy the Way**, you will help **build the Way**, and you will **invite** those you don't like **to the Way!**

### **[CHALLENGE + APPLICATION]**

Learning to die is this. Shut your mouth, Jesus is right, accept it, and be grateful for it, because He is saving you through your moral downfalls. It's called **ELECTION** and when God elects you unto Salvation he doesn't do it on condition of whether **you are sorry or not first**, He will move against your will, knock you down, confront you with Truth in Love, tell you were wrong, you know it, and then he doesn't wait for an answer from you he says, *“now get in line!”*

Family, are you having a problem with that? Where do we kick against the Goads? Is there something in your life that has made you judgmental (doesn't necessarily mean angry) towards church, towards Christianity, towards a loved one in the body? Why are you kicking against the goading of the Spirit,



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you know you are wrong to hold an offense against those in this room, cut it out, and get in line...

Are you not taking on your commission as the church to preach the Gospel to your community? Cut it out, get in line...

Learning to die to self comes through learning that **you are wrong a lot of times, that's ok**. Elect to salvation means elected to be forgiven, but please don't make excuses, cut it out, and get in line...

### **3. A Divine Affliction.**

<sup>7</sup>The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. <sup>8</sup>Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. <sup>9</sup>And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Now here's a repeating theme in Acts we have already seen so far. Those that are believing are seeing and those that don't believe only hear, for they don't really know what they are hearing. Most likely the temple guards were the ones traveling with Saul, and they hear the same voice but there is no conviction of who Jesus was and how they should be responding. That's how it is sometimes, again it's the 101<sup>st</sup> presentation of the gospel, you got it and all your friends didn't, and that's **all due to Grace**.... Please never think you are better than someone based on you being saved, you didn't dream it up, you didn't understand your need for Him, **you were saved by Grace**.

Well, they were good enough to bring him to Damascus where Saul's new life would begin. But notice Saul is now blind. He has been afflicted, the revelation of Christ has blinded him, it his new state of being aware of his wrongdoing, his depravity, in being regenerated God has placed on him a physical handicap. It will make him reliant for a while on others. It is going to give him TIME to stop and think about where he came from and how God got him there? This is a good thing not a bad thing, our **physical afflictions can be a great service to us** if we use them as God intended, to put your thoughts on Grace and direct your



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prayers to God. It works that way with any affliction, with any type of loss, it can be a blessing to you if you **put your thoughts on the Grace** you have received and **direct your prayers towards God**.

**[CHALLENGE + APPLICATION]**

This next week, we remember Jesus' three days in the tomb, we remember, Saul's 3 days of blindness, we remember what we have died to self as well. **Where has God afflicted you**, what do you need to take in since last Easter, and view a correction as God's gift of Grace to you, even though it was painful, and then turn your thoughts towards prayer, for thanking Him for that Grace.

**OR**

**Where is God calling you to die to self?** Is there something right here, right now, that Jesus is confronting you with, that is graciously saying drop it, now get in line we have work to do. Where are you kicking against his gracious goad.

**Where is your focus, is it on the cross on your own work?** Will you be wrapped up again in the rat race, will you wear yourself out with the pursuit of money, will you stress yourself out with the news of today, or will you remember the cross, and while we were still sinners Christ died for us?

Let's pray together and thank him now how he has shown us that the path to Salvation and true worship lies in the path of dying to self.

**[PRAYER]**

**[COMMUNION]**



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**[BENEDICTION]**

Go in the name of the Father, that graciously gave His Son to die a horrific death that we deserved.

Go in the name of the Son, that graciously lived the life we needed Him to do preparing the Way.

Go in the name and power of the Holy Spirit, that helps us to see the risen Christ, and enables us to die to self so He may gain.