

# SEVEN SAVED SINNERS

## Or How God Saves Men

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A study of God's Varieties of Religious Experiences in the Book of Acts

by

William Ward Ayer, D. D.

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### CHAPTER TWO

#### THE CONVERSION OF SAUL OF TARSUS

##### THE STUDY

Acts 9

##### *The Occasion*

Our story opens with the first persecution of the Church. We noted in Chapter eight that the Church leaders had been scattered abroad, but now the Jewish leaders were endeavoring to break up every local assembly, and to destroy the name and the faith of Jesus from Jerusalem and from the surrounding territory. Stephen had been stoned to death, while a young man by the name of Saul held the clothes of those who did the stoning.

Saul now comes on the scene, breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the people of God, and is on his way to Damascus to destroy the little church of faithful in that place, when the occurrences of the story take place.

##### *The Subject*

Saul of Tarsus is too well known for any need of a survey of his life to be made here. We may just note, however, that, at the time of his conversion he is one of the most promising young Pharisees in Jerusalem. Undoubtedly, he would have made a name for himself among his people.

We must note also that according to world standards, he was a most unlikely subject for conversion to Christianity. His hardheadedness, his bitterness against the faith, his tendency to ignore truth in that direction, made him such a person.

##### *The Agent*

Here the student must note the uniqueness of the situation.

There are no human agents operative. The risen and glorified Christ is here the personal worker.

Paul was the ascended Christ's own and only convert and stands unique in the history of conversion. The significance of this experience of Saul is both individual and prophetic. At a later day, he declares himself to be a Jew born out of due time. Undoubtedly, the manner of his conversion was both Jewish and Christian; Jewish in that the Lord Jesus appeared to him personally, as He will appear one day to a remnant of Israel during the Tribulation, and Christian, in that he became a member of the Body of Christ, being baptized in the Spirit into that Body at his conversion.

### *The Accompaniments*

These, too, are unique, and without parallel in history. Furthermore, we have no right to expect an exact duplication of them, or of the situation in which they appear, in any conversion today.

The supernatural, bright, vivid and unmistakable, predominates here. The student will find very little help for modern religious experience in the accompaniments of Saul's conversion, but he will find much to strengthen his faith in the miraculous intervention of God, through Jesus Christ, in the life of this man.

### *The Results*

The immediate results are very startling. We find an instantaneously changed man, with a changed purpose. The far-reaching results are comprehended only by a careful study of the life and ministry of the Apostle Paul, a man who all but brought the Roman Empire to his feet through the power of his preaching of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

### *Significant Lessons*

A warning should be given zealous folks expecting to reproduce such phenomena in present-day conversions.

It is highly improbable and decidedly unnecessary.

However, encouragement may be taught through a manifestation of the fact that no case is too great for God. Prevailing prayer looses a power which may bring modern Sauls to their knees, in repentance. This man is the type of those for whom little else avails. Some have claimed. Saul to be the convert of the dying Stephen, but there is no warrant for such an assumption, for after the death of Stephen, Saul was more vicious than ever in his persecuting of the Church. No; Saul is Christ's own and only convert, but undoubtedly great prayer had been made for him, and great results followed.

## **THE SERMON**

### **THE SALVATION OF A SINCERE MAN—DEAD WRONG**

Acts 9

The ninth chapter of the Acts records the most remarkable conversion in all history, not only for the experience itself, but for its results to the world. Saul's experience is absolutely unique; there never was another experience like his, and there will not be another in this dispensation.

I remember years ago hearing Billy Sunday, preaching on the Apostle Paul, tell the story of the man who came to the evangelist, saying he was a believer, in a sense, and he expected to be saved one day, but he said he wanted an experience like Paul's; he was waiting for Jesus Christ to appear to him in person.

I shall never forget the sarcasm with which Sunday told of his reply to this man. "Why," said the evangelist, "what right have you to expect that Jesus will do for you what He did for the Apostle Paul? Why, man alive, Paul was big game, and God could afford to do an unusual thing to get him; but you can't expect God to use a Gatling gun to get a canary like you!"

Saul, as his name was before his conversion, was the ascended Christ's own and only convert.

Practically everyone else has been converted by hearing someone tell the story of Jesus and believing that story; but Saul was different. His conversion is typically Jewish—as a remnant of Israel will be saved at a later time. You remember how the Prophet has declared that the time will come when a remnant of Jews in the land of Palestine under persecution will flee to the desert and there meet their Messiah face to face, and they shall say, "**What are these wounds in Thy hands?**" and he will reply, "**These are they which I received in the house of my friends.**"

And then they shall weep and mourn in His presence. Paul himself declared that he was a Jew born out of due time, or of premature birth. By that, undoubtedly, he meant that his type of conversion was that which the Jews will experience in the Tribulation period, when the Lord appears to them in person as He did to Saul on the Damascus road.

The conversion of Saul was remarkable and momentous. No journey was ever taken by man, save the journey up Calvary's hill on the part of the Son of God, which meant so much to the race and its redemption as did Saul's journey to Damascus.

The conversion of Saul of Tarsus is the next great event after the Resurrection and Pentecost. It takes place in the New Testament in the same significant way that the call of Abraham does in the Old Testament. It is the beginning of a worldwide outreach of the Gospel— God's first stroke in bringing the Gospel to our forebears, whether they be Anglo-Saxons, Franks, Gauls, or Norsemen—and finally to our own lives. Surely, then, this life experience is worthy of our careful study, and should yield a wealth of lessons!

It is an experience directly opposite to that which we studied in the preceding chapter. There were very few unusual accompaniments of the conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch, and what is more, he was a seeker after truth. Saul was a persecutor of those who believed the truth. God works in diversified ways and under many conditions. We shall note primarily the intense sincerity of Saul, and at the same time note that he was blasphemously wrong in his attitude toward Christianity.

Now, sincerity is an admirable virtue, "Sincerity is the face of the soul."

- Carlyle declared: "Sincerity is the first characteristic of all men in any way heroic."
- Shakespeare wrote: "To thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night to the day, thou canst not then be false to any man."

But a place can be given to sincerity which it has no right to occupy, for sincerity misdirected is a very dangerous thing. *This terrible misappropriation finds its chief expression in the realm of religion, where multitudes are sincere and sincerely wrong.*

Earnestness is no guarantee of truth, as passiveness is no guarantee of error. Earnestness and error are most destructive forces, while earnestness and truth are all but unconquerable. We have both conditions illustrated in the law.

### I. PAUL WAS SINCERE BUT WRONG IN HIS BELIEF

Paul (as he was known after his conversion) was brought up in a strict Jewish home in Tarsus of Cilicia, a Grecian town of culture, where Grecian debauchery had taken toll of many lives, but Paul's strict training reacted against it. In Philippians, third chapter, he declares with great pride: **"If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more. Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews, as touching the law a Pharisee. Concerning zeal, persecuting the church, touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless."**

All this means that he was a strict Judaist. He was a nonbeliever in Christ; he regarded Him as a fake, an imposter who had suffered a just death upon a cross. Christ's disciples were lunatics to him, deluded fanatics, better off dead than living, and though deadly sincere in those things, he was, at the same time, dead wrong.

Now, you may have no religion and be sincere about it; you may live up to the light you imagine you have, but you're wrong and God says to you, get right. You may have a religion and be sincere in practicing it, but if it is not God's revealed religion, your sincerity is but carrying you that much faster to perdition.

Adherents to false faith are almost invariably intensely sincere.

- The Mohammedan, for example, kneels and prays three times a day, with his face toward Mecca, but does not know God, or Christ, or salvation.
- The Buddhist brings his sacrifice to the temple in all sincerity; he submits himself to bodily tortures such as sitting in a circle of fire, lying on a bed of spikes, holding up an arm until the muscles shrivel and die; but he is no nearer God. With all these efforts, sincere though he may be, he is only farther and farther away from truth.
- The African mother who throws her baby to the crocodile in the Nile, or the Indian mother who sacrifices her baby, may be sincere, but nevertheless both mothers are sinful.

So with you. Your sincerity will not save you; you must be right with God, or else you will hear the words: **“Depart from me, ye cursed, I never knew you.”**

Some time ago a man bought a ticket in New York for the city of Chicago, but he got on the wrong train, and when the conductor came around to take the ticket, noticing the man was on the wrong train, he insisted that the man get off at the next stop; but the man remonstrated and said: “Listen, here, conductor, I bought this ticket in all sincerity, I want to go to Chicago, I bought a ticket for Chicago, and I was sincere in buying the ticket, and I paid sincere money for the ticket, and I was sincere when I got on this train. I can’t see any reason why I shouldn’t land in Chicago. Why should I get off this train when I boarded it in all sincerity?”

“You’re a fool, no matter how sincere you are,” replied the conductor. “You’ll never reach Chicago on this train; it’s going in another direction.”

So with you. No matter how sincere you may be, unless you’re on board the Gospel train, through faith in Jesus Christ you’ll never arrive in the Land of God’s Eternal Day.

## **II. PAUL WAS SINCERE BUT WRONG IN HIS ACTIVITIES**

The first picture we have of Saul, is his connection with the death of the martyr Stephen. He steps on the stage of sacred history, guarding the clothes of those who threw the stones, and the record tells us that **“Saul was consenting unto his death.”**

But though he comes to us in this dramatic role, Saul was not a hoodlum, but was a sincere religionist who believed that Stephen ought to die for violating the first commandment, which reads: **“Thou shalt have no other gods before me.”** Stephen worshipped Jesus Christ as God, and Saul deemed him, thereby, to be an idolater worthy of death.

Undoubtedly, he was so stirred by what he thought were blasphemies of this sort from the sect of Christians that he felt called of God to stamp it out mercilessly and completely, and seems to have set about doing the job singlehanded.

In Acts 8: 3, we read: **“As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering into every house and hailing men and women, committed them to prison.”**

I’ll guarantee that Saul got up every morning, prayed fervently for help in this matter, and every evening devoutly thanked God for what he had been able to accomplish.

You will remember that Jesus forewarned His followers of this sort of spirit, when He told that the time would come that they who killed them, would think that “they were doing God a favor.” Saul was such an one as this. He was wrong, though sincere—dead wrong.

And you may feel that this world would be better off without what you call superstitious Christians; you may think that your good works will save you. But you are wrong. Saul was a fine character, had a warm heart, and a fervent spirit. He meant well, but he did wrong.

### III. PAUL WAS SINCERE AND RIGHT AFTER HIS CONVERSION

Here is where the drama of the story comes in. Saul had heard that, in Damascus of Syria, where God had been so merciful to Naaman, the leper, was one of the places where the fugitives had taken refuge, and that they were busily at work, making converts. So, “**breathing out threatenings and slaughter,**” Saul started on his way to that city with letters giving him permission to capture and extradite those folks, carry them captives to Jerusalem, probably to their death.

It was a long journey to Damascus. Saul was nearing his destination, when a light brighter than the noonday Syrian sun dimmed Paul’s sight and felled him to the ground, and set him to crying and groveling in the dust.

Then a voice was heard saying: “**Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?**”

How remarkable, that God knew Saul’s name! Ah, yes, God knows your name; you’re not hid from Him and He’ll seek you and speak to your heart. He knows you through and through; thought and imagination; word and deed; joint and marrow.

Saul must have been astounded at the question, “**Why persecutest thou me?**”

He could have replied: “Why, I never saw you, I never persecuted you, I never spoke a word against you. These men and women that I am hailing into prison are not you!” But therein Saul had made his great mistake. These men and women he had hailed to prison were members of the Body of Christ, and Jesus was truly saying to him: “Saul, the brutal stones you piled upon Stephen, cutting his flesh, hurt Me; whenever you put one of My people in prison you put Me in prison.”

One of the beauties of the relationship of Christ and His Church is that our Lord never considers Himself separate from His people.

- They are crucified together with Him,
- They are buried together and risen together,
- They live together with Him,
- They are made to sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus,
- They will meet together with Him in the air and so be forever with Him.

Oh, I know what some folks are saying: “I’ll not go forward, I’ll not allow the preacher to convince me, I’ll not join the Church and get in with those self-righteous people. I know them!”

Listen: Jesus says: “You’re not rejecting them, you are rejecting Me. Why persecutest thou me? Your relationship is to the Son of God. You can’t separate Christ from His people. There is a philosophy today which attempts to do so, but, however unworthy we may be, our great Christ says: “Strike them and you strike Me; reject them and you reject Me.”

And Saul, subdued, blind and beaten, says: “**Who art Thou, Lord?**”

He apparently recognized the commanding character of the voice though he did not know who spoke. Then the astounding reply comes back: **“I am Jesus whom thou persecutest.”**

Imagine Saul’s surprise—horror, for that matter! To Saul, Jesus was a dead man, disgraced and hated. Did not the Pharisees and the Roman soldiers exult over the fact that they had put Him out of the way? To Saul, Jesus was a dead blasphemer, buried and disreputable of memory. Yet here, in an aura of bright light never before seen on land or sea, stands One who says, **“I am Jesus whom thou persecutest!”**

Oh, don’t you know that Christ lives? You may think of Him as a dead Christ, you may use his name in blasphemy; but when you use the name of Jesus, you’re using the name of a living Person.

What a tumult must have raged in Saul’s soul! You know the hardest three words to say in the English language—in any language, for that matter—are: “I am wrong.”

The mind is very reluctant to admit the failure and error of its conclusions; the heart rebels against higher authority. Poor Saul! His journey was ended, and his life’s ambitions came tumbling about him as a house of cards.

As though seeing, perhaps, the turmoil of his soul, Jesus then says—doubtless very tenderly—to His stricken quarry: **“It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.”**

The figure is an Oriental one, as you well know. The ox driver wields a long pole, at the end of which is fixed a sharpened iron with which he prods the animal. If fractious and rebellious, the beast will kick against the goad, injuring and infuriating itself by the wounds it receives; but, if patient, it will heed the prodding of the goad and go on its way. Jesus was instructing Saul when He said: **“It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.”** I wonder if you are kicking against the goad—if a voice is whispering to your soul that you are not merely fighting a creed or cult, but Jesus? If your heart is reluctant to admit it, as mine was, long ago, I beg of you, do not kick against the goad!

An old salt once said to a young seaman: “Aboard a man o’ war, son, there’s just one choice—duty, or mutiny.”

And in this matter of the Gospel, there is just one choice—rejection or acceptance. Your conscience tells you of sin needing forgiveness, of a soul needing cleansing; the Spirit tells you of your need of surrender, and your whole nature cries out in rebellion; but don’t, for your sake—for God’s sake—kick against the goad!

As for Saul, it was all settled with him right there. He was conquered. **“What wilt thou have me to do?”** is his first question as a Christian. What a change! See him as he enters Damascus, no longer a proud Pharisee, riding majestically with the pomp and authority of an inquisitor, but a stricken man trembling, groping, clinging to the hand of his guide, in darkness—Christ-conquered!

We read, further in the story, of his visit to Ananias and of the tenderness shown him by this brother in Christ; of the restoration of his sight, of his baptism and infilling with the Holy Spirit, and his going forth on his great ministry. The story is too well known to need retelling in detail, but we want to note Saul's attitude. We thank God for one thing, that is,—he never looked back.

The record of his life from that day forward seems to have been one of continuous obedience.

**“What wilt Thou have me to do?”** seems to be the norm of his Christian experience.

And if you are willing to ask, **“What wilt Thou have me to do?”** God's answer will be:

- **“This is the will of God, that you believe on Him whom He has sent.”**

- And again, **“If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in thine heart that God hath raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.”**

Some years ago, a British chaplain, talking to a Boys' Brigade unit, told the story of Wellington's victories in the Peninsular War. After one of the battles the defeated French officers repaired to Wellington's tent and, with characteristic French extravagance, declared to the British commander that they were not ashamed to be beaten by the greatest general in Europe, and continued with a great deal of flowery praise.

Wellington heard them sternly and coldly. When they had finished their profuse statements he simply said: “Gentlemen, your swords!”

Instantly, the Frenchmen yielded their swords in token of surrender; then, Wellington could be, and was, gracious to his captives.

“Now, young men,” concluded the chaplain, “Jesus wants your swords, that is, your yielded hearts.”

In like manner, may I repeat that Jesus wants your yielded hearts? You may be sincere, you may be earnest, you may think you're right, like Saul of Tarsus, but until you know God through the Lord Jesus as your personal Saviour, in spite of all your sincerity, you are wrong, dead wrong.

May God help you to get right.

~ end of chapter 2 ~

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