

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 12

Podcast Audio Overview

Acts 9

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Welcome back, everyone. Ready for another deep dive? Always. Awesome.

Well, this time we're tackling one of the most, well, dramatic transformations in the Bible. Saul's conversion and eventual becoming the Apostle Paul. Definitely dramatic.

We've got Dr. Craig Keener's take on this from his lecture on Acts chapter nine. And we'll unpack, you know, how this guy goes from persecuting the early church to, well, being a pillar of it. It really shows you that God can use anyone.

Seriously. Even someone who's completely against, like, everything at first. Right.

It's a pretty powerful message of, I guess, redemption and second chances. Absolutely. So picture this.

Saul, total devout Pharisee. He's, like, obsessed with wiping out these early Jesus followers. Not just obsessed.

He's got power. Oh, yeah. He gets these letters of recommendation from the high priest himself.

It's basically a free pass to arrest believers. Like, what did those letters even mean back then? Oh, they were huge E. Not just some formality. They were like a VIP pass granting you access and the authority.

Yeah. And coming from the high priest, it gave Saul major power. So talk about intimidating, right? Like- yeah.

These early Christians are just trying to live their lives. And this guy shows up with, like, official backing to arrest them. It really shows you the level of the opposition they were facing.

Exactly. So Saul sets off on this journey to Damascus, which, by the way, was 135 miles, to round up more believers. And they're called the Way in the text.

What's that all about? The Way. It had layers of meaning. I bet.

It echoes, you know, the Jewish idea of walking a righteous path. Right, right. And it connects to John the Baptist.

Yeah. Preparing the way for Jesus. Oh, I see.

So it's not just what they believe, but how they live their lives. Exactly. It's like making a deliberate choice, a commitment to a specific way of life.

Wow. And then, bam. On this journey, Saul has this total life-altering encounter.

Yeah, it's not your average trip to Damascus. He's hit with this intense, like, brilliant light. You see that a lot in the Bible when, you know, God shows up.

Right, the classic theophany. Theophany. A visible sign of God's presence, like Mount Sinai or when Jesus is baptized.

Oh, right, right. Luke, he wants us to know that this is a big deal. You know, the suddenness, the bright light.

Yeah. Something major is going down. And it gets even more intense because God calls out to Saul and he says, Saul, Saul.

Why repeat the name like that? I've always wondered. Oh, it's deliberate. You see it throughout Scripture, especially when God's calling someone out.

Like, it's a huge moment. Makes sense. Think about Abraham.

Abraham, Abraham, right? When he's told to sacrifice Isaac. Whoa. Repeating the name signals a turning point.

Something really important is happening. And then Jesus asks Saul, why are you persecuting me? It's the ultimate reality check. Right.

Like, Saul thinks he's doing God's work, but Jesus is saying, nope, you're attacking me when you do this. It totally flips his understanding on its head. Saul's got to confront the fact that he's been persecuting the very person he claims to serve.

Talk about an identity crisis. And what happens next? Well, he's blinded by the light, obviously. Right.

And he spends three days fasting, which, you know, in Judaism, it's a big deal. It's for repentance, for mourning. He's going to be processing everything.

Like, his whole world just got turned upside down. Exactly. It's a time for, like, deep introspection.

He's got to grapple with what just happened and what it means for his future. Okay. So we've got Saul blinded, fasting, and wrestling with this massive encounter.

So we left Saul blinded, fasting, trying to wrap his head around this whole encounter. And now we meet Ananias, a believer in Damascus who gets a vision from Jesus. I don't know.

Can you imagine being Ananias, knowing what Saul's been up to? Would you be, like, eager to meet the guy? Oh, I'd be terrified. I mean, wouldn't you? Totally. I mean, this is the guy who's been terrorizing your community.

But Ananias does get this vision from Jesus, and he's told to go find Saul. It's interesting, though. It's like this paired vision thing, right? Yeah, you see that a lot in the Bible.

It's like a confirmation. Like, okay, this is really from God. Right.

It's not just some random dream. Yeah. And in this vision, Jesus calls Saul a chosen vessel, which, by the way, is mentioned a few times in Acts.

So you know it's important. Definitely foreshadowing. Like, okay, this guy's going to do big things.

Right. And it emphasizes that God has a plan for Saul despite, you know, everything he's done. It's a pretty powerful message of grace.

For sure. So Ananias, well, he sucks it up, finds Saul, heals his blindness, and baptizes him. It's a huge E-turning point.

It's like a total reset for Saul. He goes from persecutor to follower like that. And the guy doesn't waste any time.

He immediately starts preaching in Damascus. But wouldn't you know it? Trouble seems to follow Saul wherever he goes. And he runs into the same kind of opposition that Jesus faced.

It's like Discipleship 101. You're going to face the same challenges, the rejection, the persecution. Right.

But you know, it's interesting. There are hints in some of Paul's later letters that maybe he even spent some time preaching in Nabataean Arabia during this period. Maybe even that detour was part of the plan.

Wow. But back in Damascus, well, Saul's conversion. Not exactly a secret anymore.

Yeah. Word travels fast, especially in the ancient world. Think about it.

Social networks back then, the marketplace. Not a lot of secrets stayed hidden for long. Exactly.

Once people knew Saul had switched sides, he was basically public enemy number one. He's a traitor in their eyes. And so what happens? He needs to make a quick exit.

Right. And it's pretty dramatic. His friends lower him down the city wall in a basket, which, I've got to say, reminded me of Rahab, you know, in Jericho, hiding the spies and then lowering them down with a rope.

It's like a classic escape tactic used throughout history. Right. But it's also this cool reminder that God can use anything.

You know, he doesn't always need these grand displays of power. Sometimes it's a simple basket. It's the little things.

So Saul escapes. And where does he go? Jerusalem. He wants to connect with the other apostles.

But can you imagine their reaction? Oh, they must have been freaking out. Right. Like, wait, is this a trick? I mean, this is the guy who caused them so much pain, so much fear.

It's got to be hard to trust him, even after this huge conversion. It shows you the impact of his actions, the trauma, and how, you know, rebuilding trust takes time. Absolutely.

So how do they bridge this gap? Enter Barnabas, this son of encouragement. Right. He seems like a good guy.

He's the one who vouches for Saul, introduces him to the apostles, and kind of smooths things over. It's a beautiful picture of grace. Like we mess up, but there's forgiveness.

There's reconciliation. And it shows how God uses people with different gifts. Right.

You've got Saul, the passionate preacher, and then you have Barnabas, the peacemaker. Both are needed. They balance each other out.

But even with Barnabas' help, Saul's not out of the woods yet. He still faces opposition in Jerusalem, threats, arguments. It's like a repeat of what happened to Stephen.

Yeah. It's a reminder that following Jesus doesn't mean life's going to be easy. Right.

But Saul, he doesn't back down. He's committed. He's in it for the long haul.

And while all this is going on with Saul, Peter's ministry is also exploding. He's traveling, performing miracles, seeing the early church grow firsthand. It's almost like a divine road trip.

Yeah. It's awesome how Luke weaves these stories together. Peter and Saul, both spreading the gospel, but in such different ways.

Okay. So let's shift gears now and talk about what Peter's been up to. So we've got Saul dealing with all this drama in Jerusalem, and then there's Peter.

He's off on this like journey. It's amazing. Filled with miracles and just these powerful moments that show God at work.

He's kind of following in Philip's footsteps, right? Taking the gospel to new places. It is amazing. And you see how Luke, the author, weaves these two stories together, you know, Peter and Saul, and it shows how the gospel is.

It's spreading, but in such different ways. Right. It's not like a one-size-fits-all approach.

Yeah. And when Peter stops, it's this town, Lydda, and he heals this guy, Aeneas, who'd been paralyzed for eight years, eight years. Can you imagine? It's hard to even fathom, like one day you can't walk and then the next.

It's a miracle. It is. And it shows you the compassion of Jesus, but also the authority that he gave his followers.

And it's interesting because the text says after this miracle, a lot of people in Lydda and Sharon turned to the Lord. Yeah. It's like seeing is believing, a real tangible demonstration of God's power.

Exactly. It's like this catalyst for faith. So then Peter travels to Joppa, and we meet this woman, Tabitha, also called Dorcas, and she's known for her good deeds, especially taking care of widows, you know, the most vulnerable in the community.

Yeah. She's a real example of living out your faith. It's not just about what you believe.

It's about what you do. Right. Actions speak louder than words, but then tragedy hits.

Tabitha dies, and the whole community is devastated. They send for Peter immediately, hoping for, well, you know, a miracle. It was a race against time too, right? Oh yeah.

Because of the Jewish burial customs, they needed to bury her before sunset. So they're desperate. They've seen what Peter can do.

And they're clinging to this hope that maybe, just maybe, he can do something. So Peter arrives, and the scene is heartbreaking. The widows are there showing Peter the clothes Tabitha made.

Everyone's just grieving. But Peter, he does something really interesting. He sends everyone out of the room.

He prays. And then he says, Tabitha, arise. And she does.

It's like a scene straight out of the Old Testament. Like Elijah or Elisha raising the dead. Right.

And Luke, the author, he wants us to make that connection. It's like God's power. It's consistent from the prophets of old to the apostles.

Exactly. God's still in the miracle business, bringing hope and restoration, even when it seems impossible.

But there's this one detail in this story that always kind of jumps out at me. Remember where Peter was staying in Joppa? Oh, right. With Simon the Tanner.

Simon the Tanner. It seems like a small detail, but it's actually really significant. It is.

Because tanners back then, they weren't exactly the most popular folks. Right. They had to live on the outskirts of town because, well, their work was smelly.

And some Jews considered tanners to be ritually unclean. So for Peter, a Jewish leader, to be staying with a tanner, that's a pretty big deal. It's huge-y-y.

It shows how Peter's perspective is changing. He's starting to break down these social barriers. And it hints at what's to come later, what he's called the minister of the Gentiles.

It's Luke being clever again, isn't it? Totally. These little details that foreshadow bigger things. It's a reminder to pay attention.

There's often more going on beneath the surface. Exactly. So as we wrap up this deep dive into Acts chapter 9, what are some of the big takeaways for our listeners? Well, first, I think Saul's conversion.

It's this powerful message of hope. God can use anyone. It doesn't matter what you've done in the past.

And Peter's ministry shows us this expanding view of God's love. It's not just for one group of people. It's for everyone.

Exactly. It's a story of inclusivity. And ultimately, it makes us think, right? Both Saul and Peter- their lives were changed by these powerful encounters with God.

So the question is, what experiences have shaped our beliefs? What's God calling us to do, even if it seems, well, kind of crazy? Those are the best kinds of callings, aren't they? The ones that challenge us, that push us out of our comfort zones. For sure. Well, thanks for joining us for this deep dive into Acts chapter 9. Keep seeking, keep questioning, and keep discovering those amazing ways God is working in the world.

We'll see you next time.