

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 12, Acts 9

6-Min. Video Overview

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Today, we are jumping into one of history's most dramatic and honestly wildest turnarounds, the story of a man who went from being a faith's number one enemy to its greatest champion. It's an absolutely radical transformation, and it's all laid out for us in the book of Acts. You know, to the very first followers of Jesus, the name Saul of Tarsus would have sent a chill down their spine.

This guy wasn't just some opponent who disagreed with them. No, he was a brilliant, driven, and absolutely relentless persecutor, and he was dead set on tearing their movement apart, piece by piece. So that brings us to the big question, right? How does a man so fiercely committed to destroying a faith suddenly become the single most important person in spreading it all over the world? Well, the answer lies on a journey that changed absolutely everything.

Ok, so let's get into it. To really get the scale of this transformation, you first have to understand the man himself. Saul wasn't just some hired muscle.

He was a serious operator, with power, with brains, and a mission that he truly believed came straight from God. So when Saul went to Damascus, he was carrying these so-called letters of recommendation. But don't let the name fool you.

These were not like a reference you'd put on a resume. In the Roman world, a letter from someone like the high priest was a serious instrument of power. It was basically an official warrant, giving Saul the full authority of the religious establishment to do what he came to do.

And when you look at his resume, it's... wow. This guy was an absolute intellectual heavyweight. He was trained by Gamaliel, one of the most respected teachers of that era.

He was a rising star, well-connected, and he knew the scriptures inside and out. The point is, he wasn't acting out of ignorance. He was a highly trained expert who was convinced that this new Christian movement was a dangerous heresy that needed to be stamped out for the good of his people.

So with his official authority in hand and this burning zeal in his heart, Saul heads out for Damascus to continue his crackdown. And this trip? It wasn't just a casual stroll. It was a clear sign of his absolute dedication to the cause.

The journey from Jerusalem to Damascus is about 135 miles. I mean, think about that. On foot, we're talking a grueling six-day trek.

That level of commitment is kind of mind-blowing. Walking for almost a week with the single purpose of hunting people down and throwing them in prison for what they believed. And then, just as he's getting close to the city, something happens that he could never have planned for.

A blinding light, way brighter than the desert sun, just erupts from the sky and engulfs him and his whole party, stopping them dead in their tracks. This right here is the whole ballgame. This wasn't just some weird weather event.

For a man like Saul who lived and breathed the scriptures, this was a theophany. It was the Shekinah, the visible, radiant glory of God himself. We are talking Moses at the burning bush level stuff.

Saul would have known in an instant that he was in the direct presence of God. He hits the ground, and a voice calls out to him, saying his name twice, which in the Hebrew tradition always means something hugely important is about to happen. And the question it asks must have just shattered his entire reality.

Why are you persecuting me? In that one single moment, Saul realizes that the Lord he thought he was defending is the very one he's been attacking. The people he's been hunting are so connected to Jesus that hurting them meant he was hurting Jesus himself. And this encounter just... it breaks him.

The proud, authoritative persecutor is completely gone. And in his place is a man who is blind, totally helpless, and now forced to rethink his entire life's purpose from square one. And the next three days perfectly illustrate this total reversal.

First, he's struck blind. I mean, you can't get a more powerful symbol of his spiritual blindness than that. Second, the man who marched to Damascus to lead prisoners out now has to be led into it by the hand like a child.

And finally, for three days, no food, no water, he just fasts and prays as the entire foundation of his life has to be torn down and rebuilt. Now, while Saul is praying, God is working the other side of the story. He gives a vision to a local disciple named Ananias, telling him to go find Saul.

These paired visions are so significant because they serve as a kind of divine confirmation. It shows both men this wasn't just a weird dream or heat stroke. No, this was a coordinated, deliberate plan from God confirmed by two different people who had never met.

Ananias is, as you can imagine, absolutely terrified. He knows exactly who Saul is and what he's in town to do. But he obeys God, he finds this blind man, and the first words out of his mouth are just astonishing.

He doesn't say enemy, he doesn't say persecutor. He lays his hands on him and says, brother Saul. In one sentence, a victim embraces his would-be oppressor as family.

That single moment captures the entire message of grace and transformation. What's so striking here is that the change in Saul isn't slow or gradual. It's immediate.

It's profound. And the consequences, they're just as fast. His entire world gets flipped completely upside down.

I mean, just look at this timeline. There's zero hesitation. As soon as he can see again, Saul goes straight to the synagogues, the very places he had planned to make his arrests, and he starts preaching that Jesus is the Son of God.

The shock and confusion must have been off the charts. And almost immediately, the hunter becomes the hunted. The authorities he'd been working with now want him dead, and he's forced to flee the city in the middle of the night, being lowered over the wall in a basket by his new friends.

What a turnaround. So when Saul eventually makes it back to Jerusalem, the disciples there are still terrified of him. They're convinced it's got to be some kind of trap.

And this is where another key player, Barnabas, steps up. His name literally means Son of Encouragement. And man, does he live up to it.

He's the one who takes the risk. He goes and finds Saul. He listens to his story, and he personally vouches for him to the apostles, building a bridge over that huge gap of fear and mistrust.

Now, while Saul's story is obviously the main event here, the account intentionally zooms out to show us that this incredible power wasn't just focused on him. The movement he had just joined was already buzzing with miracles, especially through the work of the Apostle Peter. So the narrative shifts focus to Peter, and we see him perform two stunning miracles.

He heals a man who had been paralyzed for eight long years, and then he goes to the city of Joppa and raises a beloved woman named Tabitha from the dead. These stories are told right alongside Saul's to make it clear that God was on the move in a big way, all over the place, through all kinds of people. And then, tucked away at the very end, there's this seemingly small detail that is actually a huge deal.

After the miracle with Tabitha, Peter stays at the house of a guy named Simon, who's a tanner. Now, for a devout Jew at that time, this was a big cultural no-no. Tanning involved working with dead animals, so it was considered a ritually unclean job.

For Peter to stay in this man's home shows that he was already starting to push past some of the strict religious and cultural boundaries. And that little detail is the perfect setup for where the story is going next. Peter is already pushing boundaries; he's breaking these smaller rules.

So what's going to happen when he's asked to break the biggest, most important one of all? Well, that question is a cliffhanger for another time.