

Sermon outline and notes © Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor
Swift Creek Baptist Church (swiftcreekbaptistchurch.com)
18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834
Sunday, July 22, 2018

Acts 9:15-30 (read vv.15-22) “The Making of a Man of God”

Intro. Last Sunday I shared with you about the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, and what a dramatic conversion it was! His life was completely turned around. This Sunday we will look at what God did to make him the great Christian and apostle that he became. Some Christians seem to believe that conversion is about all there is in being a Christian. Once you get saved, then you just live the best you can and wait until you go to heaven. But salvation is not just fire insurance from hell. Salvation is also a process of growing more and more like Christ. Notice in v.22 of our text that Paul “increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews....” Paul grew in strength and wisdom and knowledge of God’s Word. He quickly learned that once you are saved, you need to grow spiritually, and learn to overcome sin more and more, and learn to serve your new Lord, Jesus Christ. Paul also grew in character and strength through suffering (v.16).

Now Paul truly grew to be so Christ-like that he shook the world for his Master. What made him so successful? Our passage today gives us many clues to answer that question. Psychologists tell us that a child’s early life will largely determine his future quality of life. The same is true for the Christian. Those early years for Paul molded him into the great man of God he was to become. This morning we will learn what God did and what Paul did in those early years that made such a difference in his life.

How can *you* become a great Christian, and not just a mediocre, nominal Christian? Last week we learned the obvious first step, and that is you must be converted. Peter said, “Repent therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out” (Acts 3:19). Saul needed to turn around. He was going the wrong direction in life. He was also born again, just as Jesus commanded in Jn. 3:3. The Christian life is not a repair job, but a complete transformation. 2 Cor. 5:17 says, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.” And when you are transformed from the inside, the change is not temporary or superficial; it is deep, total, and forever. *Acting* like a Christian is not enough. You must *become* a Christian by the new birth and conversion. Have you been converted?

Now once you have been converted, then you need to begin the process toward strength and maturity as a Christian. Now the first step is this:

I. BE FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT

Being a Christian is a supernatural work of God from start to finish. Part of that supernatural work of God is to be filled with the Spirit. This is God’s will, not just for a select few, but for all believers, according to Eph. 5:18.

So we read in v.17 that Paul was to be filled with the Spirit. In v.15 Paul is likened unto a vessel. Now Paul received the Spirit when he was saved. The vessel of his body and life had the indwelling Spirit, but the Holy Spirit still needed to *completely* fill that vessel.

Every Christian needs to understand that they are a vessel through which the life of God is to be manifest. As the Holy Spirit fills your life, He transforms you into the likeness of Christ. The vessel takes on the character of what fills it.

So what must we do to be filled with the Spirit as Paul was, resulting in such a transformation of life?

A. Believe God's Word that You *Can* Be Filled – Paul received this promise from God. In v.17 we read, “And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’” Don't think that a certain person has to lay hands on you in order to be filled with the Spirit. There was a unique purpose for this here. Paul was blind at this time and the touch of Ananias' hands was reassuring, and it led to restoration of his sight (cf. v.12).

Now the key to being filled with the Spirit was simply the fact that Ananias told Paul that he *could* be filled. And when Paul heard about the filling of the Holy Spirit, he received that filling by faith. Likewise, Eph. 5:18 commands us to be filled with the Spirit. So God promises the filling of the Spirit to all believers who meet the conditions.

Do you believe that God will literally fill your life by His Spirit? If so, you are in a position to receive that filling.

B. Yield Your Life to the Spirit's Control - Paul became Spirit-filled so soon after his conversion because he was totally committed to the Lord. Remember in v.6 he had said, “Lord, what do You want me to do?” He wasn't holding back anything from the Lord. He obeyed the command go into Damascus (v.6). He obeyed the command to be baptized (v.18). And that is essentially what the filling of the Spirit is, to be controlled by the Spirit. You can run your own life or you can yield to the control of the Holy Spirit. As you mature in your Christian life, what the Holy Spirit wants is what you will want (Phil. 2:13). Eph. 5:18 says, “Be not drunk with wine, in which is excess, but be filled with the Spirit.” Instead of yielding our lives to the control of alcohol, we should yield our lives to the control of the Holy Spirit.

One opposite of being filled with the Spirit is to quench the Spirit (1 Th. 5:19). We quench the Spirit when we say “no” to Him and refuse to yield to Him. Is there some area of your life that you are not turning over to God? If so, that will hinder you from being filled with the Spirit.

Now an important aspect to being filled with the Spirit is to continue to be filled with the Spirit. In Eph. 5:18 we are commanded to keep on being filled (present tense) by the Holy Spirit. Daily Bible reading and prayer are crucial for maintaining the Spirit's control over your life. We also must keep on yielding in obedience and service to Him.

C. The Results of this Filling – When you understand what the filling of the Holy Spirit will do for you, you will *want* to be filled with the Spirit. Now you can't see the Spirit, but you can see the results of the filling of the Spirit. It's just like the wind. You can't see the wind, but you can see the results of the wind. By the way, nothing is said about Paul speaking in tongues. Why should we seek the filling of the Spirit? It would result in:

1. A Change in Character - One thing the Holy Spirit wants to do is to transform your character into the likeness of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18; Rom. 8:29). Now there are some things about you that the Holy Spirit will keep and simply refine. In the case of Paul, he seems to have had some characteristics that the Holy Spirit kept and refined. For example, even before his conversion he was a leader; he was intelligent and well educated; he had strong will-power; he was persistent; he was bold; and he was highly motivated. He continued to have these qualities after his conversion, but put to better use and improved upon.

But there are other things about you that must be put to death or discarded and replaced with positive virtues. When Paul was filled with the Holy Spirit his cruelty was changed into love; his restless spirit was replaced with a more peaceful disposition; his pride was changed into humility. And so when you are filled with the Spirit, God will bring about some changes in your character. You will begin to bear the fruit of the Spirit, such as love, joy, peace and gentleness.

Can you name any ways that the Lord has completely changed you? But He also wants to give you:

2. Power for Service - V.22 says, "But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this Jesus is the Christ." The filling of the Spirit always empowers an individual for some kind of activity or service. Acts 1:8 shows us this. And note that in Paul's case, the filling was promised after God made it known what Paul was to do to serve Him (v.15). That task would have been impossible to fulfill without the power of the Holy Spirit. He was already empowered to preach and teach from the Scriptures, showing that Jesus is not only the Messiah (v.22b) but also the Son of God (v.20b).¹ He quickly became an eloquent apologist for Christ.

Too often Christians think, "I can't preach, witness, sing, give, or serve in some other way." But you *can* by the power of the Spirit!

Next, to become a strong Christian:

II. MAINTAIN FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD'S PEOPLE

I believe somebody who is truly saved will want to be with other Christians. You will never be a great Christian without a vital, ongoing relationship with God's people. And TV Church is no substitute for Christian fellowship. I know that even God's people can be hard to get along with at times, but that does not mean that we should withdraw from them or start our own little church. Something is wrong if you claim to love Jesus Christ but have no desire to be with others who love Christ. After all, in Heb. 10:25 we are commanded to maintain fellowship with other Christians, giving and receiving exhortations. And Saul is certainly a good example of a true Christian wanting to maintain fellowship with God's people. He immediately connected with Ananias and other believers in Damascus, and then Jerusalem.

A. We Have a New Family - Soon after his conversion Paul found out who his new spiritual family was. When Ananias came to him, he addressed him as "brother Saul" in v.17. There's an old Gaither song that says, "You may notice we say brother and sister around here, well it's because we're a family..." And so Ananias quickly let Saul know that he was his brother in Christ. The people he formerly hated became his friends.

Unfortunately, the people he formerly worked for became his enemies, as we see in v.23 which says, "Now after many days were past, the Jews plotted to kill him." You will find that when you are filled with the Holy Spirit, you don't have to break off associating with your old unsaved friends; they will break off from you. But the good thing is that you still have friends, Christian friends, who are better friends. In fact, when you become a Christian and get involved in a church

¹ Bruce observes: "The proclamation of Jesus as the Son of God represents an advance on the way in which his messiahship has been proclaimed thus far in Acts." Yet his concept was not totally new to the New Testament. The Old Testament saw the ideal king of the future, the Messiah of David's line, as the Son of God (Ps. 2:7). This is why the high priest asked Jesus, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" (Mark 14:61). – Fernando.

family, you may find that you feel closer to your church family than the family you were born into, especially if they are not believers.

B. We Should Help Each Other Grow Spiritually - You should assemble with God's people to learn the Word of God from people who know it and can teach it. In the last of v.19 we read that Paul spent time with the disciples of Damascus. I'm sure he learned more about Christ from them. And Paul kept learning. As a result, we can see from v.22, he quickly became able to show from the Old Testament Scriptures that Jesus is the Messiah.

A big job that a parent has is to see to it that their child eats properly, so that they can grow and mature.

Even so, your church family is to help you grow by teaching you God's Word both by word and by example. Being accountable to a local church is essential for spiritual growth.

C. We Should Love, Support, and Accept One Another - It wasn't easy for Ananias to walk up to Paul and call him "brother." Paul could have been acting as a double agent, a spy! Paul was the man who could have carried him off to Jerusalem and even had him executed. But the Lord assured Ananias that Paul was a true Christian now, and we are to accept and forgive one another (cf. Eph. 4:32). It was as if Ananias had said, "I don't care what you have done before you came to Christ, because the moment you came to Christ you belong with us. We will love you as fully as we love any other believer. We will forgive you for what you have done." And later in v.25 the believers helped Paul escape a death plot against him. They risked their own lives in doing so. And then in v.26ff we read of Paul going to Jerusalem. According to Paul's account in Galatians, this did not occur until three years later. Unfortunately, the Christians there did not welcome him or even receive him at first. How difficult it must have been for him. Yet Barnabas led the way in welcoming him, introducing him to the apostles (v.27), to Peter and James in particular (Gal. 1:17-18). This led to a general acceptance of Paul by the believers here. In fact, in v.30 those Jerusalem Christians were willing to help Paul escape another death plot, even though they could have been hurt in the process.

That is the kind of love we should have for one another. We should be willing to overlook their past, believing in the power of Christ to change lives. We need more Christians like Barnabas, who will take the initiative to introduce new believers to others in our fellowship.

I remember reading a missionary story of how a young man in New Guinea who had been away to school and had gotten a good education after his conversion, returned to his own island and to his own village. On the Lord's day the group of missionaries and believers were gathered together to observe the Lord's Supper. As this young man sat by one of the elder missionaries, the missionary recognized that a sudden tremor had passed through the young man's body and he laid his hand upon the arm of the other in a way that indicated he was under a great nervous strain. Then in a moment all was quiet again. The missionary whispered, "What was it that troubled you?" "Ah," he said, "it is all right. But the man who just came in killed my father and ate his body. And now he has come in to remember the Lord with us. At first I was so shocked to see the murderer of my own father sit down with us at the table of the Lord, I didn't know whether I could endure it. But it is all right now. He is washed in the same precious Blood." And so together they had communion.² Does the world know anything of this? It is a marvelous thing, the work of the blessed Holy Spirit of God.

Finally, to become a great Christian:

² Ironside, 225-226.

III. FAITHFULLY SERVE CHRIST

Exercising is important in growth and development. Service to Christ is a form of spiritual exercise that we need to grow stronger in the Lord. Every great Christian is a serving Christian. Jesus said in Mt. 20:26, “whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant.” So let me give a few exhortations about Christian service. First:

A. Discover Your Area of Service – God does not want you to be frustrated, trying to serve Him in some way that God has not called or equipped you for. So you need to discover your spiritual gift, and find out the area of service that you should be involved in. Now Paul quickly discovered his calling. In v.15 we see that Paul learned that he was to carry the good news of Jesus Christ to the Jews, to Kings, and especially to the Gentiles. That is the way he was to serve the Lord Jesus. He had a special call to preach, and to be a missionary. Most Christians are probably not called to be missionaries or pastors, but all are called to serve Christ in some way or several ways.

Paul later taught that we all have a spiritual gift which will, with the filling of the Holy Spirit, enable us to serve Christ effectively. There are two main categories of spiritual gifts according to 1 Pet. 4:10-11: the speaking gifts and the serving gifts. Paul had a speaking gift. He was effective because he knew what he was talking about. He had an unusual knowledge of the Old Testament and deep insight into New Testament truths. And if you are called of God to exercise a speaking gift, you need an extra measure of knowledge of the Word of God. Furthermore, when you speak, be sure you speak about Jesus Christ. Note the content of Paul’s speech. In v.20 “Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God.” In the last of v.22 we see that he was “proving that this Jesus is the Christ.” Christ must be the focus of all that we have to say.

If you have a serving gift, your service is also very important. Some work as deacons. Some work on the Bereavement Committee. Others work on some other committee such as Ushers. Some serve in community outreach. Next week will we make available a survey of Christian service opportunities in our church. Be sure you fill that out, especially if you are not serving in a ministry. We want every member of our church to serve in some way.

B. Begin Service *Now* - Note in v.20 that Paul “immediately” began serving Christ in doing what He had called him to do. The synagogues were perhaps expecting him to come, and when he got there, instead of finding out who the Christians were in town and arresting them, he preaches the Christ whom the Christians believe in! Paul didn’t know much, but he preached what he did know!

Too many people excuse themselves from serving Christ by saying they are not ready yet. They say they don’t know enough yet. But when it comes to serving Christ, you must serve as you learn. Training is the best when it’s in the crucible of experience and ministry.

I didn’t wait until I graduated from college and seminary before I started preaching. I started preaching about a month after I announced my call to preach. My first sermon was not very good, but I learned by doing. The more I preached, the more capable I became.

So start out serving the Lord by substitute teaching, witnessing, etc. Don’t put it off! And we must teach converts about Christian service and get them active the moment they come to Christ.

C. Continue to Serve Faithfully – Don't ever quit. Paul became a great Christian because he never quit. He was faithful in serving the Lord regardless of the circumstances and obstacles he faced. He served the Lord faithfully until he died as a martyr. Toward the end of his ministry he wrote, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim. 4:7). From his example we see that we should continue serving even:

1. In Spite of Death Threats – In v.23 we read, "Now after many days were past, the Jews plotted to kill him." This may refer to what happened after 3 years in Arabia, and after he had returned to Damascus. Then v.24 says, "But their plot became known to Saul." Now look down to v.29. When Paul was in Jerusalem it says, "And he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus and disputed against the Hellenists...." Like them, Paul was a Hellenist, a Greek-speaking Jew. He picked up the mantle of Stephen and continued at the point Stephen left off. But we also read in v.29 that "they attempted to kill him." Everywhere Paul went, they tried to kill him!

Now what would you do if you found out that people were out to kill you because of your service to Christ? Would you quit? Paul didn't. He did not let death threats stop him from serving.

Furthermore, Paul kept serving Christ:

2. In Spite of Rejection - He experienced that in Jerusalem. In v.26 we read, "And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple." They avoided him like a plague! He did not receive a welcome by the church there. He could have gotten his feelings hurt and quit serving Christ. But instead he kept trying (imperfect tense) to join himself to them. At first they wouldn't even receive him! Only through the intervention of Barnabas did they finally receive him.

What about you? Have you ever quit serving Christ because someone on the ministry team didn't speak to you, or seemed to reject you? Have you thought about quitting this church because only a few speak to you? Well how did Jesus respond to rejection? Judas betrayed Christ; Peter denied Christ; but Christ didn't let that keep Him from going to the Cross and being our Savior. And you and I shouldn't quit either!

I remember when I first made myself available to pastor a church full-time. I had finished Bible College and Seminary. I had some experience as both a staff member and pastor. I finally was contacted by the committee for a country church and they decided against me. My friend Tony Crisp got a church to consider me on another occasion and 25% voted against calling me, so I didn't go. I have faced rejection in my ministry, but I always knew that God had called me to preach and not to quit, so I kept at it until God opened doors of service for me.

Furthermore, Paul kept serving Christ:

3. In Spite of Little Recognition - We read in the last of v.30 that Paul went to Tarsus, and in the book of Acts we do not read of him again for 5-10 years, or until chapter 11. But what do you think he did during those years of relative obscurity? Rest? Don't you believe it. In Gal. 1:21 he says, "Afterwards I came into the regions of Syria and Cilicia." The city of Tarsus was in Cilicia. In Acts 15:23 we read that the apostles and elders sent a letter "unto the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia."³ Who established the churches in Cilicia? It was probably Paul. Then Gal. 1:22 says, "And I was unknown by face to the churches of Judea which were in Christ." For most Christians, Paul was a nobody. But he didn't let that stop him from serving Christ.

³ Cilicia was a maritime province in the southeast of Asia Minor, bordering on Pamphylia in the west, Lycaonia and Cappadocia in the north and Syria in the east. Its capital, Tarsus, was the birth place of Paul.

So Paul was faithful to serve Christ even without the recognition of the Christians in Jerusalem or Damascus. He faded into obscurity, but that did not stop him.

There are some who quietly serve Christ in ways that most people in this church do not even know about. You may not get any recognition for what you do, but what should matter the most is that Jesus knows, and He will reward you in due time. Don't let little recognition keep you from serving Christ. Even I serve in relative obscurity to those outside this church. Yet Christ expects me to serve Him faithfully regardless of the amount of recognition I receive. Faithfulness is what is really important.

Conclusion: Do you want to be someone who has an impact on the lives of others for the cause of Christ? Do you want to become a strong, mature Christian? If so, be filled with the Spirit. Be active in a fellowship of believers, and serve Christ faithfully.

Are you lacking in any of those areas? Are you filled with the Spirit, or are you relying upon self? Are you filled with the Spirit, or are you holding back in some area of your life? Are you actively involved in a fellowship of believers? Are you involved in a small group, such as a Sunday School class? Are you serving Christ, or have you quit? Are you making excuses for not doing anything? If you want to be a great Christian, you must be a serving Christian. For some, the first step toward Christian service would be church membership. Do you need to make yourself available to God and this church this morning? If so, you come forward during the invitation.

Sources: Ajith Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998); Everett F. Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975); H.A. Ironside, *Lectures on the Book of Acts* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers 1943); John MacArthur, Jr., *The Transformed Life: Study Notes on Acts 9:1-31* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1984); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible [Ver. 5:30]* (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); Curtis Vaughan, *Acts: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982). Bruce, Eddleman, and Greene were read but not used.

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