

Acts 9:1-9: How Do You Go from Miserable Life → Wonderful Life?

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I. Introduction

Are you a Christian? If you are, is your life any better than before you became a Christian? Is your marriage better, is your family better, is your job better, has anything gotten better since you became a Christian? If it hasn't, why not? If you're not a Christian, how's your life going? Are you satisfied with it? Would you say that you have a wonderful life? Would you like a wonderful life?.....and what does Jesus have to do with it?

II. Acts 9:1-9: How Did Saul Turn Into Paul?...Going from a Miserable Life to a Wonderful Life

9:1-9, Saul was one of the individuals who heard Stephen's testimony before the Sanhedrin and in Saul's mind Stephen had just insulted God in the worst possible way. He heard Stephen say, "The temple you revere so much is not God's house and neither are you His keepers. You don't obey God; you never have. In fact, you murdered Jesus Christ, the Just One whom God sent!" (7:44-53). This is why Saul held the clothes of those who murdered Stephen and why he vehemently persecuted the church (7:57-8:3). But Saul was just getting started. He got authority from the high priest (though the whole Sanhedrin was involved, Acts 26:10) to hunt down Jewish Christians in Damascus, which is in Syria. How did the Jewish high priest come to have authority over individuals living in another country? Rome gave the high priest and the Sanhedrin jurisdiction over Jews living outside Israel's territory but only in religious cases. Thus, Saul headed for Damascus to bring anyone, men or women, back to Jerusalem in chains.

As Saul was on the road to Damascus, he was suddenly hit by a light from heaven which shone all around him, in fact, it knocked him to the ground. He then heard a voice saying, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" He knew that he was having a divine encounter, but he was confused by the whole thing. Why was a heavenly being accusing Saul of persecuting Him? So Saul asks, "Who are You, Lord?" The Lord replied, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." Jesus then tells him to go into Damascus where he will be told what he must do. The men who were traveling with Saul were speechless. They saw the light and heard what perhaps sounded like a voice (Acts 22:9), but they saw no one. Saul got up, but he was now blind because of Jesus' Shekinah glory (Acts 22:11). So they led him by the hand into Damascus. He remained there three days without sight as he fasted, no doubt contemplating what had just happened and what it all meant especially in light of his current mission in life: arrest and kill Christians.

Saul's entire life likely flashed before him, especially the recent events going back to Stephen's death and his fury against Christians. Saul thought that these Christians were blaspheming against God, that they needed to be stopped by any means necessary. But now he realized that everything Stephen said about God, the temple, and especially Jesus Christ was true! Everything that these Christians were saying was true: Jesus Christ was the Son of God, i.e., He was God Himself. Jesus Christ was Israel's foretold Messiah. God did raise Him from the dead. And God had rejected Israel's leadership because they were indeed "stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears!" exactly as Stephen said (7:51)!! Everything that Saul had been fighting for was wrong and he now knew it. This is why, in a split-second, he was ready to do whatever Jesus asked him. Saul, the Christian-killer, would become Paul, the Christian advocate. How did Saul's life change so dramatically...so quickly?

Miserable Life to Wonderful Life: Having a Personal Encounter with Jesus Christ, how do you go from sinner to saint, from Saul to Paul? Christianity. But what does that mean, how can Christianity transform you from a terrorist to a saint? Is that what going to church is about? Saul didn't go from Christian persecutor to Christian evangelist by going to church or doing church things. Saul was transformed in an instant because of a personal encounter with the resurrected Jesus Christ. Is Jesus personal and real to you or a character in the Bible?

What does a personal encounter with Jesus look like, what is He offering and what do you get? Jesus says to Saul twice, "Why are you persecuting Me?" Why does He say this? Paul's been persecuting random Christians not Jesus, so why does He say this? Jesus is telling you, me, and Paul what happens when you have a personal encounter with Him: you and He become one. What happens to you, happens to Him. You are in Him and He is in you, that's why He feels your suffering and wants to do something about it (John 17:20-26; Galatians 2:20; 4:6). Jesus is not simply offering you a way out of hell; He wants to be your personal Savior each and every day.

If your view of God is impersonal, your life will reflect it, Saul's view of God was that of a righteous judge who demanded perfection from His worshippers. And this is how the Pharisees, including Saul, behaved. They saw the temple as God's house and themselves as His executioners who were there to enforce His Law by any means necessary. Therefore Saul thought God wanted him to kill Christians, i.e., until he had a personal encounter with Him. Likewise, if you think that God is in the building you visit every Sunday and nowhere else, then your life will reflect that, your marriage, job, relationships, parenting, everything in your life will reflect what you believe about God. Who is God to you, an impersonal being or a personal Savior named Jesus Christ?

My view of God then and now, it's not that I wasn't saved. I was. I believed that Jesus was my Savior, that He paid for my sins, that He removed my penalty and set me right with God, therefore hell was no longer a concern. But I didn't walk with Jesus; I knew *of* Him, but I didn't *know* Him. Oh, I went to church faithfully, taught Sunday school, went to church socials/functions, sang, prayed, studied the Bible, but I wasn't really living daily life with Him. I followed His advice, or tried to, but I wasn't following Him. I didn't hear His voice; I heard His Word, but not His voice. Then for the first time, during 2nd Year Greek class, I heard His voice. He convicted me through Ephesians 4 as He said, "What have you been doing for My Body these past 10 years?" I acknowledged His conviction and a year later I was in Kiev, Ukraine and heard His voice every day. It was fantastic. But then I returned to the States and slowly His voice went away and by the time I became a pastor I thought my job was to preach accurate sermons. But then 10 years ago this month, God destroyed my image of Him and my view of being a pastor. When our church fell apart, here's what He said, "Where did you get the idea that your job was to preach sermons? Where did I say that? Your job is to make disciples, to show people how to live with me every day. Now, are you ready because I'm going to send you some people that are in deep trouble and you're going to show them how to walk with Me." That's when I began to know Jesus personally, to hear His voice. And I saw Him transform addicts, free those who were oppressed by panic/anxiety attacks and depression. I saw Him save marriages. He became real to me and everyone He brought to me.

III. Conclusion

As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one. Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.