

Sermon outline and notes © Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor  
Swift Creek Baptist Church (swiftcreekbaptistchurch.com)  
18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834  
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## Acts 22:1-21 (read vv.6-16) “The Miracle of Conversion”

Intro. In case you missed my last message from chapter 21, Paul had for some time been determined to go to Jerusalem to carry an offering from Gentile Christians to the poor Jewish Christians of Jerusalem. After a long journey Paul arrived in Jerusalem. He soon met with James and the elders of the church there, who received him gladly. Because of Jewish opposition to Paul’s ministry, they suggested that he demonstrate that he was not out to do away with the Law of Moses. He could do this by going through a purification process in the temple which was prescribed by the Law of Moses. Paul agreed. On the 7th day, when some Jews from Asia saw him in the temple, they stirred up a mob against Paul, and made false charges against him, saying that Paul had brought a Gentile into the part of the temple reserved for Jews. They started to beat him up. They even intended to kill him. Many Jews were upset with the way Paul had accepted Gentiles into full fellowship with the people of God without requiring them first to become Jews through circumcision. A Roman guard of at least 100 soldiers intervened and rescued Paul from the mob. They took him to the barracks, and as Paul ascended the steps, he has gained opportunity to speak to the mob about his faith in Jesus Christ. Oh, how he wanted to persuade his Jewish brethren to believe in Jesus Christ!

So in v.1 of my text it says, “Brethren and fathers, hear my defense before you now.” Since he spoke in the Hebrew tongue,<sup>1</sup> they were willing to listen to his defense. He insisted that it was *God* that had redirected his life. Paul pointed to many supernatural events to confirm this, including seeing the risen Jesus and the fact of his healing from blindness (v.13). Furthermore, how could his enemies explain the tremendous change in his life? He became a witness of the gospel of Jesus Christ and even took the gospel to the Gentiles. In his address there is an implied question: “How could I have done otherwise without being disobedient to God?”

Now there are two applications I want to make. First, like Paul, we should be ready and able to give a defense for our faith in Christ. In 1 Pet. 3:15 we are commanded to always be ready to give an answer of the reason of the hope that is in us. That word translated “answer” in I Peter is the same word that is found in v.1 of our text translated “defense.” We should be ready at all times to give a defense, and explanation of why we are Christians. Certainly, Paul was always ready. As he said in v.15, God called him to be a witness of what he had seen and heard. Are you always ready to share why you believe in Jesus?

Secondly, Paul gives a defense of his actions by sharing his personal testimony, which is one way to witness. I believe it is very important to learn to share your personal testimony of what God has done in your life. There is tremendous power in personal testimony. An infidel can argue the Bible with you, but he has a hard time refuting your testimony of what you have personally experienced. If you share your personal testimony, you can follow Paul’s simple outline that is found in our text. First, you tell about your life before you became a Christian. Paul does that in vv.1-5. Then, you tell about what led up to your decision to become a Christian. Paul does that in vv.6-16. Then you tell how your life has changed for the better since you became a Christian. Paul does that beginning in v.17. Two of our ladies will share their testimonies the first Sunday evening in May. I hope you will come hear them.

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<sup>1</sup> He probably spoke in Aramaic, which was the common language of the Jews at that time in Palestine. It was the Hebrew tongue in that sense.

So let us examine Paul's account of his conversion and its implications for us today.

## I. WHY PAUL'S CONVERSION WAS SO AMAZING

One of the great arguments for the truthfulness of Christianity is the dramatic and amazing conversion of Saul of Tarsus, one of Christianity's greatest opponents. You see, his past life made a conversion to Christianity seemingly impossible. Surely such a dramatic change would require a great cause. Indeed, only God could have converted Saul of Tarsus to the Christian faith.

Now notice a few points about his past that made conversion so unlikely. First:

A. He Was Proud of His Race – Paul begins by saying in v.3, “I am indeed a Jew.” Even though Paul was not a native of Jerusalem, he nevertheless had excellent Jewish credentials. In Phil. 3:5 Paul called himself a “Hebrew of the Hebrews.” He was a pure-blooded Jew. By the time of Paul's conversion, Christianity was rejected by the leadership of Israel, and thus by most Jews. So a man who was proud of his Jewishness would not likely become identified with Christians.

B. Proud of His Religious Accomplishments – Paul went on to say in v.3 that he was “brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers' law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today.” Though Paul was born outside of Israel, it appears that he was brought to Jerusalem as a Youth. And this seems to be affirmed also in 26:4.<sup>2</sup> He was taught by Gamaliel, one of the greatest Rabbis of that day. Then it says that he was “taught according to the strictness of our fathers' law....” Paul followed the strictest interpretation and application of the law. They had hundreds of rules and regulations governing conduct and Paul learned and lived by every one of them, or so he thought. Also, in Phil. 3:5-6 he points out that he was of the strict sect of the Pharisees and blameless concerning the Law. He was the most religious, zealous, dedicated young man of his day. Such a person would see no need for conversion.

Do you realize that some of the most difficult people to convert to Christianity are religious people? Try to convert a Mormon missionary or an active member of the Jehovah's witnesses? Then there are some people who seem to think that just because they are born into a Christian home in America, they are automatically Christians. That's not true. Your race or religion will not get you into heaven. Even if you become a deacon or preacher, that won't save you either!

Next, we see one manifestation of his zeal. He at one time:

C. Persecuted Christians – Paul said in v.4, “I persecuted this Way ....” Of course, Paul was talking about persecuting Christians, who were known as people of the Way (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 24:14, 22), probably because Jesus said, “I am the Way.” Likewise, Paul said in Phil. 3:6, “Concerning zeal, persecuting the church.” He was very zealous in his attempt to stamp out what he viewed as a heretical sect. He thought this was zeal for God. He saw that Judaism as he knew it was threatened by the Christian faith.

Here Paul shows the extent and depth of his persecution of Christians:

1. He Persecuted unto Death - Paul said in v.4, “I persecuted this Way to the death ....” Several times he cast his vote to put Christians to death (26:10). Now that's extreme isn't it? There are a number of religious terrorists around the world who believe so strongly in their cause that they will kill innocent people just to advance their beliefs.

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<sup>2</sup> “My manner of life from my youth, which was at the first among mine own nation at Jerusalem, know all the Jews.”

2. He Persecuted Even Women – Paul noted in v.4 that even women were not exempt from his persecution. Some were put into prison. Perhaps some of these women were even put to death! Paul wasn't much of a gentleman, was he? Oh, the extent of his hatred toward the followers of Jesus Christ!

Furthermore, Paul said he would go to great lengths to persecute the church. He says:

3. He Persecuted As Far as Damascus – Paul said in the last of v.5, “I also received letters to the brethren, and went to Damascus to bring in chains even those who were there to Jerusalem to be punished.” Damascus required a journey of several days by horseback and especially on foot.<sup>3</sup> Yet, Paul was willing to travel that far to stamp out Christianity.

The purpose of alluding to his persecuting zeal was to demonstrate that in those early days he had had no personal interest in the Way, much less identification with it. Such a person would never on their own become converted to the Christian faith. He was too hardheaded and set in his ways. It would be like leading Osama Ben Laden to Christ. It had to have been a powerful cause to bring about such a dramatic effect. Just as you have probably seen the experiment of Newton's hanging balls showing cause and effect. A cause is required to set those balls in motion.

So we have seen the evidence of Paul's amazing conversion. Now let's see from our text:

## II. HOW WE ARE CONVERTED

So how could such a person be saved? Well, it is similar in some respects to the way anyone is saved. First:

A. There Must Be a Divine Intervention – The Bible says, “There is none who seeks after God” (Rom. 3:11). Instead, because of our sinful nature, God has to seek after us! Jesus said in John 6:44, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him....” So let's see how God took the initiative to go after Saul of Tarsus in vv.6-8, “Now it happened, as I journeyed and came near Damascus at about noon, suddenly a great light from heaven shone around me. And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’ So I answered, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ And He said to me, ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.’” When Paul was converted, it was only because of the confrontation by Jesus Christ. Up to the time Paul had believed that Jesus of Nazareth was at best a misguided religious zealot, and at worse a false prophet. He did not believe in Jesus Christ. But after being confronted by Jesus personally, his mind and his life was changed completely. Paul certainly needed a confrontation with Jesus Christ if he were to be saved.

The same thing is true today. Each person needs to be confronted by God. There are many ways in which God will confront us. Often He will use a Spirit-filled Christian sharing the Word of God, which cuts to the heart and the person knows that God is speaking to him. Or someone invites you to church where you hear a gospel message. I've had quite a few people tell me over the years that while I was preaching, they felt like I was preaching right at them. Folks, that is not I, but the Spirit of God speaking to them. I'm just a mouthpiece. Or God may use some tragedy to shake a person up and confront him with his need of Jesus Christ.

One time the husband of one of our members was not saved until the death of his grandson. That got his attention! I've seen something similar happen several times in over 40 years of ministry.

Now notice some specific details about the divine intervention that Paul experienced. First, Christ revealed:

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<sup>3</sup> Probably a journey of about 200 miles in those days.

1. His Identity - When this voice called out from heaven, Paul probably assumed it was an angel, or perhaps even God Himself. So Paul asked in v.8, "Who are You, Lord?" Can you imagine the shock Paul experienced when the voice replied, "I am Jesus of Nazareth." When Paul heard that, it must have been like a sword in his heart. He believed that Jesus was dead! That was the official position of the leaders of Israel. Yet now he both hears and sees the fact that Jesus is very much alive. At once he must have been convicted about what he had been doing to oppose Jesus and His followers. But perhaps he realized there was hope for him. For the name "Jesus" means "the LORD saves."

Another key feature of this confrontation was the revelation of:

2. His Glory - Paul recalls in v.6 how the light shown even brighter than the blinding brilliance of a Syrian noonday sun (specifically stated in Acts 26:13). Can you imagine that? In v.11 he refers to "the glory of that light."

Some in Paul's audience might have supposed that Paul just had a hallucination. But this was not a subjective figment of Paul's imagination. There were two evidences to prove the reality of Paul's experience. First, his traveling companions could have testified that something significant had happened (v.9). They, too, saw a tremendous light, even though they couldn't make out or understand the voice of Christ (v.9). It was a true external reality, but fully comprehended only by Paul. In 1 Cor. 15:8, Paul clearly says that Jesus appeared to Him in person. Secondly, how else can you explain his blindness (v.11) unless he beheld a very intensely bright light that he found irresistible?

I believe it is very significant that Jesus revealed Himself to Paul in all His glory. It was for two main reasons. First, who is this person who has radiance brighter than the sun? Well Paul discovered that Jesus was not only alive, but He must be the Son of God, for He radiated with the glory of God! So in a moment Paul was converted from an unbeliever to a believer in Jesus Christ. And if you are going to be saved from your sin you must believe in Jesus as well. Secondly, His glory reveal to Paul his own sinfulness. As you may recall, "glory" stands for the excellent character and attributes of a person. It's not just a reference to very bright light. The glory of Christ is revealed in terms of bright light to convey the divine attributes of righteousness, purity and holiness. God has never sinned. He is absolutely just and righteous in all His ways. So Jesus, the Son of God, presented Himself in the way that Paul needed. Paul was self-righteous. He thought he was good enough to earn his way to heaven. So what Paul needed was to come face to face with the "Righteous One" (v.14; cf. 3:14; 7:52). But in the presence of the absolute righteousness of Jesus Christ, he must have realized how much of a sinner he really was. A flood of divine righteousness had swept away his self-righteousness.

You have probably heard of the experience Isaiah had, as told in his 6<sup>th</sup> chapter. He saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up. He heard the angels say, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory!" Then he said, "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips." Every man's way seems right in his own eyes, and this was especially true for a self-righteous Pharisee like Saul. But standing in the presence and glory of the holy Son of God, he realized how much of a sinner he really was.

Have you come to realize that you are a sinner in need of a Savior? Paul said in Roman 3:23, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Have you come to believe in Jesus as the glorious Son of God, who is absolutely pure and righteous?

Well Paul not only came to believe in the glory of Jesus, but also:

3. His Lordship - Paul called this person from heaven "Lord" in v.8. But notice that after he found out it was Jesus; he still addressed Him as Lord in v.10. This is understood when the issue of the person of Christ is settled. The test of true belief in Jesus is to submit to the Lordship of

Christ. You must not only accept Jesus as Savior but also as Lord! Once you believe He is the risen and ascended Lord, then you will desire to know His will, and to do His will. The question in v.8, “Who are you, Lord?” should be followed by the question of v.10, “What shall I do, Lord?” After Christ revealed His initial instructions to go to Damascus (v.10), Paul obeyed (v.11b). And Paul continued to obey Jesus for the rest of his life. [If point III is omitted, tell some of the ways he obeyed in vv.15, 18, 21.] I want to assure you that you will be far better off obeying Jesus than going your own way.

Have you come to accept Jesus as Lord of your life? Is there any area of your life where you have said “No” to Jesus? Well Jesus is not Lord of your life if you are not obeying Him.

So conversion takes place when there is a divine confrontation. But we also see from our text that:

B. There Must Be a Human Response – I firmly believe that no one is saved apart from a divine confrontation and the enabling grace of God. Yet I also believe that God does not force people to be saved. So the sinner must yield to the Lord to be saved, and many people stubbornly refuse to do so. Thankfully, Paul yielded, and we see the response expected of Paul in v.16, “And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.” There are two commands in this verse:

1. Get Your Sins Washed Away – Jesus warn in John 8:24, “you will die in your sins...” Listen, don’t face death with your sins still held against you. Get them washed away before it’s too late.

If you found out that you were just exposed to a deadly virus, you would rush home or to a bathroom and try to wash that deadly virus away as soon as possible. Well sin is deadly folks. The Bible says, “The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). I would not want to face God with my sins still clinging to me! I’m glad that my sins have been washed away!

How do we wash out sins away? It might appear that this verse is teaching that baptism in water will wash away your sins. But that is not the case! The second command is not the result of the first, otherwise the latter would have been a participle (both are aorist middle imperatives). Furthermore, the word translated “calling” is a participle, which probably only adverbially modifies the 2<sup>nd</sup> imperative. Thus it would be, “And get your sins washed away by calling on the name of the Lord.” You get your sins washed away by calling on the name of the Lord, not by being baptized. Indeed, years later Paul quoted the Old Testament in writing Rom. 10:13 which says, “For whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” Paul did that as soon as he believed in Jesus as Savior and Lord.

There are those who question the saving validity of the so-called sinner’s prayer. I agree that just repeating a prayer is not going to save you. But when repentance and faith is present, I believe that calling on the Lord in prayer to save you is a vital step in becoming a Christian, as we see in v.16.

2. Get Yourself Baptized - This is to be the Christian’s first act of obedience to the Lord. This is the first test of our surrender to the Lordship of Christ. In baptism we separate ourselves from the sins of our past and identify with Jesus Christ. In baptism we leave behind the world of sin and join God’s church. Paul’s baptism was to be the outward and visible sign of his inward and spiritual cleansing from sin by the grace of God.

Have you followed the Lord in baptism? Ananias asked Paul, “Now why are you waiting?” Could He be asking you that today? What are you waiting on? Why haven’t you confessed faith in Christ? Why haven’t you been baptized yet? In just a moment I will give an invitation to follow the Lord in baptism. Don’t put it off any longer.

Now once you are converted, and need to learn last of all:

### III. HOW WE MUST LIVE

Becoming a Christian is not just getting your sins washed away. Being a Christian is a way of life. And living the Christian life is really pretty simple in some respects. First:

A. We Need to Discover the Will of God – I talked about this last week. Ananias said to Paul in v.14, “The God of our fathers has chosen you that you should know His will....” Notice that God wanted Paul to know His will, and He immediately revealed part of His will of Paul’s life in the next verse.

Even so, God wants you to know His will also! Do you know God’s will? Well God has revealed His general will for our lives in the Word of God, and our responsibility is to learn it. That’s why you need to read and study the Bible. That’s why you need to attend a church where the Bible is taught and preached. In our last message we summarized God’s will for your life. As we saw last week, first, He wills your salvation. That was true of Paul, and God’s desire to save the whole world is seen in v.21. Secondly, He wills your sanctification (1 Thess. 4:3). He wants you to become Christlike. Finally, He wills your service. For Paul that meant being a witness unto all people (v.15) and becoming a missionary to the Gentiles (v.21).

Have you been saved? Are you becoming more like Jesus? Are you serving the Lord? Are you doing God’s will in your relationships?

We not only need to discover God’s will, but furthermore:

B. We Must Obey His Will – This is possible only by the enabling grace of God. This is possible by the direction and power of the Holy Spirit within you (Rom. 8:3; Gal. 5:16). As the servant of the Lord (Rom. 1:1), Paul had to learn to obey the Lord’s will, which called for his baptism as an initial step. He obeyed. Then, he indeed became a witness and a missionary to the Gentiles. Even though that made the Jews upset, Paul points out that he was just being obedient to the risen Lord. How can you argue with that?

Now notice with me the specific ways Paul was obedient to the Lord, and from his example how we should live. First:

1. Like Paul, Be a Witness of Your Conversion – Again, Paul was told in v.15, “For you will be His witness to all men of what you have seen and heard.” Paul had seen the risen Christ, he had heard His voice; henceforth he was to tell forth with confidence what he had seen and heard. Conversion changed the hate of Paul into love. Paul was indeed a witness of his conversion experience both in words and in a changed life. The most remarkable thing about the story of Paul’s conversion is that he had a conversion to tell.

If we have been truly converted, we are to be witnesses of what has happened in our lives. Has conversion changed your life and made you into a witness for Him? I know a great many professing Christians who can tell scarcely anything about their conversion. May the Lord help us to be as faithful to witness as Paul was.

2. Be a Witness in Spite of Rejection - When Paul returned to Jerusalem after spending 3 years in Arabia, he began to witness to the Hellenistic Jews, but his witness aroused intense hostility. This was especially so because they remembered his former zeal against the church, and they probably viewed him as a traitor. So God said to him in v.18, “Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, for they will not receive your testimony concerning Me.” In spite of the opposition he faced everywhere he went, Paul remained faithful in his witness of Jesus Christ.

When you have faced rejection of your witness, have you become bummed out and quit? Jesus warned that we would face rejection and persecution. Don’t let that stop you.

God used this rejection, and even the plot against his life, to cause him to leave Jerusalem and become a missionary to the Gentiles. God providentially overturns the circumstances of our lives to accomplish His will. So this leads to the third way Paul was obedient to the Lord:

3. Be a Witness as a Missionary – When God told Paul to get out of Jerusalem, he appealed to the Lord to let him stay. He felt that his dramatic conversion would be a convincing testimony of the reality of Jesus Christ. But God said to him in v.21, “Depart, for I will send you far from here to the Gentiles.” Paul was obedient to the Lord and became the great missionary to the Gentiles. He won thousands of people to the Lord and planted scores of churches. So he hoped to make it clear that his life’s work among the Gentiles was not of his choosing, but instead was God’s will. After all, their own Scriptures stated in Isa. 49:6, “I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles.”

I wonder if there is someone here today that God is calling to preach or become a missionary? Today would be a great day to surrender your life to the Lord’s will.

Conclusion and invitation: You may be on your Damascus road of life, and today Jesus Christ has spoken to you. If you need to be saved today, don’t put it off any longer. Today is your day to be saved and present yourself for baptism.

Christian, you were saved at the point that you repented of your sin, believed in Jesus, and surrendered to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Do you need to return to the point of surrender to His Lordship? Have you strayed from His will? Is there some life decision that you are facing right now, but you have been holding back from obeying Christ? Perhaps He is calling you to surrender to fulltime Christian service. Perhaps like Paul He is calling you to be a missionary. Perhaps He is calling you to turn away from a relationship that is hindering your fellowship with God. Then what are you waiting on? It’s time to surrender yet again to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Do it now!

Sources: F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954); 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); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); Curtis Vaughan, *Acts: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977); Dr. Jerry Vines (notes from his sermon on this text); Warren W. Wiersbe, “*Be*” Series: *New Testament Volumes 1 & 2: Acts* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1989). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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