**Convincing Others**

Acts 9:19b-31 on February 21, 2021

Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson

*Please read Acts 9:19b-31 before going further in this transcript.*

 Today’s sermon is about “Convincing Others.” When Saul comes back to Jerusalem for the first time as a relatively new Christian, Acts 9:26 says, “…he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he REALLY was a disciple.” Have you ever heard a report about someone becoming a Christian and then reacted by saying to yourself: “yeah right! No way, NO WAY!” I did some quick research on the internet this week and found some examples of people who you might be surprised to hear, claim to be Christians. We’ll only take time to consider one example. You might be surprised to hear that Justin Bieber claims to be a Christian. Justin Bieber is a Canadian singer/songwriter. As early as age 16 he was writing hit songs like “Baby.” The lyrics go something like, “Baby, baby, baby, oh…thought you’d always be mine.” Bieber has also been in the news over the years for various rebellious and illegal behaviors. In fact, you can Google his mugshot online (He’s smiling in his orange jump suit and his hair still looks great!).

 Bieber is now in his mid-20s. Last year, an interview with ChurchLeaders.com reports: “For anyone who has ever wondered, “Is Justin Bieber Christian?”, the singer recently sat for an interview that may answer that question. Bieber shared that understanding the true character and love of Jesus has helped to bring healing to his life and led him to commit to his wife, Hailey. The superstar said that although he was raised as a Christian and did believe Jesus died on the cross for him, he never “really implemented it” by obeying God. Now, however, Bieber views following Jesus differently.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

 So, what do you think: do you find this convincing? Well, the point of this introduction is not to convince you either way about Justin’s faith, but rather to get us thinking about this idea of “Convincing Others.” We’ll see this theme of “Convincing Others” traced all throughout today’s passage. Please turn or click in your Bible back to Acts 9:15. Last Sunday we learned about Saul’s conversion and how Jesus chose Saul. When Saul saw Jesus on the road to Damascus, it was not just a vision. “The resurrected Christ actually appeared to Saul.”[[2]](#footnote-2) So there was really no way that Saul could go on denying who Jesus really was: the Son of God, the Messiah. In other words, Saul was convinced about Jesus.[[3]](#footnote-3) But Jesus not only chose Saul for salvation that day, He also chose him for another reason. In Acts 9:15 Jesus says, “…This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Saul was called to CONVINCE OTHERS about Jesus, both Jews and Gentiles. He begins right in Damascus…

**1. Saul’s faith was convincing to those in Damascus.** Acts 9:20-21 says, “At once [Saul] began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. All those who heard him were astonished and asked, “Isn’t he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn’t he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?” This is a pretty INCREDIBLE turn around, because these synagogues in Damascus where Saul was trying to convince people about Jesus, were the very same synagogues to whom he had requested letters back in verse 2. Letters that would authorize him to arrest anyone who followed Jesus, and to take them back to Jerusalem as prisoners. It’s NO WONDER they were ASTONISHED!

What a strange and wonderful hypocrisy we encounter in Acts 9. The man who’d come to arrest the Christians, had himself been arrested by Christ. Saul was now trying to CONVINCE OTHERS about Jesus![[5]](#footnote-5) At first, they simply couldn’t believe that Saul had undergone such a radical change. It happened SO SUDDENLY. In fact, just about a week earlier, Saul was bound for Damascus with the religious zeal of a Pharisee. You see, Saul was a Pharisee; in fact, he came from a LONG line of Pharisees.[[6]](#footnote-6) And the Pharisees had a LONG history of resisting Jesus. Saul’s conversion happened approximately 3 years after Jesus’ death.[[7]](#footnote-7) So it wasn’t all that long ago that the Pharisees were having lots of head-to-head confrontations with Jesus. Jesus called them out many times for their empty, legalistic faith. The Pharisees were no friends of Jesus. What a strange dichotomy it must have been for Saul’s fellow Jews, to now hear a message about God’s GRACE from a formerly LEGALISTIC Pharisee.[[8]](#footnote-8) Saul is now teaching things about Jesus, that just a few days earlier, he himself had considered complete and total heresy.[[9]](#footnote-9) But his eyes had been opened, the scales fell from his eyes, his spiritual blindness had been removed.

 Saul’s many years of study as a Pharisee, meant that he was uniquely prepared to argue against the teachings about Jesus. In a twist of irony though, Saul’s background as a Pharisee, had now uniquely prepared him to convince others about Jesus.[[10]](#footnote-10) In other words, Saul was now totally convinced that Jesus was the promised Messiah that the OT had foretold. And now he committed his life to convincing others. Acts 9:22 says, “Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.” Saul was so well-trained and so full of zeal, that his Jewish opponents couldn’t stand up against the convincing proof that he presented. In other words, the Jews living in Damascus were convinced about Saul’s faith.

 Now obviously, this doesn’t mean that all of them were convinced to follow Jesus for themselves, but it sure seems LIKELY, that many of them did.[[11]](#footnote-11) Be that as it may, eventually Saul’s opponents in Damascus did become convinced of one thing: Saul’s faith was genuine. In fact, they were SO convinced of Saul’s devotion to Jesus, that they decided to make him pay for it with his life. Acts 9:23-25 records, “After many days had gone by[[12]](#footnote-12), there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him, but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall.” Let’s think about this, some of the people who helped rescue Saul, were likely some of the very same people that he’d originally come to arrest and drag back to Jerusalem. In other words, the people from Damascus who lowered Saul in a basket, had become convinced about his faith.

 However, convincing his fellow believers in Jerusalem would prove to be an even BIGGER challenge for Saul. Acts 9:26 says, “When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple.” Yeah right, there’s NO WAY that Saul is a follower of Jesus! This has got to be some kind of a trick! We know EXACTLY who Saul is: He’s a violent young man, who likes to watch people being stoned to death, who likes to throw Christians in jail.[[13]](#footnote-13) [[14]](#footnote-14) To put this in context, it’s been about 3 years since Saul left Jerusalem for Damascus.[[15]](#footnote-15) However, even after 3 years, the Christians in Jerusalem were STILL afraid of him! So, it’s Barnabas to the rescue! Barnabas, the “son of encouragement,” needs to convince them.[[16]](#footnote-16) Acts 9:27-28 says, “But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord.”[[17]](#footnote-17) After Barnabas vouches for him…

**2. Saul’s faith was convincing to those in Jerusalem.** Not only was it convincing because of Barnabas though, but it also became even more convincing, as Saul boldly/publicly proclaimed the name of Jesus. Now, here’s where we come to something rather intriguing. Acts 9:29 says that “[Saul] talked and debated with the Hellenistic Jews, but they tried to kill him.” Do you remember the Hellenistic Jews living in Jerusalem? I’ll give you a hint: we encountered them back in Acts 6. These were members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen. Jews who had been dispersed throughout various parts of the Hellenized world.[[18]](#footnote-18) In other words, the people that Saul is debating with in Jerusalem, are the very same group of Hellenistic Jews who were debating with Stephen before his martyrdom. The very same Jews who brought Stephen before the Sanhedrim for his trial. More pointedly, this is the very same group of Jews who stoned Stephen to death at the end of Acts 7.[[19]](#footnote-19) The very same Jews who had trusted a young man named Saul, to watch their coats for them while they threw rocks. In other words, Saul had such a bold commitment to Jesus, that he even tried to go back and convince the men who partnered with him in Stephen’s killing. Saul now tried to convince Stephen’s killers to follow Stephen’s Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Well, apparently they were indeed convinced that Saul had placed his faith in Jesus, but they were not convinced to put their own trust in Jesus. Instead, they try to kill Saul. Verse 30 tells us that his fellow believers sent him NW to Caesarea, which is located on the Mediterranean Sea, and then put him on a boat headed north for Tarsus.[[20]](#footnote-20)

 Acts 9:31 now closes this section with a summary on how well the Church is doing.

**3. The Church’s testimony was convincing to more and more people.** Acts 9:31 says, “Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.” Verse 31 isn’t referring so much to the plural, local churches, but rather to the singular, the Church made up of all believers. We might even say, “all of those who were convinced about Jesus.” This is a recap and summary of how all of the believers in this region of the world are doing: they are doing GREAT! After a time of great persecution and struggle, they are now enjoying a time of peace. They’re being strengthened in their faith. They’re living in the fear of the Lord. They’re being encouraged by the Holy Spirit. And in the midst of enjoying all these things, the number of people who are becoming convinced about Jesus, is growing.

 One obvious explanation for this wonderful time in the life of the Church is Saul’s conversion. The man who had once been “the church’s greatest opponent is now its greatest advocate.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Saul had gone from vigorous opponent to vigorous proponent. In order for more people to come to salvation in our day and age, some of us will need to become vigorous proponents of the gospel. I wonder who it might be among us today, who feels that calling, that burden? For some it may be a burden to take on a more active lay ministry here in our church or community. For others it may be a burden to take on a vocational calling either locally or globally. How wonderful it would be for our local church to commission some fresh young talent to send out with the gospel. Or even some older talent, someone whose faith is a little more refined and developed.[[22]](#footnote-22) Recently, we’ve seen a number of our Global Partners retiring; who will step in and fill their shoes? Who will allow our church the privilege of praying for them and partnering with them for the gospel? If God is tugging at your heart, any one of our elders would love to pray with you about that.[[23]](#footnote-23)

 But there’s something much bigger going on in Acts 9:31, than any one particular person; something else played a significant role in convincing others about Jesus. It’s this phrase, “living in the fear of the Lord.” What do you suppose the role of “fear” is, in increasing the number of believers?[[24]](#footnote-24) The word “fear” harkens us back to Acts 5. Right after Ananias and Saphira test the Lord and lie to the HS, they fall down dead in their tracks. Acts 5:11 tells us, “Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.” Then, we read something intriguing in Acts 5:13-14, “No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.” See how similar this is to Acts 9:31?

 Even as much as we understand “living in the fear of the Lord” to mean reverence and respect, it also means “fear” in terms of understanding God’s stern judgment of sin. Our God is an awesome God, He is to be greatly feared for His holiness and majestic power.[[25]](#footnote-25) In other words, part of what caused the Early Church to increase in numbers, was that the believers were “living in the fear of the Lord.” They were fully convinced about Jesus, and their testimony was fully convincing to others. There were no pretenders in the church, no half-hearted followers of Jesus. They took their own sin seriously. They weren’t playing games with God or limiting their devotion to Jesus to just one hour on Sunday.

 We are currently in the season of LENT; the 40+ days leading up to Good Friday/Easter. This is a great time of year to reflect on our own need for holiness. To repent of any sin in our lives. So let me be candid, if you are living in a way that doesn’t reflect a proper fear of the Lord, then you need to repent of that sin. If we are going to call ourselves followers of Jesus, then we need to live our lives in such a way, that others are convinced. Brother or Sister in Christ, let’s become fully devoted followers of Jesus. Let’s worship Him with reverent fear. Let’s demonstrate our respect for Who God truly is. Let’s live godly lives, that are convincing to a watching world, so that many more may come to faith in Jesus.[[26]](#footnote-26) [[27]](#footnote-27) Acts 9:26 told us that, at first, some of the people in Jerusalem didn’t believe that Saul “really was a disciple.” But by the time Saul got to the end of his earthly life, I can’t imagine that there were too many people left on the planet, who were unconvinced about His devotion to Jesus.[[28]](#footnote-28)

**Brother or Sister in Christ, let’s live CONVINCING LIVES for Jesus!**

1. <https://churchleaders.com/news/371297-justin-bieber-christian-jesus.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Also note 1 Corinthians 9:1 and 15:8. *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1841 footnote on Acts 9:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. When Ananias goes to the house where Saul was staying and places his hands on him in verse 17, it says that he addresses him as “Brother Saul.” Now, this may just have been Ananias’s way of greeting a fellow Jew. However, given that Ananias came not only to restore Saul’s sight, but also that he might be filled with the HS, it seems more likely that Ananias was greeting Saul as a “Brother in the Lord.” (See *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1847 footnote on Acts 11:1.) In other words, Ananias was convinced about Saul’s faith. By the way, apparently right at this point, or sometime shortly before this point, Saul had converted to Christianity. A clear testimony of Saul’s repentance and faith are not recorded here. However, Saul’s testimony throughout the rest of the New Testament makes it clear that he did indeed recognize his sin and need to repent, and he did indeed find salvation by grace through faith in Jesus. Also note Ananias fuller statement recorded in Acts 22:16. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In Galatians 1:15-16 Saul says that God set him apart from his mother’s womb and called him by His grace so that he might preach to the Gentiles. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Verse 20 says Saul began to preach “At once.” This demonstrates that Saul’s longtime spiritual fervor for God hadn’t decreased in the slightest. The only thing that changed, which is no small thing, is that now Saul had both ZEAL for God and KNOWLEDGE of His truth. Saul gives his own testimonial about “zeal without knowledge.” In Romans 10:2 he says, “For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge.” Provers 19:2 says, “hasty feet miss the way.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. His family tree was filled with Pharisees. See Acts 22:3, 23:6, and 26:5 as well as Philippians 3:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 349. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. What a wonderful relief it must have been for Saul to preach grace, after so many years of being bound up by empty tradition and narrow-minded legalism. Now he was free to preach a message of grace and forgiveness and FREEDOM from sin! [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Just imagine if his fellow Pharisees could hear him now? If his father, who was also a Pharisee, could hear him now? Saul likely lost just about everything when he converted to Christianity: his family, his friends, his religious position and respected reputation among the Sanhedrin, and on and on. If we haven’t suffered the loss of close friends and family due to our faith in Jesus, we should consider ourselves fortunate. We may also want to ask ourselves, why not? Why hasn’t following Jesus cost us any of those things? In other words, has the risk of offending others, caused us to shrink back from trying to convince them about Jesus? Back in Mark 10:28-30 Peter says, “…“We have left everything to follow you!” “Truly I tell you,” Jesus replied, “no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—along with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life.” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I doubt that at any time during his training as a Pharisee, Saul ever thought, “this will help me talk about Jesus some day!” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Acts 9 doesn’t specifically say that anyone in Damascus placed his or her faith in Jesus as a result of Saul’s preaching. However, we do know that the proof that Saul was presenting, was convincing proof. That’s why it absolutely BAFFLED them. It sure seems likely that although certainly not everyone was convinced to follow Jesus, many people likely did in fact come to faith. For example, note Acts 17:2-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. “after many days” was actually about 3 years. Galatians 1:17-18 says Saul went to Arabia during this time and then later returned to Damascus. Later on in 2 Corinthians 11:32-33 Saul tells us, “In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands.” [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Can you imagine being slow to believe the genuineness of someone else's faith? Perhaps you are still thinking back to Bieber? Or maybe you have someone else in mind. The more times we witness a supposed Christians crash and fall, the more skeptical and cynical we become. That said, there’s a place to be cautious about how much we trust someone we’ve just met. We should take time to get to know them before we place them in a leadership or teaching position. 1 John 4:21, 1 Timothy 3:6-7; 4:14, and 5:22. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Kevin DeYoung asks a great question: “If someone like Saul came to our church, would we be ready to accept them?” (Kevin DeYoung and Chris Ranson, *Acts: A Visual Guide*, Christian Focus Publications, Scotland, 2018 message on “Saul Sees the Light.” Listen to sermon at [www.avisualguide.com](http://www.avisualguide.com)) What about someone with a somewhat questionable background? Someone who recently got out of jail for a serious felony? Someone who recently left a long career in the porn industry? Generally speaking, in terms of Christian love and fellowship, it would be better for us to err on the side of love and acceptance. To give a potential brother or sister in Christ, the benefit of the doubt and do everything that we can to help them in their new discipleship journey. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. We figure this based on Galatians 1:17-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Acts 4:36-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. In verse 27, Barnabas testified how Saul had preached about Jesus fearlessly in Damascus. But that was in Damascus, some 150 miles away from Jerusalem. However, now that Saul was actually in Jerusalem, the home base for the Sanhedrin, and the place where his rabbi Gamaliel lived, would Saul continue to be just as bold and effective? Acts 9:28 says he was. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Some of them were from the region of Cilicia, that’s the orange arrow in the upper right of our map. Cilicia is where Tarsus is located. Tarsus, as in Saul’s hometown. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 349. Also see the discussion on pp. 314-315 regarding the witnesses. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Back in Acts 9:16 Jesus had foretold that Saul would suffer for his name. As we’ll see in future chapters, the hard times that Saul went through back in Damascus, and now here in Jerusalem, would only prove to be the tip of the iceberg. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2237 footnote on Acts 9:31. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. I like to call this an “Encore Ministry,” one more song! Serving Jesus for a lifetime means that we never want the music to stop! [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. All throughout the book of Acts, we’ve seen the important role of the Holy Spirit. One of the things that this verse attributes the increasing number of believers to, is the encouragement of the Holy Spirit. And as we’ve mentioned before, each believer in Jesus has this SAME Holy Spirit within us. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Today’s passage mentions fear 3 times. In verse 26, “When [Saul] came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple.” In verse 27, “[Barnabas] told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus.” In verse 31, “Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.” The fear mentioned in verses 26 and 27 make sense to us, but what about verse 31? How do we make sense of “living in the FEAR of the Lord”? Simply put, “fear” can mean different things depending on the context. So, in v. 26 “afraid” refers to literally being in fear for their very lives. In verse 27 “fearlessly” refers to courage and boldness. In verse 31 “fear of the Lord” refers to a deep reverence and respect for who God is. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Hebrews 4:13 says it this way, “Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.” See also Romans 14:10b-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Consider Nehemiah 5:9; Romans 2:24; and 1 Peter 2:12. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Not for our own glory, but for God’s glory. Not for our own bragging rights, but because God is awesome [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Oh that others will be so convinced by OUR Christian testimony. That OUR faith will endure and shine clearly to our final day! [↑](#footnote-ref-28)