

We can only speculate about how Saul of Tarsus felt in the days following his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road. We tend to think of Saul’s conversion in immediate terms; one moment he’s Saul the Christian hunter, the next he’s the Super Saint. And to be sure, coming face to face with the resurrected Jesus utterly changed him. But I have to think that mixed in with the shock and amazement was an almost sickening realization that his entire view of the world had been wrong.

It seems like a very quiet Saul that we see early in Acts chapter nine, silently processing what had happened to him. His way of looking at and functioning within his world had been wrong. His notions of what was pleasing to God had been wrong. As if to underscore just how wrong he had been, God blinded him for three days. It was like God saying: “This is what you were, Saul—blind to the truth.” Adding insult to injury, Saul was depending on the help of a Christian—the type of person that up until then he had been trying to eliminate. Saul had a lot to think about as he sat in that house on Straight Street. He had to find out how wrong he had been before he could do anything right. It was a painful process—he wasn’t in the mood to eat or drink for those three days—but it was a necessary process. You may recall that it wasn’t long before Saul went public, candidly sharing what he had learned, pointing people to Jesus as the fulfillment of God’s promises.

Saul’s conversion is great circumstantial evidence for the reality of Jesus’ resurrection. Why else would someone like Saul change so completely? He had nothing to gain by following Jesus, and had far more to lose. He had been thoroughly convinced that he was doing the right thing until the risen Jesus appeared to him. Something new was about to blossom in Saul. Because of his contact with the living Lord Jesus, a new person was about to emerge from the old. Saul was getting a second chance.

It is at this point that we meet Ananias. A Christian living in Damascus, he is contacted directly by the Lord and told to go minister to Saul of Tarsus, who is in a house on Straight Street. Understandably, Ananias protests this a bit, but then the Lord reveals His thoughts regarding Saul’s second chance: He says, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. *For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.*” As astounding as these words would’ve seemed to Ananias, they would be proven true. Saul would do all the things God mentions here and then some. And to his credit, Ananias goes and finds the man who had been one of the most intimidating enemies of the faith. Can you imagine Ananias’ feelings as he drew close to the man who had relished binding Christians and throwing them in prison? But Ananias speaks only words of grace, saying, “Brother Saul”—just think of it, Brother Saul—“the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” Immediately his vision is restored—moreover, his entire way of seeing the world is remade—as

he is baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit. Now his second chance had really begun, and Saul, we can safely say, made the most of it.

Saul had to see how wrong he had been before he could do anything right. He endured those dark days, and now, because of the mercy and love of the very Jesus he had been persecuting, he was a new person. He was baptized into the Christian faith—the faith that held Jesus to be the Son of the Father; the true and greatest Passover Lamb; the Messiah from David's family tree. Saul then spent some time in the company of the Damascus Christians, and just imagine what those conversations were like. Saul had been given a second chance, and he wasted no time in doing his first Christian preaching there in the Damascus synagogue. Saul, we're told, confounded the Jews in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ (the NIV says 'baffled'), and Saul would continue confounding and baffling his world with the cross of Christ Jesus as his message.

I say all that about Saul so that I can say this to you: the life of Saul is proof that our God is the God of Second Chances. Our God aches to reconcile with people and grant them a second chance. With that said, how do you do at offering second chances to those who hurt you? Is our church a place where the term "second chances" would describe how we deal with one another?

In his book, "The Practice of Pastoral Theology," the Rev. Dr. James Bollhagen crafted an unforgettable sentence. He wrote, "The church is not a place where people are granted forgiveness only if they can first prove that they don't need it." Did you get that? "The church is not a place where people are granted forgiveness only if they can first prove that they don't need it." We must fight our natural tendency to scorekeep and embrace mercy, a forgiving spirit, but you can only do that when you remember: you've been given a second chance, too.

If you have guilt about the way you've treated people, be honest about it with God. Think of the shame that Saul must've felt as he sat in darkness for three days. You are invited to admit your shortcomings and faults to the God of forgiveness—the God of second chances. If you are ready to own up to your sin, Jesus is ready to forgive it. The same Jesus who paid for your sin with His suffering and death is the same living Jesus who can send you on your way with new vision and new priorities. You have been given a tremendous gift: you have another chance to let the grace of Jesus open your eyes, dominate your thinking, and spur you on to action. Do not take this gift for granted. Let the living Lord Jesus make you a second chance person.