

GOD KNOWS WHAT HE'S ABOUT

God humbles a Proud Heart

Acts 9:1–16



LET'S BEGIN HERE

The apostle Paul is a titan of the faith: he penned a significant portion of the New Testament; planted churches and shepherded the Gentiles; and developed, encouraged, taught, and rebuked church leaders. He provided timeless and inspired lessons from which we continue to glean today. What a legacy!

But though Paul's ministry was glorious, his pre-conversion testimony was anything but. The pride of Saul was so great that only the crushing, humility-creating work of God could thwart it.

The latter half of Isaiah 13:11 says,

“I will crush the arrogance of the proud
and humble the pride of the mighty.”

It's difficult to think about the Lord crushing *anyone*, but let's consider Chuck Swindoll's words: “It is not the sign of a loving, heavenly Father to overlook wrongdoing or to ignore a child who is out of control and fast becoming impossible to rear. Good fathers step in and stop that kind of action and thinking . . . and those who are beyond impossible, God has a way of getting their attention.”

Paul's life, like a pressed flower, became a fragrance of life because of the pressure God applied to his heart.



YOUR TURN IN THE SCRIPTURES

We can begin to benefit from our reading in a way we never have before when we focus on observing the text that we're studying. We need to take time to carefully, deliberately see what the Scriptures say. Let's practice observing Acts 9:1–16.

Quotable

*When God
transforms,
suffering plays
a major role.
Suffering humbles
us and breaks
us down.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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Observation: Entering the Scenes

Where was Saul at the beginning of Acts 9? Where did he want to go?

How did God address Saul? How did He get Saul's attention?

Whom did Jesus say Saul was persecuting?

Who heard the voice of Jesus? Who understood His words?

How long was Saul blind?

How did God address Ananias? How did He get Ananias' attention?



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Compare and contrast Saul's response to Ananias' response when the Lord called.



Interpretation: Understanding the Meaning

Now let's seek to interpret the meaning.

One excellent resource that gives readers a visual as well as historical context for Paul's life is Insight for Living Ministries' *Following Paul: A Pictorial Journey Through a Remarkable Ministry*. Within this book's beautiful pages, you can view the places where Paul lived, ministered, and even where he was imprisoned. The book offers crisp, biblical exposition in addition to beautiful photography.

In this excerpt, we can observe the way the author of the pictorial used observations in the book of Acts to paint a word picture of Saul before and after his pride crashed and burned upon encountering the Savior.

The ninth chapter of Acts begins abruptly. Saul's blood was boiling. He charged north out of Jerusalem with fury. His blind hatred for the followers of Christ drove him hard toward his distant destination: Damascus. Saul had determined to go to the farthest extreme in his mission to apprehend followers of the Way. Thankfully, God had a different plan.

"It happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?'" (Acts 9:3–4).

We can almost hear the screeching of brakes. At that moment, Saul's murderous journey was brought to a divine halt. *Suddenly*. Isn't that just like the Lord? No announcement ahead of time. No heavenly calligraphy scrolled across the skies with the warning, "Watch out tomorrow, Saul, God's gonna getcha." God remained silent and restrained as Saul proceeded with his murderous plan. Without warning, the course of Saul's life changed dramatically.

Saul, who had never been under such a blazing light or heard such a magnificent voice, answered meekly and with respect, "Who are You, Lord?" The answer hit him like the blow of a stun gun: "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting" (9:5). There must have been several



seconds of deafening silence as Saul let in the wonder. Once that happened, he stopped believing Jesus was dead. Saul's rebel will was captured. His journey reversed directions. His mind did a turnaround that would ultimately transform him from the inside out. He changed his mind about God, about Jesus, about the resurrection, about those who followed Christ. He must have shaken his head for days. He thought Christ was dead. Now he was convinced Jesus was alive.

Saul's ensuing meeting with Ananias—including his healing and baptism—were only the beginning of God's plan. Luke wrote, "Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God'" (9:19–20). Like a racehorse, Saul broke out of the gate and boldly began proclaiming Christ as Lord.



Searching the Scriptures Tips

Just as we need tools in the kitchen to help us cook our meals, we need Bible study tools to help us feed ourselves God's Word. The tools we recommend for studying Scripture are a Bible dictionary, such as *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*, and a commentary, such as *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*. Versions of the Bible are available at BibleGateway.com, and an excellent online Bible commentary by Thomas L. Constable is at lumina.bible.org.

Correlation: Comparing Scripture with Scripture

During his message, Chuck takes time to fill out the details of the transformation and life of Paul by correlating—using biblical texts to interpret a particular passage. Let's do some correlation to fill out a few of the most crushing circumstances in Paul's life. Observe how Scriptures give context to the bleakness that surrounded Paul in his last days. The Bible passages are bolded for emphasis.

Few prisons were as dim, dank, and dirty as the lower chamber of the Mamertine prison Paul occupied at the end of his life. It's important to note that in the ancient world, people were rarely sent to prison as punishment. Rather, prisons typically served as holding cells for those awaiting trial or execution. Mosaic Law made no provision for incarceration as a form of punishment. Jeremiah was imprisoned under accusation of treason (**Jeremiah 37:11–16**) but was transferred to the temple guardhouse after an appeal to King Zedekiah, who sought to protect the prophet (**37:17–21**). And though Jeremiah was later thrown into a cistern, the purpose was to kill him, not imprison him (**38:1–6**). Even Jesus temporarily endured incarceration just before His trials and execution.



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During Paul's first imprisonment, he awaited trial before Roman governors Felix and Festus (**Acts 24–26**). He then was under house arrest in Rome for two years (**28:30**), awaiting an appearance before Nero. During Paul's second imprisonment, however, in the Mamertine dungeon, he had apparently had a preliminary hearing and was awaiting a final trial. He didn't expect acquittal (**2 Timothy 4:16**). Paul believed his execution would occur soon (**4:6–7**).

Considering Paul's horrible circumstances, which concluded with his execution, the transformation of his life through the work of God is that much more remarkable. By the end of his life, Paul was no longer a murderer but a martyr; no longer regarding himself as a Jew of all Jews but humbly taking on the title of "Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus" (**Philemon 1**).

What is one lesson from the end of Paul's life that impacts you?



Application: How God Humbles a Proud Heart

Chuck Swindoll serves us five principles that he extrapolates from Acts 9:1–16 concerning the process of being humbled:

1. When God steps in, it's often unannounced, sudden, and severe.
2. When God's crushing blows begin, all pride is removed, all arrogance comes to an end, and humility begins to emerge.
3. When God transforms, suffering plays a major role.
4. When God's plan for the future takes shape, humility remains in place.
5. When God is finished with His instrument, God gets all the glory.



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Effective application demands self-reflection. In light of the five principles that Chuck outlined, ask yourself the following questions, place a checkmark next to those that apply, and use the space provided to write a prayer asking the Lord to apply His Word to your life.

Is there . . .	
a sin to confess?	
an error to correct?	
a command to carry out?	
an example that challenges?	
a promise to claim?	
a prayer to pray?	



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, just as You broke Paul in order to transform him, You are able to handle any impossible individual whom I love but cannot change . . . even me. Help me to submit to Your will, even when it feels painful. Amen.



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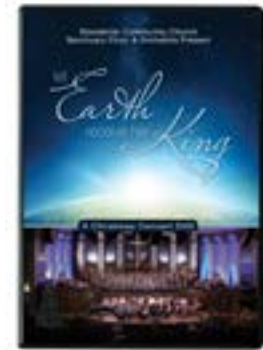
Tools for Digging Deeper



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For the 2017–2018 broadcast, this *Searching the Scriptures* study was developed by Sharifa Stevens in collaboration with Bryce Klabunde, executive vice president of Searching the Scriptures Ministries, based upon the original outlines, charts, and sermon transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll's messages.



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