



What Does It Take to Believe?

Many Christians are so convinced that Jesus' resurrection fulfilled Old Testament prophecy that they can't understand why everyone isn't equally convinced. Yet, in the Bible, we have an example of someone who was convinced that Jesus was not the true Messiah, until He came face to face with the risen Jesus. Only then was he convinced. It took a miracle to convince Saul to believe in Jesus' resurrection, and to answer God's call to become a servant of Christ.

In this lesson we will consider:

- What did it take for Paul to believe?
 - How did Paul change?
 - What about me?

What did it take for Paul to believe?

Many years after coming to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior (Acts 9:1-19), Paul was put in prison. Twice he gave a defense for his belief, explaining what had happened to him that caused him to change. Those accounts are found in Acts 21:37-22:21 and 26:12-29. In Acts 26:12-29 Paul refers to Christ's resurrection two times:

Acts 26:8 (ESV)

⁸ Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God **raises the dead?**

Acts 26:22–23 (ESV)

²²To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: ²³that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to **rise from the dead**, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.”

Paul, the name given to him after his conversion (Acts 13:9), understood that it would be difficult to accept the idea that Jesus rose from the dead. He explained that it was the power of God, the creator of the universe, that caused Jesus to rise from the dead (Acts 26:8).

Paul understood why people might have difficulty believing that Jesus' resurrection was true. Before a divine appointment with the risen Christ, Paul had railed against claims that Jesus Christ had risen from the dead. When the deacon, Stephen, was stoned to death a "young man named Saul" took care of the garments of the people who killed Stephen (Acts 8:59). He "approved of [Stephen's] execution" (Acts 8:1). Later Saul's name would be changed to Paul (Acts 13:9).

We read "Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison" (Acts 3:3). Just before he encounters the risen Christ, Saul is "still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord" (Acts 9:1).

So, Paul understood what it was like to hear the Gospel and reject it. He had done that himself, until the miracle of Christ appearing to him on the Road to Damascus. He also knew that God had called him to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles. So, he shared the story of his conversion.

In Acts 26:12-20 we find the third time the story is given in the book of Acts. The story is consistently the same each time it is repeated. If we look at Exodus 3:1-10, when God calls Moses to deliver the Jewish people from Pharaoh, we find parallels to Jesus calling Paul. Moses will deliver the Jews from slavery to Pharaoh. Paul will deliver many Gentiles from bondage to sin.

This was all part of God's plan.

Exodus 3:1–10 (ESV)	Acts 26:12–20 (ESV)
<p>The Burning Bush</p> <p>3 Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. 2 And the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. 3 And Moses said, "I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned." 4 When the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." 5 Then he said, "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." 6 And he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.</p> <p>7 Then the LORD said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, 8 and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. 9 And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. 10 Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt."</p>	<p>Paul Tells of His Conversion</p> <p>12 "In this connection I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. 13 At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me. 14 And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' 15 And I said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.' 16 But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, 17 delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you 18 to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'</p> <p>19 "Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, 20 but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance.</p>

To begin our examination of these two passages notice that Moses' name is repeated twice, "Moses, Moses," when God calls to him from the burning bush (Exodus 3:4). Saul's name is also repeated twice, when Jesus calls to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 26:14). Both saw a form of light. Moses saw a burning bush, that was "not consumed" by the fire (Exodus 3:2). Paul saw a "blinding light in the heaven" (Acts 26:13). A voice from the burning bush tells Moses, "I am that God of your father, the God of Abraham" (Exodus 3:6). God has seen the affliction of His people and has come down to deliver them (Exodus 3:7&8). The voice from above tells Saul, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting" (Acts 3:15). In both cases a voice identifies Himself as God, with Moses, or Jesus, with Paul. Both times the person, either Moses or Paul, becomes God's instrument to deliver God's people from suffering. Both encounters end with the person, either Moses or Paul, being sent (Exodus 3:10, Acts 26:17). To Moses, God says, "I will send you to Pharaoh, that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt" (Exodus 3:10). To Paul, Jesus says, "I have appeared to you ... to appoint you as a servant and witness to [Jews and Gentiles] to open their eyes ... that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me" (Acts 26:16-18)



An artist's conception shows God with the angels speaking to Moses from the burning bush.

These parallels are no coincidence. I think Luke wrote his account to highlight the parallels so that they would be clear to the person who knew the Bible well and studied it carefully. Luke is telling us that God called Paul in pretty much the same pattern that He called Moses. Luke wants us to see that Paul was a new Moses, sent to proclaim the resurrection of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles. Moses was sent to set the slaves free. Paul was sent so that slaves to sin might be set free from their sins.

Paul knew that his account might not persuade King Agrippa, but he told the story of how his life was changed, anyway. He must have known that telling his story would not gain his freedom (Acts 26:32). Paul wanted to share the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus' resurrection. He wanted to tell his story so that other people might come to believe in Jesus and be saved from their sins.

God called Paul to tell of the resurrection of Jesus to the Gentiles. Saul later had his name changed to Paul. He had a new name because he was a new creature no longer persecuting the Christians.

Not only did Paul stop persecuting Christians he preached the very same Gospel he had opposed. An enemy of the Gospel switched sides.

What does it take for a person to believe that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead? It takes an act of God. For Paul it took the form of a profound miracle, when Jesus called Him to believe (John 6:44). The only way a person can come to believe is if God has called that person (John 6:65). When God called you and I to come to believe in Jesus it probably wasn't as spectacular as when Paul met Jesus on the Road to Damascus, but we are still believers, just as Paul was. We are saved by the same Savior. Just as God called to proclaim the Christ's salvation, He calls us to do the same.

How did Paul change?

In Moses' time, the enemy of God's chosen people was Pharaoh. Saul, before his conversion to Jesus, was an enemy of the first Christians.

Pharaoh caused God's chosen people to suffer. He was their enemy. As a result, God sent plagues, then God poured out His judgment on Pharaoh with the waters of the Red Sea drowning Pharaoh's army. God's judgment on Pharaoh was severe because of the sin Pharaoh had committed.

Paul also caused those chosen by God to suffer. Before Paul met Jesus he was like Pharaoh, he oppressed God's people. But that was before Saul died to his old self, and Jesus made him into a new person. The new person, called Paul, was like Moses, and not at all like Pharaoh.

God the Father poured out His judgment, but not on Paul. Instead, God the Father poured out His judgement on Jesus, who suffered on the cross, paying the price of sin. Paul's sin was great, but he was forgiven. Jesus received the harsh judgement, not Paul. The power that raised Jesus from the tomb was at work in Paul and made him into a new man. Paul belonged to Jesus, as a result of His transformation. God used Paul to proclaim forgiveness through Christ so that others might also come to believe in Christ as Savior.

What about me?

You may feel that you don't have much to offer Jesus in exchange for His salvation. That is true for everyone who comes to believe in Jesus. What did Paul bring to Jesus at the time of his conversion? What had Paul done to earn forgiveness and salvation? Absolutely nothing, just like you and me.

I heard someone say that the only thing we bring to Jesus is our sin, and He pours out on us the fullness of His grace. He forgives our sins and gives us His inheritance. That was Paul's experience. Will you receive the gift of grace that comes through Christ? If you would like to receive the gift of Christ's salvation pray that He will give you the gift of faith to truly believe in Jesus (Ephesians 2:8).

If you already believe in Jesus, then thank God! Praise Him for the grace Jesus has shown to you by sacrificing His own life for your benefit (Galatians 1:4; 2:20; 1 Timothy 2:6 & 14). Thank God for giving you the gift to believe (Ephesians 2:8). Rejoice that the power that raised Jesus from the dead has made you a new creature (Romans 8:11; 1 Corinthians 5:17). Step out in faith that God will give you everything you need to obey and serve Him (Philippians 4:19). Be amazed at the spectacular and wonderful salvation you have in Jesus. Be amazed at how Jesus transformed Paul (Acts 9:21) and be amazed at what He is doing in your own life.



An artist's conception of Saul encountering Jesus on the Road to Damascus.

H	S	M	G	C	M	T	I	M	E	C	S	I
D	M	A	N	N	E	R	H	B	H	A	T	A
A	A	W	I	L	L	I	N	G	U	H	R	C
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P	Y	U	A	S	S	P	E	N	T	L	C	O
E	O	P	L	B	U	I	G	G	A	Y	T	R
A	H	O	P	E	R	S	E	C	U	T	E	D
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G	E	K	H	I	J	L	B	J	K	R	T	N
J	I	C	I	N	O	I	T	A	N	O	S	G
D	E	Y	E	N	R	U	O	J	O	H	E	E
U	R	Y	F	I	T	S	E	T	W	T	I	D
O	U	O	I	N	V	W	H	E	N	U	R	C
I	A	N	L	G	S	E	Y	T	R	A	P	N

“My manner of life from my youth, spent from the beginning among my own nation and in Jerusalem, is known by all the Jews. They have known for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee. And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O king! Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead? “I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities. “In this connection I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me. And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’ And I said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’

(ESV)