

SAUL'S CONVERSION

1. Most Calvinists assert God decides who is saved and who is not at his own pleasure, without any reference to people's free will or volitional attitude. This view is rightly called salvation by election. This view is fundamentally unfair and violates God's own attribute of justice and due process.
2. The Augustinian-Calvinist view is a deterministic way of viewing human life that ultimately derives from non-Christian worldviews, particularly Neo-Platonism, by which Augustine was deeply influenced. Augustine's view has cast a shadow over Christian theology. However, Augustine did not always hold this deterministic view.
3. Saul's Damascus road conversion is often cited to prove God sovereignly decides to save certain people, and he overpowers their human will to do so. The argument is that there was absolutely no input from Saul when God decided he should be saved and become the apostle to the Gentiles.
4. However, based on *Acts*, there is good reason to believe Saul, in his heart and mind, was wrestling with all he was seeing and hearing as he persecuted the early church. In his own way, he was groping toward Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God *before* his Damascus road conversion.
5. His own mentor, Gamaliel, had suggested to the Sanhedrin that Jesus might actually be the Messiah. Gamaliel was Saul's rabbinic mentor and had a huge influence on his life.
 - a. **Ac 22:3** 3 I [Paul] am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day.
 - b. **Ac 5:34-39** 34 A Pharisee in the Sanhedrin named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in honour by all the people, stood up and gave orders to put the men [apostles] outside for a little while. 35 And he said to them, Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. ...38 So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail. 39 But if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God! So they took his advice.
6. Many priests in Jerusalem, acquaintances of Saul, were believing in Jesus. Saul very likely talked with them and understood the reasons why they were defecting to Jesus.
 - a. **Ac 6:7** 7 The word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.
7. Saul heard every word Stephen spoke before the Sanhedrin and watched him get stoned. This event no doubt greatly impacted Saul. His later theology sounds a lot like Stephen's.
 - a. **Ac 6:12-7:2** 12 They stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes, and they came upon [Stephen], seized him, and brought him before the Sanhedrin. 13 And they set up false witnesses who said, This man never ceases to speak words against this holy

- place and the law, 14 for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us. 15 And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel. 1 And the high priest said, Are these things so? 2 And Stephen said: Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham....
- b. **Ac 7:54-8:1** 54 When [the Sanhedrin] heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at [Stephen]. 55 But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 And he said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. 57 But they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and rushed together at him. 58 Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. 60 And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, Lord, do not hold this sin against them. And when he had said this, he fell asleep. 1 And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.
- c. Very likely it was Paul who recounted to Luke what Stephen had said that day. Paul never forgot it. It had left an indelible impression on his heart and mind.
8. Sincerely believing the Jesus movement was a serious threat to Judaism, Saul began to ravage the church, dragging men and women to prison. But he must have been absolutely stunned at the loyalty of these Jewish believers to Jesus. His inward curiosity grew, even as he breathed threats and murder outwardly. We know from Paul's letters he was a very thoughtful, mediative person (see *Philippians*).
- a. **Ac 8:3** 3 Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.
- b. **Ac 9:1-2** 1 Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.
9. During the period between Stephen's stoning and his own Damascus road conversion, Saul was wrestling with the gospel message. He likely was researching Old Testament passages and thinking about their possible relationship to Jesus. Though he did not believe in Jesus at this point, he was considering the evidence for and against Jesus. In his desire to know the truth about Jesus, he was feeling his way toward the truth (**Ac 17:27**). Still, he was "kicking against the goads" (**Ac 26:14**). A veil still lay over his heart (**2 Co 3:15**).
- a. **Ac 17:27** 27 ...That they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him.
- b. **Ac 26:14** 14 ...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.
- c. **2 Co 3:15** 15 Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts.

10. At the right time, in the right place, in response to Saul's positive volition, Jesus supernaturally appeared to Saul to give Saul the final push he needed to believe. It's interesting how forward is Jesus. It's almost as if Saul already knows Jesus likely is the Messiah.
- a. **Ac 9:3-6** 3 Now as [Saul] went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. 4 And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? 5 And he said, Who are you, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 6 But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.
 - b. **Ac 22:6-11** 6 As I [Saul] was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me. 7 And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? 8 And I answered, Who are you, Lord? And he said to me, I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting. 9 Now those who were with me saw the light but did not understand the voice of the one who was speaking to me. 10 And I said, What shall I do, Lord? And the Lord said to me, Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do. 11 And because I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me, and came into Damascus.
 - c. **Ac 26:13-18** 13 At midday, O king [Agrippa], I [Saul] 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.
11. Within three days, Saul, under the illumination of the Holy Spirit, believed in Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God, and was baptised.
- a. **Ac 9:9** 9 For three days [Saul] was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.
 - b. **Ac 9:17-18** 17 Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on [Saul] he said, Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit. 18 And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptised.
 - c. **Ac 22:12-16** 12 ...One Ananias, a devout man according to the Torah, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, 13 came to me, and standing by me said to me, Brother Saul, receive your sight. And at that very hour I received my sight and saw him. 14 And he said, The God of our fathers appointed you to know his desire, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth. 15 For you will be a witness

for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard. 16 And now why do you wait? Rise, be baptised, and wash away your sins, calling on his name.

12. Saul immediately began to proclaim in Damascus that Jesus is the Son of God, confounding the Jews by proving that Jesus was the Messiah. He could do this because he previously had given lots of thought to the arguments put forward by Stephen and others.
 - a. **Ac 9:20-22** 20 Immediately (εὐθέως) [Saul] proclaimed Jesus in the [Damascus] synagogues saying, He is the Son of God. 21 And all who heard him were amazed and said, Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests? 22 But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah.

13. Jesus' intervention on the Damascus road resulted from his knowledge of Saul's heart and foreknowledge of what Saul would do under his own volition, empowered by the Spirit, as the apostle to the Gentiles. God could have appointed someone other than Saul to be the apostle to the Gentiles. But he liked what he saw in Saul, based on his omnipresence and omniscience. He elected Saul to be the apostle to the Gentiles because he knew Saul was the right man for the job. He knew this even before Saul believed in Jesus.
 - a. **Ac 9:15** 15 The Lord [Jesus] said to [Ananias], Go, for [Saul] is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel.
 - b. **Ac 22:14-15** 14 ...[Ananias] said, The God of our fathers appointed you to know his desire, to see the Righteous One, and to hear a voice from his mouth. 15 For you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard.
 - c. **Acts 26:16-17** 16 ...Rise and stand upon your feet, for I [Jesus] have appeared to you [Saul] 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. 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.

14. The sum of the matter is this: God's election and special calling of Saul was based upon God's knowledge of Saul's positive volition and foreknowledge of what Saul would do as the apostle to the Gentiles. God sovereignly determined when and where to intervene in Saul's life (the Damascus road). This intervention was not arbitrary but based upon Saul's positive volition during the time leading up to his conversion.