

SAUL'S CONVERSION

1. Most Calvinists assert that ultimately God decides who is saved and who is not at his own pleasure, without any reference to people's free will or volition. This is salvation by election, not salvation by grace through faith. 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 teacher 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 honor 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 Jewish priests in Jerusalem, likely acquaintances of Saul, were believing in Jesus. Saul likely talked with them and knew 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 greatly impacted Saul. His own theology, developed later, 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 said that day. Paul never forgot it. It had left an indelible impression upon 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.
- 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. His desire to know the truth about Jesus was his way of groping toward the truth.
10. At the right time, in the right place, in response to Saul's inner groping, Jesus supernaturally appeared to Saul and to give him the final push Saul needed.
- a. **Acts 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. It's interesting how little Jesus says. It's almost as if Saul already knows Jesus likely is the Messiah.
11. Sometime during the next three days, Saul, based on his own positive volition and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, believed in Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God.
 - a. **Ac 9:9** 9 For three days [Saul] was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.
 - b. **Ac 9:17-19** 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 baptized. 19 And taking food, he was strengthened. For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus.
12. Saul immediately began to proclaim in Damascus that Jesus is the Son of God, and he convincingly proved from the Old Testament that Jesus is the Messiah. He could do this because he had previously given lots of thought to the arguments put forward by Stephen and others.
 - a. **Ac 9:20-22** 20 Immediately [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 mind and his foreknowledge of what Saul would eventually do under his own free will, empower by the Spirit, as the apostle to the Gentiles.
 - a. In other words, God could have chosen someone other than Saul to be the apostle to the Gentiles. But he liked what he saw in Saul, from his vantage point outside of space and time. In other words, God's election for responsibility is based upon his foreknowledge of what we, as free will creatures, will do.
 - b. God's choice of Saul refers to his special role as the apostle to the Gentiles, not to his initial faith in Jesus.
 - (1) **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.
14. General revelation, specifically creation and conscience, points all people, at the age of God-consciousness, to the one, true, perfect Creator God.
 - a. **Ro 1:19-20** 19 What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 20 For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.
15. In his own way, Saul "groped" in the dark toward God. All people of every nation and time have the ability to grope toward God once they reach the age of God-consciousness.

- a. **Ac 17:26-27** 26 [God] made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, 27 that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us.
 - b. Likely, people who never reach the age of God-consciousness, for whatever reason, enter heaven because they never reached a point where they could intelligibly believe or disbelieve God, Jesus, or the gospel message.
16. When one gropes in God's direction, God always responds with more truth.
- a. God is able to ask each one of us, "What did you do with the light I gave you?"
17. The unbeliever's life is like a dance with God.
- a. Sometime the unbeliever steps toward God. Other times he or she steps away. Sometimes God steps toward the unbeliever. Sometimes he steps away. But as long as the unbeliever is alive he or she still has a chance to believe. The dance isn't over.
 - b. However, at physical death the dance is over. At that point, eternal destiny in heaven or hell is irrevocable. This is what is so evil about euthanasia and suicide. It artificially cuts short the decision time God has given a person to decide for or against Jesus.
18. Believers and unbelievers are daily taking steps toward or away from God. Believers do so as permanently justified persons. Unbelievers do so as presently condemned persons. God pays close attention to our hearts and minds. He is looking for those who are responsive to him, both believers and unbelievers.
- a. **1 Ti 2:3-4** 3 God our Savior... 4 desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.
19. Heaven and hell have levels of reward and punishment. Each person's reward in heaven or punishment in hell will fit him or her exactly. But between heaven and hell there is fixed chasm no one is able to cross.
- a. Here is one possible understanding of Re 20:11-15:
 - (1) **Re 20:11-15** 11 I [John] saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. 12 And I saw the dead [all believers and unbelievers of human history], great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened [containing all the good and evil deeds done by believers and unbelievers]. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life [containing believers' names only]. And the dead [believers and unbelievers] were judged [for various levels of reward and punishment] by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. 13 And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them [believer and unbeliever], according to what they had done. 14 Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. 15 And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life [believers only], he was thrown into the lake of fire [unbelievers only].

20. In the end, God's justice will be totally vindicated. We will all agree with his justice in the end. It does take faith to believe this, but it is not blind faith. It is faith built upon what we know about God, his character, and his overall love, mercy, and patience toward man.
- a. **Jn 3:16-21** 16 God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19 And this is the judgment. The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. 20 For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. 21 But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.