

A Come to Jesus Moment

(Series: Reimagining Church; Message Twenty)

Acts 9:1-19

February 7, 2021

Review (Slide)

August – focused on prayer and waiting...

September – focused on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit...

October – focused on the early church's Rule of Life: teaching, fellowship, breaking bread and prayer

November – focused on the Church's mission

January – focusing on Spirit-empowered leadership

This month – focusing on the Marks of a Believer

Scripture:

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest ²and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. ³As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

⁵"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. ⁶"Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

⁷The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. ⁸Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. ⁹For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything. ¹⁰In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"

"Yes, Lord," he answered.

¹¹The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. ¹²In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

¹³"Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. ¹⁴And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

¹⁵But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. ¹⁶I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

¹⁷Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, ¹⁹and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Message:

In the nineteenth century, two young men in England - Lord Lyttleton and Gilbert West, both lawyers, thought they had great reasons for rejecting Jesus.

One said to the other: *"Christianity stands on a weak foundation. Only two things support it - the alleged resurrection of Jesus and the alleged conversion of Saul. If we can disprove these stories, which should be easy, Christianity will fall like a house of cards."*

West said, *"I'll write a book on the alleged resurrection of Jesus and show it never could have happened."* Lyttleton said, *"I'll write a book on the alleged appearance of Jesus to the apostle Paul and show how he couldn't have been converted as the Bible says - by a voice from heaven."*

Months later they met again. One said: *"I have a confession to make. I've been looking into the evidence and I'm beginning to think there may be something to this."* The other said, *"I'm discovering the same thing."*

They both completed their research; they both finished their books. Gilbert West wrote, *"The Resurrection of Jesus Christ."* A classic that argues for the certainty of Christ's resurrection. Lord Lyttleton wrote, *"Conversion of St. Paul"* - a defense of his conversion.

What turned them around? The **evidence.**

West considered the total transformation of the disciples from those who cowered in the presence of the authorities to those who boldly proclaimed the gospel. Lyttleton was overwhelmed with Saul's transformation - from a Jewish Pharisee who considered "the Way" blaspheming against God into a witness for Jesus; from a persecutor of the faith to a defender. His only explanation - the power of God.

That is, this is more than a simple conversion story; Saul (later known as Paul) is a **transformation story possible only by God's **power** and**

grace. Only God can take his greatest enemy and transform him into his greatest advocate.

This story is so impactful, Luke tells this story repeatedly throughout **Acts: 9:1-19; 22:4-16; 26:9-18.**

THE CONVERSION

We first met **Saul** at the stoning of Stephen - the Church's first named martyr. Saul, a Jew, is on a fast track to becoming a prestigious **Pharisee**, a well-known **Rabbi**, and a member of the **Sanhedrin**. He had the best training - rabbinical school with Gamaliel (a Harvard equivalent). He wore the robes; he wore the prayer phylacteries on his head; he had a well-formed impression of exactly what Messiah should look like - and it wasn't Jesus!

I imagine it was quite a scene as God looked down and saw two key players in his kingdom standing a short distance apart...

--One covered in blood; the other covered in prayer shawls.

--One who lived for Christ; one who was committed to building his own reputation.

--One who could not save himself from men; one could not save himself from sin.

--One who was loved by God; and the other . . . also loved by God.

Luke tells us Saul had made it his **personal mission** to eradicate Christianity and the Christians who had scattered everywhere.

Saul was convinced Judaism and Christianity were incompatible and he was not about to let this Christianity thing destroy his religion, his empire, or his future. Without a hint of **grace**, he pursued the people of **grace** all the way to Damascus - a 150 mile, five day trip.

For Saul, proclaiming Jesus as Messiah meant saying God is honoring someone their law condemns - so it literally meant **denying** the **law** (Torah) of God. See the law said: *"If a man has committed a crime punishable by death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is accursed by God"* (**Deut. 21:22f**).

Its so simple: Jesus was crucified, hung on a tree; a crucified person is cursed by God. So confessing Jesus is Messiah is absurd and blasphemous because it suggests God's blessing now rests on a crucified and cursed Messiah (**Isaiah 11:2**). It wouldn't have made any difference if Jesus' death was a miscarriage of justice - cursed is cursed. Right is right; wrong is wrong; dead is dead.

So Saul pursued these *blasphemers* with a vengeance.

According to Saul, anyone who propagated that Jesus was Messiah represented a malignant growth in the faith and had to be excised. The violence of Saul's zeal drove many of the disciples of Jesus out of Jerusalem and into Judea, Samaria, and the rest of the world - so God is using this *evil* for *good* - but most Jesus' followers were still not beyond the reach of the High Priest.

In 47 AD, Julius Caesar granted the High Priest the right of extradition; that is, he could bring followers of the Way back to Jerusalem for prosecution. Luke writes, (**Acts 9:2**) "*Saul procured letters to the synagogues of Damascus so if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem*").

On the way - at midday, a light from heaven shone around Saul (26:13)
From the middle of the light came a voice: "*Sha'ul, Sha'ul ma'att radephinni?*" (*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute **me**?*")

The question is simple. But no doubt this question came as an **incredible shock** to Saul that he had actually been persecuting followers of Messiah God! Imagine the sudden wave of panic as what you have been doing begins to set in.

You have not just been making life miserable for God's followers; the divine voice said, "You have been persecuting **me**!" (Ops!) (Like Jesus says in **Matthew 25:40**, "*If you have done it to one of the least of me, you have done it unto me.*")

"What will God do to me because of what I've done..."

THE CONTINUATION

God blinded him. Saul had to be humbly led into Damascus. For three days and three nights he lived in **darkness** - neither eating, nor drinking.

Richard Rackham says it was like spending three days in a tomb. It was a time for Saul to think about the darkness he was mired in, about what he'd done, about his relationship to Jesus, about where he is going from here.

That's hard work - people stay busy just to avoid having to think about these things. Scripture says Saul used the time to pray! Well done!

But God has a bigger plan for Saul - as he does for all of us. On the third day he will rise with Christ through his baptism. He'll be filled with the Spirit; be forgiven of his outrageous sins; be embraced by the disciples in Damascus and be admitted to the fellowship of the table.

According to Midrash, the Hebrews believed the soul stayed close to a person for up to three days. Lazarus, you'll remember had been in the tomb for four days – he was dead, dead – before Jesus raised him up. Jesus was in the tomb for three days; he was completely dead – before God raised him up. Saul was in darkness – raised/transformed to a brand-new life. It is what happens when we come face to face with Jesus.

This is the **story** of God's **grace** - grace Saul personally experienced! Because of God's grace, Saul is now a new creature; Saul is a follower of Jesus.

Now in Damascus, there is this disciple named Ananias. The Lord appeared to him in a vision and says, *"Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. He is praying"* (9:11)

Ananias googled Saul and said to God, *"You're kidding, right! This guy is one mean dude. He's here to arrest us, place us on trial, and end our lives."*

The Lord said, *"Ananias, go!"* (When was the last time you heard God say, *"Ops! You know, you're right. I hadn't thought of that; I didn't know. Let me rethink that."*). No. *"Go, this man is my chosen instrument."* God often says **"Go!"**

"Lord, really! This guy is so bad there is no way he could become a Christian. But, if you say so, I'll go!" (Good answer, Ananias! Actually, it is the only acceptable answer); Ananias goes and extends **grace**. (If Ananias can extend grace to Saul, we can extend grace to everyone). No one ever said being a follower of Jesus would be easy. It's not. Extending grace is often challenging. It often looks foolish to the world. But it has to become part of our DNA!

Maybe you remember the story of Jonah. God asked him to go to Nineveh. He ran in the other direction. He knew what would happen if he went; Nineveh would repent; then God would graciously forgive them and spare their lives. Jonah didn't want his enemies spared; he wanted them gone! (Translated: we want to be the recipients of God's grace; but we don't always want others to receive it). That's not how it works.

We've all known people about whom we'd say, "It'll never happen. They'll never change! They're a lost cause! They've been a constant thorn in my flesh! Don't waste your time with them!" (Translated, sometimes we don't really believe in an omnipotent God).

Bart Millard tells the story in the moving film *"I can Only Imagine"* of his father's transformation from a "monster" who beat him into the godliest man he'd ever known – and he rightly attributes it to the power and love of God.

People change. They can. They must. Grace must be extended (70 times 7). Grace must be received. God's grace is abundant. It's ours; we call it *Church*.

The reality is, there is no limit to God's **power**; there is no end to his **grace**; his **love** reaches farther than we can imagine! (*"The love of God is greater far;*

Than tongue or pen can ever tell; It goes beyond the highest star; And reaches to the lowest hell...")

There is no such thing as people who are "**lost causes**"; grace never draws a **line**; God's arm is never too short to save; always long enough to forgive. Paul: "*Right in the middle of our sin, Christ died for the ungodly*" (**Rom. 5:8**). That's God's grace; can we offer anything less.

As Ananias enters the room, the scales fall off. Acts 9:17 reads: "*Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here has sent me so you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.*"

Jesus offered this persecutor **forgiveness**. Saul **accepts**. And the community that he had been persecuting embraced him as a **brother** (note text!) That's God's grace. That's Christ's Church!

You and I are offered that same grace. We need to accept. As a community we must embrace even those who have persecuted us! Then we become gracious! Being nice to people who are nice to us is just being friendly - not gracious! Gracious is being loving and kind to those who irritate, offend you and get under your skin. Grace offered; grace received; grace passed along - that is a mark of a believer:. (Having been forgiven much, we should be forgiving much!)

Saul is baptized and immediately starts talking to others about **Jesus**. Saul has long had an **intellectual** knowledge of God - of his Word, love and grace - he knew about that growing up as a Jew. Many know *about* God; many have attended church, Sunday School, even Christian Day school, all their lives. But it is not enough.

Saul now has an **experiential** knowledge of God - of his Word in the flesh, love and grace - he has been forgiven! His old self has died; he is a new person in Christ. He has *seen* Jesus; he has been transformed.

When we're forgiven we can **forgive**; when we're graced we can be **gracious**, when we've been blessed, we can (must) be a **blessing**. We need an experiential knowledge of God. Have you encountered him? Have you acknowledged him? Have you embraced him?

Christ's community must reflect the grace of Christ especially to the people who rub us wrong, are different than us, who need grace.

Its who Jesus is; and if we are followers of Jesus, it is who we need to be.

Saul went from rounding up **believers** for **death** to rounding up **unbelievers** for **life**. Only **God** can transform like that. And God **loves** doing it over and over again.

THE CHANGES

Sometimes God breaks into lives in dramatic fashion - as he did with Saul on the road to Damascus. Often its more gradual; we learn over time; step by step as we open our heart to God.

But everyone has to come to the point of facing **Jesus**; ultimately everyone has to answer the question: "What are you going to do with Jesus?" Are you going to acknowledge your need for God's grace and receive it or push him away? It is always a deeply personal experience.

It's not about the lights, it's not about the voices, it's about coming face to face with Jesus. It's about your heart and God's heart. It's about your sins and God's grace; it's about your life and His Church.

What Saul **learned is something we all need to **learn** (and continually relearn).**

First, Saul realized Jesus is really **alive.** The Easter message the disciples were proclaimed was true: Saul had now seen Jesus with his own eyes.

Ananias noticed a difference (9:17); so did Barnabas - (9:27). Saul himself notes - "*Have I not seen Jesus our Lord' he responded years later when his apostolic mandate was questioned*" (1 Corinthians 9:1).

This was a **theophany** at the level of Jesus appearance to his disciples following his resurrection - they changed **dramatically**; now **Saul** changes dramatically. The reality is - you can not come face to face with Jesus and not be **transformed**; i.e., if you meet him you will be changed. We all need a "come to Jesus moment!" And when God transforms your life, others can tell.

Second, Saul realized the cross had gone from a **curse to a **blessing**.** Saul no longer understood Jesus' death on a cross as a curse; it became for him a place of revelation - the revelation of God's atoning love and saving grace. Paul sums up his message: "*Jesus Christ and him crucified*" (1 Cor 2:2).

Third, Saul realized his salvation was by **Grace (alone), not by **works**.** Jesus doesn't appear to reveal God's wrath or avenge Saul's guilt. Jesus appears to enlist Saul into his service: "*Carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel*" (9:15) (Paul goes from **Sin** to **Salvation** to **Service!**).

Saul discovered a Savior who forgave him of his **sins** - and killing followers of Jesus is kind of a big one! That's forgiveness!. Saul discovered a Lord who would use him to **build** His **Church** and Kingdom - regardless of his background (that's grace). God **forgives**...and doesn't look back. It is what forgiveness and **grace** do.

We are called to be a **grace-filled community - that means **embracing** grace and **extending** grace - in Jesus' name.**

There is an old story about two monks walking in a drenching rain who encounter a woman trying to cross a stream. One monk asks, "Can I help you?" She says, "I need to get to the other side." He takes her hand and assists her to the other side.

The monks continue walking. After a lengthy silence, the second monk addresses the first: "I have a problem with you. We have both taken vows not to look at a woman - let alone touch one. You did both!"

The first monk responded, "True, but I left her on the other side of the stream and you, apparently, are still carrying her around in your mind."

We need to keep little issues small; we like to point fingers at others but don't realize there are three fingers pointing back at us. We need to look past "our way" to His way, be eager to forgive, willing to walk extra miles to extend grace . . . for in doing so we become the people God calls us to be. If we're not known for our graciousness; we have not yet been transformed by God.

God forgives and doesn't look back - its a lesson we learn as we embrace community as we strive to be His Church; it is a lesson we will need to relearn again and again as we live together.

We're a story God's transforming grace. Can people tell by your life that you've meet **Jesus**? Can people tell by your *exorbitant graciousness* that you serve a gracious God?

Could West or Littleton or anyone prove **Christianity** is viable and true by the **evidence** of God's saving **grace** and transforming **power** in your life?

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