

WORSHIP SERVICE - 7.20.2025

PART 24 - TRANSFORMING GRACE

I. INTRODUCTION

- Many of us have heard powerful testimonies of people who would be considered the most unlikely of converts to Christianity.
- In our passage today, we will see a powerful demonstration of God's sovereign and transforming grace, saving the most unlikely of people to get saved.
- It's the story of Saul of Tarsus, the violent persecutor of the Church, who is encountered by the risen Christ.
- Maybe there's someone you're thinking about right now that you feel is beyond God's reach.
- Saul's story reminds us once again that salvation is of the Lord and that no one is beyond the reach of Christ. If he can save Saul, he can save anyone!

Acts 9:1-19a

But 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. **3** Now as he 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." **7** The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. **8** Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. **9** And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

10 Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." **11** And the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, **12** and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." **13** But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. **14** And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name." **15** But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. **16** For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." **17** So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him 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.

II. SAUL'S CONVERSION

- Everything we see in Saul's conversion and calling centers on Jesus Christ.
- All that takes place is the sovereign grace of God through the risen and ascended Christ.

SAUL IN CONFLICT WITH THE RISEN CHRIST

- V1, But Saul...
- The narrative picks up where it left off in Acts 8:3.
- Saul was a hateful and bitter opponent of Christ and his people.
- The persecution led to a great scattering of the believers who fled Jerusalem.
- Some fled to Damascus, roughly 140 miles away from Jerusalem.
- But Saul had not given up. He requested from the High Priest, letters of permission to seize those in Damascus who follow Jesus.
- Paul would later say that he was in "raging fury against" the believers (Acts 26:11).
- There was nothing neutral about Saul.
- He thought he was doing the Lord's work.
- Writing to the church at Philippi a couple of decades later, he lists all of the things he had put his confidence in that he thought qualified him to be righteous before God. (Phil 3:4-6)
- The right beginning—"Circumcised on the eighth day."
- The right nationality—He was of Israel, God's special and chosen people.
- The right lineage—The tribe of Benjamin.
- The right upbringing—A "Hebrew of Hebrews."
- The right standard—"As to the law a Pharisee."
- The right devotion—"As to zeal, a persecutor of the church."
- The right morality—"As to the righteousness which is in the Law, blameless."
- Saul thought he was doing the right thing.
- If there was anyone who could have earned his way to heaven through their religious devotion and zeal it would have been Saul of Tarsus.
- Religious zeal without truth is dangerous!
- There are sincere, devout followers of a religion who can justify what they are doing in the name of their God.
- Sincerity alone cannot save us. Saul was sincere but he couldn't have been more wrong and hell bound!
- As you look at his pre-conversion state, you can see that his conversion is all of grace alone absent any works or human effort.
- Saul was not looking for Christ.
- He was persecuting Christ. He was opposing Christ. He was an enemy of the risen Christ.

SAUL CONFRONTED BY THE RISEN CHRIST

- Saul is persecuting followers of the Way. That is the first time we see this in Acts where the Christian movement is called "the Way." We will see that five other times in Acts, (19:9,23; 22:4; 24:14,22).
- John 14:6, *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life, No one comes to the Father except through me."*

- Derived from Isaiah 40:3, which tells of the way on which the Lord will travel when he restores Israel from exile bringing salvation.
- Saul is persecuting those belonging to “the Way” and along the way he is going to encounter the one who is “the Way.”
- V3 Saul is on his way with his traveling companions and they are almost a week into their journey on their approach to Damascus.
- Suddenly a bright light from heaven shone around him that both blinded him and knocked him to the ground.
- The light is the glory of the ascended Christ.
- A voice addresses Saul personally, “*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*”
- Saul recognizes this is a divine messenger or representative and asks, “*Who are you, Lord?*”
- The ascended Christ responds, “*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.*”
- Don’t miss this. It is extraordinary and profound how Jesus identifies with his people.
- To persecute his followers is to persecute him really and personally.
- To hurt God’s people, to cause them pain and suffering, all of that culminates in the body of Jesus, who takes upon himself our sufferings because of the depth of our union with him.
- There is a mysterious and amazing union between Christ and his bride the Church.
- Jesus tells him to get up, go into the city, and he will receive further instructions about what he is to do.
- Those traveling with him were standing around speechless. They heard the voice but couldn’t see anyone speaking.
- The voice Saul heard was not in his head, it was the audible voice of Christ.
- Luke wants his readers to know this is not some hallucination or dream Saul had, it is an event grounded in history.
- In an instant, Saul’s entire worldview is shattered and will be remade.
- The proud and mighty Saul is humbled to the dirt, left quivering and shaking before the blinding glory of Christ.
- Humbled and blinded, he has to be led by the hand into Damascus.
- There can be no mistake about what happened.
- Christ pursued Saul, not the other way around.
- Paul’s own recounting of this event in Acts 26 as he is testifying before King Agrippa, he says the Lord said to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.”
- Paul is saying that Jesus likened Saul to an obstinate and wayward young ox, and Jesus was like a farmer using a goad to break him in.
- Jesus had been pursuing Saul, prodding him, and he would not be able to resist the Lord.
- You can pray confidently for the salvation of lost loved ones—God is at work in them long before you even tell them about Jesus.
- God must change our heart so that we will have the willingness to repent and believe.
- Salvation necessarily begins with the divine initiative of saving grace.
- The grace of God laid hold of an obstinate rebel like Saul and transformed him from a wolf to a sheep.

SAUL COMMISSIONED BY THE RISEN CHRIST

- He was brought into Damascus and his blindness persisted for three days.
- He didn’t eat or drink anything. He is praying.

- The Lord continued to reveal himself to Saul.
 - There has been a definite transformation in Saul's attitude and character.
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- We are introduced to Ananias, a disciple of the Lord in Damascus. He too has a vision of the risen Lord.
 - The Lord calls him by name, "*Ananias*." He responds, "*Here I am, Lord*."
 - He is indicating his readiness to obey much like when Samuel and Isaiah were called by the Lord.
 - Luke recounts the Lord's instructions to Ananias.
 - Ananias hesitates. He is a bit reluctant. He is quite familiar with Saul's reputation.
 - We would respond the same way.
 - Ananias is a symbol of those who might doubt God's radical saving work in the lives of those we least expect to repent and believe.
 - As we will see, it is going to take time for Christ's followers to accept that God has saved Saul and that he is a transformed man.
 - Sometimes God will call us to love the unlovable, to forgive the unforgivable, to speak to someone we think is hard to reach and not likely to follow Christ—but we must obey!
 - Immediately the Lord responds to Ananias—"Go, he is a chosen instrument of mine..."
 - The Lord reveals to Ananias Saul's unique calling and future mission.
 - God has chosen Saul for a special mission.
 - He is to spread the name of Christ among the Gentiles and the people of Israel. He'll even take it before kings.
 - His mission will be wide-reaching but it will also involve pain and suffering.
 - The former persecutor will be persecuted.
 - It is the Lord who is directing all of these events. The Lord of heaven and earth is intimately involved in his mission.
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- Ananias obeys. He goes to the house, finds Saul, lays his hands on him and calls him, "*brother Saul...*"
 - The first words the newly converted Saul hears is from a brother in Christ who welcomes him as a brother.
 - He is welcomed into the new covenant community.
 - Ananias tells him that the same Lord who appeared to Saul on the road also appeared to him and sent him to Saul so that his vision would be regained and he would be filled with the Holy Spirit.
 - Immediately something that resembled scales fell from his eyes, he can see again.
 - His physical and spiritual blindness has been lifted.
 - His blindness is a picture of the spiritual darkness and ignorance in which he had been living.
 - We all are in spiritual darkness apart from Christ (2 Cor 4:4-6).
 - He is filled with the Holy Spirit, and he is baptized.
 - Saul has experienced a resurrection!
 - He is a new creation in Christ Jesus, the old has passed away and all things have become new (2 Cor 5:17).
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- Saul's encounter with Christ and transformation dispels any notion that there are some who are just beyond the reach of grace.
 - Don't doubt God's power to save the worst of sinners.
 - 1 Timothy 1:12-17 I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, 13 though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, 14 and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 15 The saying is trustworthy and deserving

of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. 16 But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. 17 To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

III. SAUL'S OBEDIENCE

Acts 9:19b-31

For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus. 20 And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the 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 Christ.

23 When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, 24 but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him, 25 but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.

26 And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. 27 But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus. 28 So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. 29 And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him. 30 And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

31 So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.

MINISTRY IN DAMASCUS

- Vv 19b-31 we see the immediate fruit of Saul's radical conversion.
- He was with the disciples for some days—He is now part of the community that he had previously tried to destroy.
- If someone is genuinely saved, they will want to be with Christ's people.
- He immediately began to tell everyone about Jesus.
- He goes to the synagogues and proclaims that Jesus is the Son of God!
- And the people are astonished at Saul's remarkable transformation.
- V22 Saul increased in strength, he was growing spiritually and in his ability to powerfully testify to the good news of Jesus Christ. He was confounding and frustrating the Jews who couldn't counter his claims about Jesus being the Christ.
- So the Jews plotted to take him out. The scheme was discovered and his disciples helped him escape the city.
- Preaching followed by persecution will become a regular part of Paul's unique commission.
- Don't be surprised when you face trials as you proclaim Christ and demonstrate your allegiance to him.

MINISTRY IN JERUSALEM

- The narrative comes full circle. Our passage began in Jerusalem and Saul returned to Jerusalem.
 - He left as a persecutor of the Way and returned as a disciple of the Way.
 - He attempts to join the disciples in Jerusalem but as you can imagine, they were fearful of him.
 - Enter Barnabas. Much like Ananias introduced Saul to the believers in Damascus, now in Jerusalem, Barnabas comes alongside Saul and advocates for him.
 - We all need people like Barnabas in our life.
 - He brings him to the apostles and Barnabas describes how the Lord transformed Saul, how the Lord had revealed himself to him, and how he had boldly preached in the name of Jesus.
 - As a result of his advocacy, Saul is received by the disciples as a brother.
 - And Saul continued to preach boldly and disputed with the Hellenists, the same group he was likely a part of at the time of Stephen's execution.
 - He becomes a target of a murderous plot just like he did in Damascus, and the brothers help him escape and bring him to his hometown of Tarsus.
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- Be a Saul, if you've been transformed by God's grace boldly proclaim God's grace.
 - We don't have the unique mission of Saul, but we have all been commissioned by Christ to proclaim him and his good news of salvation and life through him.
 - If you are a Christian you are a chosen instrument in the hands of God to be used for his mission.
 - Be a Barnabas, be an encourager to other believers.
 - Someone in your life needs your encouragement and trust.

CONCLUSION

- Our passage closes with a summary statement that the church continued to flourish in the regions of Judea and Samaria.
 - The church had peace.
 - The church was being built up.
 - The church was walking in the fear of the Lord.
 - The church was experiencing the comfort of the Holy Spirit.
 - The church was multiplying.
 - Jesus continues to build his Church.
 - Both the conversion of Saul and the growth of the Church showcase God's amazing grace.
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- How about you? Have you truly experienced conversion?
 - You can't use the excuse that you're too bad—if God saved Saul, the chief of sinners, he can save you.
 - You can't count on your moral or religious efforts to earn your salvation, Saul was the best of the best in this category—and that couldn't save him.
 - What you need is sovereign grace.
 - That's what Jesus extends to us all today.
 - Saul's story—is our story. We were all enemies of God until Christ encountered us on our way and saved us by sheer grace alone.
 - Just like he did with Saul, His grace rewrote our story and turned wayward sinners into beloved sons.

APPLICATION AND REFLECTION

In light of today's message....

- What did I learn about the gospel?
- How can I apply what I learned about the gospel to my life?
- With whom can I share the gospel this week?