

Acts 9 – The Most Unlikely Convert

Good morning church. So very good to be with all of you today, and so very glad that we have the ability to meet both onsite and online.

For those of you with us online due to COVID – do what you feel you need to do to take care of yourself and your family. I do want to encourage you to join us next Sunday for church at the beach. There's plenty of space out there to socially distance – no reason not to be with us in person for church at the beach.

This morning, as we continue our time of worship, we come to an incredible story in the book of Acts – the conversion story of Paul (here called Saul).

As we've seen in the pages of the book of Acts – God's Gospel, Spirit, Mission and Church are Unstoppable. We know they're UNSTOPPABLE. But we've also seen people trying to stop them anyway. We saw a few weeks ago that problems inside the church wouldn't stop them. And we've started seeing that persecution from outside of the church has yet to stop God's Unstoppable mission, gospel, Spirit and church.

BUT...that doesn't mean that people won't still try and stop it. Church history is filled with people and movements trying to stop God's Unstoppable Gospel, Spirit, Mission and Church. Two weeks ago we looked at one of the first deacons – Stephen. Stephen preached – and they killed him for it. But even killing Stephen couldn't stop God's unstoppable Gospel Spirit, mission and church. The Bible says that the people scattered after Stephen was killed – but they didn't run and hide – they preached the Word of God. And the Gospel began spreading, as the disciples scattered.

Saul the Persecutor...

And one of the characters we've just now been introduced was this guy named Saul. Saul is identified in my English Bible as "Saul the Persecutor." What a name, right? Saul the Persecutor. Sounds like a wrestling name. Andre the Giant. Saul the Persecutor. Yes, I watched a lot of wrestling as a kid – my parents are right there – you can judge them all you wan – but yes, I watched wrestling as a kid. And let me tell you something – wrestling is real. Junkyard Dog, Hulk Hogan, Andre the Giant, Ultimate Warrior – wrestling is real kids. Don't let your parents tell you otherwise.

Saul – a Pharisee – overseeing the stoning of Stephen – now ravaging the church. The word ravaging here would have been used to describe a wild animal ripping apart its prey. That's the picture of what Saul was doing. Going house to house dragging men and women to prison.

Then in Acts 9:1-2 it reads:

Now Saul was still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. He went to the high priest ² and requested letters from him to the synagogues in

Damascus, so that if he found any men or women who belonged to the Way, he might bring them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

Don't miss this – Saul, so opposed to the true things of God, so against the church – he actually asked to be able to go get 'em. It says later in CH9 that he had been “causing havoc for those who called on this name.” And then again in CH26 that Saul “locked up many...and often punished them.”

So, if you ask me, “Saul the Persecutor” is a good name for him. Saul the Persecutor. But unlike in Saturday morning wrestling, this personality wasn't just a stage name, it was his life.

And if anyone would have been able to stop God's Unstoppable, Mission, Spirit, Gospel and Church it would have been Saul the Persecutor.

Then he meets Jesus...

Saul the Persecutor, the most unlikely convert, meets Jesus and EVERYTHING changes.

Read 9:3-9

³ As he traveled and was nearing Damascus, a light from heaven suddenly flashed around him. ⁴ Falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”

⁵ “Who are you, Lord?” Saul said.

“I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting,” he replied. ⁶ “But get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the sound but seeing no one. ⁸ Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing. So they took him by the hand and led him into Damascus. ⁹ He was unable to see for three days and did not eat or drink.

V4 – Why are you persecuting me.

- If we're not careful – we'll miss this right here. That Jesus is so involved and deeply concerned with His people, that to persecute his people is to persecute him
 - Illustration – Parent defending their child. Better still though, husband defending his wife. You mess with Victoria, watch out.
- There's an incredible connection between Jesus and HIS CHURCH. And we know that the His Church is UNSTOPPABLE

V8 – Says the men that were with him led him by the hand because he couldn't see. Saul the Persecutor is humbled to the point of being led around by the hand. Imagine the humility he would have experienced.

Ananias introduces him to the church...

Read 9:10-16

¹⁰ There was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias, and the Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.”

“Here I am, Lord,” he replied.

¹¹ “Get up and go to the street called Straight,” the Lord said to him, “to the house of Judas, and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, since he is praying there. ¹² In a vision^[a] he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and placing his hands on him so that he may regain his sight.”

¹³ “Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard from many people about this man, how much harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And he has authority here from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.”

¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, “Go, for this man is my chosen instrument to take my name to Gentiles, kings, and Israelites. ¹⁶ I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”

Saul was praying – had just met Jesus, can’t see anything, and is praying. Ananias (a different Ananias that CH5) gets a vision from the Lord to go get him, and is scared. Imagine for a second, you’re told to go get Osama Bin Laden – you’d be scared. Well, Ananias is scared, but the Lord tells him to go and that even Saul the Persecutor, the most unlikely convert, can and will be used by God to advance his Unstoppable Mission in the world.

V15 – Chosen instrument to take my name...

- Gentiles – non-Jews

V16 – The necessity of suffering – I will show him how much he must suffer. There is a necessity of suffering in the life of all followers of Christ. Suffering is inevitable. Suffering is going to happen if you follow Christ faithfully, and suffering will happen when you join God in His Unstoppable Mission. Suffering is inevitable. But remember, Jesus said we are blessed when we suffer for righteousness’ sake. Suffering would take a central role in Saul’s life and ministry. Suffering for righteousness’ sake.

We see in these next few verses this transition from Saul the Persecutor to Saul the Preacher

From Saul the Persecutor, to Saul the Christian, to Saul the Preacher...

Read V19B – 20:

Saul was with the disciples in Damascus for some time. ²⁰ Immediately he began proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues: “He is the Son of God.”

Immediately he begins preaching. Don’t miss this friends – when you have an experience with Jesus, when you have turned from your sin and are trusting in Jesus alone to save you, you have all that you need to begin sharing with others.

And when you have a personal encounter with Jesus, the King of the World, when you turn to him by grace alone through faith alone; when you experience the forgiveness that only he can offer and only he can give – you will never, ever be the same. Everything changes.

Saul keeps preaching. And the content – the message he preaches – is Jesus. Oh that all of us would remember this – the content of Christian preaching is always Jesus.

- Not fluffily feel good stories
- Not 10 steps to obedient kids, or 4 things for great friendships, or 3 things to be thankful for. But Jesus

His preaching is what we would call Christ-Centered. Everything he does is to point people to who Jesus is, and the greatness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

And how do the people respond? Some of them wanted to kill him, as Saul makes this transition from Saul the Persecutor to Saul the Persecuted.

From Persecutor to Persecuted

But he keeps preaching. Speaking boldly in the name of Jesus. He escapes one of their assassination attempts by being lowered from a window.

These next few verses cover the course of about 3 years, Saul continues preaching. Pointing people to Jesus. Telling them, showing them in the scriptures that Jesus is Messiah. Proclaiming the greatest news in the history of the world – that even the most unlikely people are redeemable through faith in Christ. That there is no person so wicked that Jesus can't save through repentance and faith.

And as Saul preached, he is persecuted time and time again. But the church flourishes.

And in V31 we see the church flourishing.

A Flourishing Church

Read V31

³¹So the church throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

Because hear me – the Gospel, Mission, Spirit and Church of Jesus are UNSTOPPABLE.

So let me ask you – do you know Jesus this morning? Have you had a personal encounter with the risen Christ? Through repentance and faith in HIS NAME? Do you know Jesus? If you say no – can I encourage you right now, right where you are to cry out to Jesus and ask that he forgive you of your sin and give you new life in His name? If that's you will you let us know. Text, email, call, FB message, whatever. If you're unsure, will you get with me or with Matt, or Nicole or Victoria? Will you grab one of us and ask whatever questions you have?

For those that would say “yes, I know Jesus,” probably most of us in the room or online, let me ask you: Who in your life would you say is too lost for the grace of God? Too hard hearted. Too rebellious. Too lost. Too worldly. Too wild. Whatever.

Will you pray for that person? Will you pray that God will save this person (or people)? Will you pray that God will do what only he can do? Because hear me – if God can save Saul (the most unlikely of converts) he can save anyone. **But even more personally, if God can save you, he can save anyone.**

The most unlikely of converts, would later in his life and faith in Jesus write these words to a young pastor protégé of his named Titus:

READ Titus 3:3-7

³ For we too were once foolish, disobedient, deceived, enslaved by various passions and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, detesting one another.

⁴ But when the kindness of God our Savior and his love for mankind appeared, ⁵ he saved us—not by works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy—through the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit. ⁶ He poured out his Spirit on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior ⁷ so that, having been justified by his grace, we may become heirs with the hope of eternal life.

No one is so far lost that Jesus can't save them, by grace through faith in His Name.

PRAY.