

The Vilest Offender Who Truly Believes...
By Jason Huff
Ezekiel 36:22-28, 1 Corinthians 15:1-10, Acts 9:1-22

Our third Scripture reading today comes from Acts 9:1-22. Listen now to God's Word. "Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and 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. As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. The 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. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight." "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name." But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." Then 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." Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ."

Perspective changes everything. Many of us know C.S. Lewis as the author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, a Christian allegory set in a fantasy world of talking animals and a kingly lion who triumphs over the evil of the White Witch. But another famous book by Lewis is *The Screwtape Letters*. It collects a fictional series of letters written by Screwtape, a senior devil instructing his nephew Wormwood how to stop a man from living out the Christian life. The book reaffirms the Christian faith completely, but it makes you see your faith from a different viewpoint. Taking the other side often makes our own position more clear. A radical change in perspective can be difficult for us. And yet when it comes to believing in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, that change in perspective makes all the difference.

Today's passage marks Saul's radical conversion and transformation. When we begin this passage, it appears that Saul was pure evil – as Luke says, “breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples.” But it's not that simple. Understanding Saul's life helps us to understand our own lives as they relate to our belief in Jesus Christ. Saul's abrupt about-face and the way the church welcomed him are keys for us to know and practice and remember.

The first thing that Saul's conversion shows us is that *salvation needs a savior – good intentions are simply not good enough*. Now some of us know Saul as Paul, the author of much of the New Testament. Saul was his given Jewish name, but as he started spreading the good news of Jesus in the Greek-speaking world, he used the name Paul. The Bible doesn't tell us why, but it's likely that he changed his name because “saulos” was a rude term in Greek. It was easier for him to use his Greek name Paul instead. Now Paul was, in Jewish terms, perfect. In Philippians 3, he says this – “If others have reason for confidence in their own efforts, I have even more! For I was circumcised when I was eight days old, having been born into a pure-blooded Jewish family that is a branch of the tribe of Benjamin. So I am a real Jew if there ever was one! What's more, I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law. And zealous? Yes, in fact, I harshly persecuted the church. And I obeyed the Jewish law so carefully that I was never accused of any fault. I once thought all these things were so very important, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done.”

Paul had perfect intentions. He couldn't control being born into his Jewish lineage, but he did control how he acted. He chose to be a Pharisee; he chose to live righteously as far as the Jewish law was concerned. And not only that, but he was so zealous that he persecuted Christians for corrupting the Jewish faith. The first time he's mentioned in the Bible, he's watching over everybody's cloaks so that they can stone Stephen, the first Christian to die for his belief in Jesus. In Acts 8, it says that Saul was good at his job – the text says he was actively *destroying* the church. In Galatians 1, he himself writes how intensely he attacked the church and how enthusiastic he was for keeping the traditions of his ancestors.

But then Jesus appears in a vision to Paul on the road to Damascus. Blinded for three days, his encounter with Christ leaves him permanently changed beyond his sight, which is never quite the same again. He becomes not just a believer but one who actively preaches his new belief. He becomes one of the foremost leaders in the church. But looking back at what he'd done, he's horrified. For all his righteousness, for everything that he had done to follow God faithfully, he was totally blind to what God was actually doing. As Paul said in our reading from 1 Corinthians 15 this morning, “I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.” In Philippians 3:8-9, he continues on to say, “Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the priceless gain of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I may have Christ and become one with him. I no longer count on my own goodness or my ability to obey God's law, but I trust Christ to save me. For God's way of making us right with himself depends on faith.”

Good intentions work out as well for us as they did for Paul. By Luke's reckoning, Paul was committing atrocities against Christians with a clear conscience because he thought he was honoring the Jewish faith. Good intentions have a nasty way of working out badly. Good intentions of workers coming together led to the persecution of the church in Russia and China. Good intentions of a Protestant minister, Daniel Malan, led to apartheid in South Africa. Good intentions of aid to third world countries have destroyed indigenous businesses and economies. We could go on and on about well-meaning plans winding up as tragedies.

Our good intentions may not be disastrous or have horrible repercussions. But we can't think that God will be satisfied with our good intentions. We can't see the end results of our good intentions. If we are honest with ourselves, we know that the majority of our intentions aren't good anyway. We as human beings are first and foremost self-centered. Our intentions are only good when they happen to line up with something we want or something we think we can gain. If the very best things we do can go horribly wrong, like they did in Paul's case, what about the worst things, the truly self-centered things? It's proof positive that we need God to intervene. We don't need to be good people because we've already shown we can't be. We need a savior who can be our righteousness for us, a savior who wipes away our sins and best intentions and replaces them with His perfect love and mercy.

That brings us to the second point we can learn from Paul's conversion: *God is the one who ultimately moves towards us and shakes us out of our apathy and saves us; our response is evidence of God's work already occurring in our lives.* Until Jesus confronts him face to face, Paul is happily going down a destructive course believing himself all the more faithful and righteous because of it. Paul is truly clueless that he is working against God's purposes. Despite his desire for legalistic righteousness, it's absolutely the case. Paul sees the vision and responds – he prays and fasts the entire time he is blind. He is utterly convinced and repents. Yet all of Paul's actions are dependent on God acting first and clearing the way of salvation for him.

Knowing that God is sovereign and thus the One who holds salvation in His own hands is really important for our own well-being as believers. For one, it helps us realize that God chooses us and not the other way around; it doesn't all depend on us. Let's think about it for a moment. Many of us grew up in church and became believers as we learned our faith from our parents and community. But none of us had much choice in that. Others of us became believers later, maybe in high school or college, maybe through a friendship or relationship. But countless factors played into that decision to follow Christ, only a handful of which you had control over. Some of us are here despite terrible events in our past...even then, God is the master architect, the one who has been orchestrating all of space-time so that we might know Him and His great love for us. At first, this might seem like our free will has been squashed, but this isn't true. We make decisions and choices all along the way...and yet God is still relentlessly pursuing us, persuading us, bringing us closer and closer to Him until we realize that He is all we ever really want or need. Even past the point of decision, even past the point of admitting our sin and repenting and believing in Christ for salvation, God still beckons us, still woos us, still ushers us into His presence every day to enjoy His embrace.

It's also helpful for us to realize that God is the architect of history because it relieves us of the pressure to save others. We can't do it. We are called to tell others about Christ because He is everything to the believer. We witness not just because Jesus commands us to share His love but because we desire to do so. But we cannot change anyone else's mind or force them into the Kingdom of God. I can make a perfect argument that answers all sorts of philosophical questions and objections. I can do what Paul did when he "baffled" the Jews in Damascus by proving Jesus was the Christ. But that won't *make* somebody believe. And that's OK. We can't make anybody a Christian. What we *can* do is model the Christian life and be prepared so that when we have the opportunity to share the faith, we are ready. In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul states that it doesn't matter who does what in bringing people to faith – God is the one ultimately responsible. As he says, "[We are] only servants, through whom you came to believe... I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow." Paul goes on to tell us to be prepared as expert builders so we can help lay a proper foundation for new believers...but God is the one who makes belief happen.

This should comfort us as we share with our friends and family and neighbors. It isn't all on our shoulders. If we are sharing our faith with them in real ways – not just by hoping they'll come to church, but talking with them and listening to them and being the light of Christ to them with both our actions and our testimony – if we do these things, we are doing what God commands. We all want those close to us to be with us in eternity. We are responsible to play our role, to do the task that God has assigned to us as His witnesses. But the growth, the belief, the faith – that is God's gift that He alone can give. We can pray together that God will give that gift to those we love, and then do the work God asks of us in testifying to His salvation.

The final thing we see in this passage is this: *everyone needs Jesus' forgiveness, and everyone needs to forgive, regardless of what we've done or what's been done to us.* There's no doubt that Paul needs forgiveness for the crimes he's committed against God and the church. But when God gets hold of him, he is on fire. He's immediately baptized and starts preaching in the synagogues that Jesus is Lord and Christ. It's clear that not only is he forgiven, but the Holy Spirit has made him a new man who will risk everything for the gospel.

But it's easy to overlook Ananias. Ananias is the man sent to Paul by the Lord. He has a vision where God speaks to Him directly and commands him to go and heal Paul's blindness. Ananias is worried enough that rather than immediately following Jesus' command, he tells God what God already knows! "This is the guy who has been harming your saints! He's got authority to arrest us all!" But God makes the command a second time. God knows what He is doing. God is going to use Paul to spread His name all over the known world. By the time Paul is done, he'll be preaching in Rome itself, in the capital of the empire. But God also wants Paul to be touched by a Christian. We don't know exactly why. God could have just said the word and Paul would have been healed. But there's something more to Paul's restoration than that. The first thing that Paul sees when he can open his eyes again is Ananias' face, the face of forgiveness – the face of someone who knows the risk that Paul will arrest him, who may have lost family and friends to Paul's persecution, who came anyway to be faithful to His Lord. To heal your deepest enemy so that he might become your friend – that's forgiveness.

We all need forgiveness desperately. But the incredible news is this...nothing you have done is beyond the forgiveness of God. No person you meet is so awful that they cannot be saved. We're going to be talking about evangelism in September, and the great news is that every person you meet is someone you can share your faith with. There's nobody who doesn't qualify because of their past. And truthfully, nobody is too holy to qualify either. Nobody is so good that they don't need salvation. If faith and trust in Jesus is the requirement for eternal life, then everybody needs to know about Him.

For some of us, we need to learn to trust that God will forgive us if we so desire. We may feel like we've done something so terrible that God can't forgive us. I can't speak to everybody's past. God doesn't suddenly say that what you did was right or that there shouldn't be consequences...but He says that if you ask Him, no matter what is in your past, He will extend His forgiveness to you. Paul helped put Christians to death. But God not only forgave him, He made Paul into an apostle and used him to spread the message of forgiveness far and wide. God can forgive you.

For others of us – and I include myself in this category – we don't relate to Paul's problem as much as we relate to Ananias'. It's one thing to be forgiven; it's another to pardon. It's difficult being the abuser bearing the guilt; it's even harder to be the abuse victim who needs to forgive. When our rights have been trampled, when we've been battered or picked on or mistreated, it's easy to want revenge, not reconciliation. It is difficult to overcome the scars. I know all too well from my own history. As a middle schooler, I was the subject of daily physical and verbal abuse from other kids. It went on for years. Even now, there are times when I get too defensive at constructive criticism or flinch when somebody gets into my personal space. They are remnants of that time. I know I've come a long way. And yet, forgiving is difficult. In my old heart, the part that isn't fully handed over to God, I still have some resentment. I have a hard time forgiving those kids, and I have a hard time forgiving other people like them. Reaching out to them with not only forgiveness but love is way beyond my comfort zone. And if that's true for me, I know it's true for those who have suffered far more than I ever have.

But God's response to Ananias is "go!" And it's His response to us as well. As long as we shrink back into our fears and the darkness of our past, we will never know the full reality of God's love for us. It's when we face those fears...when we face our pasts, where we have been wronged and where we have wronged others...when we come clean and forgive, we experience the peace of forgiveness. Jesus made it clear when He taught His disciples the Lord's Prayer that we must forgive others if we expect to be forgiven. And that's not a threat; it's a statement of reality. The person who cannot forgive loses the capacity to receive the gift of forgiveness themselves...but the person who forgives learns right within that experience of forgiving that they can be forgiven too.

Perspective changes everything. When we realize that forgiveness is a possibility, that accepting Christ as savior and Lord brings about cleansing and renewal and reconciliation, it turns the world upside down. It turned Paul from self-righteousness and hatred and into God's foremost messenger to the Greek world. It turned Ananias from fear to trust in God's eternal plans. Ask God for His perspective, and He will change your world too.