

From Selfish to Servant

Introduction

If you have your Bibles, turn with me to Acts 21...

Acts 21:37-22:21

As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the tribune, "May I say something to you?" And he said, "Do you know Greek? 38 Are you not the Egyptian, then, who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?" 39 Paul replied, "I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no obscure city. I beg you, permit me to speak to the people." 40 And when he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the steps, motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great hush, he addressed them in the Hebrew language, saying:

1 "Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you." 2 And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, they became even more quiet. And he said:

3 "I 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. 4 I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, 5 as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.

6 "As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me. 7 And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' 8 And I answered, 'Who are you, Lord?' And he said to me, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.' 9 Now those who were with me saw the light but did not understand the voice of the one who was speaking to me. 10 And I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord said to me, 'Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do.' 11 And since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me, and came into Damascus.

12 "And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, 13 came to me, and standing by me said to me, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight.' And at that very hour I received my sight and saw him. 14 And he said, 'The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; 15 for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard. 16 And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.'

17 "When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance 18 and saw him saying to me, 'Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.' 19 And I said, 'Lord, they themselves know that in one synagogue after another I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. 20 And when the blood of Stephen your witness was being shed, I myself was standing by and approving and watching over the garments of those who killed him.' 21 And he said to me, 'Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'"

Context/Story

- The scene is chaos. Before the commander stood Paul, his hair matted from the blood and gashes on his face, bruised and beaten. Paul's been dragged out of the temple in Jerusalem, falsely accused of defiling it. The crowd is a powder keg—religious zealots screaming for his blood, fists raised, ready to tear him apart. The Roman commander, Claudius Lysias, steps in to restore order, but he's got questions.
 - A few years back there was an Egyptian terrorist who led 4,000 assassins out into the wilderness in a revolt against Rome. Josephus tells us more of this Egyptian that Paul was mistaken for. He writes that a battle ensued where many thousands who followed this Egyptian prophet were killed, but the prophet himself escaped. He was like the Osama bin Laden of the ancient world; they looked everywhere for him with no success.
 - This is a guy who vanished like a ghost (Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.13.5). "Is this him?" he wonders as he looks at Paul, bruised and battered and bloody. Who else could incite such a riot in the city?
 - Vs 39
 - The commander gave Paul permission to speak to the crowd, and he put him on the stairs in front of those who were screaming and yelling for Paul's blood. The power of the Holy Spirit came upon the Apostle, and with a mere gesture of his hand the screaming mob was silenced. What followed is one of the most important defenses of Paul's life and ministry.
 - Paul then spoke to them in the Hebrew language. The fact that he addressed them in their own tongue was a sign of respect. Something they did not deserve after having just beaten him. He talked about his master, Gamaliel, and how he was not just one of them, but among the very best of them.

God Transforms the Hardest Hearts

- Paul began with the same words Stephen had used so many years earlier when he addressed the mob in Jerusalem.
 - Vs 1-3
- Paul, strutting toward Damascus with arrest warrants in hand, ready to crush more Christians. He is the hunter, they are the prey. But suddenly on the road, a light brighter than the sun drops him to his knees. Blinded, helpless, he hears Jesus call his name—not to destroy him, but to save him. This is the God who doesn't just defeat His enemies; He makes them His sons.
 - Saul, Saul, Why are you persecuting me?"
 - Jesus had long ago been executed, twenty-seven years before Saul's conversion. He had been raised from the dead and had ascended into heaven. He was beyond the reach of the savagery of Saul. Saul couldn't do anything to hurt Jesus personally, and yet Jesus had said, "Why are you persecuting Me?" Saul in his fury had been persecuting Jesus' people—His body, the church.
 - Matt. 25:45 - Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me"

- Saul's persecution of Jesus' people was persecution of Jesus Himself.
 - Rather than coming into Damascus in chariots and power, Saul was led groping in the dark as somebody held his hand and led him through the alleys and the streets, taking him to the house of Ananias.
- Prove
 - Scripture shows this pattern over and over.
 - God took Moses, a murderer, and made him a deliverer
 - He took David, an adulterer and conspirator, and called him a man after His own heart
 - Mark 2:17 - And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."
- Apply
 - Some of you think you're too far gone. You've got a past—addictions, broken relationships, sins you're ashamed to name. Paul's story screams that no one is beyond God's reach. If He can take a guy who hunted Christians and turn him into the greatest missionary in history, what can He do with you? Stop running. Surrender to Jesus. He doesn't just forgive; He transforms.
 - If God can save Paul, He can save anybody—your neighbor, your coworker, even you.
 - And if you're a believer, quit writing people off. God's still in the business of changing hearts.
 - He could've quoted Scripture or debated theology, but this time, he chooses his testimony.
 - We shouldn't shy away from our story, but it also shouldn't be all that we ever use to share Jesus.
 - What is your Story? You don't need to be a theologian to share the gospel. Maybe you were the addict God set free, the skeptic He convinced, or the church kid He woke up. Your story matters because it's His story. Write it down. Practice it. Share it with that neighbor, that barista, that family member who's far from God. Don't make it about you; make it about Jesus. And don't wait for the perfect moment—Paul spoke with a mob ready to kill him.

God Calls Us To A Purpose

- Paul was blind and humbled, being led by the hand into Damascus. He's got no clue what's next. Then Ananias shows up, a guy who's probably terrified to meet the church's biggest enemy. But he obeys God, lays hands on Paul, and says, "Brother Saul, receive your sight"
 - In that moment, Paul's eyes open both physically and spiritually. He's baptized, his sins are washed away, and he's given a purpose: to tell the world about Jesus. This, as we now see, is a road of suffering, rejection, and ultimately martyrdom. But Paul says yes.

- Vs 10
 - After his conversion, Paul's life wasn't his own anymore.
- Vs 14-15
 - God didn't just save Paul to sit on the sidelines. He gave him a mission: to be a witness to the world. This wasn't a suggestion but a command.
- Prove
 - Ephesians 2:10 - We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.
 - God has some things for you to do. And let's be honest, for some of us, that just doesn't sit right. We want to be in charge of our lives. We want to be in control.
 - When we are watching a movie, I have to have the remote. I struggle to even watch at all if I am not in control of the experience. If anyone wants the volume louder, or quieter, they have to go through me. It is a real problem!
 - We are all like this. We want to be in control. But the Bible says that God is in control, He is the one with the remote. He is the one writing the story, he is the one in the driver's seat. You and I are subject to His will. And we need to learn to be okay with that.
 - He drives better than you do, and He has proven himself worthy of your trust.
 - We serve the God who serves us
 - In our culture, being a servant is a role to avoid rather than aspire to. We delegate tasks and hire people to do things to serve us. Those who work a job in the service industry will also tell you how poorly people treat those who are trying to serve them. As a general rule, the goal is to make enough money and have enough power that others serve you so that you do not need to serve others.
 - This stands in stark contrast to God's Kingdom. You see, our King, Jesus Christ, was at the top of the organizational chart for all creation. He was being served by angels ruling over everything when He decided to humble Himself and come down to earth to serve us.
 - He sacrificed and died in service to you. And now he calls you to follow in his footsteps. Christians are to seek God's will and devote ourselves to serving the will of God over our lives.
 - Life has plenty of pains and problems, which means that there needs to be a purpose over our lives bigger than those pains and problems.
 - Stop waiting for a burning bush or a blinding light. God's already spoken through His Word. What's He calling you to do? And don't give me the "I'm not qualified" excuse. Paul was a murderer, and God used him. What's stopping you?

God Sends Us to the Unlikely (Vs 17-21)

- This story is news to us. We did not hear this part in the conversion of Paul in Acts 9. He is still trying to show how faithful he is as a Jew. He was not defiling the temple, He

was going to the temple to pray. That is what Good Jews do! And it was in this time that God sends him to the gentiles.

- Paul Objects! “No, God I am a Jew, surely my most impactful ministry will be to my own people.” But God will have none of it. He sends him to the Gentiles.
- Vs 21-22 - Paul’s mission wasn’t just to preach—it was to preach to the Gentiles, the people his Jewish brothers despised. When Jesus told him, “Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles,” it was a gut punch to the crowd. They lost it, shouting for his death.
 - was a death sentence in the eyes of his Jewish audience
 - Paul’s closing arguments on his own behalf at this kangaroo court converted few if any, because the response of the crowd was the same as that given to Stephen all those years earlier.
- Prove
 - Ephesians 2:11-19 - Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— 12 remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility 15 by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, 16 and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. 17 And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. 18 For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. 19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God,
- Apply
 - Who is your unlikely? The person you’d rather avoid? The coworker with the rainbow flag? The neighbor who votes differently? The family member who’s a hot mess? God’s calling you to love them, to share Christ with them. It’s not comfortable. It’s not safe.
 - Yet this is exactly what God does: He sends His people to the margins, to the outsiders, to those we’d rather write off.
 - Think of Paul - Paul was an unlikely candidate himself. A persecutor of the church, a man who breathed threats and murder against Christians (Acts 9:1). Yet Jesus met him on the Damascus road and transformed him into the apostle to the Gentiles.

Conclusion

Pray/Invitation

Father, we thank You for Your relentless grace that saved a wretch like Paul and saves wretches like us. Thank You for calling us, not to a life of ease, but to a mission that matters. Stir our hearts. Show us the people you are sending us to. Give us the courage to obey, even when it's hard. For those here who don't know You, may they hear Your voice today, saying, "Why are you running from me?" Draw them to Yourself. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.