

True Heart Change

Fairview Missionary Church | Angola, IN

Scripture: Acts 9:1-20

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All types of magic. I loved watching the daring escapes of Houdini. I liked simple card tricks. I liked even the seemingly larger, more difficult things of magic where you would make people disappear or somebody would levitate. But most of my first memories of magic or illusion, if you grew up in a conservative household, right? So we can't say magic. But one of my first memories of illusion came from watching this guy, David Copperfield.

He was popular when I was a kid and my parents both loved watching him and so we would watch the TV shows and I remember he did things that just seemed impossible. I couldn't figure out how he was doing these tricks. I remember the tricks that he would do through the TV where you'd be sitting at home and he'd tell you to pick a card and you would go up to the TV and I would choose a card and he would do all of this stuff and eventually he would figure out my card every time. And it just amazed me.

I remember one time watching one of his specials where he made the Statue of Liberty disappear, or at least it seemed that way on TV. Of course, I wasn't there, but you know, it looked like the Statue of Liberty just disappeared. I actually enjoyed it so much, and I was nerdy enough that I decided I wanted to practice doing magic. I wanted to do illusions. And so I had come to the conclusion. I either was going to be a magician or a pastor. It was one of those two things.

Now, if you guys promise not to laugh, I will do a magic trick for you, but I will need a volunteer. So who wants to be a volunteer for me? Come on up. Come on up. Are you going to back there? Yep, yeah, yeah. Come on up. I promise I won't saw you in half. It's a card trick, okay? So come on up. All right, so first service, they didn't look at the card. So you can look at the card and remember what it is, right? You'll be able to do that.

Okay, I'm going to have you look at the card and then show everybody the card. All right, I'll keep my eyes closed. You got your card. I don't want you to look at it. I want you to memorize it. And then I want you to show it to everybody else. Everybody got it? No. Okay, show it to everybody else. See my eyes are closed. I don't know what's going on. Everybody got it? Yes, okay. Now go ahead and put it right there. Okay, now like any good card trick, we got to shuffle the cards, and I am way more nervous doing this than preaching, by the way.

So this is like got to pay attention to what's going on. All right, we're going to shuffle one more time. All right. And here we go. This is the trick. Is that your card? Not your card. This is not going well. Okay. And we'll put that one down. All right. Is that your card? Not your card. We're really not doing well, okay? Not your card? No. Good thing I became a pastor, huh?

Is that your card? Not your car. Okay, so we are over four. So we're going to check all these cards again, all right? I'm going to go through them. Is that your card? Not her card? This is doing well, okay? Not your card? None of these are your cards. Okay, I'm going to take these cards. I want you to make a fist for me like this. All right? And I'm going to slide these in here. All right. Go ahead and squeeze for me. Okay?

Is that your card? Show them. All right. Thank you. Have a seat, you guys. All right. You guys can leave tips later for me. That's fine, you know. You know, some of my, some of my favorite tricks when I was growing up

to watch was these tricks of transformation. When things would be transformed, a magician would take a cloth or a napkin, and he would turn it into a bird or a dove.

Or maybe they would take an empty cup and they would show you the cup, and then all of a sudden change would come boiling out of the top of the cup. Or when you would watch on stage and they'd have this huge cage and they would put a piece of cloth over it and they would do their little magic stuff that they do, and they would pull the cloth away, and it would be transformed into now a Tiger that was sitting inside that cage. I love those tricks because they seemed impossible. They seem to defy logic. They defied physics.

How is it possible that one thing would transform into something completely different? Today, we are going to read about a transformation, we're going to read about a transformation that is much more unbelievable than simply changing a napkin into a dove or an empty cup into a cup that's full of change. In fact, the type of transformation that we're going to read about today can only happen by the power of God.

It's not a trick, it's not magic, it's not sleight of hand. It is truly miraculous. It is something that only God can do because humanly speaking, it's impossible. The story we're going to read about today actually is so important that it is actually shared three times in the book of acts. Now, whenever something is shared over and over again, we should take notice, especially in scripture because scripture said that there aren't enough books in the whole world to hold what Jesus did while he was here on earth.

And if that is the case, then if something is in there multiple times, God must think it is very, very important for us to hear it. And for us to understand what is taking place, if it's going to take up that much space, in scripture, through the story, you and I are going to learn how God works, what part we kind of play in his story, and that nothing is impossible with God. So if you haven't already, I encourage you to open your bibles to acts chapter 9 one.

That's where we left off last time. Acts chapter 9 one. Again, New Testament Matthew Mark Luke John acts if you get to Romans, you've gone too far. And while you're turning there, let me just pray for our time together today. Have any father, we gather before you and just thank you. Thank you for the opportunity to praise you and to worship you. Thank you for your word. That continues to speak truth to us today. It gives encouragement it gives us hope.

And lord, I know that there are certainly people here today, people that are watching online, listening on the radio that desperately needs your hope. And so God, we come before you. Asking you to speak to us, to change our hearts and to help us take our next step towards you. We ask this in the powerful name of Jesus, amen, acts chapter 9 starting in verse one, Luke tells us, meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out, murderous threats against the lord's disciples.

He went to the high priest and he asked him for letters to the synagogues and 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. Now, if you remember when we left off last time, we were introduced to this man named Saul at the end of chapter 7 in the beginning of chapter 8, and when we were introduced to him, he was standing there holding the cloaks, the jackets, and giving approval of those who were killing Steven, who would be the first Christian martyr.

That he would be killed because he was proclaiming that Jesus was the son of God. And that he had been killed, he had been crucified and three days later, he had been raised to life. And now Saul was so distraught about this teaching, believing that it was not true that he made it his mission to stamp out this movement known as the way because it was heresy. How dare somebody claim that this man Jesus was God?

And Saul believed that what he was doing was right. He believed that what he was doing was holy, and it was good. I'm sure that he was receiving praise from the high priest and the other leaders. The spiritual leaders in Jerusalem had his back, saw you're doing the right thing. Saul knew the Old Testament like the back of his

hand. He had it memorized. He knew what scripture said about the coming messiah. And Jesus did not fulfill any of his expectations of who that person was going to be.

Just to give you an idea of how passionate Saul was, how much this man was fueled by trying to stamp this out, he was willing to travel a 150 miles to a city that he didn't live in and didn't need to go to just to punish those there who also believed Jesus was God. Now you might say, oh, a 150 miles. That's not a big deal. But remember, they don't have vehicles. They don't have trucks. And so I'm sure that he is loading up all of his horses.

He's gathering all of these men to go with him as he's going to go travel a multiple day trip to the city. Again, that he doesn't live. Just for the purpose of rounding up all of the men and women who believed in Jesus so that he could bring them back to Jerusalem and put them in jail. They probably brought weapons with them because they thought it might get violent, and they were willing to do so. Now, before we go on, I want you to place yourself in the story, and I want you to imagine that you are a follower of Jesus.

You're part of this movement known as the way. And you live in Damascus. And you've heard rumors you've heard stories that this man's soul who has killed believers and has come to hunt you down is coming to your city to trap you, to find you, to throw you in jail, maybe even to kill you. I'm sure that there were knights where these believers were filled with fear. And so because of that, maybe they gathered and they began to pray.

And maybe they prayed something like, God, would you please, you know, maybe allow Saul to get attacked by robbers on the way? Would you allow him to get sick? God, maybe would you change Saul's mind so that he will turn around and go back to Jerusalem? I'm sure they prayed for protection for themselves, even if he does come, God, would you just protect us? I'm sure they prayed for wisdom so that they knew what to do, how were they supposed to react? How were they supposed to respond?

I'm sure they thought about plans just as I would about hiding. And maybe even fleeing the city so that, you know, while he's there, you're just not around. But I highly doubt that anyone prayed for what is actually going to happen because it probably seemed more impossible to them than their whole city disappearing. So what is it that happens? Here we go in acts, chapter 9 three.

Luke tells us that as Saul near Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him, and he fell to the ground and saw heard a voice say to him, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? And Saul asked, who are you, lord? First thing I want you to notice in this couple of verses here, did you notice that the lord had to say his name twice? He had to say his name twice to get his attention.

And I try to think to myself as I'm reading that, why did he have to call his name twice? It's like he couldn't get his attention the first time. Or Saul was too distracted. And so I began to go back and scripture and I wanted to find the other times where an angel or the lord is calling to somebody and he has to say the name twice.

So you go back in scripture and the first one is Abraham, Abraham's name had to be said twice, Jacob, Moses, Samuel, Martha in the New Testament, Simon Peter in the New Testament, and now Saul, do you notice anything about those list of names that I just shared with you? They all play an extremely important role in God's story.

And as I think about these individuals, and I read their stories and scripture, I also notice that they all had the same type of personality that when they set their minds to something it was going to happen. They were driven. They were focused when they said they were in, they were all in. Whether it was for good or whether it was for bad. They were focused people, some people might even say they were devoted or strong willed.

And so maybe God had to wake them up to get their attention. And so I asked the question of you, has God had to call your name twice? Maybe you've begun to follow him and then life just got in the way and God is

calling you again today or just in the recent past and you said, I've heard my name again. Maybe it's because of your stubbornness that God has had to call your name twice like these individuals.

And so you can look at your spouse and say, it's okay, God made me this way, right? It must mean God's gonna do something amazing through me because I'm stubborn. The second thing that I notice in this section of scripture is that Saul asks who is speaking to him. He is bewildered by what has taken place. What is caused this bright light? Where is the voice coming from? And I have to imagine all Saul was thinking to himself was, please don't be Jesus. Please don't be Jesus.

Because that's who he was going to persecute. Ready? And here's the answer. I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting he replied, which I imagine Saul was then terrified at that moment. Now get up and go into the city and you will be told what you must do. Luke tells us that the men that were traveling with Saul stood their speechless for they heard the sound, but they did not see anyone. So 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, Saul was blind, and he did not eat or drink anything. Of course, it's Jesus, who is calling him. And even worse than it being Jesus, is the fact that nobody else really understood what was happening. All of the men that were with Saul, they knew something happened, but they didn't hear the actual words. They didn't see anything. Can you imagine how lonely saw would have felt in that moment?

Here I've experienced this crazy thing and no one understands who is going to believe me. What am I going to do next? He was so distraught, Luke tells us that when he rose and he couldn't see, he was led by the hands by his hands into the city. And once he got there, he hid. And for three days and three nights, he didn't eat or drink anything. This had to be a pretty bad experience for Saul, it was a really, really bad day.

Don't forget the fact that he was still blind while he is hiding. And he doesn't know the rest of the story. He doesn't know what's going to happen. He might be blind for the rest of his life. And he probably feels like he deserves it. We go on in verse ten. In Damascus, Luke tells us there was a disciple, a follower of the way, named Ananias, and the lord called to him in a vision, Ananias, notice only once. He calls his name? Yes, lord, he answered.

And the lord told him, go to the house of Judas on straight street. Don't try to say that 5 times fast. I purposely pause there because I want you now to put yourself in his shoes again. Here is a disciple whose minding his own business. He's come to the conclusion that he believes Jesus is God. He believes that he has been raised to life, and he has submitted his life to that. And and I just has to be terrified at the news that this man named Saul is coming to his town to persecute or even kill people like him.

And God calls Ananias. God calls you. Imagine, out of hiding, and he tells you, listen, I want you to go find a man, and I am sure Anna Nia is thinking to himself, please don't be Saul. Please don't be soul, right? And then the lord continues. I want you to go to straight street, and I want you to ask for a man from tarsus named Saul for he is praying and Ananias goes, I knew it. I knew it.

In a vision God tells Ananias, 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 holy people in Jerusalem. And he has even come here with authority from the chief priest to arrest all who call on your name. Don't you just love it when we try to explain things to God like he doesn't know.

Please tell me I'm not the only person that prays like this, right? Like I feel God's telling me something and I've got to explain to him and say, you know what? God, I don't think that's a good idea. Let me tell you why. Let me give you some details. There has to be a better plan. Can you imagine the shock of Ananias? He was probably going to do everything he could to hide from this man and now God was telling him, no, I actually don't want you to hide it all. I want you to go and seek out this man. What would you do in that situation?

This is a moment where the rubber meets the road, is Ananias going to have the faith to trust that God knows what he is doing. But the lord said to Ananias, go, this man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the gentiles and their kings and also to the people of Israel.

I will show him how much he must suffer for my name, so then Luke tells us and an IS went to the house and he 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. If I put myself in Ananias' shoes, I'm not sure I would be happy with what God has just told me to do.

I would have asked questions like God. Why are you going to save and use this man? Don't you know how evil he is? Don't you know all of the things that he has done? Do you know how many people he has hurt? There are so many better options. I have to imagine Ananias was even thinking, you know, I'm here. You could use someone like me. I've not murdered anybody. I'm trying to follow you. I have submitted to you. But Anne and I has responds in obedience anyway. And faithfulness, he puts his life on the line.

And he immediately goes to this place, and he puts his hands on Saul, and did you notice the first words that come out of Ananias mouth? He says, brother. Brother, Saul. I think that this is more significant in Saul's life than what is going to happen next, even with his healing, with his physical sight. Ananias calls him brother. He acknowledged him as part of the family.

You see, Saul knew he wasn't worthy at this point. He knew that he had a terrible past. He knew that he had chosen the wrong side of the argument. He knew there had to be better people that God could use besides him. He knew these believers in Damascus and anions included should have taken this opportunity. The chance that they had in order to maybe even kill him. To get to him first, he knew he was vulnerable, but these people didn't do that.

Ananias didn't do that instead, they invited him in. They loved him, and they risked everything for him. You see, Saul recognized that something was different about these people. He was experiencing something that he had never experienced before. And it was then at this exact moment in Saul's story that his spiritual eyes were opened. I believe that his spiritual eyes were open before his physical eyes were opened.

And only after his spiritual eyes were opened, was God going to allow his physical eyes to be opened again. We wrap up in verse 18 through 20. Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and he was baptized. And after taking some food, he regained his strength. Then Luke tells us that Saul spent several days with the disciples and Damascus, and at once, he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the son of God.

The transformation that takes place. Saul had heard about Jesus before. He had heard the stories about him. He had heard about his followers before. But now, Saul had experienced Jesus. And that's completely different. These believers in Damascus were the hands and feet of Jesus. Could you imagine being in that community and Damascus? There's probably some people that couldn't wait for Saul to come and to stamp out this movement called the way.

They were just disturbing, like, I can't wait. Can you come and just take all of these people away? I don't want to see them anymore. And now this guy that you were excited to come because he was going to stamp out this way is preaching the very thing he came to destroy. A true transformation. So I closed today by asking the question, who is God calling you to love? Who is the person in your life that maybe you're afraid of? Maybe you despise this person. Maybe they are your worst enemy.

Maybe you even have prayed many things for them, but they're not good things. They're bad things. What would happen if you chose to love them? What would happen if you actually loved and forgave the person who is hurting you? What would happen if you prayed for the person that sometimes you wish would just

die? What if you actually prayed that God would transform their heart? Maybe it's possible that God has a huge plan for that purpose.

And his kingdom, and when that kind or type of transformation takes place, many lives are impacted. When God transforms a heart and a life, it's not a trick. It's not a sleight of hand. We serve a God who transforms hearts. And many of us are here as witnesses of that. With Easter coming up again, it's just a great opportunity to invite somebody to church, to invite somebody to watch online, 'cause maybe they can't come into hear the good news of Jesus Christ.

Maybe God's asking you even of a little more, and he's not just asking you to invite that person to church, but he wants you to share your faith story and journey with that person. He wants you to introduce him to them. And I know in your mind right now you're thinking, pastor Joel, you don't have any idea who this person is. This is not a good plan. It's not a good idea. If God is asking you to do it, none of that matters. None of that matters. Don't try to tell him why it's a bad idea if he's asking you to do it.

And finally, this morning, I want you to know that God often uses people with a past. You and I have done things that were not proud of. You might say pastor, you don't know my past. There's no way that God could use me. I love the story of Saul because if God can use him, he can use you. God often uses people that have a past. They have things that they're ashamed of, things that they wish they never would have done, but they have been transformed.

You might say to yourself, pastor, I've hurt way too many people before. This community is small. Everybody knows my story. Everybody knows my history. I am the rascal, if you will. And God says you're the exact person I want to transform. Because I want to use you to make a difference. If you've never heard it before, let me be the first to tell you that when you submit to God, when you repent of your sins, that he will enter into your life into your being.

And you might actually be the best person for the plans he has for this community. Who knows what he wants to happen? Let me close in prayer. How many father? I know that there are people here today. They're watching online. They're listening. Maybe they're here in the sanctuary that just feel unworthy. They feel that they could never be used by you because of their past because of their history.

Because of whatever reason, father, nobody is outside of your reach. Nobody is outside of your love. May we all learn to submit to you? May we all be willing to listen to your call upon our lives? So that you would receive the praise. And we can take our next step towards you. We ask this in Jesus name. Amen.