

“Total Transition”

Acts 9: 9: 1-9

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Text: Acts 9:1-9 (NIV) ¹ Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest ² 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. ³ As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" ⁵ "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. ⁶ "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." ⁷ The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. ⁸ 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. ⁹ For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

Saul. Here was a man whose whole life was all about his religion. He was certain of his views. He was clear as he could be about what God required. He was committed to his legalistic understanding of the Word of God... what we call the Old Testament! Everyone who knew of him considered him a spiritual all-star and yet...when he came face to face with the Risen Christ, Saul had to say to him “Who are you Lord?” Saul, despite all of his power and religious zeal, had no idea who the Christ was!

But...why study this event? Does it have any practical application in our lives? I mean...some fellow named Saul got saved twenty centuries ago and that’s very nice... but what does it have to do with us at this moment? Is there anything we can do with it right now? Well...that question can be a problem for God's people... the idea that every sermon should address the “right now” concerns. To do with our families and our marriages and how to communicate and all the everyday and immediate things. But we need to see how God interacted with this man to understand God's nature better. And that is the purpose of the pulpit. That is... knowing God better and better and walking with Him as closely as possible. So... what can we squeeze out of this passage that will benefit us in our Christian lives? Let’s see. First, let us pray.

Over the years, I have told a funny story that I will share again briefly this morning. I was about fourteen when I chipped in with three other boys and we bought a 1948 Ford sedan for forty dollars. We had it driven to my friend Freddy’s house. He lived on a long, private dirt road and all we did was drive that old bomb up and down that mile until it was a wreck. Clouds of dust everywhere! Of course, it had a clutch. Since none of us really knew how to drive properly, within a couple of days we had stripped everything but third gear. It didn’t even have reverse; we ruined it. Basically, it was demolished. It was a real challenge to turn it

around at the end of the mile with no reverse. So, we would race down the road and then slow way down and put it into neutral and drive into a great oak tree at the end of the lane... and go bouncing backwards... quickly turning the wheel and then go the other way. It was a riot! But, finally, one day Freddy's mother pulled up in her big Cadillac and just stared at us and said, "That's enough!" The car was towed away the next day. A wonderful childhood memory.

The Apostle Paul was driving like a crazy man all around Jerusalem until he ran into a great oak tree named Jesus. Then the Son of God stood over him and said, "That's enough." And he was turned around and made to go in the opposite direction. Let's study that today but first, let us pray.

Was there ever a man more sure of himself than the Apostle Paul? He was previously known as "Saul" and he was a leader of the Pharisees. His own description of himself, before he was saved, was as follows:

Philippians 3:4-6 (NIV) If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.

Saul of Tarsus might have been the most "religious" person in all of Israel. Yet, notice when he came face to face with the Risen Christ... with the Son of God... he had to ask, "Who are you Lord?" Saul was the perfect example of a man in need of total transition. Saul was the perfect example of the person who needed to have his life turned around. Saul was the perfect example of someone who had to run into a great oak tree to go in the other direction. Indeed... an example of a total life turnaround!

What was his problem? And how could he have been so certain of his convictions and be so wrong... and be so cruel and hateful towards those who disagreed with him? Consider God's sovereignty in this account. Saul of Tarsus was in Jerusalem and may have heard Jesus speak but he, Saul, was never a disciple of Jesus before the Crucifixion. But consider the background to this event in Acts Chapter Nine. God in His sovereignty was allowing many of his own people to be persecuted. We are always left slightly wondering why God allows His own people to suffer. Even today, more Christians are being martyred for their faith than any other group... probably all groups combined. This is not new.

In Acts Chapter Seven, Stephen is speaking before the Sanhedrin, the ruling council and he says something that infuriates the people including Saul of Tarsus who became known as Paul. We read that Stephen is saying:

Acts 7:51-53 (NIV) ⁵¹ "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! ⁵² Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the

coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him--⁵³ you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it."

No doubt it was that last statement that did it. At that point, they raced towards him with gnashing teeth and fury. He told them how he was looking at Jesus, but they couldn't care less. All they wanted to do was kill him. And then we read this:

Acts 8:1 (NIV) ¹ And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

This reminds us that God allows His own people to suffer. In fact, this persecution brought about a scattering of the young Christians who shared their faith everywhere they went. So, the suffering was part of God's plan to plant the church. It was the second century theologian Tertullian who said: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church!" Without martyrdom the Gospel would have never taken root in the world of the first and second century. Why not? Because the watching world saw that Christians were being persecuted and executed yet they continued to share the Gospel and spread it around! So, allow me to suggest:

OBSERVATION NUMBER ONE: God allows suffering and struggle into our lives so that we can witness for our faith. If we suffer persecution even in the neighborhood or the school or workplace that can be God's way of giving us the chance to demonstrate that we belong to Christ!

Back to Saul of Tarsus. It is possible that he was so angry at the words of Stephen that he flew into a super rage. At that point he needed papers to the clergy in the synagogues, so he could root out the young Christians. We need to understand, that in some cases the new believers in Christ still worshipped among the Jews in the synagogues. To many Jews, following Christ was just a subset of Judaism. Many who had not been converted to Christ just shrugged at seeing neighbors in the synagogues who believed in Jesus. But Saul wants them out and he is going to find them!

¹ Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest ² 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.

Saul had been going from house to house dragging people off to jail. He is still using his Jewish name "Saul." Later, when he becomes the missionary to the Gentiles, he begins to use his Roman name "Paul." We see that in Acts Chapter Thirteen. But in any case, at this point Saul is filled with rage. He is beyond furious because he just can't accept that some dead carpenter named Jesus has this power over people. Saul is sure that Jesus is dead! As when I asked an unbelieving man what he thought about Jesus and he replied quickly "He's dead!" So... if you

believed that Jesus had not been Resurrected and you believed that this “myth of Christ” was damaging to God's people, you might fight against it too. The only thing that will turn Saul around is to experience the Risen Christ for himself. So...

OBSERVATION NUMBER TWO: When sharing your faith with unbelieving friends and family remember that unless and until they experience the Risen Christ, they will not “get it.” They must experience Christ. Otherwise they will say things like “That’s good for you that you believe it. Fine. But I’m not interested.”

Saul will never relent until he sees the Resurrected Christ for himself. And now he does. We read:

³ As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.

We remember that Jesus said, “I am the light of the world!” Of course, that was a metaphor but in this case it was quite literally true. Recall that when Jesus went up to the Mount of Transfiguration, he could barely be looked at. We read:

Matthew 17:1-2 (NIV) ¹ After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. ² There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.

They could barely look at him! Remember last summer (2017) when the big eclipse came across North America? When the scientific people warned everyone not to look directly at the eclipse even with the glasses on? That was because the light of the sun is more searing than it even seems to be. It can penetrate the eye tissue and cause blindness. This is called “solar retinopathy” when the macula of the eye is damaged. Then scar tissue develops and vision is blurred or even lost.

The light emanating from Jesus when he was close up was a thousand times more powerful than the sun and Saul was immediately blinded. His loss of vision would have been permanent if Jesus had not miraculously healed him a few days later. But for now, he is blind. Notice that a moment later we read that God was merciful as always because the servants with Saul heard this exchange but did not see anything! Jesus is able to shine his blinding light directly upon the person he is confronting and no one else at a given moment! Now Saul is stunned and terrified and blind and on his knees. Imagine these moments of fear... we read:

⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

OBSERVATION NUMBER THREE: When the people of Christ are harmed Jesus insists that he himself is harmed! That he himself is persecuted. Thus, even today Jesus knows of everyone suffering for himself and he feels their pain.

Imagine Saul at this point. Talk about transition. His life is being turned around and he is in a complete fog. He has to ask:

⁵ "Who are you, Lord?"

This is always the case with those who do not believe in Christ. Its not just that they don't believe; it is that they do not know who he is! This is why Jesus had told his disciples:

Luke 10:22 (NIV) ²² "All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and no one knows who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

What an amazing blessing it is to be a Christian! You and I are recipients of Divine Mercy because he has shown us who Jesus is! The word used here for "reveal" is "apocalupto" from which we get the word "apocalypse!" It means to uncover something! To blow something up! When God revealed Christ to you He literally blew up your thinking and your spirit and your mind! But Saul is in the dark and does not know Christ! We are watching a man be blown up by God! "Who are you Lord?"

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.

Saul wants to cry out "No. Can't be! How can I be persecuting someone I don't even know?!" I think that is what Saul is thinking here... but Jesus in his mercy has plans to use Saul and Jesus in his mercy does not hate Saul. But he has something for Saul to do. We read that Jesus said:

⁶ "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."⁷ The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone.

Now the proud one stands up. The one who has been giving orders and breathing out murderous threats struggles to his feet, but he cannot see. He must be led like a little boy or an old man. He has gone from murderous independence to total humiliation. He has eyes that cannot see. We read:

⁸ 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. ⁹ For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

And now we see another life undergo a great transition. A faithful servant of Christ named Ananias had a vision. This was not the same Ananias who later dies for his deception. We read:

Acts 9:10-12 (NIV) ¹⁰ In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. ¹¹ 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. ¹² In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

Ananias would have heard what Saul was up to. He was a leader in the synagogue and probably had heard that Saul was coming for him. He is stunned at what the Risen Christ just told him! Ananias wants to say: "Wait Lord! Can we talk? You do realize that this man Saul is the worst of the worst right?" We read:

Acts 9:13-14 (NIV) ¹³ "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

Jesus explains himself to Ananias:

Acts 9:15-16 (NIV) ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

OBSERVATION NUMBER FOUR: God is filled with surprises! Sometimes God does the very thing we are certain He would not do!

It is fascinating that Saul went on to be the great missionary to the Gentiles. Some even argue that Saul was the most important sinner who ever lived! But at this point, he was still blind! He can't serve the Risen Christ without his sight, and so we read:

Acts:17-18 (NIV) ¹⁷ 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." ¹⁸ Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized...

OBSERVATION NUMBER FIVE: In order to be saved and in order to walk more closely with the Lord, He has to give us new vision. Sometimes He corrects our vision even after we have walked with him a long time.

But let us rejoice at how our eyes can be made clear. I like that story about Tom Phillips who was used by God to lead Charles Colson to Christ and salvation. Phillips was a millionaire

businessman who had everything in life a man could wish for... on the material side. He was the President of Raytheon Corporation and had a nice family and several homes. But there was an emptiness inside.

One night, he was in New York City for a dinner. After it was finished he walked alone past Madison Square Garden and at the big marquee all lit up. It read: **“Tonight! Billy Graham shares the Good News of Christ!”** So, this man who had everything but eternal life was about to experience total transition. He went in and sat alone listening to the Gospel. When the invitation came, he went down front humbly and asked Jesus to save him and give him the new life.

The marquee had changed his life because Christ was ready to change his life. Mr. Phillips simple testimony was that when he came out of the arena onto the sidewalk there was a light rain and a thousand shining lights. As he looked about he realized that everything looked different to him. Everything looked new and bright and clean. Like Saul, his eyes had been opened! His life was now one of total surrender to the Risen Christ.

Rejoice friends! The biggest transition of all is belonging to Jesus. And the proof is that we do not have to ask, “Who are you Lord?”

Let us pray.