

A PRISONER OF CHRIST JESUS

“God Has Reconciled Us to Himself”

by Jonathan Hayashi

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“There’s the motorcycle, parked where it was yesterday. Let’s go for a ride! The key is in it. Me first! Come on, come on!”

We attempted to kick-start the motorcycle.

“It won’t start! Let’s take it anyway. Come on, help me push it. If we can’t fix it, we can sell it for parts.”

Right around the corner, there were police sirens ready to escort us to the police station.

That was me 18 years ago in Japan. In September 2005, at the age of 15, I was in the police vehicle, cuffed for theft. I was put on the blacklist and sent to court. Running the streets and riding all over Asaba, far from God and lost in misery because of sin, I was a very angry, depressed youth.

I was trying to fill the emptiness within me with all the pleasures of this world. I knew, deep down inside, that life was more than indulging in fights, gambling, immorality, disrespect, and other destructive behaviors. But I didn’t know how else to live my life.

RESTLESS, EMPTY HEARTS

If we are honest, this is the story of our lives, isn’t it? Every single one of us today has that same thirst, to be loved and to believe in something or someone, that is true and real.

I sought after “that something” in every way to satisfy this soul, but thought I would find it in relationships, with multiple women, and yet it was never right. I sought my satisfaction in reputation, only to find myself alone, cast away from society, and empty inside. I pretended to be happy, but my insides were twisting with pain, longing for acceptance and love.

Every single one of us thirsts to be loved; even the most callous and hard-hearted longs for the affection of a parent, spouse, friend, or child. What Augustine said many years ago is indeed true, “Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in Thee.”¹

I relate to Augustine and feel like I can relate to the story found in the book of Philemon. Who would have thought

that a runaway slave, Onesimus, would be reconciled by the triumphant grace of God and was now a new believer in Christ? Running away from your master was a serious crime in Roman law. What seemed just would be Onesimus going to prison and Philemon breaking fellowship with Onesimus. But Paul pleads for something else.

The picture of the gospel is displayed in Paul's desire to reconcile Onesimus and Philemon. Even when Onesimus was once a "prisoner" in the wrongdoing, through Christ there can be true biblical reconciliation. Even when we were once sinners in the wrongdoing, through Christ, we have been reconciled to the Father.

Jesus welcomes messed up, vile, rebellious, depraved sinners. Regardless of culture or socio-economic background or status, a relationship in Christ enables freedom and reconciliation by grace.

Jesus welcomes
messed up,
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GOD IS IN THE BUSINESS OF GOSPEL RECONCILIATION

What is the gospel? The gospel is the good news story of King Jesus, God's Son, who came, died, and rose again for helpless sinners in a hopeless world so that all who believe, repent, and follow Him may inherit the eternal joy in Christ for the kingdom.

He is the one and only God over the world, and we all have sinned against Him. As a result, we have been separated from God. If we die in our guilt before God, we are separated from Him in hell forever.

But this God loves us. Indeed, He is love and made a way for us to Him because of His love. He wants us to be forgiven of all our sins and come back to Him through the person of Jesus, the God-Man—like us in every way, yet without sin.

If we turn from our sins and trust in Jesus for what He has done for us, we will be forgiven of all our sins. We will be reconciled to God now and forever. This is the greatest news ever.

As Scripture says, Jesus is the One through whom God was reconciling the world to Himself (2 Cor. 5:18-19). God longs for every single person to come and bow at the feet of the loving Savior in fellowship with Him forever. The reconciliation story is indeed the gospel story.

A FORMER PRISONER OF SIN

Though I was carnal, wicked, ignorant, sin-loving, and a God-hating prisoner, Scripture says Christ loved me (Rom. 5:8). There is healing and forgiveness in Christ's work of reconciliation. Through Christ's death and resurrection, God provided the means to restore our broken relationship.

The old hymn rings true: "I was sinking deep in sin, far from the peaceful shore. Very deeply stained within, sinking to rise no more."² Within my very being, I had no hope, and there was nothing good within me but sin. But thanks be to God! I was sixteen when I received the Lord as my Savior, and I was reconciled unto God. Outcasts and untouchables like me—God rescues us all.

References

1. Augustine of Hippo, "The Confessions of St. Augustin," in *The Confessions and Letters of St. Augustin with a Sketch of His Life and Work*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. J. G. Pilkington, vol. 1, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886), 45.
2. James Rowe and Howard E. Smith, "Love Lifted Me," No. 107, *Baptist Hymnal* (Nashville: Lifeway Worship, 2008), Public domain.



A TRANSFORMED MURDERER

+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. Saul experiences mercy from the Lord (Acts 9:1-9).
2. Saul receives a mission from the Lord (Acts 9:10-16).
3. Saul proclaims the name of the Lord (Acts 9:17-20).

Background Passage: Acts 9

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

In Saul's conversion, we see an example of the grace of God and the power of the gospel, which is able to transform even the most hostile opponents of Jesus.

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

The conversion and calling of Saul is a demonstration of God's power to save. Through an encounter with the crucified and risen Jesus, this once-hardened persecutor of God's people began his journey to becoming perhaps the greatest missionary the world has ever known. Only the gospel can transform a public opponent of Christ into a fervent witness to His salvation.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

Because we were once estranged from God but are now God's children through Jesus, we pray for the salvation of others with full confidence that God can transform even the hardest heart.

GROUP TIME

Group content found in the Daily Discipleship Guide is included in the shaded areas throughout the session.



SCRIPTURE HANDOUT

Scan this QR code for a reproducible handout of this session's Scripture passages.



INTRODUCTION

ASK: As participants arrive, ask: **Would someone like to share their conversion experience?** (explain that you are not looking for a dramatic story—any story will do and every story is a work of the Spirit; wait for a volunteer to respond first; only share your response as a conclusion to the discussion)

TRANSITION: Regeneration begins with the Lord's merciful and gracious work in our lives. It is undeserved and unexpected, and each conversion is unique in its own way, even if the same story plays itself out time and time again throughout history. Our God is a saving God!

SUMMARIZE: Help your group understand the **setting** for this session.

- The first-century church continued to grow in the power of the Holy Spirit. Although the theme so far has been the ministry of Peter in Acts, we backtrack to chapter 9 to take a look at Saul. Saul was a Jew with his mind set on crushing this new religious fervor rising out of the synagogues and city streets in the name of Jesus. He saw it as blasphemous because he didn't yet know the true God. He sought and obtained the power from the chief priests to bind all Jesus's followers, but he did not expect the arresting power of Jesus to bind him.



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POINT 1

SAUL EXPERIENCES MERCY FROM THE LORD (ACTS 9:1-9).

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Acts 9:1-9** from his or her Bible.

1 But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest **2** and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. **3** Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. **4** And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” **5** And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. **6** But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” **7** The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. **8** Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. **9** And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

EXPLAIN: Use **PACK ITEM 13: PAUL’S EARLY YEARS** to learn more about Paul. The conversion of Saul is one of the pivotal moments in all human history. Saul, also known as Paul, wrote most of the New Testament, and his writing and thinking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit changed the world. God used Paul to bring the gospel to the Gentiles. He was a primary instrument in taking Jesus’s name to the nations. Discuss the main idea below while referring to **verses 1-6** (Daily Discipleship Guide [DDG] p. 110):

No heart is too hardened for Jesus’s softening mercy and grace.

- Saul was not a man any Christian wanted to cross. He breathed “threats and murder against the disciples.” He was on a rampage with an arrest warrant in his hand and hatred in his heart. The scary thing about the pre-converted Saul is his assurance that he was right. His zeal for Judaism convinced him that persecuting Christians was the true path.
- Later in life, Saul (known also by his Roman name, Paul) would write in Romans 5:8, “But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” While Saul was persecuting Christians, Jesus mercifully stopped him in his tracks and saved him.
- Mercy is mercy before we realize it’s even there. It’s the kind of thing only realized afterward. We aren’t looking for it, but we can’t imagine living without it when it comes.
- Why the great light in verse 3? J. I. Packer states it is because of Saul’s great pride and zeal that “Christ had to show some sign of his majesty for Paul to see that he was dealing with God himself and not with any mortal man.”¹



THE WAY

An early name for Christianity, possibly describing the way to salvation or referring to Jesus’s statement that He is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

- If any of us are to be saved, a similar thing must happen, albeit often of a much smaller order. Few have blinding lights, but if blinding lights are what it takes to make an impact, the Lord Jesus can do it. And in response, Saul fell to the ground in fear and honor.
- Notice in verse 5 that Saul asked who spoke to him. When Jesus revealed His name, the humbling truly began. Saul found it was not the followers of Jesus whom he was persecuting; it was Jesus Himself. That's how closely Jesus identifies with His people. To harm one of them is to harm Him.
- Jesus then told Saul to go into the city and wait for further instructions.

ASK: (DDG p. 110)

What is interesting about the various ways Jesus meets and saves people? (Jesus can do whatever it takes to help someone find salvation; He uses people and circumstances, good and bad; He can appear in dreams; He can use tragedy and loss as well as blessing and triumphs)

TEACH: Use the below points and **verses 7-9** to teach the following (DDG p. 110):

When you truly meet Jesus, He humbles you and you are changed forever.

- Those with Saul heard the sound but did not see Jesus's glory. Their eyes were still figuratively blind. Saul, though blind, could now finally see. No, he could not see the physical objects in front of him. But he beheld Jesus's glory, and it transformed him.
- Saul obeyed and got up from the ground, but not being able to physically see, the men with him helped him enter the city of Damascus. Saul continued to be humbled, needing help from others.
- Whether Saul fasted or refrained from eating and drinking because of the recent events or because he couldn't feed himself being blind, we do not know. We do know he couldn't see for three days and waited for instructions as Jesus said.

DISCUSS: (DDG p. 110)

What are ways God humbles us when we need a greater glimpse of Him? (He can bring some discomfort to our life; He can bring things into our lives that are out of our control; He can remind us of our sin, past or present; He can remind us of His greatness)

TRANSITION: The humbled Saul was now at the mercy of the servants of Jesus whom he previously persecuted.

POINT 2

SAUL RECEIVES A MISSION FROM THE LORD (ACTS 9:10-16).

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Acts 9:10-16** from his or her Bible.

10 Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” And he said, “Here I am, Lord.” **11** And the Lord said to him, “Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, **12** and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.” **13** But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. **14** And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.” **15** But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. **16** For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”

INTERACT: In groups of 3-4, respond to this scenario: Imagine yourself in Ananias’s shoes. Saul was ravaging the church, arresting and handing over Christians to the authorities. He was a man to steer clear of. But suddenly, Ananias received a vision from the Lord with instructions to go directly to this persecutor. How would you respond?

INSTRUCT: Use **verses 10-14** and the points below to instruct on the following (DDG p. 110):

Believers follow Jesus even into the unknown because Jesus works in marvelous ways, even if His disciples can’t yet see His plan.

- Ananias was a disciple in Damascus. When the Lord called Ananias by name, unlike Saul who didn’t know it was the Lord, Ananias replied. “Here I am, Lord” (v. 10). Ananias’s response brings to mind moments in the Old Testament when God gave people significant tasks, such as Abraham (Gen. 22:1), Moses (Ex. 3:4), and Samuel (1 Sam. 3:4).
- Ananias knew Saul’s name, and he feared it. Saul was known as a man who had “done great harm” to the saints in Jerusalem (v. 13), and Saul would have authority to arrest Ananias. But the word of God superseded Ananias’s fears. He trusted Jesus, even if he had hesitations about the task.
- Could Jesus not have healed Saul’s eyesight Himself? Of course, He could. But Jesus chose to work in this world through the obedience of His followers for both Ananias’s and Saul’s benefit. Ananias had a part to play, not because Ananias was so great, but because the grace of Jesus was so great that using Ananias would highlight it a little clearer to Saul.

VOICES from THE CHURCH

“If you know that God loves you, you should never question a directive from Him. It will always be right and best. When He gives you a directive, you are not just to observe it, discuss it, or debate it. You are to obey it.”²

—Henry T. Blackaby

ASK: (DDG p. 110)

What are areas in our lives that Jesus might be telling us to walk into that might seem too unknown to us? (sharing the gospel with a coworker; serving in a ministry at church; helping a neighbor; random acts of kindness; going on a missions trip; stepping into a leadership role)

COMPARE: In groups of 3-4, suggest individuals answer, “What are a few of your goals in life, personally or professionally?” Then look at Saul and compare the task for which Jesus appointed Saul with Saul’s original mission. Saul was going to inflict suffering, but Jesus rearranged his life to live for Christ. Then have individuals answer, “What is one goal in your life that you can focus on to change or add onto, that could bring more glory to God?”

EXPLAIN: Using **verses 15-16**, explain the following (DDG p. 110):

When Jesus transforms a person, He does so to grow the kingdom of God and bring salvation to more people who would trust in Him.

- Saul would go from persecutor of Christians to Jesus’s chosen instrument of worldwide evangelism. What a change! Saul was chosen as a child of God, for a particular ministry to the Gentiles. Saul would spend the rest of his life taking the name of the One he once persecuted to Jews and Gentiles alike around the known world. Saul would fulfill the promises of God that His kingdom would expand to all nations, tribes, and tongues. What a mission! What a gift! The call of God is not only for a select nationality. It is a worldwide invitation.
- Saul would see how much he would have to suffer for Christ’s name. That sounds like a threat, but it is not. And Saul did not receive it as such, as we know from his later writings (Rom. 8:18). To Saul, suffering for Christ would be an honor.

DISCUSS: (DDG p. 110)

From Day 4 in the DDG: **How can we specifically live out our own calling to spread the good news of Jesus?** (hospitality and giving are some ways to help grow the kingdom of God; but also have people name names of those they want to see reached; take time to pray for these people and opportunities to arise)

TRANSITION: Saul went from persecuting those who shared about Jesus to being the one who would share about Jesus. The transition from blasphemer to praise-giver was nearly complete. All that was left was for Saul to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

POINT 3

SAUL PROCLAIMS THE NAME OF THE LORD (ACTS 9:17-20).

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Acts 9:17-20** from his or her Bible.

17 So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” **18** And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; **19** and taking food, he was strengthened. For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus. **20** And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.”

DIG: Tell the group that we will be looking at the two characters in this passage. First, we see Saul’s conversion from being a persecutor of Christians to being a believer Himself. Invite a volunteer to read the key doctrine “Regeneration” from the DDG (p. 110).

Key Doctrine #69: Regeneration: Regeneration takes place at the beginning of the Christian life and is the miraculous transformation, or the new birth, that takes place within an individual through the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit (John 3:3-8; Titus 3:5). It is the divine side of conversion (a person turning to Christ in repentance and faith), being the work of God within a person’s life that causes him or her to be born again, a work that human effort is unable to produce.

EXPLAIN: Use the points below and **verses 17-20** to show Saul’s regeneration:

- Ananias’s touch was a healing one. When Ananias prayed, Saul’s eyes opened. Something like scales fell from his eyes. As the Spirit filled Saul’s heart, what a relief that must have been! How good that must have felt! Saul regained his sight, and the Holy Spirit filled his heart.
- When the scales fell from his eyes, Saul got up and was baptized. He emerged a cleansed man. His sin was forgiven. The Spirit was alive in him. He had a new purpose, a new mission, and a new master. He regained his strength. But this strength was of a new nature. It was now a strength dependent upon the grace of Jesus.

LIST: Invite a volunteer to read Philippians 3:4-11. Guide the group to write on a board a list of characteristics of Saul’s life as a Pharisee and his life as a Christian from the passage. Notice the change in what he thought he could have confidence in, and then what he found that he could truly rely on. (circumcised as a Jew, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee, blameless; in contrast to the worth of knowing Christ Jesus, gaining Christ, being found in Him, a righteousness that comes from faith in Christ, the power of the resurrection, to share in the suffering of Christ)

EXPLAIN: Now move from Saul's character to that of Ananias and the disciples. Notice the way Ananias responded to Jesus's command and the way he greeted Saul. There was no hesitation to accept Saul as a brother. This is a remarkable example to us of how to respond to Jesus and His work in the world. Discuss **verses 17-20** and the following (DDG p. 111):

God uses the body of believers, when we respond in obedience and grace, to help and encourage each other to proclaim Christ.

- Ananias responded to Jesus's command with prompt obedience. He went and entered the house. Do you wonder what that must have been like? Was he afraid? That would not have been unreasonable. After all, Saul had come to persecute people like him. But Jesus had appeared to Ananias and confirmed to him His intentions for Saul. From those words, Ananias decided to receive Saul not as an enemy but as a friend. In verse 17, he welcomed Saul as a "brother." That simple act is filled with the amazing grace of Jesus. The kind of grace that makes friends of enemies.
- Ananias confirmed to Saul what he had experienced on the road to Damascus, that the Lord Jesus appeared. Possibly reassuring himself as he was reassuring Saul, Ananias mentioned that he was "sent" by Jesus so that Saul could see again and receive the Holy Spirit.
- Through Ananias being obedient, Saul's blindness was healed, and he saw with new eyes—Spirit-filled eyes. And the first person he saw was one who called him a brother in Christ, one whom previously he might have persecuted. Now, he had a new family and a new purpose.
- He then spent time with the disciples. Surely, Ananias vouched for Saul among the disciples in Damascus. Luke says he spent "some" time with them, probably enough to learn and be encouraged by them that he "immediately" began proclaiming Christ.

ASK: (DDG p. 111)

Why do you think God uses us in ministry even when He doesn't have to? (to develop our character; to call us to obedience; to give us purpose; to grow our love for one another; to help us have grace and compassion for others, to work alongside us)

TRANSITION: The conversion of Saul was complete, and the world would never be the same. Jesus would use Saul to write a lot of the New Testament and he would take the gospel to the Gentiles.

MY RESPONSE

SAY: The conversion and calling of Saul is a demonstration of God's power to save. Through an encounter with the crucified and risen Jesus, this once-hardened persecutor of God's people began his journey to becoming perhaps the greatest missionary the world has ever known. Only the gospel can transform a public opponent of Christ into a fervent witness to His salvation. Because we were once estranged from God but are now God's children through Jesus, we pray for the salvation of others with full confidence that God can transform even the hardest heart.

HEAD:

There is no heart so hard that Jesus cannot soften it. Jesus is the most powerful Person in the universe, and His grace is greater than any person's sin. Jesus is the Savior, and when He saves, He not only redeems that person but uses that person to redeem others, just as He did with Saul and changed the course of history.

How do we see God's love, mercy, and grace through how He saves us and others?

HEART:

The heart is the center of a person's whole being. It is the heart that must be softened and changed before life is reoriented to a new path. And every heart changed is a miraculous work of God. We should be grateful that no heart is so hard that Jesus cannot melt it by His grace.

How can we praise God for our conversion story?

HANDS:

Ananias is a great example of obeying Jesus's call to pray for and minister to others. He set his fears aside and followed Jesus into a home where an enemy resided. But because he knew the grace of God, he went to Saul with grace, extended his hand for prayer, and received Saul as a brother.

Who is God calling you to minister to and pray for right now?

PRAY: Father, we thank You that You can redeem even the hardest of hearts. We thank You for the conversion of Saul and that You used him to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth. Use us as You see fit. We are so thankful for Your mercy and grace.

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"God turned this great persecutor of the early Christians into the first great missionary. He took the man who had been doing most to harm the church and turned him into the man who did most to build it up. If God could do that with Saul, God can do the same thing today."³

—James Montgomery Boice (1938–2000)

POINT 1: SAUL EXPERIENCES MERCY FROM THE LORD (ACTS 9:1-9).

+ **COMMENTARY**

“I am Jesus.’ The voice came from heaven, and so it should have pierced Paul’s mind as he realized that he had been fighting against God. This ought to have turned him immediately to true submission, when he realized that he would not escape scot-free if he carried on rebelling against the hand he could not avoid. From this verse we can learn many things. Christ showed what great store he puts by the Gospel when he said that he will not be separated from this cause. Therefore, he can no more refuse to defend his cause than he can deny himself. Secondly, believers may take courage from hearing that the Son of God is their partner in the cross when they suffer for the Gospel’s sake. He lays his shoulder to it, so to speak, so that he may bear part of the burden. Not for nothing does Scripture say that he suffers in us; he wants us to be wholly assured that he feels the same feelings along with us, as if the enemies of the Gospel wounded us through his side. That is why Paul says that whatever persecutions the faithful now suffer for the defense of the Gospel are missing from Christ’s sufferings (Colossians 1:24). Moreover, this consolation not only helps to encourage us when we suffer with our head, but also gives us hope that he will deliver us from our afflictions. He proclaims from heaven that all our suffering is common to him as well as to us. Lastly, we see what horrible judgment is prepared for the persecutors of the church, who fight against heaven itself and brandish their spears, which will soon come back on their own heads. By troubling heaven, they provoke the thunderbolt of God’s wrath against themselves. Also, we are all taught generally not to attack Christ by harming our brothers unjustly, and specifically that no one must resist the truth rashly and in blind fury, pretending to be zealous.”⁴

+ **ILLUSTRATION**

There are moments in all our lives that change us. One minute we were someone, and the next, we are someone else. Perhaps it was a tragedy. Maybe it was a moment of utter joy. For married folks, before the ceremony, you are two people; after, you are one.

Christian regeneration is like that. One moment we are dead in our trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1), and after the Holy Spirit regenerates our hearts, we are made new. We are alive in Christ (v. 5).

EXTRA

Not everyone has the Damascus Road conversion like Saul. Many of us cannot even pinpoint the exact moment we were converted. That's okay. It's not a problem at all. The point is that, at some point, you were changed by a power not your own. God reached down from heaven and made you new from the inside out. A slow conversion is the same as an instantaneous one. It's a miracle of God. It's an appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ, beheld not with our physical eyes but, like Saul, with the eyes of our hearts.

POINT 2: SAUL RECEIVES A MISSION FROM THE LORD

(ACTS 9:10-16).

+ COMMENTARY

“The risen Lord Jesus was going to employ him in a way that Saul could not have imagined for even a moment. Even the Christians in Damascus could not have imagined that God would call as their chief spokesperson and leader the very man who had tried to kill them. Yet Saul was to become God's instrument, ‘to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel,’ adding, ‘for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake’ (Acts 9:15-16 NASB). This says something about the strangeness of God's providence—you can never really predict what God might do to expedite his purposes for the church of Jesus Christ. William Cowper captures this truth beautifully: ‘God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform; He plants his footsteps in the sea And rides upon the storm.’ What began as a mission of persecution ended with the conversion of the persecutor. God turned the tables, bringing about one of the most important and dramatic events in the history of the church. It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of Saul's conversion—for the early church as well as ourselves. Thus, we should continually thank God for what he did in Saul's heart.”⁵

+ ILLUSTRATION

In physics, Newton's third law states that when one body exerts a force on another body, the second body exerts an equal force on the first body. This principle of action and reaction explains why a force tends to deform or change the shape of the body. This can be an illustration of how when Jesus ushers in His kingdom, the forces of the world and of Satan, are going to react. And thus, for the believer and the body, there will be consequences that include blessings and suffering.

Paul was involved in more ministry than most of us will ever see, but one truth is universal: If we are to serve Christ, we will suffer with Christ. There is no way to follow Jesus in this world and come out unscathed because the forces of God and Satan are at play. Of course, God is always victorious, but on this side of heaven, there are sufferings to endure. We can never know the path that the Lord Jesus will ask us to walk. This life is about Jesus, not about you or me. When we see that Jesus is the point of everything, we become willing to go anywhere, do anything, and take any risk for His glory.

When we see the way the world treated our Lord, we see a glimpse of how they likely will treat us as well. But to be treated so is not a sign of God's abandonment. It is a sign of God's involvement. When we start praying for boldness in the face of danger, we will start rejoicing in suffering for the sheer amazement that we are counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Jesus.

POINT 3: SAUL PROCLAIMS THE NAME OF THE LORD (ACTS 9:17-20).

+ COMMENTARY

“Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, ‘Brother Saul... ’” (v. 17). The angels must have sung when they heard these words of forgiveness. Ananias probably knew some young women who had been widowed by Saul. Perhaps some of his friends had been orphaned by Saul’s bloodbath or had been killed themselves. But Ananias (whose name means “God is gracious”) forgave him. Because the two men were brothers in Christ, they were parts of the same body. . . . Ananias is one of the obscure heroes of the Church. We never hear of him again, though he did a great work.”⁶

+ ILLUSTRATION

Recently, journalist, historian, and teacher Molly Worthen converted to Christ. She was always interested in religion from a sociological and historical perspective, but as she got close to a church and a pastor in her hometown for a news story, she was drawn to Christ and redeemed.

In an interview with Colin Hansen on the Gospelbound podcast, she made a statement that sounds so much like something Saul could have said after his conversion experience. She talked about how she wanted to meet Christians. She needed friends. Her circle of friends and family did not know Jesus, and they could not understand her newfound faith. She was, in a way, very lonely and needed friendships with others who had experienced the same grace she had experienced.⁷

Ananias was perhaps the friend Saul needed in the days after his conversion experience. His companions did not know Jesus and did not understand what had happened to him. He was likely lonely. Once the leader of the clan, suddenly, he was an outsider.

What a difference friendship can make. Ananias welcomed Saul as his brother immediately. That is the kind of friendship we ought to extend to other Christians, perhaps especially to new believers whose world suddenly is not like it once was.

References

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