

UNIT 33

+

A PRISONER OF

CHRIST JESUS

“God Has Reconciled Us to Himself”

by Jonathan Hayashi

“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.

“Thou hast formed us
for Thyself, and our
hearts are restless
until they find
rest in Thee.”

–Augustine

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

Jesus welcomes messed up,
vile, rebellious, depraved sinners.

There is healing and forgiveness in Christ's work of reconciliation.

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 Corinthians 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 (Romans 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.



A TRANSFORMED MURDERER



+ **SESSION IN A SENTENCE:**

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.

+ **BACKGROUND PASSAGE:**

Acts 9

+ **SETTING:**

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.

DAY 1

READ:

Acts 9:1-4

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Acts 9:4

NOTES

Look at how Jesus addressed Saul in Acts 9:4. Do you know how closely Jesus identifies with His people? He considers an attack on His people as an attack on Him. Saul was not looking for Jesus. He was looking for Jesus's followers. He wanted to arrest them for blaspheming God. He did not realize that the Jesus they followed was alive and on the move. As Saul sought to bind Jesus's disciples, he sought to bind Jesus. But Jesus cannot be bound. If death could not hold Him (Acts 2:24), Saul couldn't either.

There is comfort in this for the follower of Jesus. When an injustice is done to you, Jesus does not stand aloof. He considers that injustice as something done unto Him. You are that connected to Him. You are, in fact, one with Him (Romans 6:5).

That means that when you face hardship in this life, when you face unfair words and deeds from unbelievers, and when you face suffering for Jesus's name, He is with you. He stands for you. He defends you. He protects you. And, by the wonder of His grace and mercy, He may even use the wrong done to you to save the wrongdoer through you. Only Jesus can do such a miracle.

How does knowing Jesus identifies with you change the way you face the challenges of today?

DAY 2

READ:

Acts 9:1-5

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Acts 9:5

NOTES



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.

The Bible repeatedly describes God's glory as a shining, blinding light. Saul would have understood the light to represent God's glory, but he might have been confused about the accusation against him. Saul believed, after all, that he was doing God's work by arresting Christians (John 16:2). When Saul asked who was speaking to him—whom he was persecuting—this is the response he received, "I am Jesus." Those three words are the most authoritative words in the world. They can change a man from a staunch opponent into a devoted follower, and for Saul, he would have no doubt about Jesus's power or authority.

No other name is this powerful. No other name holds as much potential to change a sinner's heart. No other name will cause all knees one day to bow before Him. The name of Jesus is greater than any other name that ever has been or ever will be spoken. His name can drive out the demons (Matthew 7:22; Mark 16:17). His name can bring healing (Acts 4:30). His name can justify the sinner (1 Corinthians 6:11). His name is the one name that has been given all authority in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18). It is the greatest name in the universe.

That day on the road to Damascus, Saul came to know the name of Jesus. Later in his life, quoting from the prophet Joel (2:32), Paul wrote that everyone who calls on Jesus's name will be saved (Romans 10:13). What's in a name? If it is Jesus's name, salvation is wrapped up in it (Acts 4:12).

How does the power of Jesus's name encourage your heart today?

DAY 3

READ:

Acts 9:10-16

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Acts 9:10

NOTES

When we give our lives to Jesus, we give our whole selves to Him. We give up our autonomy and place our lives into Jesus's mighty and gracious hands. That means, of course, that we cannot determine where we will end up. Jesus directs our lives. He calls us to go one place at one time and another place at another time, and we are simply to go where He leads.

Ananias experienced this reality in a powerful way. He was at home in Damascus, minding his own business, when Jesus showed up and called him into the house of an enemy. Saul was in town, and though he came with evil intentions, Jesus met him on the way and changed his direction. He was now in need of prayer so that the Holy Spirit would come and inhabit his heart. Ananias probably had other plans than stepping into the same room as a murderer of Christians, but when Jesus calls, you answer with, "Here I am, Lord."

The response of Ananias is an example to us all. He showed how we are to respond to the voice of Jesus. Notice that he did need some reassurance. In verses 13-14, Ananias brought up his concerns. But the Lord answered those objections, and Ananias obeyed.

We can never tell where Jesus might take us, but we can know that if He takes us there, it is for purposes beyond what we can imagine at the moment. Perhaps there is a Saul waiting for prayer. Who are you to say no to Jesus when He comes calling?

How do you need to yield to Jesus's call today?

DAY 4

READ:

Acts 9:10-16

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Acts 9:15

NOTES

Because Jesus is Lord, He has the right to use us how He sees fit. As Paul would later write, Jesus can mold us as He likes. We are at His disposal as vessels for His use (Romans 9:16-24; 2 Corinthians 4:5-7; Ephesians 2:8-10; 2 Timothy 2:20-22).

That can sound threatening, of course. We love control over our lives. But in the hands of Jesus, we can be used for glorious purposes that fulfill us in ways we can barely imagine. Paul would suffer much because of this call on his life, but even he would consider those sufferings as nothing compared to the glory that awaited (Romans 8:18). It was, in other words, worth it to him. It was an honor to him (Philippians 1:29).

Each of us has a call on our lives from God, like Paul. Paul was a very special man with a very particular mission, and Jesus used him to change the entire trajectory of the world. That's a big deal.

But Jesus uses you in profound ways too. You might have a neighbor who needs Jesus. You might have a family that needs love and care. You might have a workplace or a school or friends that need to hear the gospel to be saved. Jesus may use you for greater things than you can yet imagine. You are His chosen instrument for something, and that means your life is of extreme value and worth.

How can we specifically live out our own calling to spread the good news of Jesus?

VOICES from THE CHURCH

"God's promise to you is that no sin is beyond the reach of his forgiveness. You can rest in faith in his grace. If he could use murdering, abusing, blaspheming Paul, he can forgive and use you."¹

—Elyse Fitzpatrick

DAY 5

READ:

Acts 9:17-20

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Acts 9:17

NOTES

How can an enemy become a friend? Only through a profound change at the deepest part of our hearts.

Saul was an enemy of Jesus. Ananias was a friend of Jesus. Therefore, they should have been enemies of one another. Acts 9 starts out just that way. But by verse 17, there was a change in Saul that created a change in Ananias's view of him, and it had nothing to do with what Saul did or didn't do. It had everything to do with what Jesus did. On the road to Damascus, as Saul sought to arrest Christians, Jesus met him and converted him.

Then Jesus appeared to Ananias and called him to go and pray for Saul that he would be filled with the Holy Spirit. Ananias obeyed, and he got up and went to the house in which Saul was staying. He greeted him in Acts 9:17 with two amazing words, "Brother Saul."

A day earlier, Saul was not his brother. He was his enemy. Then Jesus got involved, and He changed Saul's heart. Notice how quick Ananias was to accept Saul. There was no hesitation in his heart. He welcomed him into the family despite all the wrongs he had done against Jesus and His people. Ananias called Saul his brother. What amazing grace!

Jesus calls us to pray for our enemies (Luke 6:28). Who is the Lord calling you to pray for today?

GROUP

NOTES

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

POINT 1: Saul experiences mercy from the Lord (Acts 9:1-9).

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

? **What is interesting about the various ways Jesus meets and saves people?**

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

? **What are ways God humbles us when we need a greater glimpse of Him?**

POINT 2: Saul receives a mission from the Lord (Acts 9:10-16).

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

? **What are areas in our lives that Jesus might be telling us to walk into that might seem too unknown to us?**

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.

? **From Day 4: How can we specifically live out our own calling to spread the good news of Jesus?**

POINT 3: Saul proclaims the name of the Lord (Acts 9:17-20).

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.

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



Why do you think God uses us in ministry even when He doesn't have to?

MY RESPONSE

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:** How do we see God's love, mercy, and grace through how He saves us and others?
- **HEART:** How can we praise God for our conversion story?
- **HANDS:** Who is God calling you to minister to and pray for right now?



Scan this QR code to access this session's Scripture passages.

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)