

11/8/15

Acts 9:1-9

A Changed Man

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.

(Pastor Prays)

We have before us the most dramatic conversion story in the whole Bible. Even people who don't go to church know the phrase, "Damascus Road Experience." Paul's conversion is astounding. In fact, it's so astonishing, Luke tells it 3 times in the Book of Acts. Saul was by birth a Jew, by citizenship a Roman, and by education, he was a Greek. But by the Grace of God, he was an Apostle like nowhere else in the Bible. We have a picture of marvelous power of the Gospel to transform sinners.

Nobody expects Saul to be converted. His heart is too hard and his will is too strong. His hatred is too deep and his ambition has blinded him. His mind was possessed so much that v. 1 says he was breathing threats and murders. He's that past person you would ever think would come to Christ and yet *God* broke into his life, overwhelming his ambition, and from this experience forward, the man Saul would never be the same and that's the point. It's what the Gospel of Jesus does. It changes you so that you are never the same again. Your experience might not be as outwardly dramatic as Paul's, but if you are a believer, it's as inwardly powerful as his ever was.

God works Through the Gospel in all kinds of People

God Specializes in Bad People

Even Jesus said, "I came not to save the righteous but sinners." And what a mean sinner Saul was.

In fact, if you were to start in Chapter 7 of Acts, you would find Saul described as a particularly unsavory character. In Acts 7:58, Luke tells us he takes part in the stoning of Stephen. Then in Chapter 8:1, Luke says Saul approved of his execution. In Acts 8:3, Luke tells us Saul is ravaging and terrorizing the church – systematically breaking into house after house and dragging off men and women and putting them in prison and in our text 9:1-2, the air he breathes is murder. He has blood in his eyes and he's headed to a town named Damascus with the authority to keep on killing. He was proud, ambitious, brilliant and hateful. His goal was advancement and his way of getting there was to hunt down Christians like ISIS is doing now.

By anybody's measure, he was a bad person. But that is who God specializes in – bad people. Not good people. He seeks the lost, the misguided, the strung out and materialistic. He seeks people who don't believe. When you read the Gospels, you see Jesus who became known as the friend of sinners. Think of who he spoke to – Zacchaeus, the fraud - the woman at the well, a serial adulteress – even the rich young ruler, he loved. He specializes in bad people. People who don't even ever think about Him. Sometimes people come to church and feel intimidated because of their past or resentful because people are hypocrites. Don't forget, we are sinners, saved by grace, orphans made heirs by the cross of Christ. And if God will save Saul, he will save you. He specializes in bad people.

Let me tell you what else, he not only specializes in bad people...

God Changes Hard People

In v. 3, as Saul is traveling it happened. And notice how it happened in v. 3 & 4 *Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"*

The journey from Jerusalem to Damascus is about 150 miles. It would take about a week and he was almost there. And notice in v. 3 & 4, God meets him, not when Saul is seeking God, but when Saul was hurting the church and living outside of God's will. God came after Saul. Saul would not have changed on his own. Saul despised the church and anything to do with Jesus of Nazareth.

Now look, those of you who have a spouse or children or friends that have no interest in Christ or are even antagonistic to the Lord: don't despair of those that show no signs of conversion. Saul wasn't open to the Gospel or interested in Christ or sensitive to spiritual things. He was utterly closed and completely convinced that Christianity wasn't true. As he would later write in Ephesians 2, he was "dead in sin." Saul was hard and dried and shriveled up on the inside and what happened to him was sudden and unexpected and a complete work of God's Amazing Grace.

Here's my point: if you know someone close to you who needs Christ and yet is not interested or, even worse, is hateful about it, don't stop praying and speaking the truth

in love. There's always hope with our God. Rosaria Butterfield wrote a book, "The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert." She was a lesbian English teacher specializing in feminist thought and had no desire for God. She miraculously came to Christ and said, "There is only one thing to do when you meet the living God. You must fall on your face and repent of your sins."

You know what is ironic to me in this passage. Before the Damascus Road experience when Saul was converted, the last person to have seen the resurrected Christ and glorified Savior was Stephen – a man Saul had a hand in killing. The next to see the Glorified Jesus was Saul. God's Grace. I'm telling you this to point out in dramatic fashion that people don't seek *God*, God seeks *people*. If people are changed, God, by the power of the Gospel, does the changing. Confrontational – Convicting. V. 4, *And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"*

Saul needed to know how wrong he had been. When we preach the Good News, we always must include how bad the Bad News is. God is in the business of changing hard people. Some of you here today were at one time so gone that almost everyone had given up on you. He changed you. Some of you have people you love, a son or daughter like that; don't give up. Keep taking them to the Lord. It's His business. Some of you here *are* the hard person. A loving, kind and forgiving God pursues you. In faith, turn and confess your sins to God and believe in the Lord Jesus who died for your sins and be saved.

He specializes in Bad People...He changes Hard People

He Loves Church People

This is interesting to me.

When Saul fell to the ground, the exalted Jesus said to him, "Why are you persecuting me?" Saul replies, "Who are you Lord?" "I am Jesus who you persecute." Saul had never met Jesus. He didn't know what He even looked like. Saul was persecuting the church but when he set out to hurt the church, he was persecuting Jesus. Years later as a Christian missionary, in Acts 20, in his farewell address to Ephesus, Paul would call the church, "The Church of God, He Purchased With His Own Blood." John MacArthur says, "No blow struck on earth, goes unfelt in Heaven." This passage reminds us of the unbreakable connection Christ has with His church. Be careful how we treat the church and the people of the church. The Lord's church. Hickory Grove is 60 years old today. He purchased her with His blood. We don't devour one another; we take care of one another. We are a group of Christian people. Christ has the power to change.

He Builds With Humble People

And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. 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. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

In v. 4, when Christ appears, Saul falls to the ground. Now remember, he came out of Jerusalem toward Damascus with an entourage with him, breathing out threats. He had great authority and was headed to Damascus with power. He met Jesus, was knocked to the ground and in v. 4 he was confronted. In v. 6, he was controlled and in v. 8 & 9 he was humbled, led by the hand because he was blinded.

Christ took this proud man and stripped him. He thought he was headed to Damascus to run the show. He met Jesus and all pride was removed. God hates pride.

V. 9 is a pitiful sight. He is blind and in such turmoil and when God speaks to Ananias, Paul is praying. Everything he thought was right is turned on its head. Three days of searching, changing and remaking. God would remove pride and create a man for His own glory. Ananias will come to the street called Straight, put his hands on Saul, call him brother and the crusade of Saul's life would begin. God, by the power of Jesus, changes people. In v. 18, something like scales fell off Saul's eyes, he was filled with the Spirit, was baptized and started a new life.

That's just what God offers today: new life in Christ. If God can change a man like Saul, He can change you. If God will forgive a man like Saul, He will forgive you. Will you receive him today?

He Specializes in Bad People

He Changes Hard People

He Loves Church People

He Builds Humble People

He Uses Obedient People

By the Power of Jesus, God changes People and it starts when you repent and believe.

(Pastor Prays)