

“For God So Loved the World”

Acts 9:1-22

Pastor Jarrett Stephens

For the last twelve weeks we have been making our way through the early chapters of the book of Acts in this series we are calling: *FORWARD*.

And our goal from the very beginning has been to look at and discover how God moved in the hearts and life of the early church. They became such a force to be reckoned with...always advancing.

The power of God was on display in such an incredible way in this early church. We have seen how:

- They loved one another and cared for those in need both inside and outside their faith community...
- They were together often...meeting in homes...fellowshipping together...worshipping together...
- A common characteristic noted was their unity...they were of one heart and one mind...this often flowed from their commitment to prayer and seeking the heart of God.
- They were bold and courageous in their witness, refusing to stay silent regarding the claims of Christ and the hope they had in the gospel...

And as a result of all of this, something else we have seen throughout the early chapters of this book are huge numbers of people coming to know Christ in a personal way.

- 3,000 people at Pentecost received Jesus as Lord and were baptized.
- Another 2,000 came to believe in Christ after hearing Peter preach at Solomon's Portico in the Temple.

This is the thing about the gospel. When you live the message of Jesus out in a true and authentic way and combine that with proclaiming the message of Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit, the end result is ALWAYS going to be lives changed.

It was true in the early days of the church as we have seen in this Acts study and it's true now as we are witnessing it here in our own church!

Illus. Last week – This past week...talk about moving FORWARD...talk about seeing lives changed! God blessed us and we baptized 112 people across our campuses! So far this year we

have baptized over 600 people and have 10 more we are baptizing at the end of the service today!

Illus. Baptist Press – We got a phone call here at the church from *Baptist Press*. It is the news arm of the Southern Baptist Convention. They had gotten word about this past weekend and wanted to do a story on what God is doing here.

My thought when I first heard they called is this is going to be a short story because we're not doing anything super-creative or uber-out there. We're doing exactly what they were doing in Acts. We are living out the message of the gospel and sharing the message of the gospel and as a result we are seeing God change lives. He is doing a work! He is changing lives!

And THIS, Champion Forest is what it's all about! It's all about seeing God change lives by the power of the gospel. And I hope we NEVER get over it!

- Let's NEVER get over seeing people pass from death to life...
- Let's NEVER get over seeing people transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light...
- Let's NEVER get over seeing a life changed by Jesus...

Whether it's one person that is changed or 601 people that have been changed, let's keep living and preaching the message of the Christ so that we can see it more and more. It's life change that we're after and life change is what the passage we are looking at today is all about.

In fact, this is the title of today's message. I'm simply calling it: **A Changed Life**

I don't know of a conversion in the Bible that is as dramatic as the one we will read about today in Acts chapter nine. I also don't know when put into the context of Christian history if there is a more significant conversion than we read about here in Acts chapter nine.

If you've been in church for any amount of time, you know I am talking about the conversion of Saul...the man who we know today as the Apostle Paul. In terms of influence and impact, there is no one that compares to what this man achieved for the sake of Christ and the advancement of the church.

He is responsible for writing 13 of our 27 New Testament books and if you ever wonder about his contribution to the Kingdom, just listen to this tribute by author and commentator, **Lloyd J. Ogilvie**:

“Paul is the most important human being who ever lived. He led the Church into a worldwide movement, formulated its theology, and shaped its destiny. Without Paul, or someone like him, the infant Church would not have grown into the spiritual and intellectual maturity which changed the course of history. And the only explanation of the dynamic of his leadership and the immensity of his gifts was that he was a man in Christ.”

Paul wasn't always "in Christ" though. This man who changed the course of history was at one time at a VERY different place in his life...at one time the direction he was going was on a VERY trajectory than where he ended up.

And we see in the scripture we are looking at today that his life was changed...the direction of his life altered...all because he met Jesus.

So, let's look at the text and here is what we are going to see. We are going to see Paul before Jesus. We will read about Paul meeting Jesus. And then we'll read about Paul after Jesus.

And in this we will see up close what were calling: **A Changed Life.**

Acts 9:1-2 – “But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 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.”

Now, if you are taking notes label this section: **Paul BEFORE Jesus**

Before Jesus changed his life, Paul lived VERY differently than what we read about him throughout the rest of the New Testament. “Saul” was his Hebrew and certainly the name he would go by in and around Jerusalem. Paul was his Roman name and he would use this name as he lived and ministered to the Gentiles.

We first read his name at the stoning of Stephen in **Acts 7:58 – “Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.”**

He's mentioned again in **Acts 8:1 – “And Saul approved of his execution.”**

And then again in **Acts 8:3 – “But Saul was ravaging (It's this idea of creating havoc...to violently mistreat) the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.”**

This is who Paul (Saul) was before meeting Jesus. Now, before passing judgment on Saul, I want you to keep in mind that he thought he was doing God a service in attempting to destroy this religious sect known as “The Way”.

In his mind, they were confusing people...they were blaspheming God and because they were blaspheming God and leading others to do the same, his attempt to arrest and execute was justified by the Law that he knew, studied and loved his entire life.

See, before Jesus, Saul was a Pharisee...and a VERY good one at that! According to his own testimony in **Phil. 3:4b-6 – “...If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of**

Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”

In other words, he grew up in a religious home, under religious parents. He was educated in the best and most influential and respected synagogues.

In fact, he studied under a rabbi by the name of Gamaliel, who according to the Jewish Talmud (book that records Judaism moral law and discussions from rabbis about it) is one of the greatest rabbis of the Jewish faith.

We read about Gamaliel in Acts 5. He was the Pharisee who stood up and swayed the Sanhedrin in Acts 5 not to prosecute and kill the apostles after they were found teaching in the Temple. This would have been pretty hard to do since he was in the Pharisaic minority...but this shows his considerable influence.

Paul was trained under this man...and as typical in religious sects, those that are in training are typically a bit more radical than even their leaders.

As a Pharisee, Paul was passionate about the Law. And it was his passion for keeping God's Law that led him to oppose the early church.

Gal. 1:13-14 – “For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.”

This zealotry...this passion is perhaps what distinguished him from other up and coming leaders of his day. He was “all in” on defending his God, and he showed this by how he persecuted the Church.

When you read in Acts (9:1-2) that Saul was “breathing threats and murder against the disciples”, it's important to remember that according to how he was raised and what he was trained in his entire life – this led him to believe that he was doing right by God!

SO committed to this cause, he was willing to travel 150 miles to Damascus (a week-long journey) just to bring these apostates to justice! This is who Saul (Paul) was BEFORE meeting Jesus.

Quite a “past” isn't it? Saul is NOT someone that I would have ever believed would be a candidate for salvation.

? – Have you ever thought that about a person?

- No way could God use this man...
- No way would God use this man...
- No way is he a candidate for God's salvation...

- No way is he a target of God's infinite love and forgiveness...

But there is a truth here we need to highlight and emphasize...we learn this from Paul's life. It's this: **No one is too far away from God.**

If anyone could be written off, it was Saul the persecutor! Yet we're going to see in just a moment Jesus meet him and save him! And if he can save Paul, he can save anyone! Paul is "exhibit A" of the fact that no one is too far from God!

Paul would say probably what all of us who have been saved by Jesus feel at one time or another!

1 Tim. 1:15-16 – "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life."

Paul readily admits, "If God can save me, he can save anyone". And to that, I say, "Amen and amen."

No one is too far away from the grace and mercy and love of God. And so that person you are praying for that you don't think will ever come to know Jesus, just look at Paul and be reminded that if Jesus can change him, he can change anyone...and don't you dare stop praying and sharing with them.

Illus. Hollie

No one is too far away. Hollie wasn't...Paul wasn't! Look at what I'm talking about. Let's move to our second section of the sermon and see when and how: **Paul MEETS Jesus**

Acts 9:3– "Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him."

Just write out beside this verse in your Bible – "When God wants to get your attention, he will." I've noticed that all conversion stories...all stories of changed lives carry this theme.

When God gets ready to change a life, he starts by getting your attention!

Now, 99.99% of conversions will not be like this one - lights shining, eyes blinded, voice out of heaven. However, 100% of conversions begin just like this one – God gets Paul's attention.

This is how ALL conversions start. God gets someone's attention. It can be through something as simple as a Bible story with a child and them learning of the love of Christ...he gets their attention and brings them to himself at an early age.

Or it can be as dramatic as one we hear often and that is he brings a person to the end of themselves and gets their attention by allowing a trial or overwhelming circumstance into their life.

How many testimonies have you heard with this as the by-line?

- “I was off doing my own thing going my own way...it cost me my marriage...or it cost me my relationship with me kids...it cost me my job.” And absolutely miserable, you come to the point and realize you need God – he got your attention.
- “I went in for a regular check-up and next thing I know I get the prognosis and you realize you need something bigger than yourself to make it through this!” Or maybe a loved one dies and life rattles you to the core and now God has your attention.
- Maybe you’ve made it to the pinnacle...you’ve arrived! Got the house, the family, the position and job title. You can afford to do anything you want to do –and yet there is no joy! There’s no peace when you pillow your head...only fear and confusion!” And the lack of peace leads you to the prince of peace! God has your attention!

However it may happen all conversion stories start with God getting your attention! God gets Saul (Paul’s) attention here.

Acts 9:4-9 – “And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (I LOVE this...the fact that Jesus identifies with his church! You pick on his people, you are picking on him! We’ve talked a lot about the persecuted church in recent weeks.) And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” (Now, Saul knows he’s dealing with God. What is taking place here is supernatural. And look at how the Lord responds. He’s dealing with God alright! Saul is meeting Jesus – God in the flesh! He wasn’t expecting that!) 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.”

Now, we’ll see in just a few more moments the completed version of this conversion story, but this meeting with Jesus changed Paul’s life forever. This is what a meeting with Jesus will do...it will change your life!

We use that phrase...throw that phrase around a lot about things don’t we - “That will change your life!” We say:

- Have you tried Lupy Tortillas beef fajitas? They’ll change your life. (Maybe a bad example, they really will change your life.)

- Have you downloaded this new app? Bought these new shoes? Tried this new retailer? What this new show? It'll change your life.

We say this about so much, but does it change our lives really? Something may make our lives easier...it may make it more convenient...more comfortable...in Lupy's case, it may change your beltline, but your life?

We say it, but Jesus can really do it. It's the testimony of so many people here. You were going one direction and you met Jesus. And like Paul here, he changed the entire trajectory of your life! This is the power of Jesus.

- He changes your desires...
- He changes your focus...
- He changes your heart...
- He changes your life...

Jesus is the ONLY one in life that doesn't over-promise and under-deliver!

You meet Jesus. He comes to live inside you. It's supernatural. It's a miracle. And when he does you'll come to discover that was once so important, isn't as important anymore. What was once such a big deal is not such a big deal anymore.

Billy Graham – “The converted person will love the good he once hated, and hate the sin he once loved.”

This is the kind of change Jesus brings into your life when you meet him. Paul because of meeting Jesus goes from being one of the most ardent defenders of Judaism and persecuting Christians to becoming the greatest church planter and missionary evangelist to ever live – ONLY GOD can do that!

Paul had religion, but what he needed was a relationship! And this is another truth we need to highlight. We learn this from Paul's testimony: **Religion doesn't make one right with God.**

The people we run with today need to know this! A lot of people out there equate being religious (going to church, growing up in church, belonging to a church) to being right with God, and it's just not the case!

This was Paul. Talk about someone who grew up in church! For goodness sake he was a leader in his religion...we read his testimony – VERY religious. And yet his religiosity did not make him right with God!

This is a message that many people need to hear. As you live the message of Jesus out in your workplace, schools and neighborhoods and have gospel conversations, have at the forefront of your mind as you have these conversations that what makes us right with God is NOT religion – whether its having alot or none (“noness”) – not having a religion is a religion! What makes us right with God is a relationship with Jesus.

People KNOW religion isn't changing anyone's life! Jesus came because religion could not save...it couldn't forgive our sins...only he can. This is the point of the gospel! Only Jesus can make us right with God and restore us to a right relationship with the Father.

When talking with someone about Jesus, more often than not they are thinking in religious terms – we need to be thinking in relationship terms. People who are lost in their religion or claim no religion at all need exactly what Paul needed and that is ONE meeting with Jesus.

Now, Paul had some help early on immediately after his conversion. This is where Ananias came in. And everyone that meets Jesus needs an Ananias. When someone meets Jesus, they often need someone to explain to them what has happened. This why discipleship is so important. We don't want to be mile wide and an inch deep here!

Illus. Invitation - It's why if you make a decision here at church, we ask you to make it public by coming down here at the end of our services. It's not to embarrass you, it's to celebrate with you and put resources in your hands that will help you understand the decision you are making. We want to answer any questions you may have about faith and what it means to walk with Jesus.

Jesus sends a man named Ananias to meet with Paul. We won't stay here long, but the account is worth reading for sure!

Acts 9:10-19a – “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.” (Always a good prayer to pray. On Nov. 15, it will be the year anniversary since I met with the search committee. You know I started praying this prayer Jan. 1, 2020. One year before I would come to CFBC – tell story – v. 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, 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.” But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.”** (In other words, “Are you sure about this, Lord?” There is a little hesitation here and I can't really judge him because as mentioned before would have been thinking and probably saying the exact same thing! You can't change a man like Saul, Lord! Do you have a plan B, Lord?) **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. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”** (Remember from last week? Good things happen when God says, Go! – Don't say “no” when God says “go!” – v. 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.”** (What happens if Ananias doesn't obey?! Unknown soldier doing the Lord's work – you may not be a Paul, but someone you serve may be! Kids ministry, children's ministry) **And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was**

baptized; (baptism – identified with Christ immediately!) **and taking food, he was strengthened.”**

It's Paul BEFORE Jesus. We see Paul MEET Jesus. Now, let's look at: **Paul AFTER Jesus.**

Acts 9:19b-22 – “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.” ²¹ And all who heard him were amazed and said, “Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?” ²² But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.”

Come on!!! He was one way before Christ and completely different after meeting Christ. Persecuting Christians one day. Preaching Christ the next day. A CHANGED LIFE.

Question: What made the difference?

Answer: One meeting with Jesus. One meeting with Jesus!

Notice...what's in between the BEFORE and AFTER of a changed life? It's meeting Jesus!

Now, today, in the world in which we live MOST people (dreams and vision – even then there's an Ananias to explain) will meet Jesus because they first meet one of his followers.

And so, I want to close this message out by giving you some homework. This is the practical application of the message today. The “take home” if you will.

Here it is: **Tell someone how your life was changed by God.**

And I want you to tell them this week! Our outline today was:

- Paul BEFORE Jesus.
- Paul MEETS Jesus.
- And Paul AFTER Jesus.

Well, for every person here that has a personal relationship with Jesus, you can substitute Paul's name with your own. I have a story to tell. It's:

- Jarrett BEFORE Jesus
- Jarrett MEETS Jesus
- Jarrett AFTER Jesus

I can share that story in 90 seconds or I can spread it out over an hour! The greatest way though to see life change is to share with others about your life change.

Tell how God “got your attention”. The power and beauty of sharing your story is that no one can dispute it! They may not believe it, but they can’t dispute it! It’s your story. God is writing it. Others can identify with it. So, share it!

THIS is what Paul did! Over and over and over again! As we continue reading Acts, we’ll find that anytime Paul got an opportunity to preach whether it was to a crowd that had gathered in a synagogue or outside in a city somewhere or even when standing before influential leaders, he ALWAYS began with his testimony!

This is who I was BEFORE Jesus. This is how God got my attention and he shares about MEETING Jesus. And here is what my life has been like AFTER.

So, the homework this week...I want to encourage you to share with someone this week how your life was changed by God.

Listen, put it on me! Take a co-worker out to lunch...tell them that one of your pastors at your church challenged you this week to do it...take them to lunch...PAY for it...and then share with them your life:

- BEFORE Jesus.
- How you MET Jesus.
- What your life has been like AFTER Jesus has come into your heart and life (and be honest, don’t sugarcoat – if it’s been hard and difficult, share!)

Share with them how Christ died for you, was raised to life for you and the hope that he offered in forgiving of your sins and granting you eternal life!

Tell them about your changed life and see if it doesn’t result in watching God do what he does best and that is lead to another: CHANGED LIFE.

Let’s pray.

Please Note: This document is not meant to be a published, cited, annotated research paper. It is simply a transcript of a spoken message, provided as a resource. Many commentaries, articles, and other sermon helps were likely studied and contributed to the forming of this message.