

## ***Jesus turns Enemies into Disciples***

***Acts 9:1-19***

Today we consider the account of how a man named Saul who went from being an enemy of Jesus to being a disciple of Jesus. This is one of the most consequential conversations in the history of the Church. One of the main features of this account is how Jesus himself drives the action. At the end of this passage, Saul knows he is a disciple of Jesus because Jesus wanted him to be his disciple. He hadn't volunteered; Jesus had tracked him down, revealed his spiritual blindness, sent him someone to welcome him into the body of Christ, gave him the Holy Spirit and a lifelong assignment. Saul knew that Jesus had turned him, an enemy, into a disciple.

Saul's circumstances were unique. But the elements of his experience are common to every disciple of Jesus. ***Jesus still turns his enemies into his disciples***. This morning, I'm going to challenge you to think about your own life and your own experience. Some of you are already disciples of Jesus and some of you aren't. Saul's experience might help you locate where you are and therefore where Jesus wants to take you. I hope that you leave here today believing that Jesus wants to do in your life what he did in Saul's life and that Jesus is driving the action in your life. Things that seem like a coincidence may just be the very things Jesus is using to make you a disciple.

First, **Jesus confronts our blindness**. (Acts 9:1-9) We learned in Acts 8 that Saul ("a young man" - see 7:58) had approved of the execution of a disciple named Stephen and that he was "ravaging the church" by putting Christians (both men and women) in prison. We pick up the narrative in Acts 9:1.

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.

Jesus had told his disciples in John 16:2 that "the hour is coming" when people would kill them who "think they are offering service to God." Saul was that guy. He honestly believed that he was doing the will of God by imprisoning and executing Christians.

In a very literal sense, Saul wanted to ***undo*** what Jesus was ***doing***. Through his disciples, the gospel had spread beyond Judea and Samaria to Damascus, a town 135 miles northeast of Jerusalem in Syria. When Saul heard about this he obtained authority from the high priest in Jerusalem to go to Damascus and bring Jesus' disciples back to Jerusalem. There they would be imprisoned. The message about Jesus would be contained. But Jesus had other plans.

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?"

The fact that it was “a light from heaven” made it immediately clear that this was in some respect an encounter with God. This light was so intense/glorious that Saul fell to the ground. And then “he heard a voice” saying, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting **me?**” Instinctively Saul knew that this was God (what other options were there?!?!), so he replies:

5 And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

The answer from heaven turned Saul’s world upside down. When he heard, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” his entire theology came crashing down. It turned out that **Jesus is Lord** and is **so identified with his disciples** that to persecute **them** is to persecute **him**. Thinking he had been doing the will of God, he was actually persecuting Jesus, the Son of God. Jesus gives him a simple instruction:

6 But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”

Saul was on his way to Damascus to **tell others** what to do; but Jesus tells him to go into Damascus where he will **be told** what he is to do.

7 The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one.

Saul’s traveling companions also heard the voice from heaven, but they didn’t see Jesus. We’re told down in verse 27 that Saul had “seen the Lord” in some sense. Jesus was appearing specifically to Saul.

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.

Saul started this journey proud, breathing murderous threats against Jesus’ disciples. But this encounter with Jesus left him sightless and humbled.

9 And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Saul’s physical blindness mirrored his spiritual blindness. He knew the Scriptures as well or better than everybody else, but he didn’t recognize God when he showed in a flesh and blood body. He was profoundly blind spiritually. He thought he was righteous, but he was sinful to the core. As an act of mercy **Jesus confronted his spiritual blindness**.

Not everybody experiences a “christophany” where Christ himself appears in his glory. And not everybody is violently hostile toward Jesus and his people. But we all enter this world in spiritual blindness. We are all “born in sin.” Therefore we are all “enemies of God” (Romans 5:10). And one way or another, in his mercy **Jesus confronts our spiritual blindness**.

I remember a baptism service about 25 years ago in which a boy about 6 or 8 years old was baptized. When he got up to tell his spiritual story he said something to the effect of, "Before I knew Jesus, I lived a life of sin. . ." I remember thinking, "Well that a cute thing to say." But he was absolutely right; it's just that his sin was limited by his stage of life and lack of opportunity. When you're six years old you can't live a life of sin the way you can when you're 21 (or 51). But he basically saying, "I once was blind but now I see!"

This passage has prompted me to reflect about my own spiritual blindness. I was never an axe-murderer, but I was profoundly blind spiritually. When I was in high school our Sunday school teacher had us read C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Spoiler alert: the hero of the story was a lion named Aslan who allowed himself to be sacrificed on an altar so that a very bad little boy could be set free; Aslan was killed on an altar and miraculously came back to life the next morning. I read that entire book. And I went to Sunday school and only after I heard others talking about it did I realize that Aslan was a Christ figure. I was like the people who heard Jesus' parables and had no idea what he was talking about. Over the next few years my spiritual blindness became more and more obvious.

***Jesus confronts our spiritual blindness*** (and therefore our sinfulness) as an act of mercy. Let me just ask you straight up: At any time in your life have you come to the place where you've realized you were spiritually blind and admitted it to God? The Scriptures also describe this spiritual condition as being "lost" - which is not an insult. If you're lost you're not where you should be and you don't know how to get where you should be. Perhaps today Jesus is confronting your spiritual blindness.

We each need to get to the place where we realize, "I don't just need a consultant or an advisor. . . I need a **Savior** who will find me and open my eyes and wipe away my sin and give me life"? If you let him, Jesus will show you your spiritual blindness. This is a humbling diagnosis to get, but there's a remedy in Jesus. He sacrificed everything to give you life.

Second, ***Jesus sends disciples to bear witness***. (Acts 9:10-16) Jesus could have spoken directly with Saul about his need to repent and believe and about his assignment as an apostle. But he didn't. He sent one of his disciples to talk with Saul. Actually he sent one of the very disciples Saul had set out to take back to Jerusalem as a prisoner (see 22:12 - he was "a devout man according to the law"). Notice again how Jesus is driving the action:

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."

Ananias was understandably cautious and fearful at this plan. For all he knew, Saul would regain his sight, arrest him, and take him back to Jerusalem in chains.

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.”

Notice how Jesus clarifies things for Ananias. He says that Saul will no longer be hunting down those who “call on his name” to make **them suffer**; he will become a disciple who **himself suffers** for the sake of Jesus’ 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.”

No, Saul wasn’t merely going to regain his sight; he was giving him an assignment. The second half of the book of Acts will give accounts of Saul preaching Christ to Gentiles and kings and other children of Israel (i.e., Jews). Saul (who will go by his Roman name Paul) will also suffer in the same ways that he had made other Christians suffer: imprisonment, stoning, beatings, etc.

Jesus would restore Saul’s sight and pour out the Holy Spirit into his heart and give him this assignment of preaching Christ and suffering. But he wouldn’t do this independent of his people/church. Jesus tells Ananias to go and speak with Saul and lay hands on him.

And that’s still the way Jesus works: **Jesus sends disciples to bear witness**. Occasionally you hear of someone coming to Christ independent of any believers, but the plan is for Jesus’ disciples to “go and make disciples,” being his witnesses near and far.

That was certainly my experience as a sophomore in college. When StuJ, Joel, and Bob befriended me, invited me to play basketball on Friday afternoons, invited me to study the Bible with them, and shared the gospel with me, I certainly wasn’t thinking, “Jesus has sent some of his disciples to bear witness to me. . .” But that’s EXACTLY what had happened. They heard Jesus voice from heaven through the Scriptures telling them to “Go and make disciples.” They took Jesus at his word and lived transparent lives and shared the message of the gospel. Because they embodied the message they brought me, I found it compelling.

If you are a disciple, maybe you’ve never locked in on the truth that Jesus sent some of his disciples to bear witness to you because **he wanted you as a disciple**. It’s like Jesus told his original disciples in John 15:16, “You didn’t choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit. . .” I’d encourage you to think back about the disciples that Jesus has sent to you over the years (you parents, a friend, a coworker).

And please know that Jesus is sending you to bear witness to people. That's been the plan from day one. This may be a new way of thinking about your life. Don't put a lot of pressure on yourself; just pay attention and be available and live a transparent life (in word and deed).

If you aren't yet a disciple, consider the possibility that Jesus himself is pursuing you through those who are already his disciples. You may not see them this way now, but one day I pray you will see them the way I now see StuJ and Joel and Bob. Jesus himself sends you people who can tell you about their experience with Jesus and who can tell you how you can experience the same. Think about it: If Jesus himself is wanting to do a miraculous thing in your life, you don't want to miss it, right? Be curious and receptive if he's sent people to talk with you!

Third, ***Jesus gives us sight, the Holy Spirit, and assignments.*** (Acts 9:17-19; 22:12-16) In other words, Jesus turns us into disciples. He does this when we turn to him in faith. These verses are a compressed account of Ananias' interaction with Saul. We two other accounts in Acts (in chapters 22 and 26) that fill in more details.

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."

Regaining his physical sight would coincide with gaining his sight spiritually. He would be given the gift of the Holy Spirit who would open his eyes to more and more spiritual truth and would lead and empower him.

18 And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized;

This passage doesn't explicitly state that Saul repented and believed in Jesus. But in the book of Acts, repentance, faith, and baptism all three go together. Sometimes only one of these elements are mentioned (as here). When one is mentioned, the other two are implied. That's certainly the case here with Saul.

19 and taking food, he was strengthened. For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus.

Clearly Saul was now a full disciple of Jesus. As we'll see in the rest of chapter 9 next week and in Acts 13-28, Saul began living out his assignment to be a witness to Gentiles, their kings, and fellow Jews (v. 15).

Jesus does for every believer what he did for Saul. Again, Saul's circumstances and assignments were unique. But ***Jesus gives us sight, the Holy Spirit, and assignments.*** Whereas Saul was told his assignment up front, our assignments usually become obvious over time as we walk with Jesus.

Many of you have heard this before. . . But after I became a follower of Christ, the first thing that changed for me was my experience with the Bible. It went from being a book I knew I was supposed to read to being a source of nourishment and life for me. And the first book of the Bible I studied was 2 Timothy, a letter that Paul wrote to Timothy, a young pastor in Ephesus. I found out (Acts 16) that Timothy's mother was Jewish and his father was a Gentile (just like my mother and father). To make a long story short, everything in 2 Timothy made sense for me. In retrospect, I see that God began using 2 Timothy to call/draw me into being a pastor. That's one of my main assignments from God.

Of course, Jesus gives assignments to all of his disciples, not just those in vocational ministry. Just this past week two different people (who aren't pastors) told me about specific assignments they sensed Jesus had given them. Both of them involved serving others in sacrificial ways; both of them realize that they will suffer as a result.

If you are a disciple of Jesus, I hope you have sensed that God has given you significant assignments to further his kingdom. These assignments often involve helping people enter into a relationship with Jesus and then growing in their relationship with Jesus. Those assignments typically involve the main commitments in your life: your family, your work, your relationships, your giftedness. Understanding your specific assignments can give you focus and motivation and faith that the Spirit will empower you to be faithful.

As I said at the beginning, if you are a disciple, I hope you leave here believing that Jesus is driving the action in your life (see John 15:16). This makes all the difference in how we live our lives. If you walk through your days thinking, "I really don't think that Jesus has anything significant for me to say and do," you probably won't say or do anything that's very significant. That way of thinking becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

But if you believe that Jesus pursued you for a reason (like he did Saul), and that he showed you your spiritual blindness, and sent some of his people to share the gospel with you, and that when you believed he wiped out your sins and that he gave you the gift of the Holy Spirit to empower you, then you have every reason to live your life with anticipation and faith. This week, go through your days believing that Jesus has incredibly significant things for you to say and do.