Acts 9:1-19 *Legendary 2: Paul: Seeing the Light*

***Conversion***Christianity is a religion of conversion. Everything we say, and everything we believe, is built upon this revolutionary premise: You don’t have to stay the way you are. Your life can be radically changed by God.

Conversion is a miracle that happens when God’s grace breaks into our lives. Once God’s grace gets a hold of us, our lives are never the same. Up to that point we may be religious, we may be very good people, we may be trying our best, but we have not been converted.

Conversion is the certainty that what you were does not determine what you are, and what you are does not determine what you will be. You can be changed, you can be different, your life can move in an entirely new direction.

If you take that truth away from Christianity, it ceases to be a supernatural religion. If the possibility of real change is gone, then we have nothing to offer but a set of rules. Can the leopard change his spots? Of course not. Not by himself. But with God all things are possible.

Today, as we continue our Legendary Summer series looking at great heroes of the Bible, we are going to look at the greatest conversion story of them all: that of Paul, also known as Saul of Tarsus: a citizen of the Roman empire, raised as a Jew, trained as a rabbi, he became a violent persecutor of the early Christian church. He hated Christ and his followers so much that he did his best to eradicate the new religion as if it were some sort of dreaded virus. He was a terrorist who did his evil deeds in the name of the God of the Bible. Then Jesus got a hold of him, converted him, and he became the greatest champion of Christianity the world has ever seen.

The story is told at the beginning of Acts 9. Today I am going to read the story all the way through, then we’ll talk about it. **Acts 9:1-19:**

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest **2**and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. **3**As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. **4**He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

**5**“Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked.

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. **6**“Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

**7**The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. **8**Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. **9**For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

**10**In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, “Ananias!”

“Yes, Lord,” he answered.

**11**The Lord told him, “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. **12**In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.”

**13**“Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. **14**And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.”

**15**But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. **16**I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”

**17**Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” **18**Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, **19**and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

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***The Most Important Word***As we get started, I should note that in the story I just read, Paul is called Saul. For most of the Bible after this—at least starting in Acts 13:9—he is referred to as Paul. Most people assume that as a part of his conversion, God changed his name; sort of like Abram became Abraham. But the Bible never explicitly tells us this. Rather, Saul is his Hebrew name and Paul is the Greek version of that. Since we know him better as Paul, that’s how I’m going to refer to him in the sermon, even though he is called Saul in the text.

An argument could be made that, next to Christ’s resurrection from the dead, this conversion of Paul is the most important event in the history of Christianity. This is a hinge point—a crucial moment—in the growth of the early church.

Paul is going to become the most influential of all the early Christians. From this point on, the book of Acts is going to be increasingly about him. Paul is going to be personally responsible for bringing the message of Jesus Christ to many new lands. Plus—most significantly--most of the rest of the Bible is going to be written by him. From Romans to Philemon his letters form the heart of Christian scripture. More than any other human he has helped Christians from the 1st Century to today understand the meaning and implications of Jesus Christ.

And, as if to emphasize the importance of this story, the Bible refers to it often. Twice more in the book of Acts—in chapters 22 and 26—Paul is going to recount this story in detail. In his letters, he is going to refer to it again and again (1 Cor. 15; Gal. 1; 1 Timothy 1; Titus 3 and others).

I think it is safe to say that Christianity today would look very different if Jesus had not appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus. The story of Paul’s conversion is crucial to Christianity because of who Paul became.

But, more than that, the story of Paul’s conversion is crucial because it is the preeminent example of the most important word in all of Christianity—grace. Paul keeps referring to his Damascus road experience because it was there that he learned something about God which he had to share with the world, namely, that God is gracious to sinners. That God redeems the unredeemable. That there is hope even for the most wicked, stubborn, God-hating person in the world.

The story of Paul’s conversion is a story of grace. It’s a story about the grace of Jesus and it is a story about the grace of Jesus’ followers.

***The Grace of Jesus***Let’s consider what this story has to say about **the grace of Jesus.**

In order to understand what a dramatic moment this is, you need to understand who Paul was before he traveled the road to Damascus.

Paul was an utterly committed opponent of Christianity. He hated the church. As a fast-rising star of the Jewish establishment, he was “extremely zealous” to preserve the status quo (Gal. 1:14) and saw this new sect as a real threat to everything he believed in.

He was committed to stamping it out, and he was not above using violence to erase all belief in Jesus Christ.

We see this the first time the Bible introduces us to him. At **the end of Acts 7,** when Stephen becomes the first person to die for believing in Jesus Christ, we are told that “the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.” (7:58); and that—throughout Stephen’s stoning—“Saul approved of their killing him” (8:1). This is meant to imply that he was more than a simple bystander. By telling us that Paul was holding the coats, Luke may very well mean to tell us that he was in charge of the whole, grisly affair.

Certainly, in the persecution that broke out following Stephen’s death, Paul took a central and leading role. **Acts 8:3** tells us that “Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.” When Christians were put on trial for their life, Paul cast his vote against them. He went from synagogue to synagogue to hunt out the followers of Jesus and have them punished. He was not above beating his prisoners, in order to force incriminating statements from their mouths. (cf. Acts 22:4-5, 19; 26:9-12)

And now, when **we pick his story up again** in chapter 9, we find that he is still “breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples” (v. 1). Basically, violence is the very air he breathes. And, not content just to hunt for followers of the “Way” in Judea, he is taking his campaign of terror on the road. Hunting for Christians in Damascus.

The point is: this was a bad man. He absolutely hated Christianity. He wasn’t just ambivalent toward the gospel—“I could take it our leave it”—or skeptical of it—“I don’t really believe it, but you can if you want”—he was actively and publicly opposed to anything having to do with Jesus Christ.

**He had taken a stand** against the followers of Jesus, and in doing so he had taken a stand against Jesus Himself (v. 4,5).

Plus, he was a murderer, and the worst kind: he actually believed that by voting to have these people executed he was doing the right thing.

So, the last thing you would expect is that Jesus would choose this man to become a Christian. The last thing you would expect is that Jesus would show kindness to this man. If anyone deserved to be punished for his attitude toward Jesus, it was Paul. If anyone deserved to be condemned as a sinner, it was Paul.

And yet, here on the road to Damascus, Jesus Christ appears to Paul—not to destroy him—but to call Him to be a part of the Church.

Nobody would have predicted this. No one could have looked at Saul the persecutor and anticipated that he would become Paul the missionary. It would be like the leader of Iran suddenly becoming pro-American or an outspoken atheist like Bill Maher suddenly urging people to trust in Jesus. And yet, it happened. God chose Paul. Jesus turned his life around.

That’s grace. Grace is an undeserved gift freely given. It is God deciding to show mercy on sinners even though they have not earned it. It’s a second chance in life for people who have done nothing but squander their first chance.

Jesus shows grace to Paul, and it changes the history of the world.

***The Grace of God’s Followers***But it is not only Jesus who shows grace in this story. We also need to see **the grace of Jesus’ followers at work here.**

The thing that really gets me about this story is what Jesus asks Ananias to do. It’s one thing for God to decide that He is going to show unmerited kindness to a man who has been extremely horrible. That’s surprising enough. But Jesus takes it a step further and asks his followers—represented here by Ananias—to show the same sort of nonsensical grace.

We don’t really know that much about Ananias. Most likely, he became a follower of Jesus early on in the history of the church. Perhaps he was one of the pilgrims in Jerusalem at the time of Pentecost, when Peter preached the gospel message for the first time. Probably, he stayed in Jerusalem like so many of the other early converts—only returning to his native city when the great persecution broke out following Stephen’s death.

He knows about the Jewish hatred toward followers of Jesus. He knows about families being torn apart as the officials come to throw mom or dad into jail. He knows about terror and threats and executions. He knows about Paul.

And now, **Jesus comes to him**, and tells him to go seek this man out (Acts 9:10-12). Worse, Jesus tells him to place his hands on Paul—to restore his sight—and to welcome him into the family of believers.

Put yourself in Ananias’s shoes for a minute. One minute, the rumor mill is telling you that Paul is on his way to your city. You hear that he has letters of authority from the high priests in Jerusalem to systematically go through the synagogues and root out all who follow Jesus. So you’re getting ready to get out of town. You’re stuffing clothes into bags. You’re telling your wife and children to be brave, to not worry, even though your own fear is bubbling over inside. You’re making a break for it.

And then, all of sudden, there’s Jesus, telling you to go and find the man who is terrorizing you. It just doesn’t make sense.

You’d probably object. You’d probably say something like: “Lord, I know who this man is. I know what he has done to the church in Jerusalem. I know what he plans to do to your followers here. This is not a good man.”

And, in fact, **that’s what Ananias did**. In verses 13 and 14 he objects to Jesus’ plan. He tries to explain that, surely, in this case, God’s grace is misplaced. But Jesus’ answer leaves no doubt that God’s grace—no matter how little sense it makes—is never out of place. **Verses 15 & 16:**

**15**But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. **16**I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.

Ananias argues, but the Lord brooks no argument. He simply says: Go! If Jesus has chosen to show grace to somebody, why should Ananias refuse to do the same? If Jesus has chosen Paul, who is Ananias to challenge that?

It doesn’t make sense, but it does mean life. Jesus expects His followers to show the same sort of grace—the same sort of unconditional acceptance, the same sort of openness and willingness to forgive—that He shows. If Jesus can love Paul, then Ananias can too.

To Ananias’s eternal credit, he does. **He heads down to Straight Street,** finds the house of Judas, lays his hands on Paul, and—in a word that must have taken more grace than we can imagine to speak—calls him “brother.” (Acts 9;17) The enemy becomes a friend.

In the events that follow, the Church is going to be understandably cautious with Paul. They don’t want him to use a pretend conversion to arrest and kill more of them, and so they allow him to prove himself.

But to the Church’s credit, they eventually follow Ananias’s example and show the kind of grace and acceptance that will allow Paul to take his appointed place as God’s “chosen instrument” to carry the name of Jesus to the world.

Jesus shows grace, and Jesus’ followers show grace, and the world is changed.

***As an Example***Later in his life—in one of the last letters he wrote—Paul reflected on his Damascus road conversion in a correspondence with his young student Timothy. **1 Timothy 1:12-15**. You can turn there in you Bibles with me now. Paul wrote:

**12**I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. **13**Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. **14**The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. **15**Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.

Paul was a bad man. He was a “blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man.” He acted “in ignorance and unbelief.” In the King James Translation he calls himself the “Chief of Sinners.”

But Christ Jesus changed that. And Paul knows what made the difference. It’s grace. The most important word in all of Christianity. “The grace of the Lord was poured out on me abundantly.” That’s just what I’ve been saying.

But what I really want you to see in this passage is the explanation Paul offers for why this grace was so abundantly poured out. Look at **verse 16:**

**16**But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.

What happened to Paul is an example to those who would believe. The story in Acts 9 is meant to be an object lesson for us.

So: what does it teach us?

I have two lessons that we must take home with us today. Two ways in which the story of Paul’s conversion should serve as an example to us: First, I want you to see that what Jesus has done for Paul, He can do for you. And, second, I want you to see that what Jesus has done for you, He wants you to do for others.

**First, what Jesus has done for Paul, He can do for you.**

With Paul, Jesus has displayed his “unlimited patience.” If Jesus can have mercy on the chief of sinners, then he can have mercy on you. If Jesus can forgive a man who was hunting down and killing His disciples, then He can forgive you. No matter who you are. No matter what you’ve done.

I’m not trying to say that Paul was worse than any of us (he’s the one who calls himself the “worst of sinners”) or that you are any more evil than the next person. Rather, I’m recognizing a Biblical truth that says that “WE ALL have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” We are all—in our own way—persecuting Jesus by breaking His laws and despising His people. We are all guilty, and deserving of rejection and wrath.

In fact, that’s what we expect. Deep down, we know that we have done wrong and deserve to be punished for it, and so we want to run from God—to shield ourselves. That’s what makes sense—since we understand justice.

But Jesus wants us to see that grace doesn’t have to make sense—at least, not by our reckoning. Jesus wants us to see that the most unlikely people can be saved and are saved. God’s grace and love are not limited to people who have been set up for Christianity by a perfect home life or flawless worship attendance or a spotless moral track record—it’s also available for people who come from broken homes who don’t always make it to church on Sunday morning and who have made some mistakes in their lives. In other words, God’s grace is available for all of us. It’s for you.

Some of the greatest heroes of the Christian church were converted out of terribly sinful lives. St. Augustine, the first great theologian, was an idolater and a sex addict. John Newton, who wrote the hymn *Amazing Grace*, was a slave ship captain. Charles Colson, who founded Prison Fellowship Ministries, spent time in jail for his part in the Watergate cover-up.

This is the wonderful, nonsensical, life-giving power of Christianity. What Jesus has done for Paul, He can do for you. His grace is available for you. No matter who you are.

**And then, second, what Jesus has done for you, He wants you to do for others***.*

If you have experienced the abundant grace of Jesus Christ, and He has called you to be His follower, then you need to recognize that He wants you to bestow it upon others. This is the lesson of Ananias.

And this doesn’t always make sense either. Now that you’ve been cleaned up, God wants you to spend time with people who are dirty. Now that you’ve been made good, God expects you to make room for people who are bad. Now that you’re in the church, God is calling you to reach out and touch those who are outside of it—and, maybe, even those who hate it.

It doesn’t always make sense, but it is our opportunity to bring life to others.