

“The Power of A Changed Life” Acts 9

- Give Sermon Title

Never underestimate the power of a changed life.

Intro – Next Weekend "Fall Back". Running at Community Park – Neon sign – "Free compost, Sat. mornings". Fall - leaves die and fall off, but bring about fertilized soil that brings new life. Life comes from a death!

The Holy Spirit can do the same with a life surrendered to Him. When we “die to self”, we move out of the way so the Spirit can breathe in new life! We certainly see that in the life of Saul of Tarsus in Acts 9

Last week talked about the Spirit moving through the life of Stephen. First Christian Martyr. Full of the Holy Spirit (fully surrendered). His wisdom when he spoke out couldn't be denied so instead of accepting, hardened hearts shut him out. Chapter **Acts 7:54-8:1**

When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ “Look,” he said, “I see heaven

open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

⁵⁷ At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸ dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

⁵⁹ While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.

And Saul approved of their killing him.

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

Chapter 7 ends with a Pharisee named Saul (sworn to teach and uphold Jewish law) approving of Stephen’s murder. Helped instigate. Hated Christianity and saw Stephen as a threat. So it's like he held the stoners coats so they could get a good ark with their throwing arm! But notice Stephen’s prayer at the end. HE PRAYED FOR SAUL ALONG W. THE OTHERS WHO WERE STONING HIM! Jesus example shines through. (Still best way to teach)

Church was then dispersed **Acts 8:3**

Through the sacrifice made by Stephen the church spread out and influenced many more. *Satan can throw His best at us, but often backfires on Him when the Holy Spirit is involved. The gates of hell will not prevail!

Philip “the Evangelist” goes to Samaria Ch. 8, but pick up story of Saul in Ch. 9

I. Acts 9:1-9

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.**

When you think about it, Jesus really turned the tables on the Pharisees by changing the heart of Saul of Tarsus.

Saul was brilliant - "Pharisee among Pharisees", born in Tarsus (Roman Province, but brought up in Jerusalem), tribe of Benjamin, learned under the best Rabbinical schools, followed the law to the letter, Roman citizen, etc.

Saul was zealous - he couldn't be content with Christians just leaving town so he goes after the ones that fled to city of Damascus.

But he may very well have been influenced by what he saw in Stephen - he too wanted to see God, and possibly saw something in the face Stephen he couldn't forget.

A. It has often been said, "the church owed the conversion of Saul to the prayer of Stephen."

Often the seeds planted by the Holy Spirit are like a "ticking time bomb"!

Traveling to Damascus from Jerusalem was about a 140 mile trip and would have taken a week.

As Pharisee, Saul couldn't associate closely with Sanhedrin Police that he took with him. So the Holy Spirit may have been working on Saul during the whole trip as he had time to think on his own – reminding him of Stephen's prayer and the look on his face!

Saul had to pass through Galilee. That may have kept Jesus on his mind. (Like we said, God May be doing the same thing with those you have shared with and are praying for right now!)

Approaching Damascus, Saul suddenly is faced with a blinding light and is most likely knocked off his (biblical word for donkey) onto his (biblical word for donkey).

****I WAS JUST GOING TO SAY THE WORD IN CHURCH, BUT SHARON TOLD ME NOT TO!**

****Bible says men w. him heard the voice but saw nothing. Later in Acts 22 when Saul/Paul is giving his testimony, Bible says they *didn't* “hear”.**

Contradiction? Gk. Literally (NIV gets it right) – “didn't understand”. We need to pray for others to *hear and understand* His voice as God draws

So Saul who plans on entering Damascus like an avenging fury, ends up being led in by the hand, blind and helpless! (later named "Paul" = "humble"). Often how we end up meeting Christ. When life becomes unmanageable on our own = often when we come to our senses and look for His leadership).

****Notice Saul responds by calling Him “Lord!” Shows the Spirit has been breaking down the walls of Saul’s hardened heart already!**

Some come to Christ suddenly and dramatically. Others quietly and gradually. Both just as genuine! (Like Timothy - led by grandmother) - who Paul says, "there is no one else like him". So don't count yourself unworthy to be heard or without a powerful testimony if you came gradually vs dramatically!

The Holy Spirit is not a feeling - He is God!

Saul of Tarsus, who became Paul the Apostle, was a real guy in history with real life change! (Peter

Jennings - hugely responsible for spread of early church.)

Like we said, never underestimate the power of a changed life! (Including yours!!). it could change Redlands!

II. Acts 9:10-18 - Ananias - (a good one. There is a good one and a bad one mentioned in book of Acts.)

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,

B. If the church owed Saul/Paul to Stephen’s prayer, they also owed him to the COURAGE and hospitality of Ananias!

Ananias - Very obedient, but funny how he is trying to fill in the all-knowing God on who this guy Saul really is and what He is really asking! But God is very patient with him.

****This would be like God telling you to go and welcome in a former member of Isis who had supposedly become a Christian when previously had been killing people by crucifixion, sawing in two.**

Ananias is even able to call Saul “brother”, maybe after Saul has murdered his friends!

(My Oldest son hard time sometimes believing in life change because of what he has seen as a cop, but recently a hardcore former gang member led training. 20 years later after serving time = hardcore Christian.) Really touched him. Again, “Never underestimate the power of a change life!” (including yours)

III. ACTS 9:19-22

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. ²⁰ At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. ²¹ All those who heard him were astonished and asked, “Isn’t he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn’t he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?” ²² Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

Saul goes right back into Damascus instead of going away where He could have remained anonymous. The power of a changed life was clearly seen by those who knew what he had been. This was another powerful sign/wonder in the early church.

Any change in your life people would be astonished by?

****MY FRIEND GREG – IN BAND GOING BACK AND GIVING HIS TESTIMONY IN JUVI. . .**

Already Saul is testifying to His belief in Jesus as the Christ and later states plainly in Romans 1:16 - **¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.)** I AM SURE AT ONE TIME PAUL COULD NEVER HAVE SEEN HIMSELF SAYING THAT!! (Just like you and me, but that is what the Holy Spirit does when He comes in and we let Him fill us!)

Didn't all happen overnight - In Galatians 1:17-18 describes how Saul goes to Arabia to get away with God to prepare for the plan God has for Him (Joel and YWAM)

Acts 9:23-25

After many days had gone by, there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him, ²⁴ but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. ²⁵ But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall. (Wide enough to ride a chariot with houses sometimes built on)

When people continually harden their hearts against the message of Christ, maybe time to move on to those who are open. Maybe God will soften their heart in the meantime!

Plot to silence him - still going on today(NT) - Satan is a deceiver and twists people's reasoning. How else do you explain such a lack of common sense in our culture today? The Holy Spirit is going to be your antidote – and your kids' antidote) If your'e going, "What?", may be time to open your heart to Christ more and His wisdom instead of what we get from the mainstream media! WILL GIVE YOU A CHANCE TODAY.

IV. Acts 9:26-31

When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. ²⁷ But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. ²⁸ So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. ²⁹ He talked and debated with the Hellenistic Jews,^[a]

but they tried to kill him. ³⁰ When the believers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

³¹ Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

NO DOUBT BELIEVERS HAD BEEN PRAYING FOR SAUL AND THIS WAS THE RESULT. WE NEED TO PRAY FOR OUR LEADERS (esp. In California!)

Barnabas = "Son of Encouragement"

(You can read more about Barnabas throughout the book of Acts)

C. If the church owed Saul/Paul to prayer of Stephen, and the courage of “good Ananias”, they owed his longevity in the faith to the mercy and encouragement of Barnabas!

Are you being a “Barnabas” to anyone?

***My friend Greg didn't have enough Barnabases in his life. We thought band and youth group was enough. He needed more. Later when I was in Bible college he ended up in the student parking lot looking for me in a**

stolen car out there at 4 am. An unbelieving girlfriend, some bad advice from a church leader and he fell away hard! Sadly I don't know what happened to him after that.

I feel like now more than ever God is leading me toward a stronger ministry of encouraging and empowering others. My dream for Solid Ground . . .to be a church that produces disciples who make disciples who make disciples.

Behind every Hero is a Hero Maker

God put someone in your life to do this for you so that you would do it for another who would do the same!

Seeing people change to be more like Christ is a joint effort.

We want to be a church that can do this, and if we can pull it off with the Spirit's help - then any time we're together has meaning and purpose as we equip and encourage each other.

***Was encouraged by those who came for prayer last week. Have been encouraged by the openness that has been growing in our small group! It shows a desire to trust God and work together to put Him first!**

Conclusion: Think about this. . .If God can use someone as bad as Saul/Paul, we need to stop thinking he can't use someone like us or you! God even used him to write most of the New Testament!

Paul gives his testimony in the book of Acts several times. Do you know how to give yours? In 3 min. or less? (3 parts – write down and practice) Holidays are coming up with family and friends. May be some open doors. The Spirit will always be with you in this (see Great Commission.) So if God opens the door in a conversation, shoot up a prayer, take a deep breath and go for it!

****Never underestimate the power of a changed life. (Including yours!)**

Saul's sin and his need for Christ was obvious. But what if we or someone we are sharing with is an overall good person? What if our kids are good kids with a basic belief they call on once in a while? Next week we will look at a "good man" named Cornelius, who was already a believer, but he still needed the Holy Spirit in his life! If you want to read ahead in Acts 10, see if you can pick out when this man was really ready to meet God?

Are you? Are you allowing His Spirit to change you day by day, or are you fighting Him. You don't have to

face this battle alone. We are offering again, a time of prayer today. As you go for communion in a moment, there will be people in the room to my right to pray with you. Where 2 or more are gathered. . .

If you grew up in a home where approval was very performance based, and failure wasn't tolerated, it may be especially difficult to walk in the Spirit with confidence and experience a truly changed life. You may find yourself in a pool of guilt constantly trying harder vs surrendering to the God who loves you perfectly and has adopted you into his family. Maybe it is just time to come home and surrender fully to Him, knowing He loves you perfectly even when you fail. He is always there to pick you up, dust you off and help you get a fresh start! Go to the prayer room and start experiencing that w. the support of others! Partake of communion and go on in, or if you don't feel ready to partake and you want to pray with someone first, go ahead.

Pray

