

Jesus Meets Boba Fett
What Can Stand in the Way Series
Acts 9:1-19
Week 3: March 26, 2017

Welcome/intro/vision

This is week 3 of our What Can Stand in the Way series, if you're just joining us, let me get you up to speed

We're looking at the story in the New Testament of what happened when Jesus sent his people out on mission just before he left them

They were a small, un-educated, under-resourced group of people, and Jesus said that their job was to bring his message of grace and truth through the cross and the resurrection to the ends of the earth

And there's all kinds of obstacles and opposition and initially those first followers of Jesus got pretty comfortable just hanging out in Jerusalem

But the invitation week 1 from God is to be about a life that's much bigger than ourselves, to join with him on his mission to bring good news of grace and truth to a weary world

So God uses a season of persecution to get his people moving to the ends of the earth

And as they get going, what we're seeing is that in spite of all the external obstacles and opposition

And in spite of internal obstacles like lack of resources and sometimes in spite of their own resistance to doing what God would have them to do

What we're seeing is that nothing can stand in the way of this message and work of Christ spreading and moving and spreading and moving slowly but eventually moving all over the globe.

It's like a strong river that just bursts through all the obstacles that get set in its way

Think about this: we're here in Chatham County in 2017, 2000 years after all this happened and thousands of miles away from where it all happened

as evidence that nothing has successfully stood in the way of this message going throughout the world to change the world

This is the single most successful movement in all of history and it's not because there was some grand strategic plan or because it was so well-financed or orchestrated

It's because the good news of a God who so loved the world that he sent his Son to lay down his life to forgive us and to reconcile us to a good God is both true and it is captivating

And it has changed more lives across more people groups and countries and races and ethnicities than any other movement

And we're here as a church, one church in two locations, to participate and be a part of that strong and mighty river moving forward in our generation, in this time, in this place

We started a new service in Pittsboro, to be a part of that mission.

We're hoping to build a building in the next couple of years in Northern Chatham, to give us another resource to further that mission

If you're a guest with us today or if you've never been in a church before and all of this is new to you, we're so glad that you're here!

And we invite you to join us as we participate and get our hearts and minds around both the great news of God's grace and mercy
and God's great mission of grace and mercy to a weary and broken world

Now if you step back and look at why things have failed throughout history, why countries have failed, why businesses have failed, why athletes have failed, there are often external or situational factors like the economy or other competitors

But there are also **two key internal factors that are in that often undermine** these new ventures and keep them from becoming successful

And those two big internal obstacles to success are things that I think we're all familiar with: **pride and fear**

Have you ever had something that had potential in your life, but your own pride or your own fear got in the way?

In my own life, most of my greatest regrets come from decisions I made that were driven by either pride or fear

There was an opportunity or experience that had potential to be wonderful, but the thing that stood in the way of realizing that potential was inside of me: pride or fear.

Today we're going to watch as God works to overcome those twin obstacles of fear and pride that could have stood in the way of his message and work going forward

And together today, we're going to see how God does that and we're going to ask God to do that same thing in our own lives

Bible/no Bible/screen to Acts 9--and we pick back up on the persecution happening back in Jerusalem:

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest ²and 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.

Okay, so again to the map so we can see how this all fits together: Saul is down here in Jerusalem recreationally imprisoning and beating Christians

He knows they're scattering so he asks permission from the high priest in Jerusalem if he can freelance a bit as a bounty-hunter, an ancient Boba-Fette

And he's eager to head up here to Damascus to hunt for any rebel Christian scum up north

And here we must pause for a moment to recognize that while this isn't our reality here in the United States, all over the globe there are people who cannot do what we're doing here

There are authorities and government officials and terrorist organizations and individuals who are breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples

Open Door USA reports that 300 Christians are killed every month somewhere around the world for their faith

Including and especially in Damascus, which of course is in modern day Syria

which just had the bloody celebration of 6 years of a civil war that has been horrific for many, many people, including and especially the Christians who are living there

And so I want us to pause here for a second to pray for the Lord's hand to both protect our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world

and to give them great boldness in the face of such tremendous opposition and bloodshed

PRAY

Saul is essentially the founding father of the terrorizing of Christians here he's got his plan to arrest and harass and destroy the church, he's on his way to Damascus, let's see what happens next

³As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He 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."

When I was a kid growing up in a Christian home, we would talk about any dramatic experience of God as a Damascus road experience.

This blinding light that knocks Saul to the ground and a loud, loud voice that convicts him

It's likely that most of you haven't had an experience of meeting God quite this dramatic, perhaps that's because you haven't tried your hand at imprisoning and torturing Christians!

Maybe this is the pre-requisite for this type of experience—give that a shot!

In all seriousness, one of the worst things that we can do with this story is take this very exceptional and rare experience and make it the normal or the standard of what EVERYONE should experience

Most of us don't have this type of experience with God, it's recorded in part because it was so exceptional and because it had such an impact on the trajectory of the church

But that doesn't mean that there's not important stuff here for us to attend to

And as we were talking about this passage last week, Steve Tamayo our executive pastor pointed out this great little pronoun: "me"—as in 'why do you persecute me?'

Not why do you persecute my people or my church—why do you persecute ME?

Throughout the New Testament, there's this declaration that to be a Christian is to have Jesus in each of us and for us to be IN him, to be a Christian is to be grafted into Christ

A Syracuse professor has been working for years and years on grafting and he's growing a tree that produces 40 different kinds of fruit all on the same tree

This is a picture of what he expects it to look like in about 10 years—beautiful, isn't it?

To be a Christian is to be grafted into Christ, each of us onto one giant, beautiful, global tree, and each of us bearing unique fruit but all of us grafted into the same tree, the same trunk, we all share in Christ himself

And if one of these branches is being tortured or persecuted, the trunk feels it

Here's the good news my friends: Jesus is so connected to you, so tied to his people, that if you're in Christ and if people persecute you, if they disparage you, if they talk bad about you, if they gossip about you, they're doing those things to him.

And because you're grafted into this larger tree the invitation in good times and in the storms is to sink your life-roots deeper and deeper into Christ

to make prayer and Scripture and the life of Christ and presence of Christ to make these regular habits, norms, just a part of the energy that makes you who you are

to let the things of God be the sap that runs through your heart and mind, that delivers nourishment and life and energy to your relationships and your work and your play

Now Saul apparently doesn't know who this person is that he's persecuting, he has no clear idea what he's doing—he asks the blinding light “Who are you, Lord?”

And as Steve wrote in this week's Connect Devotional, “Bullies often have bad memories.” Whatever hate, rage, anger, or pain that they've experienced that drives them often clouds their thinking and makes their worlds and their lives very, very small

In his zeal to snuff out the church, Saul had apparently never stopped to consider the claims of the church.

He never considered that Jesus might have actually risen from the dead, might actually be God's gift to all of humanity to heal a broken world.

To Saul, Jesus was a problem to be exterminated, not a savior to delight in and to worship because Saul had underestimated Jesus

Which is something that we all do from time to time.

We tend to either over-estimate ourselves or over-estimate our obstacles and problems all the while under-estimating Jesus

And what happens when we over-estimate ourselves is the problem we talked about at the very beginning: pride.

And what happens when we over-estimate our problems or obstacles is the opposite extreme that we talked about at the very beginning: fear.

These two practices of over-estimating ourselves and/or over-estimating our problems are at the core of those two internal obstacles that have for many of us led to some of our worst decisions and some of our biggest regrets

And I want to propose to you that under-estimating Jesus is what sets us up for those regrets

Because when we realize and embrace and remember that Jesus is the center of the universe who does that mean is NOT the center of the universe? Me! That's humbly good news that quiets my pride

And if I realize and embrace and remember that Jesus has conquered all of sin and death and that he is the one who has overcome every obstacle and broken every chain

My problems are real, but the one who has overcome all my greatest problems is more real, and fear no longer has a grip over me.

When we over-estimate ourselves or our problems and we under-estimate Jesus, it's a recipe for a mis-shapen life and broken relationships everywhere

This is Saul's problem, and Jesus is stepping in to remedy that problem in a very spectacular way—Saul will spend the rest of his life NOT under-estimating Jesus ever again!

But this week as I've been working on this, I've realized that I've got Saul's same problem:

I go back and forth between over-estimating myself which of course results in all kinds of ugly pride

OR I over-estimate my problems and obstacles, which of course results in all kinds of anxiety and worry

Both of those are themselves the product or consequence of under-estimating Jesus

And this morning the invitation to all of us, you and me, whether you're a church person or not, is to embrace the good news that Jesus is the Lord and king of the cosmos and the one who has conquered sin and death forever

And in light of that great news, to discard pride and fear, the twin mistakes of over-estimating ourselves or our problems while we've mistakenly under-estimated Jesus.

Saul is experiencing this radical re-orientation, let's keep reading:

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

Now when Saul left Jerusalem, this was not how he pictured arriving in Damascus, was it?

If you were going to film this whole story as a movie, can you picture how you'd film Saul leaving Jerusalem with his entourage to eradicate Christianity from Damascus?

This confident, self-righteous anger, striking out as Saul the conqueror full of vitriol and assertiveness and aggression and adrenaline.

But then he has this blinding experience of the Lord.

And if this is your movie, the before and after picture or posture or attitude of Saul is dramatic, isn't it?

BEFORE the encounter with the light, Saul was confident, cocky, angry, assertive, aggressive

NOW he's been humbled, quieted, sobered, being led by the hand into the city where he was supposed to arrive as the great conqueror

Here's the question: at which point in the story did Saul FEEL the best—before or after he encountered the light?

Saul FELT the best when he was off to conquer the Christians! He was pumped full of adrenaline and full of delusions of grandeur!

But which demeanor was ultimately healthier for Saul and more life-giving to all the people around him?

When Saul was pumped up full of himself and his agenda and his adrenaline and anger, he felt better, but the healthier, more life-giving place for him to be was on the other side of God's discipline and correction

My friends, none of us like the process of being corrected or re-directed by God.

I've had several turns in my life where I've been corrected or re-directed and my first response was anger and frustration and in a couple of cases it took me months and months to get over it

But if we're willing to receive God's correction in our lives as a gift of grace in our lives, even if it doesn't feel as good initially as it did before the correction came

Ultimately it will always produce more life in us, not less.

Because Life is God's property, it's his idea, and he delights to give more and more life to us generously, but sometimes we're on paths that cut us off from the life he wants to give us

And so this morning if you're on the other side of a correction that God's placed in your life and you're hurting or disappointed or upset

OR if you're in the middle of a situation where God is trying to re-direct you, if he's convicting you of something and you're resistant to it, which is unfortunately very normal

I want to implore you that life on the other side of submitting to his voice is ultimately always, always, always more life-giving than life lived in resistance to God's voice and his discipline

So God has met Saul, gotten him to Damascus in a way that he would not have chosen for himself, and now God wants to finish this work that he wants to do in him, here's what God does next:

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."

Notice a couple of things: God already appeared to Saul once in a blinding light and spoken directly to him, but to seal the deal, God gives Saul a dream NOT about Jesus explaining the cross and the resurrection to him

To seal the deal God involves people, community. God is going to get Saul started in a dramatic way, but very shortly thereafter God goes back to his typical plan A which is to work through people

My friends, the reason why we're here talking this morning about being a part of God's nothing can stand in the way mission of bringing grace and truth to the world is because God's plan A to bring grace and truth to the world is through everyday people like you and like me.

Now, picture you're Ananias, and you're in hiding in Damascus. And God appears to you and tells you that Boba Fett has arrived and God gave him your name.

I'd be like:

"You gave him my name?!? Oh great, how about you just give him my street address, my cell number, and that one password that I use for for everything including Pokemon Go, too?!?!"

I'd be freaked out!

That's essentially what Ananias says:

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."

Saul was full of pride, which had potential to stand in the way of the work of the Lord. Ananias rightly and understandably has significant FEAR which could stand in the way of the work of the Lord going forward.

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."

Now notice this interesting response: when Ananias is freaked out, does Ananias get God's plan for Ananias? No! He comforts Ananias with his plan for Saul.

If I were Ananias I'd perhaps hear this and ask, "Ok, that sounds great for Saul, but what about ME?? Please just tell me that you've got plans for me that don't include me ending up in a scurvy-generating experience in a dungeon in Jerusalem if I go talk to this guy!"

Sometimes God will give us comfort in ways that are oblique, sideways, not exactly what we were looking for.

And if we're willing to receive it as comfort from the Lord, it can give us courage and strength for the tasks he's calling us to undertake.

What Ananias does next is one of the most courageous things he'd ever done in his life.

And he didn't know it at the time, but it was also one of the most history-making things that ANYONE has EVER done in all of history, here's what he did:

17 Then Ananias went to the house and entered it.

This simple, faithful, obedience to the call of God is a critical link in the chain of events that has all of us gathered here this morning, 2,000 years later and 6,000 thousand miles from Damascus

And what he does and says next are so full of simple kindness, love, grace and mercy to this man who had previously made it his life's goal to destroy the church and people like Ananias with 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.

And from this whole experience, Saul who eventually becomes Paul, who eventually travels all around the Mediterranean rim starting churches

And just like God had said to Ananias, he does, indeed proclaim the good news to all kinds of people and he does indeed suffer for the name of Christ

And part of that suffering is he ends up spending lots of time in nasty jails

but while he's in prison he ends up writing some letters that get circulated and copied and circulated and copied

and eventually they're collected and become a major part of what we now call the New Testament of our Bible, the best selling book of all time

Ananias was the key to Saul's career change from bounty hunter to becoming a New York Times #1 best selling author!

In this series, we're asking "**what can stand in the way?**"

And in this story, there are two main obstacles that need to be overcome and those challenges are **Saul's pride** and **Ananias's fear**.

And so today, for your Wildly Important Take-Home, a couple of questions I want you to consider are these:

1. Where is pride or fear threatening to stand in the way of God's work in you and through you (even if it feels good or safe right now)?

For all of us, whether you're a Jesus person or not

if you take two seconds right now and really thought about it I would guess you could identify a place right now in real time where your primary way of thinking about that situation, that relationship, that decision that you're trying to make

It's all about either fear or pride.

The trick of this is that acting in pride feels deceptively strong and living in fear feels deceptively safe

But they're both traps that would keep you from stepping into a life that is full of the mercy and grace of God, where we're meeting God as we step out into his way of life

And more specifically, if you're a Jesus person, we need to wrestle with this question:

-Where are pride and/or fear at work in your heart keeping you from participating in God's mission to bring life to a weary and broken world?

Is pride or fear keeping you from serving someone that you're pretty sure God would have you to serve?

Is pride or fear keeping you from inviting someone to church that you're pretty sure God would have you to invite?

Is pride or fear at work in your heart in ways that would keep you from being a part of this tremendous chain of events that got unleashed and kicked off 2,000 years ago and that we're invited to participate in here and now in this place?

And it's not enough to just see what you want to get rid of in our hearts, to say that we don't want to be fearful or proud any more, we need something to replace that stuff with.

So here's the prayer I pray when I'm in that spot, maybe it'll be helpful for you: ***"Jesus, replace my fear and pride with right understanding of you."***

Jesus, help me to no longer under-estimate you but to see you for who you really are and from that perspective I can see reality better—I can see me for who I really am, not too big, not too small, JUST RIGHT!

And I can see my problems for what they really are, real problems but not ultimately definitive because Jesus has overcome all problems for all time in his resurrection from the grave

In the book of Acts when fear and pride threatened to stand in the way of the mission going forward, God showed up in a big way!

Try praying this this week and see if God might start to remove some of your own internal barriers

so that nothing might stand in the way of your own part in this majestic, simple, wonderful work of bringing the light and life of Jesus into our broken and weary world.