

Breakthrough to Supposed Enemies

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Good morning.

My name is Beth Todd and I'm a part of the Oakmore Community Group. A reading from the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 9, verses 1 through 18.

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 as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

[1 : 17] And he said, who are you, Lord? 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 he neither ate nor drank.

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.

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.

[2 : 17] 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. 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. 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.

And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized, and taking food, he was strengthened.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Thank you, Beth, for that scripture reading. Good morning, everyone.

[3 : 38] My name is Andrew. I'm on the pastoral staff here. It's good to be back. I've been gone two weeks. Not sure if anyone noticed. We were in Hawaii two weeks ago, and last week I got to preach at a church in Vacaville.

That's part of our denomination. But it's good to be home with all of you today. So will you join me in a word of prayer before we get into the scripture? Lord God, we are coming before you on this Trinity Sunday wanting to experience the love of the Father and the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Would you convince us of the heights of your holiness and the depths of our sin and the overwhelming abundance of your grace toward us in Christ? Convince us of that truth, and so convince us of that truth that we can't help but be witnesses of Christ and everything that he's done, everything that he's going to do to make this world your new creation.

That's what we long for, that's what we hope in, and that's what we want to proclaim. So be honored in the preaching of your word this morning, God, and I pray these things in the name of Jesus. Amen. All right, so we're in Acts chapter 9 today, and you know, preparing for this sermon from Acts chapter 9, it took me back to an episode in my life that I'm like, honestly, super ashamed about, super embarrassed about.

It's an episode from my high school days. Two of my buddies and I were out running. We were on the cross-country team, and we were off campus running, and we were running by this local Catholic school.

[5 : 07] And it was around the time when this Catholic school was letting all the students out, so there were students coming out of this Catholic school. We were running there. And some of these students from this Catholic school started jeering my friends and I.

Now, one thing you need to know about where I come from is that I grew up in a very, you know, conservative, evangelical, Protestant tradition of a church and a private Christian school.

And so what I was taught in this church and school was that, you know, Roman Catholic Christians, maybe you actually weren't really Christians. They believed a different kind of theology of salvation than we did.

And so I took that, and as we were getting jeered by these Catholic school students, I said something that I still think about, you know, at least once a month.

I said, you're all going to hell. I said that to them as they were jeering at us. I said, you're all going to hell. And, you know, I said it with a smile on my face.

[6 : 08] And also to the amusement of my fellow Protestant buddies. And when I think about this shameful moment in my life, my immediate temptation is just to excuse my immature high school self, right?

But no matter how I slice it, I can't get around, you know, the tribal and dogmatic malice that was in my heart. And the way that I used even the beautiful Protestant doctrine of salvation by grace through faith alone as a tool, I used it as a tool for my own superiority.

Even if what I yelled back was true, and we don't have time to get into that, it's quite complicated. But even if what I said was true, that I told other human beings made in the image of God, that they were going to hell.

And that I said it with a smile on my face and delighting in my own religious supremacy. Man, it fills me with incredible shame. Incredible shame even to this day.

Especially as someone preaching the gospel here at Christ Church. But as someone who will soon be ordained, unless Jonathan changed his mind after hearing that story, or the elders, as someone who will soon be ordained in the next couple weeks, ordained as a minister of the gospel of God's grace, I hope this story goes to show you, much like Saul's story here in Acts chapter 9 today, not just the depths of the sinful heart, but the heights of God's gracious heart.

[7 : 43] And that God can truly use anyone, anyone as his witness, to testify of his grace and his mercy and his radical inclusion, even those who previously weaponized his truths for their own evil ends.

Now, if you're new at Christ Church, we've been going through the book of Acts, and we're considering what it means to be witnesses of Christ, the crucified and risen Christ, to the ends of the earth.

And we've been seeing how when Jesus told his early church that you'll be my witnesses to the ends of the earth, man, he really, really wasn't kidding. And we cannot miss how crazy it must have been for the early church to see the Spirit of God crossing all kinds of religious and social and cultural boundaries so much that it was like, man, is there anyone whom God's Spirit won't reach?

Is there anyone who God is just not interested in pursuing, not interested in knowing by name? Maybe, you know, someone whose heinously wicked deeds just went just too far, too far beyond God's saving touch.

Or someone whose life is just so completely jacked up and opposed to God, so beyond repair, that God could never turn such a life around and use it for his good purposes. Or someone whose hard-heartedness was just too hard to be softened.

[8 : 59] Surely there must be some despicable, undeserving, and stubborn person whom God's Spirit just principally refuses to dwell within and unite to his Son, right?

Well, in Acts chapter 9, today we see these questions really pushed to their limit in the story of Saul from Tarsus, better known to us maybe as the Apostle Paul, right?

I mean, this text, it begins with Paul in verse 1, breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. And yet somehow, by verse 18, it ends up with him filled with God's Holy Spirit and baptized in the name of Jesus.

So let's look at this Saul of Tarsus. Just for some background, Saul of Tarsus, he was what was called a Pharisee. The Pharisees believed that Israel's exile and their foreign occupation was due to their unfaithfulness to God.

He was part of this distinct Jewish religious group that sought to restore Israel through faithful and extreme observance of the law. And thus the Pharisees especially saw, who was called a Pharisee of Pharisees, well known for his teaching ability and his knowledge of the law and his devotion amongst his peers.

[10 : 05] They were experts at the law. Externally, they were blameless. In their minds, their nation's whole future depended on their faithfulness and their blamelessness before God. So no one in this time was more righteous than the Pharisees and certainly not more righteous than this guy here, Saul of Tarsus.

So zealous was he for the purity of Israel. He even approved of the murder of those he considered to be theologically incorrect. So what happens?

Earlier in Acts, this is an example of how zealous he was. Earlier in Acts, we didn't actually preach on this, but earlier in Acts, what we see is he's actually watching the coats of people who stoned the first Christian martyr, Stephen, who is preaching that Jesus is Lord and Messiah.

This is how hardcore he was about what he believed in. And as we get here to Acts 9, we see that Saul, he still hasn't let up, right? Verse 1, 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.

See, now that many of the followers of Jesus had scattered from Jerusalem after the martyrdom of Stephen, so zealous Saul was for the purity of his religion.

[11 : 25] He's like, no, I'm going to go pursue them. I'm going to go get the rest of these infidels. I'm going to bind them and make sure that they meet the same end as well. Even as far as Damascus, a five-day journey from Jerusalem.

Now, Saul was known by the early church as a persecutor, right? He was known as a persecutor, and Jesus himself called him that. But of course, Saul didn't think of himself as a persecutor. Saul didn't think of himself as a persecutor, and this is a scary thing if you think about it, right?

It's a pretty scary thing. No one ever says, all right, I think I'm going to be a persecutor today. Like, it's a good thing to aspire to, right? No one says that. I mean, Hitler, Mao Zedong, right?

Kim Jong-il probably didn't think of themselves primarily as persecutors, right? Rather, Hitler and Kim Jong-il and Mao would probably say they were just being men of principle, right?

Carrying out what they believed to be true and just and good. What was best for their nation? What was best maybe even for the whole entire world? Simply carrying out a certain kind of coherent logic that, though twisted according to others like us, made lots of sense according to their values and their views of the world, which they believed with certainty were absolutely right.

[12 : 33] And I don't say this to excuse this crazy, wicked persecution of these men, but to warn us. To warn us of the real danger, right? The real danger of becoming persecutors ourselves.

See, being a persecutor is not about whether or not you, you know, resolve to be a mean and prejudiced person. It really starts with the most basic and ultimate beliefs that you devote your life to.

If you are Hitler and your guiding foundational principles are Aryan supremacy, right? And the Jewish peril. If you are Israel and these are the foundational values that you believe will make the world a better place, then the Holocaust, according to such logic, is justified.

According to such fallacious premises, the Holocaust would then be justified. And really anything, anything that serves what you're ultimately devoted to is justified. And see, this is how Saul, who believed he was the most devoted Yahweh worshiper ever, despite, you know, Yahweh's commandments, thou shalt not murder and, you know, love your neighbor as yourself.

This is how Saul of Tarsus was still able to justify his murderous intentions toward the followers of Jesus. This is how I justified my telling these Catholic students, you're going to hell with a smile on my face.

[13 : 46] According to Saul, these people he was pursuing, they were infidels who needed to be wiped out to cleanse the promised land. This was his logic, and it justified his hate.

Saul's religion was weaponized, just like mine was in high school. And as Yale theologian Willie James Jennings writes, though, no one is more dangerous than one with the power to take life and who already has mind and sight set on those who are a threat.

Such a person is a closed circle relying on the inner coherence of their logic. Their authority confirms their argument, and their argument justifies their actions, and their actions reinforce the appropriateness of their authority.

The disciples of the Lord have no chance against Saul. They have no argument. They are betrayers of the faith who are a clear and present danger to Israel. This is how Saul sees them.

His rationality demands his vision of justice. See, you could be the most principled person in the world, but if your principles are off in the first place, your passionate devotion will only ever lead to harmful destruction.

[14 : 52] In Saul's mind, he was doing everything he thought was right and good and pure in the supposed service of the Lord, and yet all it revealed was that he actually didn't know the Lord at all.

And it should be incredibly sobering to us that while Saul of Tarsus absolutely believed that he was loving God and serving the Lord with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength, and while he was even right to acknowledge the glorious light that knocked him off his heart as a light that came from this God he worshipped, he still didn't actually know the Lord.

He didn't know him. Verse 3, Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

And he said, who are you, Lord? See, Saul knew that this was the Lord. He knew that this was Yahweh. Who else could encounter him with such power and such glory? But he didn't know the Lord's true identity.

He says, who are you, Lord? He didn't know him. And get this, the Lord answered, he said, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. And man, we have to understand how mind-blowing this must have been for Saul to hear, right?

[16 : 07] He was so sure that this was the Lord getting his attention, yet this Lord was the same Jesus that he detested and whose followers he committed his life to destroy. It's a huge shocker, a paradigm-shattering revelation.

Jesus? The crucified man from Nazareth? The one who rejected so many of the traditions that my people, the law-abiding Pharisees, gave to the people?

The one whose way I've been trying to exterminate from Israel? How, how, how could this be? How could the Lord Yahweh be a crucified man from Nazareth? And how could I and the rest of the Pharisees, you know, experts in the law, how could we be so wrong about so much?

In this moment, Saul realized that the God he thought he knew, the God he thought he served, was not the God he wanted nor expected. And an application question for us today, Christ Church, is could it be?

Could it be that many of us are actually searching for, many of us are actually devoting ourselves to a God that we want to believe in, rather than the true Lord revealed to us in Jesus Christ?

[17 : 17] Could it be that the God we're either looking for or think we're serving is simply one made in our own image, a God who fits in our box, right? And sure, you know, as people made in the image of God, we should definitely have many things that resonate with us about this God.

But if we also believe in sin, if we believe in the fallenness and brokenness of our world and the fallenness of our head and our hearts and our hands, then if we are looking for or giving ourselves to a God who never disagrees with us, never rubs us the wrong way, it is quite likely that we are not worshiping the one true God who made us in his image, but a God we've crafted after our own images.

And this is called idolatry. And if you don't think this is such a bad thing, I'm here to tell you that a God crafted in your image, a God crafted in my image, is no real God at all.

And certainly not the kind of God that can save and deliver us in any meaningful way, right? For to create a God in our own image is basically to equate ourselves with God.

But that puts us where? It puts us back at square one. If I am my own God and my only hope for salvation is thus myself, man, I'm in huge trouble. I'm in huge trouble.

[18 : 34] But, but if the God who called out to Saul and knocked him off his horse with a blinding light, if that God is my God, then even if my butt is sore from falling off a horse, even if my ego is sore from being so wrong and so blind about so many things in my life, then perhaps this God, perhaps this God might have something better for me than anything I could come up with myself.

And this is the gospel, right? This is the gospel that it is quite possible, even likely, that we are running the wrong way to the detriment of ourselves and of others, but that we can never outrun the grace of God or escape his good purposes for our life.

And this is the gospel. And through this encounter, Saul, he was just beginning to be acquainted with the truth. The truth that though he had been terribly wrong about so much, the true Lord, Jesus Christ, knew the way to restoration and wholeness for Saul.

And that's why Saul says, according to the conversion account he tells in Acts 22, after being knocked down, blinded, and hearing the name of Jesus, Saul says, what shall I do, Lord? What shall I do, Lord?

And I love this little detail because check it, Saul began on the road of repentance without having all the answers. But he just says, what shall I do, Lord? He knew enough to begin asking the right questions of the right Lord.

[19 : 57] He didn't know exactly how Jesus could be Lord, but that Jesus was Lord was unmistakable to him now. And though not having all the answers, but somehow knowing who the true Lord was, he just began to bow the knee and say, what shall I do, Lord?

To which Jesus replied in verse 6, rise, enter the city, and you'll be told what you are to do. So Jesus doesn't even tell him that much. He really just tells him, hey, I'm going to tell you later, just get up and go into the city.

And Saul, he just goes, blind, led by the hand. He waits three whole days, right? I mean, this guy, it's just crazy. Just imagine. Imagine those three days without hearing what's in store for him.

He's just obeying the Lord Jesus. I'm going into the city. He's fasting. He's praying for three days, hearing nothing. And this guy, right? He knew the law. Just imagine what was on his mind. He knew the law.

He had the highest regard for the holiness of God and the high standards of Yahweh. And here he was realizing that this whole time he had been persecuting Yahweh rather than serving him. Maybe his mind went to the curses in Deuteronomy chapter 28, all those curses listed for the unfaithful and the disobedient, which apparently he was one of them now.

[21 : 10] In particular, Deuteronomy 28 says of the disobedient and the unfaithful, it says, Wow, this was him, right?

Isn't that him? This was bad. It was really bad. Saul knew he was in deep water. And he knew according to Yahweh's holy and righteous law, he deserved nothing, nothing but the curse.

So without knowing all the answers or what would now happen, he did the only thing he knew was right to do. He bowed the knee to Jesus as Lord and simply asked, what shall I do now, Lord?

His only hope now as the persecutor of Yahweh was a radically gracious and merciful inclusion of Yahweh. Now we're going to see what happens next, but I want to turn our attention to another character who doesn't get talked about that much here in the church.

But if you think about it, it's quite an integral figure in church history, and that is Ananias. Unlike Saul, Ananias was a faithful follower of Jesus. You can see him kind of as a foil to Saul.

[22 : 18] He had a vision too, right? Just like Saul, he had a vision. But this guy, he knew exactly who he was talking to. When his name is called Ananias, he doesn't say, who are you? He says, here I am, Lord.

He has a deep, personal, intimate relationship with God. But then God asks him to go and do something crazy, right? Something pretty crazy. Go to this stranger you've never met before, but who you've heard about, and who you've heard is extremely dangerous.

And this guy who's come to the very city to bind you and to murder people like you, why don't you go over there and go lay your hands on him so that he will receive his sight back and so that he can receive the greatest power, the greatest honor imaginable, so that he can be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit.

And Ananias is understandably reluctant, probably just as confused as Saul was. Like, God, don't you know who this guy is, how much evil he's done, how much evil he's planning to do?

He's against us, God, and therefore he's against you. But do you see what's happening here with Ananias' reluctance? Why, God, why should I help the other team, the evil team?

[23 : 31] Ananias, too, is tempted to fall into his own tribalistic logic, a logic that doesn't recognize the radically gracious inclusion of God. But praise God, right, that God's ways are far more gracious, far more creative, far more expansive than any of our ways.

And verse 15 says, 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.

God says, And this was crazy because, you know, Ananias, he probably had, you know, no idea.

There's no way he could have known how impactful this Apostle Paul figure would be, you know, who's written so much of the New Testament scriptures. There's no idea that, you know, he'd write these inspired words from God, so beautiful that we'd still meditate on and memorize today.

Things like, For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing. It is the gift of God, not a result of work, so that no one may boast. Or, you know, Oh, death, where is your sting? Right? Oh, grave, where is your victory?

[24 : 48] All Ananias knew is what God told him to do. And he did it with great faith in the God of a radically gracious inclusion. Look, he even calls Saul, this great persecutor of the church, who just three days earlier wanted to kill him.

He even calls him Brother Saul in verse 17. And he recognizes God's inclusion of this sinner among the saints of God's family. And the application here for us today, Christ Church, is who could your Saul be?

Who could be your potential Apostle Paul? Like last week when Jonathan asked, Who's your one? Who's your one? Who's that one person in your life that desperately needs to know about Jesus?

That desperately needs to know the love and the mercy and the grace and the compassion of God? And why would we withhold such good news? Think about it. Think about it.

What amount of awkwardness should keep us away from offering Christ to others? And perhaps seeing God write an amazing story out of their lives and ours.

[25 : 59] Think about it, Christ Church. What if we really believed in the radically inclusive grace of God? What if we believed in the God who pursued Saul of Tarsus? What if we believed that the God who called upon Saul by name calls our names as well?

And not only our names, but the names of people in our lives we'd never expect. What if redemption were possible even for the most messed up amongst us? Even for those whom we hate and those whom we cannot fathom?

The idea of their redemption. And even more than redemption, their shalom. In Christ, the possibilities of such beautiful stories are limitless.

They are limitless. And God invites us to take part in these stories. Every story testifying to his amazing grace. That's what we're called to do as witnesses.

See, this is what we're offering people as witnesses of Christ. We're offering them Christ. We're not offering people some kind of weird, self-harming cult or a lifestyle preference. We're inviting people into a relationship and an encounter with the crucified and risen Christ who pursues us in compassion and love.

[27 : 09] See, the main thing, you know, we could talk about the details of Saul's sinfulness. We could talk about, you know, Ananias' reluctance. But the main thing here in Acts chapter 9 is not about Saul. It's not about Ananias.

The main thing here is the compassion of Christ. It's Christ's compassion that won Saul's heart and turned this persecutor of Christ and his church into perhaps the greatest missionary and theologian of the early church.

It's Christ's compassion that expanded Ananias' horizons and allowed him to play a part in the incredible salvation story of Apostle Paul. Christ's compassion is what we bear witness to.

And it's a reality that wins people all by itself. Even in spite of my lips and my life, it wins people all by itself. I have the easiest job in the world. I get to sell Jesus, the grace of God, the gospel.

Yeah, Ananias, he played an important role in this story, but the most important role was played by the compassionate Christ. If you don't see this, you're missing the main thing, the whole point of the Christian faith.

[28 : 12] You're missing the gospel. I mean, notice how tenderly Christ beckons Saul, this persecuting murderer. He doesn't say, murderer, murderer. He doesn't say, fool, fool.

He doesn't say, self-righteous Pharisee or imbecile, imbecile. He doesn't even say, stop, you're hurting me. He doesn't try to explain why what Saul is doing is wrong. He simply asks a question.

He merely says, Saul, Saul, with a personal and intimate tenderness. And then he simply asks a question. Why are you persecuting me? No accusation here.

Just a gentle question that will forever change the life of Apostle Paul. And notice, he doesn't say, why are you persecuting them? He says, why are you persecuting me?

And we cannot miss how incredibly profound this was for Saul to hear. What do you mean I'm persecuting you, Jesus? Don't you mean I'm persecuting your followers, your disciples?

[29 : 10] Well, what Jesus is saying here is, Saul, don't you see? Don't you see that so intimate is my bond? So intimate is my union with my people.

So near am I to them that what's theirs is mine and what's mine is theirs. And I am in them and they are in me. This is the radically profound doctrine of union with Christ. By which Paul would later say things like, I've been crucified with Christ.

It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. Or that we've been raised with Christ and even seated with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. Jesus was subtly introducing Saul to a faith unlike any other.

Without at all compromising his divine nature, God covenanted to unite his very self with fallen and finite and frail human beings for their good that they might share in his glory.

Partakers of his glory. See, every other faith either unites creator and creature by minimizing the distinction or it eschews the possibility of union because of the creator-creature distinction.

[30 : 12] It says it's not possible. Either it blurs the distinction or it says it's just not possible for the creator to be united to the creature. But in the Christian faith, through Christ, the God-man, Christianity is altogether different.

And see, Christ Church, this is what we as witnesses of Christ get to invite people into.

Union with God. Union with God. Not just any God, but union with the compassionate Christ. With the compassionate Christ. I want to close by drawing our attention to one extra detail that Paul introduces into his conversion story in the account in Acts chapter 26.

A detail that I just absolutely love because I think it speaks volumes of the heart of compassion of Christ. In Paul's retelling of the story in Acts 26, Jesus, again, he says, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

And then he adds, it is hard for you to kick against the goats. And I love how this so beautifully demonstrates the heart of Jesus. For even here in mentioning Saul's persecution of himself, Jesus' primary concern is not the persecution of his own body.

[31 : 26] But his preoccupation is Saul's self-harming kicking against the goats. And goats are these, you know, sticks with sharp pointy edges used to goad and herd livestock.

The image here is of an ox, not wanting to be led in the right direction. But futilely and unnecessarily kicking at, you know, these prickly things, harming itself to its own dismay and to the dismay of its master.

See, Jesus is a compassionate Lord. He does not delight in seeing us bloodied by the goats. And so we have to understand, we have to understand that bearing witness to Jesus is not a mere indictment.

It's not merely a challenge to make people change. It's really an invitation. It's an invitation to a better and less painful way. Jesus says, my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

In reality, Jesus can't stand to see us pierce our feet by kicking at the goats. Because he's a compassionate Christ. He doesn't want to see us bloody our feet by kicking at the goats.

[32 : 26] And why? Because he already came to have his feet pierced in our place on the cross. There's no need for further bloodshed because of the compassionate Christ.

And this radically inclusive God of grace called unto Saul by name. And he's calling unto many of us by name. Perhaps he's calling you today and or someone in your life.

Someone you might never have expected. He wants to be united with us, Christ Church. God himself wants to be with you. And he wants you to be with him. No matter what you've done.

No matter where you've come from. No matter how broken you think your life is. He wants to be with you. He's got plans for you. And he's paid it all to free you from a life of kicking the goats.

A life where you have to shed your own blood. Don't you want this? Don't you want this for your friends, your families, even your foes? Don't you want this for our world?

[33 : 27] Christ Church, what if we believed in this compassionate Christ? Let's pray. you?