

Saul: The Hunter Hunted: Acts 9:1-19

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[0 : 0 0] And thank you, Josh and team. It's good to be here this morning. Amen. It's good to see our young adults. I'm glad that you guys didn't keep hitting the buzzer this morning. I know that our young adults were out on retreat this weekend and probably got a whole 40 minutes of sleep last night, but they're here. So I know I got my work cut out for me with the sleep deprivation, but go ahead and turn open to Acts chapter 9. Begin a new chapter this morning looking at verses 1 through 19. We're in a study doing an exposition through the book of Acts and I get to share with us major plot twists this morning. So would you join me in prayer? As the deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, oh God, my soul thirsts for God, for the living God. Father, we thirst for you this morning. We thirst for your presence. We thirst for your help in our lives, for your direction, for your comfort. We long to experience something of your joy today. And so whatever you need to accomplish in our hearts, in our lives, we want to be in a posture of listening and humility. Thank you for the text.

Thank you that you gave us a book that we might know you, understand ourselves, and that Jesus is a sole means of salvation. And so we just feel very blessed to be called your children. Would you speak to us now? And might we be in a posture where we would say yes? It's in your name we pray Jesus. Amen. Sometimes you don't really see who's there unless you look really hard. Okay, I got my work cut out for me today with all of you. Well, we are this morning going to be considering the life of a world-class sinner. And I don't believe it's an overstatement to call this individual at the beginning of their life a despicable human being. Someone you would avoid at all costs, a man who you would strive to protect your family from. Someone who you might even secretly hope would die if you were alive in his day. In fact, today we're going to consider the greatest critic, the greatest intellectual critic of Christianity that I believe has ever lived. And I say this because although we have great antagonism today from the new atheists, whether it's Hitchens or Dawkins or Sam

Harris or Bart Ehrman, none can hold a candle to solve the Pharisee. And when I use that idiom to hold a candle, it's a workman who, Apprentice, is there to hold the candle so that they have light to see to do their job. And yet this apprentice isn't even skilled to hold the candle. You don't even get to hold a flashlight. None of those atheists of today are in the same arena with Saul.

Because Saul wasn't just willing to call you a fool for your profession of faith in Jesus. He was intent on destroying your life. Why? Why? Well, we're given some clues right off the bat as we consider this section of Scripture. So we're just going to dive in and we'll make some observations along the way. But really, there's just one single application at the end of our study this morning. So let's just begin and see what we can learn about this individual. Acts 9 beginning in 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. Do you see the clue as to why he is intent on destroying those who profess Christ? It's right there. In fact, Luke describes

Christians as how those belonging to what? The way. The way. And so from the very beginning of the church's existence, salvation is found in Jesus alone.

[6 : 16] There's no other name under heaven by which men are saved. And that's simply an echo of Christ's own words. We hear it from John 14.6 where he says, I am the way.

I am the way. I am the way and nobody comes to the Father except through me. The exclusivity of Jesus. It's there from the start. And of course, if Jesus is God, of course, he's the way. And that would have not only bothered Saul, it would have infuriated him. That's the why. See, he would have been angered in two ways.

Number one, essentially he was trusting in himself for his salvation. And secondly, he's infuriated because Jesus, who got crucified, he is not my Messiah. See, we know that Saul trusted in himself. He trusted in his flesh, in his birthright, in his efforts to access heaven. And he makes that very clear in Philippians 3 verses 5 and 6. He tells us something of his birthright. I'm in because number one, I was circumcised on the eighth day. I'm not a proselyte, circumcised later in life.

I'm not an Ishmaelite, circumcised the age 13. I am a Jew from birth. He says, I'm of the people of Israel. You can trace my lineage back to Abraham. I'm of the tribe of Benjamin. You know that tribe, the tribe of the first king of Israel? King Saul, my namesake? And I'm a Hebrew of Hebrews. I'm not a Hellenist. The culture that I embrace, the language, it's of my people. I'm a Hebrew son of Hebrew parents.

And on top of the fact that I was born into the right family, I have even gone beyond that. I am what we would term the uber Hebrew. I am the eagle scout of Jews. See, as to the law, a Pharisee. I didn't just obey Moses. Man, I added rules for good measure. As to zeal, a persecutor of the church, those that want to hijack the Messiah, I'm going to eliminate. I mean, we don't know who the Messiah is, but it's not Jesus. And as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Paul saw at this time as flawless in his external record of legalistic righteousness. Not perfect, but flawless. Do you smell that? You smell that in this guy? What is it that we smell? It's pride. This is a proud man. This is not a man ready to admit that he needs rescue. In fact, he envisioned that he was his own Savior. And this notion that salvation is free, he's worked his lifetime.

[10 : 29] He's been good working his way to God. No way. He's been on this mission. He's been on this aircraft that's going this direction. I'm way too committed at this point to change aircrafts. See, Paul is being driven by pride and what we see it now turning into. It's morphed into rage. And so what we find out is that he asks the high priest for letters of extradition to bring Christians back to Jerusalem to try them and punish them. See, the exclusivity and the authority of Jesus, it's always been offensive church. You can talk first century. You can talk 21st century. There's nothing new here. Nothing new. And so we need to have courage to talk about the fact that there's no other name under heaven by which men, women can be saved. I mean, if you can find me another book with 300 plus prophecies fulfilled in one person, you have my ear. But until then, I'm sticking with Jesus. I mean, it truly is intellectual suicide to stare the prophetic in the face and then to decide to keep your options open. And I ache over this because I speak with folks just about every week who are in this camp.

I just want to keep my options open. I don't want to be wrong. I just want to keep my options open. Well, Saul is consumed with his mission. You know, this city Damascus, it's some 130, 40 miles northeast. In fact, it says here in Acts 9 that he is still breathing threats and murder. This is not a side hustle for Saul. How often do you breathe all the time? And that's what's being described of this man. He's breathing threats and murder. And actually, the word here is it can notes breathing in. It's like taking air in to breathe fire.

This is the state of this man. He's infuriated by these Christians. We see that state when he's there at Stephen's execution. Acts 8.3 says Saul was ravaging the church and entering house after house. He dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. This is not a nice man. He's ravaging the church. That's the same word in the Old Testament from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament in Psalm 80 verse 13. It says, the bore from the forest ravages it. So we have this image of Saul. He's like this wild beast. His anger cannot be quenched. Listen to him describe his state. These are his own words when he's standing trial in Caesarea before King of Grypa. Acts 26:11 he says, and I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme. There's a lot in there. Did he torture them? We don't know, but I'm gonna get you to renounce Jesus somehow. And in raging fury against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities. This is a brutal man. His aim in life was to exterminate Christians from planet Earth. Very third right-esque. And so in his own words, in terms of sinners, right, 1st Timothy 1:15, he describes himself as foremost. Foremost. Is that hyperbole? No. Why did you write it? Because it was true. And so any of you here this morning may be troubled by the thought that God could forgive you. I know there's some of you here because about a month ago I tricked you. I had you raise your hand, right? It's more difficult to believe that God could forgive me or forgive someone else. Most of you put your hand up with the former. Yeah. Well, this story is for you. This story is for you. God could forgive this man. Perhaps there's hope for you. And I love that the

Bible, it instructs us through narrative, through story oftentimes. Because as it does so, it just, it punch, it just, it reaches our soul. So let's continue the narrative here in verses 3 through 9.

Says here, now he went on his way. He approached Damascus and suddenly a light from heaven shown 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? 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 open, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight and neither ate nor drank.

[17:27] So as Saul is on his travels, it's actually later recorded in Acts 22 that it's about, it's midday, it's noon. This is the brightest time of day. He's on this week-long trip up to Damascus. It's located north up in Syria. And by the way, Damascus is one of the oldest cities in the history of the world. It's actually first mentioned back in Genesis 14 in Abraham's day. It's still the capital city of Syria to this day. It's called the city of Jasmine. And it's named after this aromatic flowering tree that grows in that region. In Paul's day, there was a very large settlement of Jews in the city. And so Saul's intent is, I'm gonna snuff out this idea that Jesus is a Messiah before it even takes a footing in this place. I want us to understand something here. Like, don't make a mistake.

This is not a leisure trip for Saul. It's not vacation time for him. He's not going to Damascus to observe the beauty and sniff the flowers. He's on a hunting trip. And as he is engaged in this evil at the very worst possible moment in the midst of his evil, God shows up.

You ever been caught doing something you weren't supposed to be doing? Maybe as a student you were cheating on an exam and then you feel the presence of the teacher just standing right behind you. And you're like, I'm dead. I'm dead now.

I'm dead when I get home. I'm dead, dead, dead. And you feel like you're just, I remember as a child I was supposed to be out raking leaves, worst chore for my childhood growing up in the Midwest with all these large oak trees and supposed to be outside Saturday morning. I found a need to go in the house and sneak into the upstairs family room and turn on the television because it was Saturday morning cartoons. It's a super friend's. And I even shut the door. You couldn't find me. And I still remember the moment I saw the door knob and creaking open and my dad standing there. And then the question, what are you doing son? It's

Batman dad. Like, I mean, just the fear. I can't, I can't even put my, I can't wrap my mind around this experience for Saul. What was going through his mind when God shows up? What? I mean, how quickly is he connecting the dots? It's the brightest time of the day and yet there's a light that is blinding. Saul knows. Saul knows.

[21 : 28] He knows. He knows because later in the narrative it says you were speaking with Jesus. I mean, he knows. And in fact, his question reveals that he knew. He says, who are you Lord? Not Lord in the small but in the ultimate sense. Saul knows.

Cotton is evil. But it's interesting to me because there is, there's yet still a kindness that we see in the approach of God here because when he comes to him, he says Saul, Saul. You know, there's about 15 occasions in scripture where someone's name is stated with repetition. Just the name of you Abraham, Abraham, right? Don't don't lay your, your hand on the lad. Moses, Moses. Don't draw near to this place.

Take off your shoes. When Jesus rebukes, Martha, remember Martha, Martha. Jesus wept over the city. Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem. When Jesus is addressing the Father from the cross. My God, my God. It's a very personal way to address a person and it carries a familial tone to it. In fact, at the end of days, many it says Jesus will attempt to do the same to him in Matthew 722. On that day, many will say to me, Lord, Lord, didn't we know you? He says, no. No, I never knew you.

Sobering words. You never trusted in me as your, your personal savior. It's interesting to me that Jesus comes to Saul here and he does so in a very personal way. Saul, Saul. This is the heart of God caught in the evil. And yet what we see is the heart of God that he aches for people. See, Jesus aches for those that Saul is harming. We know that because he says, why are you persecuting me? Right? Saul's persecuting the church. Jesus takes that personally. As we suffer, so does God. Psalm 56, 8 says in a, in a sense, he puts our tears in a bottle. He pens them in a book. He knows the suffering of his people. God aches. He aches not just for those that are being harmed, but he's aching for the one that is actually destroying his own life. Under compounding sin. In the record in Acts 26 14. It says, and when we had fallen, when we had fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

It is hard for you to kick against the goats. What's a goat? A goat is a, not sure why you have a city slicker up here telling you what a goat is, but I'm going to continue. A goat is a pointy stick. Usually would have metal as the point and it was used to urge oxen to move forward and goats would be attached to ox carts to the front of the ox cart because if the ox kicks into the cart, the cart is done. And so they'd be attached to the front of the ox cart and if the oxen weren't willing to respond to the whip to move forward and decided they're going to rebel, they're going to kick into the ox cart. They would be injuring themselves with the goats attached. In fact, they would be kicking into the goat, piercing their own leg, their foot. And Jesus says this to Saul.

[26 : 20] It's a very kind question in fact. I mean, centrally, who are we injuring when we choose to live life in rebellion to God? Ourselves. Ourselves.

It's a very kind way for God to approach Saul. Didn't deserve it. Didn't deserve that kind question. But I think maybe there's something here for us, some application, not just for the unbeliever, but for the believer that man, if you're miserable this morning, there may be a number of different reasons for that. But one of those, perhaps, may be as a result of you thrashing against the very clear direction of God. And you're like, wow. Okay. Can a believer kick against the goats of God? Yes. Anyone here ever done it? Yes. And if you're there this morning, repent. Surrender. Because you're just injuring yourself. You're just compounding sin. You're just injuring yourself. And maybe you're here for Jay. I can't let go of that one thing. I can't do that. And I get it, man. It's hard. It's hard. I don't know what the, I don't know where you're, I mean, I was a pastor and had a secret area of rebellion. So it could be possible that one or two of you might have that as well, at some point in life. And it was hard to give that up. Because even though

I was inflicting damage on myself, I was a dumb ox willing to continue. When the Lord confronted me when I had made an alcohol of vice, I had one bottle left in my hidden, not so hidden spot in the garage and on the shelf behind the stereo. You could see the top of it. It wasn't really hidden, but kind of hidden.

And it's like, I had to get rid of it. I had to call a friend over, brother and Christ, say, hey, can you come over? I need to get rid of this. But I knew that I needed help. I needed the accountability. And it's hard. It's hard. This is the insanity of sin. You know, as I was pouring out this last bottle of bourbon, the thoughts that were going through my head were like, well, how in the world if I keep pouring, am I going to do tonight? And then other thoughts of, you know, well, maybe, I mean, maybe I could just drink the rest and then stop. That's insane. I mean, my health was already declining at that point. And that I was in the moment kicking against the goats. And yet in that moment, even though there was great trepidation of like, I don't know how I do life now. I mean, I don't know that there was a weight that had lifted. I knew it had ownership over me.

And God had to crush me in order to get me to release my grip. So I'm all about joining any poor parties. You need to dump something. Just call Pastor Jay. I can pour out alcohol with the best of them, trust me. But that's what you got the church for.

[30 : 53] I don't know what the thing is that's got a grip on you. But whatever that is, enlist the body of Christ to walk with you, to journey with you, to encourage you.

That's why we're here, amen. Is anyone here because they're righteous in their own efforts? Anyone?

So perhaps if you're caught in the web of sin and you need help, find a brother sister, put the body of Christ is for, to shoulder burdens, to encourage. You know, the goads of life are God's severe mercies. And we see this in Saul's life. It says, like, so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. Like God had to crush him and brought him to this place of just humility. This is not the way that Saul intended to enter that city, is it? No, he, chef pussed, chef, you know, chest puffed out and ready to, you know, take action. And he's being led. He's just, he's, he's a shell of a man right now. And it's God's severe mercy. The Lord disciplining the one he loves. God cares about our salvation and God cares about our sanctification. And you see this pattern three days of blindness for

Saul. Time for repentance, time for reflection, three days in the belly of a fish for Jonah. Space to repent and to consider who he had been becoming.

Seven years among wild beasts for the Babylonian King. To get perspective, to get to that place of repentance where he can then say, Daniel 437, now I Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven. I can do it now.

[33 : 08] For all his works are right in his ways are just and those who walk in pride he is able to humble. Severe mercies of God. Man, we can be a stubborn people. We can be dumb oxen. Amen. Okay. That's a whisper.

C.S. Lewis, he described it this way in his own reluctant conversion. He says, who can duly adore that love which will open the highest gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance to escape. The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men and his compulsion is our liberation.

Who's the hunter in this story? It's actually not Saul. It's God. God is such a better hunter in this story, in your story. But J, this, I mean, this is so supernatural. Well, so is yours. Yeah, but I didn't get a vision. Did you need a vision? If you are in Christ, if you have trusted in Christ, the Lord pursued you.

He drew you. You were dead, spiritually dead. What's better than dead? God has to be the one to initiate. And so whether you like it or not, Paul's story is your story too, if you're in Christ. Let's look at verse 10 to the end here. 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. I mean, Ananias is ready. I'm your guy, God. You got something for me. I'm there. 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 and he has seen a vision, a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.

Best line ever, verse 13, but Ananias answered. Lord, I've heard a few things. In fact, I've heard many about this guy, how much evil he's done to your saints at Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name. Thank God, you want to reconsider? 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. I feel like in a nice like, you've got the wrong guy. This is not, this is, I mean, he's having an out of body experience right now. He's just like, what? Verse 16, 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

[37 : 16] 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 for some days he was with the disciples at Damascus. Man, I so understand Ananias here. I so get it.

Like God, I was ready. And then you're like, I got this guy and I'm saying God, not that guy. I mean, choose another guy. I mean, you have so many options. Not that guy. No. No.

This is a plot twist of a lifetime. Church, this is the greatest critic of Jesus. Now he surrenders his life to the Lord. I mean, it is unthinkable. If you were alive in that day, you could never even have imagined this. Not in your wildest dreams. Makes no sense. It's like the day that my former coach that I coach football with, I used to go football with, Kip Hauser. He was just like the worst human I could possibly imagine. He was a womanizer. He was a drunk. He was foul mouth. He was just a trainwreck of a person in every facet. And then on a Sunday morning, he comes through the doors of the church and says, Coach Turner, I got saved. Like I'm in the wrong.

What? What? No way. That's what you'd be feeling with Saul? Paul? I think maybe that tells us a little why, you know, that that's insight into why there's actually three records of his conversion in Acts, Acts 9, chapter 22, 26. Right?

[39 : 42] Yes, he really, he really met Jesus. Let me, let me say it again. He really met the Lord. His faith is, is legit. And this is considered the scene in Damascus. It's, it's incredible. Verse 19, taking food, he was strengthened. For some days, he was with the disciples at Damascus. He is now fellowshiping with the people that he intended to murder. How does that happen? It's the gospel. That's it. That's it.

This is not positive thinking. It's not self-actualizing. It's the gospel. That it decimated a man. That you are bankrupt without Christ. It's incredible image.

Well, church, there's an application here for us. I think you've hopefully caught it this morning. But if not, let me restate it. And it's simply this. No one, no one, is beyond the gospel. No one is too dirty to be forgiven.

Let that minister to your own soul. Maybe the doubts that you possess. That God might forgive you. That somehow salvation works for everybody else in the room, but not you. That you're secretly here and you're kind of like, I know I'm not really in. I know that I'm not really forgiven. That's an offense to God. You're now becoming God and telling him what he should do and what he's capable of. Just enjoy the fact that the Father came and put the robe on you and you're like, I didn't deserve it. He said, you're right. You don't, but enjoy. That's too good. It's too good. You know, I had to, I had to wreck much of my life in order for this to get here. I lost much. I was a pastor. Decided I would harbor some sin. Took my health. About a year later, ended up being removed from my church. Had no income.

Had no reputation. Nothing. And the gospel became enough.

[42 : 31] Became enough. It's so good. And that's the thing that we want. You want to be there because that's the joy. That's the joy. And for now Paul, it became everything. I mean, how in the world can a man who had destroyed, and we don't know the numbers of people that he had destroyed their lives, we don't know the number. How do you undo that? You can't. All you got at that point is, God, you have forgiven me. And that now is the fuel to live. I'm forgiven. I can do this. In fact, this is what Paul says. 1 Corinthians 15 10. This is life first.

He says, but by the grace of God, I am what I am. That's it. That's it. The family I was born into things I've accomplished nothing. By the grace of God, I am okay, is what he's saying. And his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I but the grace of God that is in me. I got saved. I got forgiven. I want to give that away. I want you to know.

Because I know who I was. Paul's saying, I know who I was. I was the chief. I was number one in line. And church, if the gospel is sufficient for Saul, now Paul, who was the chief of sinners, how dare we say it's not sufficient for us?

Because guess what? You don't hold a candle to Paul in terms of your sin. And somebody like, well, I beg to differ. Frankly, even if you could, what's your point? The gospel is sufficient. God's grace is sufficient. And so this is not just Paul's verse. I pray that this would be our verse. By the grace of God, I am who I am. I am who I am. Well, I didn't do all the evil stuff. Praise God. You were rescued from sins that you never have to commit. Praise God. Praise God.

Let the shape how we view not only ourselves, but the city. They're not the enemy. They're lost. They're broken. They're compounding sin. And they needed rescue.

[45 : 37] Let it shape us. I still think about this young gal that I drove back in Seattle that I was having a conversation with, trying to just sort of make common ground and kind of find out about her life and who she was and want to know, like, amongst other things, what do you do for work? And she was very evasive. She didn't really want to tell me. And I could tell that there was something in her that didn't want to go there. And so I just said, okay, she's involved in something. She's not, you know, she's obviously embarrassed by. And I had driven a number of escorts. And this gal actually, you know, she was working at a strip club. And as I was driving her, I just was burdened like, man, I just want her to, I just, I just want her to know, like, that she is made in the image of God, that she's valuable, that she's, and so I just, I began to share about my family and what they were doing. And I would begin to ask her, like, you know, what are your dreams? Like, you ever have a dream? Like, what you wanted to do when you grew up? And she just all of a sudden kind of began to open up and like, and she began to talk about the fact like, oh, I just, I wanted to be a teacher. I wanted to be a school teacher. And it was such a beautiful moment because the rest of that evening, no doubt she was going to be objectified. And I wanted her to have a moment where it was like, you just, like, she got to feel like a, like a person. And by the time we were done with the conversation, we had kind of this rapport going and she changed the drop off point to where she had me actually drop her off a block before the destination point. And it was just interesting and it was sad because what had happened is she had, we had connected and she had, she was seen as a person. And I think she was embarrassed. And so she had me drop her off a block. And I just kind of sat there and watched her.

And she, she walked on, she then went into the back in the alley and then walked into the back door of the strip club. That's who the Gospel's for, church. That's who the Gospel's for. If you've been broken by your sin, man, then let's be like Paul. Let's outwork. Let's seek to bring life. Let's hunt. Let's hunt, but not to destroy, to offer life. Father, thank you that it would be in your heart to rescue sinners. Lord, thank you that we are part of a church that revels in the Gospel, that worships you, Jesus, that you are the good shepherd, that your ways, your heart is kind. Your love is voracious. Your forgiveness is often we think is just too good to be true. And yet, Lord, it's so. And Father, I pray that we would be a people that are marked by your grace. And Lord, it would affect us, not just personally in the joy that we would experience today to know that we're clean and there's nothing cleaner than clean. Clean is clean. If we had been forgiven, that's past, that's present, that's future. Let us experience that joy, but Father, I pray that it would fuel the desire that we would make you known. That there is a Father who's waiting. That there is a feast. That the table is set. And the Father is also kind. Lord, forgive us for being a judgmental people. Would you break a heart for what breaks yours? And Father, might we have testimonies of those that have come to know you and the goodness, the goodness of having their sins forgiven?

It's in your name we pray, Jesus. Amen.