

New Man

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[0 : 00] Let's pray. Father, we are here because you sent your Son, Jesus Christ, to seek us.

We were all lost sheep, and you pursued us, and you found us, and that's why we're here. And our hearts give great thanks for that.

We ask now that you will focus our attention upon your word, that you would open our ears so that we can hear what you are saying to us, that this would indeed be a time where we can hear your voice and your voice speaking clearly.

Speak into our condition, O Lord. In Jesus' name, amen. Well, we are, keep your bulletins open to that first reading.

Am I just a little loud, or is it just kind of where it's hitting me? Am I about right? Okay, good, good. We're going to be looking at that first reading, and we are continuing our series in the Book of Acts.

[1 : 14] And this, tonight, we are looking at one of the great conversion stories in history. It's the conversion of Paul.

Now, you'll notice in our text that he's referred to with the name Saul, and we're used to calling him Paul. Don't let that confuse you. Saul is his Hebrew name. Paul is his Greek name.

There's really no difference between the two. But we're looking tonight at the conversion of Paul on the Damascus Road. And by any account, this moment is one of the great moments of history.

It's one of the great turning points in history. Even if you don't like Christianity, even if you don't believe anything of the Christian gospel, even if you think Christianity is a really bad thing, you have to agree that the conversion of Paul was a big moment.

And if you look at the Book of Acts as a whole, this moment of Saul's conversion acts kind of like a dynamite, a stick of dynamite.

[2 : 22] Now, as a child, I had an inordinate interest in pyrotechnics. And I could tell you stories of some experience I have with these things, never with a whole stick of dynamite.

I think the biggest I ever got was a quarter stick of dynamite, but I'm not going to tell that story here. But based on what I know, when you light some fiery, you know, explosive thing, you've got a little wick and you have a very little flame.

In fact, sometimes you don't even, you can't even really tell that anything's burning, except that the wick begins to diminish. And that's when you run away. Because you know that there is a big, big boom that's coming and you don't want to be anywhere near it.

That's what happens in the Book of Acts with the conversion of Saul. At first, it is just one guy, one guy on a lonely road outside Damascus. But before long, and we'll see this as we walk through the rest of the Book of Acts, it turns into a massive explosion that rocks the very foundations of Rome. Something remarkable happened on the road to Damascus. Something happened in Saul's life that motivated him, propelled him out into the Roman world so that he proclaimed Christ from one end, from Damascus all the way to Rome and maybe even to Spain.

[3 : 56] Something remarkable happened on the road to Damascus. And if that wasn't enough, not only did Saul proclaim Christ from one end of the Roman Empire to the other, he also suffered for Christ.

And that gets my attention. Because it is one thing for a great man to attempt great things for God. It is another thing for that man or that woman to suffer for Christ. And Saul, whatever happened on that road to Damascus, it propelled him to endure and persevere adversity and suffering and persecution and all kinds of calamity for the rest of his life.

And in the middle of it, he gave thanks. He gave thanks in the midst of suffering. So all this brings up for me at least two questions.

And they're the two questions we're going to look at tonight. The first question is, what in the world happened on the road outside Damascus? We'll look at that first.

[5 : 02] The second question is, how does that dynamic, whatever it is that happened on the road outside Damascus, how does that dynamic propel Paul to face adversity?

How does it help us deal with adversity? Okay, first question. What happened to Saul on the road outside Damascus? When we pick up the story in our reading, Saul has kind of appointed himself as the chief prosecutor against Christians in the area around Jerusalem.

Now, a few chapters ago, we saw the martyrdom of Stephen. I don't know whether you were here for that. You probably remember it. And at that time, Saul was on the sideline. He was manning the coat check desk while the rest of the people were busy stoning Stephen.

Do you remember that? Well, he's not on the sideline anymore. He's right at the center of things. And he is spearheading the anti-Christian movement. And it seems as if Saul is almost obsessed with the Jesus movement because he goes to the chief priest.

Notice, it is not the chief priest's idea. It is Saul's idea. Saul goes to the chief priest and he begs the chief priest, give me authority so that I can go to Damascus and scour the synagogues and look for the Christians that are there so that I can bind them and arrest them and bring them back to Jerusalem.

[6 : 30] Most of the Christians had already fled Jerusalem. But now Saul has his eyes set on Damascus, 135 miles away. We pick up the story at verse 3.

Now, as Saul went on his way, he approached Damascus. And suddenly, a light from heaven flashed 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. Friends, those words absolutely shattered Saul's life.

The moment Saul heard the words, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting, Saul's life, everything he had built his life on came tumbling to the ground.

[7 : 33] It shattered Saul's life. Why? Why did it shatter Saul's life? Because Saul, up until this point, had done everything right.

Is that what you thought I was going to say? Saul had done everything right. It's easy to villainize Saul, right? But if you're going to understand this guy, if you're going to understand Saul of Tarsus, you've got to understand that this guy had done everything right.

Think about his life for a little bit. Saul was born in Tarsus, which is modern-day Turkey. But as a young man, he chose to move to Jerusalem.

And the reason he chose to move to Jerusalem is that he wanted to study with the premier Jewish theologian of the day, a guy called Gamaliel. We read about Gamaliel a few chapters ago.

You can read about Gamaliel and his sayings in the Mishnah and in the Talmud. Premier theologian of his day. Saul went to Jerusalem, hung out with this guy Gamaliel, and Saul joined the strictest, most conservative denomination of his day.

[8 : 47] He joined the Pharisees. And Paul writes later that he advanced beyond all his contemporaries as a Pharisee.

He did everything right. And why was he doing all this stuff? Was he insincere? No. Saul wasn't insincere.

He was the sincerest guy he knew. He was sincerely pursuing God. He went to Jerusalem to pursue God. He studied with Gamaliel to pursue God.

And in his sincere pursuit of God, he came to the conclusion that the Christians were terribly dangerous and that they needed to be opposed at every point.

And that's why when he meets Jesus on the road, his life is so utterly shattered. Because Saul had expected that all his religious sincerity would lead him to God.

[9 : 53] But the moment he meets Jesus, he realizes that all his religious efforts and sincerity that he thought would lead him to God had actually produced the opposite effect.

He had ended up being a persecutor of God. Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? I mean, he thought his whole career was defending God, but it ended up he was abusing God.

Jesus shattered Saul's life. Everything he had lived for. Now, we live in Vancouver, not Damascus or Jerusalem or Tarsus.

And in Vancouver, you've got religious people and you've got irreligious people. This passage, this passage shatters both of us.

Let me explain. You've got religious people and this is a gross overgeneralization, but generally speaking, religious people will say something like, believe right and do right and you'll find God.

[11 : 06] Irreligious people say, gross generalization I know, but something like, there are lots of ways to God, but what matters is your sincerity.

If you're sincere, if you're authentic, then you'll get to whatever you consider to be God. This passage shatters both of us.

Because Saul was both religious and he was sincere. And instead of finding God, he ended up fighting against God. Do you see what this is saying?

This is a remarkable thing that is going on here. This passage is telling us that you can do everything right and get it all wrong.

You can do everything right and you can... Does that disturb you? That disturbs me. Because I've been spending my whole life as a good religious person trying to do it all right.

[12 : 12] It's disturbing. What's the solution? Here's the solution. Saul cannot find God. Jesus has to find Saul. Saul cannot pursue God successfully.

Even if he tries all the things that he thinks are right, it doesn't work. It produces the opposite effect. But if Jesus comes to Saul, then it's a whole different story.

And friends, isn't that the great irony of this text, of this story? I mean, here's Saul outside Damascus. And his life is shattered because he finds out that his religious efforts have ended up making him an enemy of God and a God abuser.

And he's standing in front of Jesus, the Lord of all the universe. And you expect Jesus to give him what he deserves. You expect Jesus to smite him.

Isn't that what God does to naughty little people? But that's not what Jesus does. Because Jesus hasn't come to Saul.

[13 : 22] Jesus hasn't pursued Saul in order to smite him, but to save him. Saul thought that he was searching for God, but he found out that Jesus had been searching for him.

Friends, you've got to see that this is what makes Christianity different from everything else.

Because human religion, in all its different forms, will say something like, If you get it right, you'll get God.

And your religion says, in all its different forms, be sincere. And you'll get God if he's there, or whatever it is you want to aim at. The Christian gospel says, both are dead ends.

Jesus must find us. This is the first week of Advent. That's the point of Advent. Jesus comes. He comes to us. We don't find him. He finds us. And Jesus chased down Saul. Saul didn't like Jesus.

[14 : 28] Saul wasn't searching for Jesus. Saul didn't decide for Christ. Jesus sought him down. Jesus chased down his enemy. And do you know why Jesus chased down Saul?

Saul, do you know why? Look at verse 15. Jesus chased down Saul because he wanted to chase down you and I. Look at verse 15.

Jesus is speaking to a very frightened Ananias. And Jesus says, Go. For Saul is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name, note it, before Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. What does that mean? This is what it means. It means that Jesus sought Saul in order that through Saul, Jesus could reach out, search and seek for the children of Israel, the religious people, and the Gentiles, the irreligious people, the pluralists.

Jesus has to seek both. And he chose, he sought out Saul so that through Saul, both the religious people and the irreligious people could be found by Jesus.

[15 : 45] Did you think Jesus, you know, a lot of people know that Jesus was a really good teacher. But Jesus is way more than that. Of course he is that. But he's so much more than that.

Jesus, Jesus is the hound of heaven. And he chases us. Have you ever seen, I'm a dog guy, what do I say?

Have you ever seen a hound chase, chase down a rabbit or something like that? There's nothing that dissuades them. They run with perfect focus.

They run. And they will run until their paws bleed and then they'll keep on going. You know, we talk a lot about believing in a God of love.

Let me tell you what Christians mean when we talk about a God of love. We are talking about a God who in Jesus Christ has searched us and pursued us and chased us down until his hands bled, until his feet bled, until from his side blood and water flowed.

[16:53] That's what we're remembering tonight at the table. You know, I don't know what comes to your mind when you think about God, but let me ask you a question.

Does the God in your mind love you enough to bleed for you? Does the God in your mind love you enough to pursue you and search after you, even if you do not want to be found?

That's the God of Christianity, and he's different than everything else. For the last 2,000 years, people have had a funny experience.

They've read this passage. They've considered Saul and his conversion on the road, and they've found oftentimes to their fear, to their bewilderment, that the same Jesus that sought out Saul on the road to Damascus was seeking them out.

And we Vancouverites pride ourselves on being open-minded, and I wonder if you would be open-minded enough to consider whether this same Jesus that sought Paul is seeking you out right now.

[18:11] Give it a think. Just give it a think. What happened on the road to Damascus? Jesus sought Saul, and he's still pursuing us.

Second question. How does this dynamic help us deal with adversity? How did it help Saul deal with adversity? Now, you're going to ask me, Jim, why are you asking the adversity question? And I'm asking it because it's in the text. Look at verse 16. Jesus is speaking to Ananias, and right after he says, go speak to Saul, he says, I will show him how much he must suffer for my name. We've been walking through the book of Acts, and this passage that we've got tonight is the conclusion of a subsection within the book of Acts.

And this subsection within the book of Acts is all about how the church faces adversity. It began in chapter 6 with the martyrdom of Stephen.

[19:27] Adversity, persecution broke out in Jerusalem, but it didn't stay there. It spread to Damascus. You can see it in verse 13.

Ananias is scared to death of Saul. Why is he scared? Because he knows that with Saul is coming greater persecution. And even after Saul is converted, in this text, the persecution doesn't stop. The adversity doesn't stop. There's two assassination attempts at the end of our passage tonight. It got worse before it got better. And throughout this subsection and these chapters that we've been looking at, there's a kind of implicit question hanging over the text.

And the question is this. Where is God's mercy when the church faces adversity? I mean, why doesn't God just change the circumstances?

He's powerful enough to do it. Why doesn't he do it? Here's the answer. Here's some of the answer. God's mercy is found.

[20:43] God's mercy for the church is found not so much in changing the difficult circumstances that we face. God's mercy is found primarily in using the difficult circumstances that the church faces in order to pursue people more vigorously.

Jesus' priority is to pursue and save people, religious people and irreligious people. And that's Jesus' priority in times of adversity.

A few weeks ago, we saw that it was through adversity that Jesus sought and found the Samaritans.

Do you remember that? Last week, it was through adversity that Jesus found the Ethiopian eunuch. And this week, it is through adversity and in times of adversity that Jesus finds Saul of Tarsus.

Now, Leslie just gave us an announcement. You were wondering how long it would take me to get to here, weren't you?

[21:53] And it's been a difficult week for some of us. And it's been a difficult few months for a lot of us around here. And all signs are that the difficulty we've been facing up to this point is not going away anytime soon.

So where's God's mercy in all of this? Friends, God will show us His mercy not so much by changing the difficult circumstances we're facing, but by using those circumstances so that Jesus can pursue us more vigorously and so that we see Him more clearly, so that the scales of our eyes fall off and we see Jesus as the risen, reigning Lord of all and the object of our greatest desire.

Now, most of us here call St. John's home and I want to speak to you for just a second. If you call St. John's home and particularly if you are feeling the difficulty that the church is facing, I want you to look at verse 4.

Jesus has some comforting words for you. Look at what Jesus says to Saul. Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

Now, Saul was not persecuting Jesus, was he? He was persecuting Jesus' followers. But that's not the way Jesus sees it.

[23 : 29] And there seems to be a special kind of fellowship that exists between Jesus and His church, particularly in times of great adversity. adversity. When the church faces adversity, Jesus is right there with us.

The Lord of all the universe is right there with us, experiencing the adversity with us. It's been said that Jesus bleeds with the wounds of His church.

And if that's true, if Jesus really does bleed with the wounds of His church, then the same reality works backwards.

If Jesus bleeds with the wounds of His church, then the church also receives as a gift the strength that only Jesus can give us. Years later, when Saul was mainly going by the name Paul, he went through a time of great difficulty.

He called it his thorn in the flesh. And, we know it was very hard for him. We don't know what it was. We don't know if it was physical or spiritual or circumstantial.

[24 : 47] But in any regard, the thorn in the flesh was something that was deeply troubling to Paul and he begged Jesus to take it away. He begged Jesus to change the circumstances.

Jesus said no. But he didn't just say no. He also said this. This comes from 2 Corinthians 12. Jesus said, Paul, my grace is sufficient for you.

My grace is enough for you. My power is made perfect in weakness. See friends, in times of adversity, Jesus takes our suffering to himself, our difficulty to himself so that the Lord of all the universe experiences it with us.

But he doesn't stop there. In exchange for our adversity and suffering, he gives us his strength and his grace and his power in our weakness that makes up for what we lack in ourselves.

Friends, there is an extent to which you will never know the full power of Jesus in your life until you know it when times are really hard. And if you're a Christian, you know that Jesus sought you at your conversion.

[26 : 10] You know that. You know that you got chased down by Jesus when you were converted. But you need to know that right now, even still, all these years later, Jesus is still chasing you.

He's still pursuing you. He's still chasing you down to give you his strength and his grace for every day. His power in your weakness.

Where's God's mercy for us? Friends, God's mercy will not be whether or not we keep the building or lose the building. God's mercy is not measured in brick and stone.

God's mercy is measured in the extent to which Jesus has sought us and continues to seek us.

And his mercy will be when the scales fall from our eyes and we see Jesus more clearly. That's what he's up to in this congregation in this time. Now, you need to know that that's also what Jesus is up to in this city.

[27 : 18] Remember, Jesus pursued Saul so that through Saul he could pursue both Jew and Gentile. Jesus is pursuing St. John's in order that through St. John's Jesus may pursue Vancouver.

Isn't that great? Jesus is pursuing Vancouver just like he's pursued Saul of Tarsus. And you know one of the remarkable things about this passage?

We can't pass this up. One of the remarkable things about this passage is that it's proof, assurance, that Jesus loves his most obstinate enemy.

Isn't that good news? Because you know what that means. It means that Jesus loves people who hate him. It means no one is disqualified from Jesus' mercy.

It means no one is so lost that Jesus cannot still find them. And that gives us great hope for this city. It gives us great hope for ourselves as well.

[28 : 27] If there's anyone here tonight who thinks that you are too far gone for Jesus' mercy, this passage stands over and against that. This passage proclaims to you that Jesus loves you and he pursues you.

And this passage proclaims that Jesus loves this city. So St. John's, do not ever, don't you dare, ever give up on anyone.

The people you pray for, the people you hope will come to Christ, don't you ever give up on them. Don't give up on your family. Don't give up on your schoolmates. Don't give up on your workmates. Don't give up on this city. You know, the church in Jerusalem just couldn't believe that Saul had been truly converted. Because Jesus' mercy always exceeds the expectations of his church.

And so Jesus' mercy to Vancouver will exceed the expectations you currently have. And that's why, friends, Jesus calls us as a church in this time of adversity to give no place to bitterness, no place to anger, no place to any even hint of bitterness and hatred.

[29 : 46] Jesus calls us to love because we have been loved. And a wonderful thing will be done. A wonderful thing will happen. Jesus will use us to call Vancouver to himself.

Jesus will heal our blindness. The scales will fall from our eyes. And we and Vancouver together will see Jesus, the one who has pursued us. And we will realize that he is the object of our greatest desire.

That's where God's taking us. Let's pray. Let's pray. Lord Jesus Christ, I ask that tonight we would be able to see that you are in pursuit.

grant us to see how you pursue us. Whether we've never seen it before or whether we haven't remembered it for a long time. Grant us to see that you are pursuing us and that you are pursuing the world.

Open our eyes to see how you are doing that that we may worship you and give thanks to your holy name forever and ever. Amen. Amen.

[31 : 05] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.