

The Man in White

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[0 : 0 0] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.! For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

Acts chapter 9, beginning in verse 1. This is the Word of God. But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for the 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 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. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.

[1 : 0 9] 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.

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 Tarshish named Saul. For behold, he is praying. And he has seen a vision of a man named Ananias.

Come and lay his hands on him, so that he may 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.

[2 : 1 2] 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 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 might 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 of Damascus. Immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogue. He is the Son of God, he said.

And all who heard him were amazed and said, Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests.

[3 : 28] But Saul increased all the more in strength and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus, proving that Jesus was the Christ. This is the word of the Lord.

Well, there was never a movement more completely dead than the movement surrounding Jesus of Nazareth on the night or the morning after he was crucified.

The Gospels tell us that all of his followers abandoned him. Peter, his beloved disciple, denied him three times. After he was crucified, all of his followers were discouraged.

Their hopes dashed. Their dreams devastated. They were trying to figure out what to do with their lives, how to return back to the life they left. Then suddenly, something very surprising happened.

The weak, fearful disciples began to preach with courage, conviction. The movement that was completely dead suddenly came alive.

[4 : 32] It began small and an unknown. It was unknown to the world, insignificant to those who knew about it. But within a few hundred years, it became the leading religion in the Roman Empire. And now, 2,000 years later, Christianity is the leading religion in the world, claiming over two billion followers, the world's population, some 30%.

From a historical standpoint, the sweep and spread of Christianity is simply staggering. Historian Tom Holland says, in a new book I got, he says, it's difficult to see the influence of Christianity on society because it's not just in those who profess Jesus Christ, but in the assumptions we share about human nature, morality, the rule of law, government, and so much more.

But it all turned on these disciples. What happened? What changed? These guys that scattered up to the upper room on the night the Lord was betrayed, they believed Jesus Christ was raised from the dead.

Now, it wasn't merely that they believed in a historical fact that Jesus was raised from the dead. You may believe in something difficult to prove. You may or may not believe that the coronavirus started in a lab in Wuhan.

You may or may not believe that Nico Iomaliava was worth \$4 million. But whether or not you believe any of those things doesn't change much about you.

[6 : 07] But when the disciples believed that Jesus was raised from the dead, everything changed. It's not merely that they believed in a historical fact.

Something happened to them. They were made new. They were transformed. They went from weak to strong, fearful to courageous, cowardice to conviction.

They didn't just believe in the resurrection. They came to know the power of the resurrection. And there's no change, more sudden, more surprising, more dramatic than the change that occurred to the Apostle Paul when he saw the risen Christ on the road to Damascus.

In this brief encounter, everything changed for the Apostle. He went from a seemingly tireless persecutor of the church to a free grace proclaiming apostle.

It's hard to overstate the significance of Paul's conversion. People say outside of the birth of Christ, nothing is more significant. The birth and death and resurrection of Christ. There's no event more significant to human history than the conversion of the Apostle Paul.

[7 : 15] He traveled over 14,000 miles, most of them by foot, planted at least 14 churches, wrote 13 of the books in our New Testament. It's hard to overstate it, but it's also easy to understate the substance of his conversion.

It's easy to miss what happened. He was completely changed. He was converted. In a moment, he went from an opponent to a follower of the way.

It does not take a conversion these days to see the influence of Christianity in our world, in our country, but it does take a conversion to understand and know the power of the resurrection.

Today, many believe in the resurrection, but do we know the power of it? That's what I'm after this morning. Do you believe in the resurrection? It's an important question, but a much more important question is, do you know the power of the resurrection?

Do you know the peace that surpasses understanding? Do you know the joy that is unspeakable and full of glory? Do you know the freedom of a clean conscience?

[8 : 24] Can you truly sing, I once was blind, but now I see. I once was dark, lost in darkest night, as we just sang.

In a word, where we're going is the only way people truly change is through the power of the resurrection. So we're going to unpack this story and look at it through a couple points. The first is, change occurs by comprehending how lost you are.

Change occurs by comprehending how lost you are. Now we all know some people are lost. They might have that thing on their Jeep. Not all who wander are lost, but they look lost, you know.

Some people are lost, you know. Drunkards, child abusers, they're lost. Murderers, hard-hearted dictators, they're lost. We all would agree on that. But many other people are lost and it's hard to see.

When we meet the Apostle Paul in this text, he is anything but lost. He is a respected member of the Jewish synagogue in Jerusalem. He's zealous for the truth. He's carefully obeying the law of God.

[9 : 30] He is a student of the Scriptures, not a neglecter of them. And when followers of Christ or followers of Jesus of Nazareth begin telling folks that Jesus was raised from the dead, he wants to put an end to this lie.

He's on a mission. He begins persecuting the church in Jerusalem. We see that in Acts 7 that he watches and approves of the first martyr of Stephen, the first martyr of the church killed for confessing faith in Christ.

And then when he sees the church flee from Jerusalem because of the persecution, he goes to hunt them down. Look back there in verse 1. He said he's still breathing threats and murder against the disciples.

He goes to the high priest. He asks for letters to the synagogues in Damascus. He wants to go with permission from the high priest and bring those people back.

Bind them. He's anything but lost in these verses. He's on a mission, and he's not just on the mission, he's a ringleader. He's the one taking initiative.

[10 : 34] He's leading the charge to Damascus. But what might not be obvious in this text, he believes he's on a mission from God. A little back story.

Paul was born a Jew, raised in the strictest group of Jews of that day, the Pharisees. Strict because of their adherence to the law. Acts 22, Paul sharing about himself before the king.

He says, I am a Jew born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city in Jerusalem, educated at the feet of Gamaliel, according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God, as all of you are this day.

What he's telling us is that he was not a law breaker. He was a law keeper. He's not anti-religion. He's all about it. He's not a party boy or foul mouth like we often think of people when we see people that are lost.

He's clean and careful. He's zealous. Blameless, according to the law, he says in Philippians 3. That's what drives him to chase down these followers of Jesus Christ.

- [11 : 45] He's convinced that what he's doing is right. He's convinced this is the will of God. He's convinced that followers of Christ are opposing God and they must be stopped.
- He believes he's right until he's blinded by the light on the road to Damascus. Look down there in verse 3. It says, As he went on his way, he approached Damascus and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.
- Now Damascus was 135 miles away from Jerusalem. So likely Paul had been traveling for several days.
- And as he nears Damascus, he tells us later that it's around noon. So he's traveling to Damascus and suddenly the light floods him. The height of day.
- A light from heaven. Now we see pictures in Scripture of heaven, of glory, of this place of light.
- [12 : 49] God dwells in unapproachable light, the Scriptures say. And so it seems that this invasion of light is indicating to Paul that he is encountering the Lord Himself.
- He falls to the ground. Now despite the many paintings in the Sistine Chapel and other places, there's no mention of a horse here. There's only mention of light that startles him, throws him to the ground.
- Then he hears a voice. Look there, falling to the ground. He heard a voice saying to him, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?
- After seeing the light, the narrative kind of turns and focuses on his voice. Perhaps Paul closed his eyes because the light was so bright.
- Or perhaps he immediately went blind when he saw the light. But either way, we hear this voice in this conversation with the Lord. And after the conversation concludes, he opens his eyes to realize he's blind.
- [13 : 57] Look down at verse 8. He says, 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.
- He's blinded by the light. Now he's striking. Why wouldn't the light help him see? And yet the light leaves him blind, leaves him in darkness.
- And I think the light blinds him so he can see how spiritually blind he is and how lost he is. Now it's not hard to convince a bad person they're lost.
- All you have to do is bring up past failures and mistakes and flaws. But it's very hard to convince a good person they're lost. Have you ever attempted to correct a friend who thinks they're never wrong?
- Or a conflict with someone who never asked for forgiveness? Or attempt to win an argument with an all-knowing family member? It's not going to happen.
- [15 : 04] Paul was convinced he was a good man. He was convinced he was doing what was right. He was convinced that he was the man in white. That he was the man who had no imperfections, but was blameless before the God.
- But all of his obedience led him to the darkness. The Lord brings a sudden supernatural darkness in the presence of this sudden immersion of light to show how spiritually blind and lost he is.
- Now the Bible teaches us there's two ways to rebel against God. You can rebel against God by doing everything wrong. You can go your own way. You can do your own thing.
- You can turn your back on what you know. Usually this is the younger sibling in the family. The free spirit. They rebel and buck the system. They want the love and admiration of their friends far more than their parents.
- They want to avoid the normal life at all costs. And so they chase the bigger and the better. But when you do everything wrong, you get lost.

[16 : 11] But you can also rebel against God by doing everything right. That's what's coming to light here.

Usually this is the older sibling. Now I was a middle sibling and they're just completely nuts. But the older sibling plays by the rules.

Obeys mom and dad. Focused on the rules. All about what is fair in the household. Making sure equal portions go to all. They're quick to tell everyone in the family when they're acting unfairly.

And you can get lost like that. Many believe this is the main point of Christianity. Do what is right.

Be a good person and you'll go to heaven. I've asked many people over the years sharing the gospel. If God were to let you into your... Or if God asked you why should I let you into my heaven, what would you say?

[17 : 09] And by and large most people say I'm a good person. They might say I was baptized. You know, I went to church as a kid and generally they just say what they're saying is I'm generally a good guy.

Right? That's what we all contend to believe. I mean it makes sense. It's what's fair. It's how the world works. Good deserves good things. If we do well in school we get good grades.

If we do well at work we get promoted. If we do well at sports we play varsity or get a scholarship or something like that. That's what we've been taught all our life. And so if there's a good God who lives in a good place reserved for good people and we do good then we are good and we should be welcomed there.

After all who does God invite to His heaven? Bad people? But these verses alert us that something is bad wrong because all of Paul's goodness led him into the darkness.

darkness. It left him blinded by the light. The darkness symbolizes the judgment and the wrath of God.

[18 : 15] Very clear to the Apostle Paul. He knew that on the night of the Passover it went dark because the judgment was falling. He knew that on Jesus' crucifixion all of Jerusalem went dark.

Why? Because the judgment of God is falling. So he's alerted that all of his goodness all of his rule keeping has led him to the darkness away from God and that's the only place it will take him.

We all know bad people don't go to heaven but we must see that good people don't go there either because no one can be good enough. Good is always relative.

We measure it by looking again looking alongside looking at other people. We might be good if we're better than some other people but we'll never be good enough before a holy God. Not even the citizenship award will make you good enough before a holy God.

And so it's alerting us. Paul had all the accolades. We know that. Philippians 3 you could read it this afternoon. He was born in the right family. He had the right background.

[19 : 22] The right training. The right conviction. The right education. The right lifestyle. He had it all. But all of that led him into the darkness. Change occurs by comprehending how real Jesus is.

Change occurs by comprehending how real Jesus is. Before Paul is struck with blindness he sees the risen Christ.

If you look back at that scene the light was from heaven. from heaven is not a reference to the sky or the stars or something like that.

Luke or the author here is alerting us to something. It came from somewhere. More than that it came from someone because we know that Jesus is the one who is exalted above all rule and authority and power and dominion.

He is the one in heaven ruling over things on earth and so just like he gave the spirit in Acts 2 so he's giving the light here so that Paul could see him.

[20 : 29] And Paul does not just see the light he sees Jesus Christ. We see in verse 17 Ananias says the Lord Jesus who appeared to you. The apostle says several times that he saw the Lord Jesus as well.

He's an apostle. He realizes in that moment that Jesus is the risen Lord. Now the first martyr was stoned.

I don't know if you remember Acts 8 or Acts 7 Stephen preaches this long message. He's preaching all about what God is doing outside the temple to alert them that God was about to bring down the temple and bring down so many of the ways they thought about religion and the very last thing he said is I see Jesus Christ the Son of Man standing at the right hand of the Father and then they stoned him to death.

But in this scene that's where Paul sees him. He sees Jesus of Nazareth exalted to the right hand of God the Father the man I trust saw on earth he sees exalted in heaven.

He realizes not just that Jesus is alive but that Jesus is the risen Lord. that's what's going on in this scene if you notice he immediately said Saul, Saul the double address would have alerted any studier of the Old Testament that this was an encounter with God just like God said Moses, Moses Samuel, Samuel God is speaking to Paul and then when he sees the risen Lord he struck blind and left alone in silence.

[22 : 14] It's incredible. last Sunday night Rory McIlroy won the green jacket he won the masters for anybody that cares he completed a career grand slam one of only six players to win all four major PGA tour events and I watched it with my family he won his third major in 2014 so he's been chasing this one for 11 years all the naysayers have been saying all their things about Rory but after he sank the winning putt something striking happened the commentator Jim Nance who's been calling the masters and other events for years was completely silent for four minutes completely silent as Rory fell to his knees weeping on the green as he hugged Justin Rose as he hugged his wife kissed his wife hugged his child was walking up to the clubhouse all of this and it's completely silent

I didn't even realize it because I was so taken in to Rory's response it's as if Jim Nance was saying it's time for you to be quiet and think about what you just saw and that's what God did to Paul it's time Paul for you to be silent and think about what you saw three days the apostle Paul is in darkness three days he's thinking about what he saw I just want to go to that room I want to see what he saw you know he's just thinking about he neither ate or drank he was fasting he was praying surely he began to think if Jesus is alive could it be that he died and suffered for the sins of others because the scriptures say the soul that sinned shall die but he did not die he's alive again could it be that he suffered for someone else's sin he must have been thinking the Messiah was meant to be a strong defender but could he also be the suffering servant that we read about in Isaiah 53 this strange character that emerges like God but suffers for the sins of men could it be that the Messiah and the suffering servant are one man one suffering

Messiah could it be that what about all the animal sacrifices over the years why did this happen on Passover night could it be that all the lambs and all the bulls and all the things offered up were pointing to a final sacrifice could it be that the whole story all along was about Jesus of Nazareth that he is the true ark and the true ladder to heaven the true ram provided by the Lord the Passover sacrifice surely the apostle Paul realized in those few days that the only people that get to heaven are those that get there through Jesus that heaven's not for good people it's not for bad people either it's for forgiven people so Paul take the silence maybe that's what the Lord's doing this morning wants you to take the silence think about who he is in the darkness

Paul realizes that Jesus is the risen Lord but he also realizes that Jesus is after him the risen Lord does not just speak to Paul he takes over if you notice depending on what your translation is you see the emergence of tons of red ink highlighting the words of our Lord Jesus Christ he says Saul Saul why are you persecuting me Paul says who are you he says I'm Jesus whom you're persecuting now you go to the city and you do what I tell you Ananias rise and go to Saul he's like nah I'm not doing that but he says I know who he is I know what he did but you go there you pray for him because he's a chosen instrument of mind that's what's going on suddenly the risen Lord is making it known that he is seeking the apostle Paul the hound is being hounded the hunter is being hunted the tracker is being tracked and the Lord has found him and spotted him on an open road and he moves in to apprehend him with grace apparently the Lord has been searching for Paul for some time he said in Acts 24 26-14 retelling the story before the people in Rome

Saul, Saul why are you persecuting it is hard persecuting me it's hard for you to kick against the goads now a goad is a stick that serves as the same purpose as a whip to goad someone or goad an animal into going where you want it to go and so the Lord has been saying I've been coming after you Paul I've been impressing myself on you I've been trying to bring you to me how long will you keep resisting me you know the poet Francis Thompson was born into a wealthy family in England a little over a hundred years ago when it seemed like everything was set for a successful life a religious family a wealthy family but he spent his life on the run he ran from his parents and what they wanted him to do he ran to the big city of London to chase his dreams when things didn't pan out he ran to opium became addicted he ran until he found himself alone and helpless he almost died but someone rescued him and after getting back to help he began to write his most famous poem tells the story of his life it's called

[28 : 20] The Hound of Heaven he says I fled him down the nights and down the days I fled him down the arches of the years I fled him down the labyrinth ways of my own mind in the midst of my tears I hid from him when Thompson looked back on his life he realized that all of his life was running from the Lord I fled from him it was him that I was made for and I was fleeing from him from the family home I fled he fled God to London he fled God with drugs and hard living but despite all his running God continued to follow him and hound him he wrote at the end of the poem I fled him but everywhere I fled him he hounded me well that's the story of these verses the Hound of Heaven is after the Apostle Paul and the Hound of Heaven is after you you may be lost because you've done everything wrong you've done your own thing you've bucked the system you've driven away family and friends with hard living and selfish choices you may look rough and tough but you know you're lost that's my story lost run into anything that would satisfy you may be lost because you've done everything right that's a lot of people's story down here you've tried to color between the lines you've tried to be perfect you've tried to mine your P's and Q's you may look good on the outside but you do not know peace you may not you may not know true joy you may feel as if other people have something you do not you are lost your path ends in darkness and the risen

Lord is seeking after you that's the truth of scripture while we were yet sinners Christ died for the ungodly that's the hallmark message of the apostle Paul after he saw the light God gave him a gospel the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ well that's the message for you the reality of the gospel is that we have to run from all our bad deeds and that's easy to know but we have to run from all our bad deeds and we got to run from all our good deeds if we're going to get to heaven because there's only one way to heaven it's through Jesus Christ who is perfect the scriptures say if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you will be saved hallelujah when Paul comes to the Lord everything changes I love that image you know the image has been one that the church has held on to and repeated again and again the scales fell from his eyes something like scales fell from his eyes he began preaching that

Jesus is the son of God he began preaching that Jesus is the Christ which is not Jesus' last name it means that Jesus is the Messiah the promised one Paul was converted now anyone can come to Jesus but no one comes to him without being converted you cannot come to Jesus without a change that's what's going on in these passages it may not be dramatic like Paul's it may not be a blinding light a vision being thrown down sometimes we say the Damascus Road experience as if that's the only way God intervenes in our lives but you must come you can only come with a change with a surprise a turn a transition a transformation I love Ben's story saying we're all one phone call away from finding out what we really believe so if you get the ring today what's it going to reveal it's going to reveal what you really trust we're all a phone call away and so God wants the power of the resurrection to invade your life invade your heart to invade you and change you finally change comes by comprehending how vital the church is change comes by comprehending how lost you are how real

Jesus is and how vital the church is I love everything about the apostle Paul's conversion I think all of it was intentional I think the Lord put him in darkness for three days he could have called him to the light just like that just like Hank Williams saw it but Hank Williams sang it but he didn't call him to the light immediately he made him wait he made him wait until a brother came everyone in the church was terrified of him you know they'd heard reports about this guy that struck down Stephen when the Lord says Ananias go to him he's like nah bro I'm not doing that Lord but the Lord says he is mine you go to him and I love look down at verse 17 Ananias departed once the Lord spoke to him this is what obedience looks like he departed and entered the house and laying his hands on him he said brother

Saul he's saying you're one of ours now you belong with us look at 19 for some days he was with the disciples at Damascus so they all kind of gathered around him and relating to him after he's converted the Lord surrounds him with believers he surrounds him with others who confess Jesus Christ the Lord sends Ananias to help him so that he would realize that he was meant to live in this community and when Paul's converted he does not receive a new life merely he receives a new family I love the way the Lord revealed himself to him here when he says Saul Saul why are you persecuting me he says who are you Lord he says I am Jesus whom you are persecuting it's stunning the way the Lord reveals himself he's saying I am and identifying himself so closely that there's no separation between him and the people that confess his name and the people that Paul is striking down

[35 : 04] Paul realizes that the church is the body of Christ imagine how that doctrine develops and his teaching he realizes the church the followers of Christ are the hands and feet arms and legs of Christ on earth he realizes this body of Christ this mysterious union of all who confess the name of the Lord Jesus Christ you know when I hear the word when we hear the word body of Christ I often think we think about the church like it's like a body of Christ like great metaphor Lord but that's not the way the Bible uses that it always says it is because the church is unlike any other place on earth you know C.S. Lewis once said friendship begins with what you too that's all it takes for me to connect with somebody as a ball fan what you too let's go in on this and talk for 30 minutes but the church has something far better he's saying that God gathers people with the same

Lord the same blood the same spirit filling us the same peace uniting us the same hope before us and then he gathers Paul into this little ragtag group and sends him on a mission he goes to Damascus to bind Christians but then begins preaching Christ with them I find that unbelievable the people there are incredulous isn't this the guy that was killing all these people in Jerusalem killed Stephen it was but now he's different now he's different one of my favorite things being a pastor is watching the penny drop watching someone change I was walking around somewhere in this county this week and somebody pulled me aside and said trust he won't care you know that guy

Bo Cagle that man is a changed man you know what that means to a pastor it's amazing that's what we're selling here we're selling changed lives for the glory of God we're selling the gospel we don't have anything else we don't have a book of manners to help you kind of mine your P's and Q's you know something well balanced for the family that's not what we're offering if that's what you want go somewhere else I want you to see what we have to offer is all that God has to offer to you a new life a resurrected power the power that's at work in Jesus Christ that raised him up on that third day is the one that will raise you up and bring life to you produce fruit in you love joy peace patience kindness goodness faithfulness gentleness self control and all of these things that's what he will do that's what we offer and so Paul is kind of taken away with this purpose to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ and we've been talking about what he did in the power of the spirit for 2000 years but the same things true you and

I we were made for a purpose to live for the Lord to follow him to make him look great I'll never forget when I first came to Christ almost 24 years ago I hated my life I hated my life but suddenly I had something to live for I had someone to live for do you know the peace that surpasses understanding do you know joy that's unspeakable and full of glory as the as Peter said do you know freedom of a clear conscience do you know what it feels like to not fear anybody finding out anything about you if you don't know that I would love to talk to you today can you sing I once was blind but now I see do you live with the purpose of

God the only way people truly change is through the power of the resurrection the power that was the work of Christ unleashed in our world and takes over our lives let us run to it father in heaven we thank you for this day we humble ourselves before you we give to you our lives we thank you your scriptures are clear those who are in the flesh cannot please God but if Christ is in us although the body is dead the spirit is life and Lord I pray that you would draw us to you this morning to new life through Christ come by your spirit help us we pray strengthen us this day we commit this afternoon and this day we receive all that we receive today from your hand and we give you thanks in

[40 : 26] Jesus name amen