

Message Date: 11-01-20

To the Ends of the Earth- ACTS Part 5: What Only God Can Do

Message Title: Week 1, The last thing anyone would expect

✠ The worse thing that could happen?

- *Ever had an experience where the WORST thing that could have happened turned out to be a blessing you would have never expected?*
- *ENTERPRISE Alabama... Boll Weevil statue (1919)... led to success in peanut farming*
- *In Acts, this isn't a rare occurrence, it is a pattern.*
 - *For early days of church in JER... people being healed through apostles... worst thing might be if apostles were arrested... AND YET when they were, God used this to even further strengthen and grow the church*
 - *For same early community, WORST THING might be some of their own lying to apostles and facing some horrible consequence that would scare everyone... it happened, and yet God used it to further strengthen and grow the church*
 - *OR, perhaps the worst thing would be the church growing so much that some people in need, maybe people belonging to a minority group within the church, were neglected while others needs were met. CRISIS! Imaging how divisive that could be! AND YET, it happened, and God used it to raise up new servant leaders, and strengthen and grow the church.*
 - *OKAY.... THE WORST THING would be for one of those new leaders, say a dynamic evangelist like STEPHEN, to be arrested, killed, and a great persecution erupt that would cause us all to lose everything and flee for our lives. OK... the only thing worse than THAT that could happen is if we had to flee to SAMARIA... AND YET IT HAPPENED, and not only did the church grow, the first two legs of the great commission were accomplished in the process.*
- *Where we arrive in our story today, the ABSOLUTE WORST THING THAT COULD HAPPEN was embodied in the very intense mind, will, and actions of the churches chief persecutor, a dynamic and murderous young man named SAUL.*
- *We first met Saul as he stood by approving of Stephen's murder, after which he initiated and led the widespread persecution of believers in Jerusalem. Today's text isn't just the turning point in Saul's life, it is one of the great turning points in the book of Acts and all of Christian History. I'm talking, of course, of the road to Damascus, where Saul came face to face with God himself, the resurrected Jesus. It is no exaggeration to say that the world has not been the same since.*
- *We're going to look at this story in detail, and then zoom out to see several powerful principles that speak, very practically, into our lives and circumstance today.*
- *BUT FIRST, TODAY IS SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 1st, 2020. Today we enter PART SIX in our journey through the book of Acts... Chapter NINE... I'm Pastor Ethan, Trinity online.*

✠ The road to Damascus

Acts 9:1-2 *Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest² and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.*

- *Not content to have terrorized the church in Jerusalem, Saul sets his sights on one of the cities where he suspected believers had fled, Damascus. He obtained letters from the chief*

priest (Caiaphas) giving him the authority search the synagogues in Damascus and bring back to Jerusalem, for trial, any followers of THE WAY. (First time we see this term)

– **SO, JUST WHERE IS DAMASCUS, and why would these persecuted believers flee there? TO THE MAP!**

– **HERE IS THE last thing Saul expected!**

† **The last thing Saul expected**

³ As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”⁵ “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied.

– **Aside from the incredible significance of this event itself, several observations:**

○ **Jesus said SAUL, SAUL- saying Saul’s name twice conveys great emotion.**

○ **Saul responds, ‘who are you LORD’. Saul recognizes that whoever this voice is, He is OF GOD.**

○ **“I AM JESUS, whom you are persecuting!” This is incredibly important. Here we see Jesus identifying himself as being in union with the lives of his followers. TO persecute the believers was to persecute them. And even though its still years before Paul will use this phrase, here we first see the reality that the church is, literally, the body of Christ. These believers Saul was persecuting were the presence of Christ in the world.**

– **IMAGINE being Saul here! You caught in a supernatural experience, and this voice, this presence that you recognize as GOD tells you I AM JESUS, the one you are fighting.**

– **UH OH! Everything you thought, everything you were convinced you knew was right, the driving purpose of your life... you were 100% WRONG, and your life is utterly turned upside down.**

– **YOU ABSOLUTELY knew that Jesus was an imposter... You are confronted with the reality that JESUS IS LORD.**

– **If you are Saul, what would you expect to happen next? I’M DONE! Not what happened...**

⁶ “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

– **Thought... why didn’t Jesus just tell Saul everything right then and there? He had his attention! SAUL! You are my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to all people!**

– **But God had another plan.**

† **Speechless**

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

– **What has changed for Saul? Before his encounter with Christ, he was at the top of his game. He was respected by his allies and feared by his enemies. Everything was going his way. He was THE MAN!**

– **THEN, in a blinding flash of truth, everything changes. Everything Saul had counted on as his foundation of life was stripped away.**

○ **Lost his sight**

○ **Lost ability to be in control**

○ **Lost his confidence, his plan, his purpose, his pride**

○ **He is humbled, dependent on his servants to even walk... for three days he sits in isolation, blind, broken, unable to eat or drink.**

- **Saul is a broken man.**
- **IMAGINE what is going on in Saul's heart during that time.**
- **Saul has been given knowledge that Jesus is risen, that he is who his followers proclaim him to be.. He is LORD. Now, God is allowing Saul to be broken- for everything he depended on- his old source of life- to be stripped away, so he will be ready to receive a new source of life- a new identity- the very life and presence of Jesus himself.**
- **His first glimpse of what God had in store would come through a follower of Jesus named Ananias.**

✠ What God had in store...

¹⁰In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. ¹¹The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. ¹²In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

- **Both Saul and Ananias have encounters with Jesus. DIFFERENCE in their responses.**
 - **Saul's... who are you Lord?**
 - **Ananias... YES LORD. Ananias already knew what Saul was soon to discover. That Jesus is Lord, and as a disciple of Jesus, the answer that is always best is YES.**
 - **It's been said that if we ever say NO, LORD, then we are contradicting ourselves, because if we say NO, then we are denying that Jesus is Lord.**
- **Incredible thing we see here is that everything happening is directed by Jesus. God is not distant in this story. He is intimately involved.**
 - **Jesus prepares Ananias to go to Saul, (straight street is there to this day)**
 - **Jesus is preparing Saul to be ready to hear from Ananias**
- **We often pray "God, prepare the hearts of people we will minister...).. this is what God is doing!**
- **Not surprisingly, Ananias needs a little clarification...**

¹³"Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm (evil) he has done to your holy people (SAINTS) in Jerusalem. ¹⁴And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

- **Brief aside. In this passage we see four different references to Christ followers, two of them right here.**
 - **V1- we are the Lord's disciples. We are FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST.**
 - **V2- we belong to the WAY... as Christ leads us in a New WAY of life (In Romans Paul would say we now serve/live, in the NEW WAY of the Spirit)**
 - **V13- we are Saints... Holy and dearly loved- Paul's favorite term for believers**
 - **V14- We are those who call on Christ's name. We look to him as our source of life itself.**

¹⁵But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. ¹⁶I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

- **Jesus responds by stating that HE IS IN CONTROL. That He is SOVERIEGN.**
 - **"I know this is that last thing you would have planned, but Saul is whom I have chosen. This is MY PLAN. And through this man who was your worst case scenario, I will bring**

my Gospel- good news- to ALL PEOPLE. Through this man I will show the world the NEW LIFE I have made possible- it is for everyone.

- *Then Jesus says “I’ll show Saul how much he must suffer for my name”. What’s that about? Is this about punishment for Saul’s actions? I don’t think so.*

✠ Suffering for Christ’s Name

- *In this new path before Him, Saul is going to hear Jesus say... something like this...*
 - *SAUL! I have a plan for your life. And my plan isn’t centered on your plan, your prosperity, your comfort. It is centered in ME, and my plan to bring the hope of my salvation to all people... I’m going to do this through you.*
 - *Saul... this journey will not be easy. You will sacrifice much, and at times you will suffer. This means you must depend upon me. Look to me. Lay down your life and trust me.. FULLY!*
 - *Because Saul... even though you don’t understand yet, this plan I have for you is greater than anything you could have imagined or accomplished on your own. YOU SEE SAUL... I am not just a cause you have been opposing... I am LIFE ITSELF, a new life you will come to know and proclaim with great joy, even in the midst of difficulty, opposition, and suffering.*
- *And now, once again, God brings Saul what he couldn’t have expected....*

✠ Redemption and Restoration

¹⁷ Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” ¹⁸ Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, ¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

- *For Saul and Ananias, this is a moment of acceptance, love, and brotherhood. Laying on hands was a way of conveying connection, that Saul was now included in the community of believers. AND ANANIAS calls Saul ‘Brother’, a bond that would have been unimaginable three days earlier.*
- *This is the second time in Acts the Holy Spirit is received through the laying on of hands. Here, God uses this moment so Ananias can see the authenticity of Saul’s conversion, and Saul is able to see the love and acceptance of a fellow believer.*
- *God puts a supernatural exclamation point as something like scales fall from Saul’s eyes, and once again he is able to see. Saul’s blindness wasn’t from a concussion or some other physical condition... it was the work of God, just as it was God who opened his eyes.*
- *And so, Saul got up, was baptized- confession of his faith- he ate, and regained his strength.*
- *THINK OF THAT MOMENT when Saul’s eyes were opened. The restoration of Saul’s physical sight is a picture of God’s greater gift to Paul of SPIRITUAL SIGHT. God has opened the eyes of Saul’s HEART so he could begin to understand what he would later write down for all mankind to hear...*
 - *That he was crucified with Christ, and he no longer lived, but Christ now lived in Him*
 - *That In Christ, the old was gone, and a new life had come*

- *And in the coming years Paul would pray that the “eyes of your heart would be opened, so that you may know the hope to which God has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and His incomparably great power for us who believe.”*
- *Church- With Saul’s conversion, God had done what only God could do and it was the last thing anyone would have expected.*
- *The persecutor of the church whose authority was a piece of paper from the high priest, was now Saul, the great witness to the gospel whose authority was God.*

✠ Saul’s story speaking into our story

- In Christ, NO ONE is too far gone.
 - *There is no one too far removed from God’s Grace to respond to the gospel.*
 - *So, if there is a person on your heart... Pray. Love. Share. Like Ananias, be open to how God may be at work.*
- Christ is INVOLVED in His work.
 - *As Christ’s followers, we are not alone. God didn’t give us the great commission, disappear into heaven and tell us ‘good luck!’. No, he is at work, he is with us, preparing in advance good works for us to do.*
- God allows us to experience BROKENNESS.
 - *God knows that at times, the greatest barrier to our relationship with Him is our own perceived strength and wisdom, the things we look to for life apart from Him. So much here... if you are in this place... God is at work. There is hope. Talk...*
- God is SOVEREIGN.
 - *God chose Saul. God had His plan, and he accomplished it in a way no one would have expected. This is a MYSTERY! From our perspective, we are thinking, planning, doing what we think is best... we pray for good outcomes and for God to deliver us from bad things... but our great hope is that even when things transpire that MAKE NO SENSE TO US... WORST CASE SCENARIOS... God is at work, and it JUST MIGHT BE HIS PLAN.*
- God IDENTIFIES with our suffering.
 - *Saul, why are you persecuting ME?*
 - *Friends, in our struggles, questions, confusion, loss, pain, CHRIST IS PRESENT.*
 - *Romans 8... there are times when “We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.”*
 - *In Acts, the believers are suffering persecution for their faith. This is the case with many in the world today, and could be the case for us.*
 - *But God’s presence isn’t limited to religious persecution!*
 - *May be suffering consequences of our own actions. Christ is present, teaching, redeeming*
 - *May be suffering injustice, crimes against us... Christ is present, sustaining, comforting, reminding us that our hope, our identity, our life is in him, not the actions of others*
 - *Whatever the cause... Christ is present, calling us to look to him, trust in him to protect us from fear, despair. TO SEE THE GREATER TRUTH that we are not alone, and that IN HIM, we are precious, dearly loved, with the future of eternity and a purpose right now.*

- **THINK OF IT... Saul, the man who had dedicated his life to work against Jesus' followers, would one day come to write...**

Romans 8... If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? ³³ Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword (or a pandemic, election outcome) ? ³⁶ As it is written:

“For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

- **PRAY... God, thank you.... Open the eyes of our heart so we may hear, see, how you are present and at work....**