

God of the Second Chance  
Acts 9:1-15  
September 30, 2018

William J. Ingersoll  
First Presbyterian Church  
Lake Forest, Illinois

It was a summer years ago and the Ingersoll family was in the midst of our annual summer vacation. We had stopped in my hometown of Huntington, West Virginia, and were on our way to Atlanta, Georgia, to visit my wife Roberta's parents. We planned to make the trip from West Virginia to Georgia in one day. There were reports that there was a great deal of construction on the highway, but we knew if we stayed on schedule we could still make the trip in one very long day.

The tales of road construction proved true. And, as was always the case back then, about two hours after our last stop, our children, Lori & John, 13 and 9 then, insisted on making another pit stop. I was less than thrilled about making a stop. After all we had a long way to go. (Nowadays, I'm the one needing to stop but that's too much information!) But stop I did.

As we were getting back in the car, my wife Roberta noticed an older lady sitting in the car next to us with a young man by her side. Promptly the young man approached Roberta and told her the following story.

The lady was his mother. She had been recuperating from surgery at his home in New York. She was driving her car back to her home, a small town in Tennessee, and he was following behind in his own vehicle. They were just three or four exits from where she needed to turn off the road but construction had caused the drive to be tedious. For some undisclosed reason he was eager to begin his return trip to New York. So he wondered if she could follow us. He assured us that once she saw her exit, she would know where she was and would be on her way.

I'm glad you didn't see the look on my face as Roberta enthusiastically said, "Of course, we'd be happy to help."

So we were off, with me grumbling, and the little lady behind us. It was then that we were given the opportunity to observe her driving skills or lack thereof. If we pulled into the left lane, she did too. When we turned back into the right lane, she did too. But the problem was that she pulled over as soon as we did, cutting off the vehicle we were passing. You should have heard the squealing of car tires and I'm glad you didn't hear the words mouthed by truckers as they slammed on their air brakes. So as we navigated our way we had to be sure that whenever we passed someone, we didn't pull back into the right lane until she was able to safely pass as well.

At one point Roberta thought she should offer to drive the woman's car to the exit. But I reminded her that we didn't have any idea who this lady was. Why she could be another Ma Barker for all we knew. This caused my daughter to say – “Yeah, dad, her bridge club might be waiting at the next exit to jump us.” As you can imagine, after some time, more construction, and some very interesting family conversation, we finally made it to “her” exit.

We stopped again at a service station. She thanked us profusely and offered to pay us for our time and trouble. We assured her that we were simply glad to be of assistance. Then she said, “Now how do I get on the right road?” I asked the clerk directions, which were indeed quite simple, explained them to her and she was on her way.

After another short pit stop, we too were on our way again. But just past the entrance of the interstate there sat the little lady asking two men for directions. We couldn't believe it. Resigned to our fate I asked Roberta, “Would you like me to stop again?”

Surprisingly, Roberta said no. She wanted to get to Georgia to see her parents. The woman had some folks who had stopped to help her. So we entered the expressway, and were off!

Well it wasn't long before even my conscience began to work on me. Roberta felt even worse, saying how wrong we were for not stopping to help once again. So much for our supposed Christian compassion. We continued to travel through the construction and finally decided to stop for lunch. It was a depressing meal as we moaned and groaned about how we had let the woman down but there was nothing we could do about it now. When we got back in the car, though, our 9 year old son said, "There is *something* we can do." "What?" we snapped. He replied, "We can pray for her." From the mouths of babes... So right then and there in the back of our mini-van, the four of us prayed. We prayed for her safe travel home and that people who were kind and loving would be provided to give her assistance. I must admit that our spirits changed once we had given our anxiety and worry over to God.

As we continued the trip it was not long before we found ourselves once again stopped in two lanes of traffic slowed down by the construction. As we turned our heads to the left, I couldn't believe what I thought I saw. I said, "Isn't that our little lady?"

Indeed, there she was again in the lane right beside us. As she drove by our gridlocked lane, she mouthed the words, "I'm lost!" Needless to say, our family celebrated with joy and laughter. And it seemed a good time to share with our son a teachable moment. Our conversation went something like this: "John, you have to be careful what you pray for. Sometimes we never know if God answers our prayers, and other times God gives us a second chance!"

Needless to say at the next exit we got off together. Remember this was in the day before GPS systems were common so we examined the map. We

took her all the way to her neighborhood. As we said our good-byes, her final benediction to us was, “May God bless you.”

And God did bless us with abundance. We stopped in a beautiful mountain town, right at the Cumberland Gap, hiked some trails, shared a picnic with our children and arrived safely in Georgia, the *next* day.

A second chance: Now surely the foremost Christian story of the second chance is today’s scripture: the conversion of Saul. We first met Saul back in chapter 7 of Acts where Luke calls him “a young man” who watched over the garments of those who were stoning Stephen to death. Very quickly this Saul moves from being a willing bystander to an active persecutor of Christians. “But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison” (8:2,3). Yes, Saul is a busy, resourceful, dangerous enemy-number-one of the church. By the time we meet him again here in chapter 9, Saul has gotten himself appointed head of the Stop-the-Church Movement. He has official letters granting him power from the authorities in his program of persecution. He’s on his way to Damascus to stamp out this Christian thing once and for all. Now some Christian commentators have imagined Saul’s possible inner turmoil, his possible doubts about his mission, which led to his conversion. They have had him searching for something more fulfilling in his life, something that might better explain how this story ends in conversion.

Forget it. There’s none of that in the story. Saul isn’t searching for anything except Christians. He isn’t filled with inner doubts or uncertainty. He has no doubts at all about the will of God and what he ought to be doing with his life. He is a full-time theological authority, conducting investigations helping to make Israel safe again for God.

On the road to Damascus, he hears his name called: “Saul, Saul.” He

doesn't know the one who calls him. But the voice intrudes and devastates his self-confident journey. In an instant, the once vibrant, intelligent, believing, sure, resourceful man is rendered helpless. He opens his eyes, but he can't see. He has to be led around by the hand by strangers like Ananias and cannot eat or drink for three days. It's quite a contrast with the Saul we first met, the one who was so active, going to and fro with letters of introduction from the bigwigs up at the temple, pursuing believers all the way to Damascus. Now, he is helpless, frail, needy, small. He has reverted, fallen backwards toward a second life. His turnaround was so great his old name wouldn't do. So he got a new name for his new life: Paul. Church public enemy number one became number one leader of the church.

Please understand, a second chance is often not cheap. Sometimes it can turn into an easy enough family story like the one I just recounted, but often the cost is much greater. Please also understand that I am dealing primarily with second chances that *God* gives, not proximate human justice. For example, I'm not suggesting that a serial killer be released from prison or that someone unwilling to own up to a past mistake be rewarded in the future. Regardless, though, being given a second chance (or more!) by God is an undeserved blessing that is a fundamental part of the Christ-centered life.

As one minister tells it (William Willimon), a couple of years ago, a friend of a friend hit bottom: spun out of control, crossed the median, headed the wrong way down the interstate at a hundred miles an hour. In other words, he fell from his prestigious perch as an attorney to the depths of alcoholism.

The good news is he's on his way back, thanks to a loving wife and children and the work of Alcoholics Anonymous. I'm aware, of course, that it's not that way with everyone.

Among the many things that surprised this man on his way back to life was church. He had always gone to church, but like many smart people, he always considered himself a step or so above it all. Church was for losers, for intellectual wimps he felt.

“You would be amazed at what I’ve learned about God,” the man said  
“Like what?” someone asked.

He said, “So many words I had heard all my life in church have suddenly, like a flash of blinding light, become real to me. Words, little Christian slogans, that I’ve heard all my life, are suddenly, amazingly real, deep, true.”

“Like what?” he was asked again.

“Like being ‘born anew.’ Or like ‘You can only find your life by losing it.’ Or say like, ‘Take up your cross daily and follow me. Through my pain, by hitting bottom, I’ve met God,” he said.

Now, let me ask each of you in the congregation a question: Have *you* ever needed a second chance? Think about it.

My friends, I do not know exactly what brought you here this morning: maybe you had to usher or sing in the choir, maybe you wanted fellowship, maybe God was tugging at your heart. But I do know this: Each of us needs a second chance. Whether it be in relationships, work, or school, we need, in minor or major ways, another opportunity. You may not know what to do now that someone has turned his or her back to you; you may not know how you will come out with that shake up at the office; you may be battling with a poor self-image. You may be dealing with a significant moral failure. You or a loved one may be facing a life threatening disease. I don’t know.

But I do know that God will stop at nothing to redeem this world and bring you and me unto God's own self. Ultimately, nothing — the cross, defeat, death- nothing will defeat the accomplishment of God's purposes for the world and for each of us. Thank God for those second chances. Amen.

## Sources

Green, Joel B., "Acts." *New Interpreter's Bible, One Volume Commentary*.

Wall, Robert W., et.al., "Acts." *New Interpreter's Bible, Volume 10*.

Willimon, William, *Acts: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*.

Willimon, William, "The Second Chance", on Acts 9:1-20, *Pulpit Digest*.

Willson, Patrick, "Making Bread Together", on Acts 9:1-19a and 1Corinthians 15:1-3, *Pulpit Digest*.