“By Grace Alone” Christine Chakoian

Acts 9:1-19 First Presbyterian Church

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Acts 9:1-19

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. 3Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ 5He asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The reply came, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 6But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.’ 7The men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. 8Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. 9For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

10 Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, ‘Ananias.’ He answered, ‘Here I am, Lord.’ 11The Lord said to him, ‘Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, 12and he has seen in a vision\* a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.’ 13But Ananias answered, ‘Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; 14and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.’ 15But the Lord said to him, ‘Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; 16I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.’ 17So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul\* and said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’ 18And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, 19and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

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We’re almost to the end of our worship series, “40 Stories that Remind Us Who (and Whose) We Are.” Starting at the beginning – with Genesis and the creation – we’ve explored some of the most important people, transformative moments, and lasting lessons in Scripture.

Today we come to Paul – arguably the most influential apostle of all. The New Testament records more words written by Paul than those spoken by Jesus![[1]](#endnote-1)

What do we know about him? His Jewish name was Saul; as was the custom in urban circles then, he also carried a Latin name, Paul. He was born in Tarsus in what is now southern Turkey - a trade center on the Mediterranean Sea. Paul was culturally bi-lingual: well-educated in Greek philosophy and rhetoric, and also in the rigorous Jewish rabbinic tradition. In Philippians 3:5-6, Paul himself attests that he was “circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”

Why was he a persecutor of the church? Precisely because he was a devout man of God who was trying to help his people navigate faith in a fast-changing world … a world a lot like our own. Paul was fiercely faithful, and he believed that followers of Jesus were taking Judaism down a dangerous path. Indeed, it wasn’t easy to be faithful in that culture. Just as today, there were external “threats” – secular philosophies, hedonistic cults, mystery religions, emperor worship and a host of other options bombarded them. Internally, leaders argued fiercely over what it meant to be faithful. Pharisees advocated learned Judaism across the Empire, Temple priests promoted rituals and worship in Jerusalem, Herodians who advocated a get-along-with-the-secular-government, revolutionaries wanted to overthrow the secular government, and plenty more – including followers of Jesus Christ.

Paul persecuted Christians because he felt it was dangerously wrong. But in the story we just heard - when Paul encountered Jesus on the road - everything changed. Suddenly, his eyes were opened, and he saw Christ’s way as profoundly faithful. And then, in a radical turn, he saw how the way of Jesus flung wide the door of faith to Gentiles as well as Jews. To say this was a game-changer is a gross understatement. Without Paul, Christianity would still be a tiny sect within Judaism. Without Paul, we wouldn’t be here today.

But I’m convinced that Paul’s impact is not just his profoundly important work of bringing the God of the Jews into the Gentile world 2,000 years ago. He translated Jesus’ teaching for a secular, conflicted, multi-faith world – which is why Paul’s teachings are still so pertinent for us. He was smart, he was culturally savvy, he was successful - and he was willing to give up everything – *everything –* for the sake of the Gospel. Honestly, I could write a book on why I love Paul. But for now, let me give you my top-ten list of his legacy for us.

**Number 10.** *God’s grace alone saves us* – saves us from all our mistakes, our sins, our weaknesses, our foolishness, our pride. Like the Jews of Paul’s time, we aren’t saved by believing the right thing, belonging to the right faith, doing the right things. We can’t earn God’s grace. Paul writes, “There is no distinction [among people], since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift” (Romans 3:23-24). *God’s grace alone saves us.*

**Number 9.** Because *God is God and we’re not*, nothing can take away God’s grace. Not our errors, nor the world’s hard edges. We know how the story ends. Paul writes, “I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39). *God is God and we’re not.*

**Number 8**. Because *God’s love is sure*, because we know how the story ends, no matter what the circumstances in life, we can be confident – and more than confident, we can “rejoice in the Lord always,” Paul tells us – which, by the way, Paul wrote when he was in prison, and had precious little hope to get out (Phil. 4:4, as well as 1 Thess. 5:16). *God’s love is sure.*

**Number 7**. *Rejoicing doesn’t just happen*. It takes practice. Especially when leaders or systems frustrate you, or a family member fails you, or you fail yourself, or you want to throttle someone. These things will inevitably happen, because we are human and live in a vulnerable world. Did I mention that “we all sin and fall short of the glory of God”? So how do we practice rejoicing? Paul tells us, “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is commendable – if there is any excellence and anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Philippians 4:8). Rejoicing happens not because the world is perfect but because we are invited to practice, focusing on all that is good and right even when they are hard to see. *Rejoicing doesn’t just happen*

**Number 6**. *Act on those thoughts.* Keeping good thoughts at the forefront of our minds is a start … then the next step is to act on them. As we ponder all that is honorable, just, pure, commendable, and so on –as we keep our eye on the prize, we need to press ourselves to sync what we believe with how we behave. More than once, Paul reminds us, “Do not repay evil for evil, but overcome evil with good” (1 Thessalonians 5:15 and Romans 12:17, 21). Its not enough to think good thoughts, we need to do good too. *Act on those thoughts.*

**Number 5**. *Sometimes we’ll get it right, and when we do, we shouldn’t gloat*. “Bear one another’s burdens” (Galatians 6:2) and, more pointedly, “We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak” (Romans 15:1). *Sometimes we’ll get it right, and when we do, we shouldn’t gloat.*

**Number 4**. While we’re on the subject of not gloating, Paul reminds us that *faithfulness isn’t a competitive sport*. “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging symbol. And if I have prophetic powers and knowledge to move mountains, but don’t have love, I am nothing. And if I give away everything I own so I might boast but do not have love, I gain nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:1-3). *Faithfulness isn’t a competitive sport. Faith is a matter of love.*

**Number 3**. While we’re on the subject of love, it helps to remember that *love is WAY more than a feeling*. Like rejoicing, love also takes practice, and Paul has a few practical pointers. “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; love does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends” (1 Corinthians 13:4-8). *Love is WAY more than a feeling*. Love is a choice we make to act day after day in a way that is patient and kind.

**Number 2**. Ultimately, *the love of God that takes root in us will lead us to humility* – because by God’s grace, *we don’t need to prove ourselves anymore.* Let me say it again: *the love of God that takes root in us will lead us to humility* – because by God’s grace, *we don’t need to prove ourselves anymore.* This is the path that Jesus Christ showed us. Paul writes,

“Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was\* in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be used or exploited,
but … humbled himself … to the point of death —    even death on a cross. …

Therefore, my beloved, … work out your own salvation [humbly]; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Philippians 2:4-13). *The love of God that takes root in us will lead us to humility because of grace.*

**Number 1**. Did I mention? It is *God’s grace alone that saves us* – God’s grace alone is enough. Paul couldn’t save himself, as righteous as he was. And yet, he discovered for himself on that road, the joy, the freedom, and the purpose that comes through the amazing grace of God. In the end, that’s what he wanted all of us to know: “By grace you have been saved, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8). Friends, if we are to take anything from Paul, let it be this. Let us be as open to that astonishing news – rejoice in that good news – think about that good news – and, though we’ll inevitably fail, act on that good news – seeking to live to honor God’s love every moment of our lives. *God’s grace alone that saves us.*

Paul could have stayed a Pharisee. And we could stay locked into whatever beliefs and practices we have come to know and trust. But my prayer for each of us is this: that we might keep meeting Christ on the road, having our hearts touched, having our eyes opened again, having our lives blessed by the way of God’s grace – amazing grace that saves us all. Amen.

1. Fourteen letters are attributed to Paul. Of those fourteen, scholars believe half are definitely by him, and half are likely written by his students, according to the custom of the time. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)