

## “Conquering Saul” (Acts 9:1-31)

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*Acts 9:1–9 (ESV)*

<sup>1</sup> But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest <sup>2</sup> and asked him for 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. <sup>3</sup> Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. <sup>4</sup> And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” <sup>5</sup> And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. <sup>6</sup> But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” <sup>7</sup> The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. <sup>8</sup> Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. <sup>9</sup> And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.<sup>1</sup>

This past Thursday, the artist formerly known as “the artist formerly known as Prince” was found dead at the age of 57. As is often the case when a celebrity dies, many people gushed over how they were big fans of Prince and how much they loved his music. This phenomenon is most easily seen on social media, like on Facebook, where all kinds of people were offering their tributes and posting videos of Prince. The same was true when David Bowie died not long ago, on January 10. To a lesser extent, the same was true of Merle Haggard, who died on April 6. The tributes that these men received make it seem as if they had changed the world. You would think they had cured cancer.

Now, all of these men won Grammy Awards and they sold a lot of records. Whether you like their music or not, that’s a fact. But did they really change our lives in any significant way? Did they really change the world? I don’t mean to belittle their lives or their achievements. I just think they are not as significant as many other people who have walked this earth.

Perhaps we would be wise to learn more about people who have truly changed the course of human history. If you were to write up a short list of the most influential people of all time, who would be on that list? Perhaps philosophers like Aristotle? Scientists like Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein? Political or military leaders like Napoleon or George Washington? Writers like Shakespeare? What about Paul, the apostle of Jesus Christ?

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

I remember hearing a sermon a few years ago in which the pastor said that Paul was one of the top five most influential people in history. That statement surprised me a bit, but then I thought more about it. Paul wrote thirteen books of the New Testament, the letters that bear his name.<sup>2</sup> These letters provide important commentary on the significance of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, as well as instruction for the church. From a human perspective, without Paul, the world would not know about Jesus. (Of course, Jesus could have chosen someone else to be the apostle to the Gentiles.) Paul's writings have transformed countless lives. He has helped shape all of Western culture. It was Paul's writings which changed Martin Luther, which caused the Protestant Reformation, which has affected not just religion, but all of Western culture. I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that without Paul, there would be no Reformation, and without the Reformation, there would be no United States of America.

Paul is one of the most important people who has ever lived, and his conversion is one of the more important events in the book of Acts. It's so important that the story is told three times in the book (here, chapter 22, and chapter 26).

Today, we're going to learn about how Paul, also known as Saul, came to faith in Jesus. He had an unforgettable, life-altering encounter with Jesus while he was on his way to arrest Christians. Not only did he come to faith in Jesus, but he was commissioned to go into the world and tell others that Jesus is the Christ, the anointed King, and the Son of God, who died for the sins of his people and who rose from the grave in an immortal body.

We're going to read through most of the ninth chapter of the book of Acts today. But before we do that, here's a brief reminder of where we've been. The book of Acts tells the story of what happened after Jesus rose from the grave and ascended into heaven. It starts with the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem. There was tension in Jerusalem as the apostles were telling others about Jesus. The message of Jesus was earth-shattering. It said that God had become man and had lived among his people. It said that Jesus died as a sacrifice for sin. It said that the temple and its system of sacrifices were no longer necessary. All the priests were no longer necessary. The dietary laws and all the other symbols of Judaism were no longer necessary. And

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<sup>2</sup> Yes, some scholars contest whether Paul wrote Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, and Titus. I find the arguments against Pauline authorship to be entirely speculative and rather weak. We have no external evidence that Paul didn't write these letters (no manuscripts of these letters claim another author, and no early theologians ever made the claim that Paul didn't write these letters). The internal evidence, including differences in style, can be accounted for by Paul's use of amanuenses (secretaries), the different situations that occasioned these letters, and the different purposes Paul had in writing them.

this challenged the Jewish religious leaders who didn't believe this message. This tension increased until these leaders killed a Jewish Christian named Stephen. And at Stephen's death, there was a man named Saul, also known as Paul. We're told that "Saul approved of his execution" (Acts 8:1).

After Stephen died, a number of Christians left Jerusalem and went into Judea and Samaria, while the apostles stayed in the city (Acts 8:1). And "Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison" (Acts 8:3).

In the rest of Acts and in Paul's letters, we get a sense of who he was before he became a Christian. Paul was born in Tarsus, in the province of Cilicia, which is part of modern-day Turkey. Tarsus was a large city, perhaps as large as half a million.<sup>3</sup> It was a center of commerce and also a city where the people loved and studied philosophy. Paul was a Jewish man, but also a Roman citizen (Acts 22:25), which becomes important later in the story of Acts. This means that Paul had something of a background in the Greco-Roman world. In fact, some people mistakenly think that Paul's name was changed from Saul to Paul. But that's not true. We're not told that Saul's name was changed to Paul. After his conversion, Luke continues to refer to him as Saul. It's only when he goes to Gentiles that he is referred to as Paul. Paul is likely his Roman name. It's a Latin name. And Saul was his Jewish, or Hebrew, name. So Paul had a background in the Roman Empire that probably exposed him to Greek philosophy and culture.

But at a young age, his family moved to Jerusalem, and Paul studied under the rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). He also tells us that he was a Pharisee (Phil. 3:5). That means that Paul was well-versed in the Hebrew Scriptures. We also know that he was a zealous man and, by his own admission, a persecutor of the church (1 Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:13-14. Phil. 3:6; 1 Tim. 1:13).

Now that we know something of his background, let's see what happens to Paul, who is referred to as Saul. Let's read Acts 9:1-2:

<sup>1</sup> But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest <sup>2</sup> and asked him for 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.

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<sup>3</sup> John B. Polhill, *Paul and His Letters* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 1999), 6.

Saul was so zealous to persecute Christians that he was willing to travel from Jerusalem to Damascus, a journey of about 135 miles, in order to arrest them and bring them back to Jerusalem where they would be put on trial. If you were on foot, that journey would take at least seven days. Apparently Saul had letters from the high priest asking the synagogues in Damascus to turn over any Christians. It's likely that if they were arrested and brought back to Jerusalem, they would face the fate that Stephen experienced.

What's interesting is that Christianity is sometimes called "the Way" in the book of Acts (9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). Apparently this meant "the way of salvation." Jesus said he is *the way* to the Father (John 14:6). So Christianity is not one of many ways to God. It is *the way*, the only way, to be reconciled to God and have eternal life.

In Saul's mind, he was traveling to Damascus to round up some heretics and have them punished in Jerusalem. But little did he know, he was about to meet his enemy.

Let's read verses 3-9:

<sup>3</sup> Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. <sup>4</sup> And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" <sup>5</sup> And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. <sup>6</sup> But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." <sup>7</sup> The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. <sup>8</sup> Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. <sup>9</sup> And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

This is Saul's "Damascus Road moment." As he came close to Damascus, he saw a bright light, he fell to the ground, and he heard a voice. Jesus says to him, "Why are you persecuting me?" Saul doesn't realize it's Jesus right away, but he knows he is encountering the divine. Light, whether in the form of a fire or lightning, is usually associated with an appearance of God. So Saul says, "Who are you, Lord?" Jesus identifies himself and says that Saul is persecuting him.

We don't really know what Saul was thinking right at this moment, but I do want to point this out: When someone persecutes the church, they're persecuting Jesus. Jesus is so identified with his church, that whatever someone does to the church, they do to Jesus. Last week, I said that the way people respond to Jesus' messengers, his people who proclaim the good news about him, is really the way they respond to Jesus. The verse I used to show that is Luke 10:16: "The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me

rejects him who sent me.” (See also Matt. 25:31-46.) So when people mock Christians, they’re really mocking Christ. When people reject Christians who are trying to tell them about Jesus, they are rejecting Jesus. Some people say they like Jesus but not the church. Yes, there are some churches that are so unfaithful to Jesus that it’s hard to call them churches, and perhaps those churches don’t represent Jesus well, or at all. But there are a number of churches that are faithful, and when someone doesn’t like churches that really are churches, they really don’t like Jesus.

At any rate, Jesus tells Saul to go into the city, where he’ll receive further instruction. We’re told the men that were with Saul were speechless. If you combine what we read here and what we read in chapter 22, it seems that they saw the light, but didn’t see Jesus, and they heard a sound, but they couldn’t make out Jesus’ voice. This shows that this was not some hallucination that Saul had. No, it was an event that others could witness even if they didn’t understand what happened. This was not Saul’s private hallucination or some private vision he had.

This is very important because Saul’s, or Paul’s, conversion is one of the more important evidences for the truth of Christianity. People who are skeptical of the Bible must concede three facts: Jesus lived a remarkable life and was crucified under Pontius Pilate; Jesus’ followers had experiences that led them to believe that Jesus rose from the grave and appeared to them; and within a few years after Jesus’ death, Paul was converted to Christianity after Jesus appeared to him.<sup>4</sup> Skeptical Bible scholars believe that the disciples had some kind of hallucination, or believed that Jesus lived on in spirit. They argue that the disciples were in such grief and had such a hope of seeing Jesus again that they imagined he had risen from the grave. There are many reasons not to believe the theories of these skeptics, but these kinds of theories can’t apply to Paul. He wasn’t a follower of Jesus. He didn’t mourn Jesus’ death. He wasn’t hoping to see Jesus again. And yet his life was radically changed. And he is the earliest writer of the New Testament documents who discusses the resurrection. Most of his letters were written before the earliest Gospels were written.

You can’t simply write off Saul of Tarsus. Here was a man who was a Pharisee, a religious leader who was committed to the old covenant. After he is converted, his views change.

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<sup>4</sup> For much, much more on this, see Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010).

He goes from believing in a unitarian God to a trinitarian God. He starts to believe there is a God-man, Jesus, the Son of God. His views on what it means to be reconciled to God change. His views on practices like dietary laws and Sabbath observance change. His views on the temple and sacrifices for sins change. His views on Gentiles change. In short, his whole life turns around. What can explain that other than what we find in the book of Acts?

Now, before we move on, I want to note one last thing. We're told that Saul was blinded by the light. He couldn't see, and he didn't eat. Now, perhaps the light was so bright that it temporarily blinded him. Perhaps he was in such great shock that he didn't eat. But it seems that when he truly encountered Jesus, his actual condition was revealed: He wasn't a believer in Jesus. He couldn't see the truth about Jesus. He was spiritually blind all along, though he thought he was in the right because he was a Jewish man and, more than that, a Pharisee who so zealous for what he thought was right that he persecuted the church.

Now let's move with the story. Let's read verses 10-19:

<sup>10</sup> 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." <sup>11</sup> 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 Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, <sup>12</sup> and 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." <sup>13</sup> But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup> And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name." <sup>15</sup> 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 the children of Israel. <sup>16</sup> For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." <sup>17</sup> 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 may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." <sup>18</sup> And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; <sup>19</sup> and taking food, he was strengthened.

For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus.

We don't know much about this Ananias. We can assume he was a Christian who fled from Jerusalem to Damascus, or perhaps he heard about Jesus from another Christian who left Jerusalem. At any rate, Jesus appears to him in a vision and gives him a special task. His job is to confirm Saul's experience. He is told to go to a certain house where he'll find Saul. And he's told that Saul had a vision that he, Ananias, would come to him. This is all a bit unusual, but we must recognize that Saul's conversion is unique. It needed to be confirmed to Saul and to those

who were afraid of Saul. (It's very similar to what we'll see next week in chapter 10 with Peter and Cornelius.) Ananias, for his part, has reservations. He tells Jesus, "I've heard about this man and the evil that he's done to Christians. He has the authority to take any people who believe in you." But Jesus reassures Ananias and tells him something remarkable: The enemy of the church is his chosen instrument. Saul is going to proclaim the Gospel to "Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel." That's exactly what we see in Acts.

But Jesus also tells Ananias something interesting: Jesus says, "I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." Saul is going to suffer for the cause of Christ. And he will. He will be threatened and whipped and people will throw stones at him in an attempt to kill him. He will be arrested and shipwrecked. We see all this later in Acts. Eventually, he will die for Jesus, though we're not actually told that in the Bible. Just as Jesus suffered, those who are united to him will experience suffering, at least on some level (Rom. 8:16-17).

When Ananias finds Saul, he tells him his message. Then Saul's temporary blindness is healed. He needs to know that Jesus is the one who can make him see. The one who was blind can see. The one who was trying to bind Christians has been bound to Christ. The one who caused Christians to suffer will experience suffering for the cause of Christ.

After he stayed with some believers in Damascus, he started to preach. We see that over the next few verses. Let's read verses 20-25:

<sup>20</sup> And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."<sup>21</sup> 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 he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?"

<sup>22</sup> But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.

<sup>23</sup> When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him,<sup>24</sup> but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him,<sup>25</sup> but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.

While in Damascus, Saul went to the synagogues, where Jewish people gathered to worship, and he proclaimed that Jesus is the Son of God. This is actually the only time in Acts where Jesus is clearly called that term. The people who heard Saul were amazed because they knew his background. They knew, just like Ananias knew, that Saul had persecuted the church and had come to bring Christians back to the chief priests in Jerusalem (cf. vv. 13-14 with v. 21).

Whatever they thought, we're told that Saul "increased in strength and confounded" them by "proving that Jesus was the Christ." We're going to see this throughout Acts. With Jewish people, Saul, or Paul, reasoned from the Scriptures, showing that Jesus is the Messiah. He is the fulfillment of the promises of the Old Testament. This shows that Christianity is rational. It can be demonstrated to be true.

We also see that these Jewish people were confounded. They couldn't argue against Saul, so they do the next best thing: They try to kill him. At this point, Saul had disciples, and these students of Saul helped him escape. He probably escaped through a window of a house built into the wall of the city.

Luke doesn't tell us this, but the time between when Saul was converted and when he went to Jerusalem was about three years. In Galatians (1:15-18), Paul says that he went into Arabia, then returned to Damascus. Arabia was a province that was rather large. Paul might have gone a bit further east and south, going into the main city of Petra. Paul was surely preaching the gospel during this time, and it was preaching that got him into trouble. He was upsetting people so much that they wanted to kill him. In 2 Corinthians 11:32-33, Paul writes that the governor of Damascus was trying to seize him, but he escaped.

Luke's account is compressed, so he doesn't give us all these details. His main goal is to show us that Saul converted to Christianity and immediately started preaching. Luke also wants us to see that this preaching got Saul into trouble.

What's interesting is that Saul's experience here is similar to when Jesus preached in a synagogue in Luke 4. In both cases, the men preach in a synagogue; the audiences are astonished; the audiences ask similar questions about the men's identity ("Is not this Joseph's son?"—Luke 4:22; "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?"—Acts 9:21); and both men escape before they are killed. Luke wants us to see that Saul is following in Jesus' footsteps. And he's getting his first taste of suffering.

This won't be the last time people try to kill Saul. Let's see what happens when he gets to Jerusalem. We'll read verses 26-30:

<sup>26</sup> And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. <sup>27</sup> But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had

preached boldly in the name of Jesus.<sup>28</sup> So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord.<sup>29</sup> And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him.<sup>30</sup> And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

When Saul went to Jerusalem, he encountered some Christians who could not believe that *he* was a Christian! That's completely understandable. A few years earlier, he was trying to have Christians killed. But Barnabas, the generous Christian we saw in Acts 4:36, brought Saul to the apostles. (In Galatians, Paul tells us that he saw Peter and James.) The apostles could see that Saul was a changed man. And then Saul went and preached boldly while he was there. In fact, he "disputed with the Hellenists." It's possible that some of these people were the same ones who got Stephen into trouble. You may remember that these people couldn't refute Stephen and so they brought false charges against him. And Stephen was killed while Saul looked on approvingly. What must they have thought when they saw this same Saul, three years later, preaching the same message that Stephen did! They must have thought that when they killed Stephen they had won. But the gospel message cannot be stopped.

Since they can't refute Saul, they try to kill him, too. But Saul escapes. He went to the city of Caesarea, which was to the north and on the coast of the Mediterranean. He sailed back to Tarsus, his hometown, where he would stay for a number of years.

Saul's conversion helped strengthen the church. After Saul came to faith in Christ and started preaching, we read this in verse 31:

<sup>31</sup> So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.

Luke tells us that there is one church in all these areas: Judea, Galilee, and Samaria. Surely they had many local churches in those areas, but they were united. They were being built up. They were growing in their faith and their knowledge and their awe of how great God is. That's what "the fear of the Lord" means. They were stunned that God could transform someone like Saul and use him in such a mighty way. Throughout all that happens in the book of Acts, we see that the church continues to multiply.

Now that we have learned about what happened to Saul of Tarsus, I want us to consider three things.

One, Saul's conversion is and is not unique. It's unique in that Saul, or Paul, was a very special person who had a very special role. He saw the risen Jesus. We won't see Jesus until we die or he returns. Paul would write about a quarter of the words of the New Testament. We will never write Scripture. Paul would go to bring the gospel of Jesus all the way to Rome, as well as other important cities in the Roman Empire. It's likely that none of us will be influential as Paul was in terms of evangelism.

Saul's conversion was more dramatic than most. Sometimes when you hear conversion stories, you start to get the impression that if you don't have some kind of Damascus Road moment yourself, you're not actually a Christian. In some Christian circles, there's a pressure to know the exact moment when you first believe. I remember telling that to a pastor one time. I said something like, "I don't know exactly when I became a Christian. I didn't have a Damascus Road moment." And the pastor said to me, "Brian, you have to remember that Paul was going to have Christians killed, so Jesus had to step in and stop him." That's a good point. Saul's conversion isn't the only type of conversion we see in the Bible. Some Christians are like Timothy. Timothy had believing grandmother and mother (2 Tim. 1:5). It seems he was a believer for pretty much his whole life. Some Christians are like Jesus' disciples, who spent three years with Jesus. Can we really say when they came to real, saving faith in Jesus? And some are like Saul, who rather quickly come to faith. But we should remember that Saul was steeped in the Old Testament. He knew the Hebrew Bible forward and backward. All he needed was to see Jesus and to understand that he is the Messiah and the Son of God. Most people who become Christians today will have to spend more time learning about the Bible before they come to faith.

What matters is that each Christian is born again. Some births are quick, and some take many hours of labor. But what matters is whether you are born again, whether you have been transformed by God.

But Saul's conversion isn't unique in the sense that when anyone comes to faith, the scales fall from our spiritual eyes. We receive the Holy Spirit. We should be baptized. And we should tell other people about Jesus. Our views on all kinds of things—money, relationships, ethics, and even politics—should change.

Here's the second thing I want us to consider: In the end, God will conquer all his enemies. In the end, there will be people who reject God who are judged and cast out of his presence forever. But sometimes, God conquers his enemies by making them his friends. I don't

think it's an accident that Paul had the Hebrew name that he had. There's another famous Saul in the Bible, the first king of Israel. And I don't think it's a coincidence that both Sauls were from the tribe of Benjamin (1 Sam. 9:1-2; Rom. 11:1). The first Saul was a wicked king who persecuted David, who would succeed him as king of Israel. Saul chased David and tried to kill him (1 Samuel 19; 23). Saul even had some of David's people killed (1 Sam. 22:17-19). But David escaped time and again. And David even had the opportunity to kill Saul, but he didn't. He said, "The LORD forbid that I should put out my hand against the LORD's anointed" (1 Sam. 26:11; cf. 24:6). Saul would later die and David became the next king.

In this story, in Acts, Saul is persecuting the Son of David. He contributed, at least indirectly, to the deaths of some of Son of David's people killed (Acts 22:4; 26:10). He was chasing down some of the Son of David's people when he encountered the Son of David himself. And Jesus, just like his ancestor, didn't kill Saul. Instead, Jesus transformed him. He didn't say he couldn't kill God's anointed. But in a similar way, he told Saul that he was his chosen instrument to bring the gospel to all kinds of people.

The point is that God is gracious. He deals mercifully with people who are set out against him. Sometimes, he takes people who seem to be his greatest enemies and he makes them his greatest servants. That's what he did with Saul.

And that should give us hope. Let's face it, Christianity has a lot of enemies now. The church has a lot of enemies now. Which is to say that Jesus has a lot of enemies now. But there's hope. If God can transform Saul into a gospel preacher nearly two thousand years ago, he can do that today. That's the third thing I want us to consider today.

A few years ago, I read a blog by a theologian named Russell Moore. The title was, "The Next Billy Graham Might Be Drunk Now."<sup>5</sup> The article was published shortly after New Year's Eve, so the implication was that someone who had a wild time the previous night could be the next great gospel preacher. In the article, and in his new book, *Onward*, Moore writes this:

The next Jonathan Edwards might be the man driving in front of you with the Darwin Fish bumper decal. The next Charles Wesley might be a misogynistic, profanity-spewing hip-hop artist right now. The next Charles Spurgeon might be managing an abortion clinic right now. The next Mother Teresa might be a heroin-addicted porn star right now. The next Augustine of Hippo might be a

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<sup>5</sup> Russell Moore, "The Next Billy Graham Might Be Drunk Now," <http://www.russellmoore.com/2012/01/02/the-next-billy-graham-might-be-drunk-right-now> (accessed April 24, 2016).

sexually promiscuous cult member right now, just like, come to think of it, the first Augustine of Hippo was.

But the Spirit of God can turn all that around, and seems to delight to do so. The new birth doesn't just transform lives, creating repentance and faith; it also provides new leadership to the church, and fulfills Jesus' promise to gift his church with everything needed for her onward march through space and time (Eph. 4:8-16). After all, while Phillip was leading the Ethiopian eunuch to Christ, Saul of Tarsus was still a murderer. And that happens over and over again, as God raises up leaders who seem to come out of nowhere, with shady pasts and uncertain futures. And none of us would be here, apart from them.<sup>6</sup>

The next great Christian leader could now be in a same-sex relationship, confused about his or her gender, or nursing a hangover. We don't know. But God does. So let's not lose hope. Let's walk in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit. Lord willing, though we may suffer, we might just multiply, too.

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<sup>6</sup> Russell Moore, *Onward: Engaging the Culture without Losing the Gospel* (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 215.