

Persecutor to Preacher

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Scripture Reading: Acts 9:1-6, 17-22

¹ Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and 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. ³ Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" ⁵ He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."

¹⁷ So 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." ¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, ¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, ²⁰ and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." ²¹ All who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked this name? And has he not come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?" ²² Saul became increasingly more powerful and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah.

Let us pray. Ever-loving God, by your Holy Spirit speak into minds, hearts and souls so that we may not only hear your words but follow them too. Allow your Word to be alive and active in us and our lives so that others cannot help but be touched by your loving and saving grace. And speak through me, transforming my words into the message you have for each of us this day and for what you call us to do in the days ahead. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Have you ever seen anyone change, truly and genuinely change? I'm sure we can remember someone or even you changed for a time or moment or even a while but change back. For example, if people get pulled over for speeding, gets a simple warning or maybe actually does get a ticket, and then drives at the speed limit or even below the speed limit for a while. But from what typically happens is that in time a certain number of people eventually start driving like they like you used to, even getting more tickets until they either can't afford it or they are at risk of having their license suspended.

There have been rare occasions when people refused to wear their seatbelt while driving. If I'm driving, I require it. If they are driving, I try to convince them to wear it. I know, you would think everyone wears a seatbelt when driving, but they don't want to. However, it's the law and

they will get pulled over and ticketed if seen by the police. I have even witnessed people putting the seatbelt kind of around their shoulder but not buckled in.

I'm not here to judge those who do not like to wear a seatbelt, my point here is it is hard to change their behavior, even after they've gotten a ticket. It's usually take quite a bit of pain in some way, whether they are at risk of losing the ability to drive, it costs too much, or they actually are involved in an accident and they are injured to which only then they decide to always wear a seatbelt.

When I was younger, before I could drive, I have actually been in a car with people when a police car pulled out right in front of the car I was in, trying to catch a speeder going the other way, and we crashed into the police car. The person in front of me did not have her seatbelt on. Her head cracked the windshield. Fortunately she was fine after recovering from a mild concussion. I later found out that she never forgot to put on her seatbelt from then on.

People can change when good things happen also. The birth of a child that takes a person who may have always been so impatient and short-tempered to become incredibly patient and able to manage one's temper better than before.

Sometimes it's in meeting someone that makes a significant and long-lasting if not life-long change. I know that people told me after I met Jamie about 21 years ago that I had changed in that I seemed more upbeat, less serious about life, more easy-going, and to put it simply, different in better ways. We've been married for about 18 years, and that phrase people use that another person brings out the best or makes one better can often be so true.

As scripture tells us in Proverbs 27:17, "As iron sharpens iron, so a friend sharpens a friend."

This does not mean only the easy and sought after things that we look forward to, but also the challenging and difficult things that may even try the friendship, whether that's between spouses, family members, and of course friends.

Sometimes the change in a person is a long, arduous process, like watching a child learning how to stand, then take a first step, and then walk with lots of stumbling and falling and frustrations. Then in time it's not only less frustrating and bit easier, but then enjoyable and filled with so many possibilities.

In life, we find that certain things in us and the ways in which we live need not only to develop, grow and mature more, but also be changed and even transformed. Sometimes that takes a little bit of hard work, at other times it's a longer and harder process, and in some cases it seems near impossible.

Today I want to look at the near impossible cases where we and others are either struggling, simply accepted it is what it is and people just have to deal with it and you, and even simply

given up trying to be what they know would not only be good or best but also what God would have them be and grow into.

I know we all have stories of people in our lives who have changed, genuinely changed because of something. We also have stories of people in our lives who refused to change, even when they regularly or even daily suffer for it, including in pushing everyone away from them, even their own family and spouses.

Fortunately God is in the saving and transforming business.

When it seems impossible for others and for ourselves to change, we cannot forget what Jesus came to do. We all know Jesus came to fulfill the mission of saving us by dying on the cross and rising from the dead. Jesus also came to give life, life abundant here on earth and promised life eternal in heaven. And the life abundant here on earth is more than being abundant for ourselves as followers of Jesus Christ, but abundant in sharing the same life-giving words and gospel of Jesus Christ with others.

Jesus moves in every life differently because each of us is different. Sure there are many commonalities as followers of Christ. And thank God for that. At the same time, Jesus meets each of us in ways that he can only do as he created us wonderfully different and unique.

And with each of us being different in various ways, we know that because of sin entering the world and the human race, some of those differences have been turned to ways that become counter to what God would have. Instead of passion for good, for helping those who are in need, and to correct a problem rather than make it worse, sometimes that passion turns into anger, rage, and even hatred for others, self, and the world.

This is what happened to Saul. Though he was brought up with the teachings of God, though he was trained in the ways of a good and contributing citizen, and though he had the education that anyone would be proud of if not also envy, he did not use the passion that was within him to do and live for God in teaching, helping and loving others, but rather became one who learned the way so those who were older and supposedly wiser. He watched his elders and peers stone Stephen, the first martyr, for proclaiming that Jesus Christ was the Messiah, God the Son who died and rose again to save people. Saul stood and watched and approved of it.

And then he was so inspired by seeing the death of Stephen that he asked to be signed up and to be given authority to do what Acts 8:3 tell us, "...Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison."

So we come to today's scripture reading, from Acts 9 and Saul was not passionate about helping the poor, the widowed, the hungry, the sick, the oppressed, the very people God called followers to help, but rather saw his righteous works for God in the hatred of the people of the Way, those who followed Jesus, and quote, "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord" in the first verse of this chapter. To put them in prison so they could not proclaim

the gospel to anyone else. To stop all disciples of Christ so that he could be part of the efforts of snuffing out Christianity once and for all.

And it seemed like nothing would every dissuade him, stop him, and of course not transform him.

Now I want to stop here and say I wish Jesus would do this more often. I mean, wouldn't it be great when someone is being hurtful, hateful, and even saying words that not only wish harm on others but even desiring the death of others, that Jesus would appear, knock them to the ground, blind them, have them filled with the Holy Spirit of God, and taught and truly and genuinely transformed to live as Jesus calls us all to live? In addition to being kind, patient, and loving, to also give the life and salvation of Jesus Christ to others rather than bringing harm or draining the life out of others.

Wouldn't be awesome if everyone who was hateful, hurtful, and murderous would be met with such amazing and loving force that they couldn't help but be changed?

Just think of all the people in the world that persecuted others, not only Christians, but those who tried to wipe out an entire group for one reason or another.

This is a most difficult question since Jesus did it here with Saul. Why not to more or even all?

Sure there have been many who have been changed and transformed, but we must not only wrestle with those who are not changed or want to be change, we must also continue praying for each and every person who has been led on a path that is antithetical to Jesus and his ways.

And I believe there were many who were praying for Saul since they all knew about him, as Scripture tells us. Even after Saul's conversion, and Saul was preaching the gospel, there were many who asked if it wasn't the same person who has special letters so he could go after them, put them in prison to rot till death or be executed.

Saul was known throughout the area, in Jerusalem and all around. He was on the road to Damascus, ready to bring not only threats but also actions to those threats to all the disciples of Jesus Christ.

Could you imagine having lived at that time? Could you imagine hearing warning you that Saul was coming to get you? Could you imagine living in fear for being a follower of the Way?

It would have been tempting to stop following Jesus. It would have been tempting to run and hide. It would be tempting to simply lie and say you're not actually a disciple of Jesus. But the Spirit of God within you wouldn't let you do so. And seeing your family, friends, your pastor, your teachers, and pretty much every fellow Christian being persecuted with threats such as "Watch out, Saul's going to get you. You should just stop believing in such a lie. It's not worth going to prison and killed for."

Thank God that Jesus intervened since we may not have the message of salvation reach us if Saul succeeded in his efforts, which he was so good at.

Thank God that when no one could stop Saul, Jesus did.

Thank God that not only did Jesus stop Saul the persecutor, Jesus also transformed Saul to be a preacher.

That transformation happened directly from Jesus, with being blinded, to being cared for by Ananias. With the touch of Ananias' hand by the direction of God, Saul's sight was restored with things like scales falling from his eyes.

This was not only a physical healing, but a spiritual one which came to fullness with God's Holy Spirit filling Saul.

This is not like other stories of people coming to faith where they hear the gospel, repent, accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Saul was on his way to imprison and murder Christians.

Jesus confronts him and says I'll tell you what you're going to do.

There's no mention of Saul coming to realization of what he did wrong, no repenting, no agonizing over betraying his people who were about the persecuting of Christians as well as now being one that he'd be hunted, persecuted, and possibly arrested and killed, which he did end up being persecuted, jailed and eventually killed. Jesus told Ananias, who resisted at first to go to Saul because of who Saul was, that Saul would be used by Christ to reach the gentiles (all who were not Jews), kings and all the people of Israel as well as suffer many things for Christ (Acts 9:15).

Though there is no mention of all of that, surely Saul did have a conversion experience like no other because Saul was not like anyone else.

But one thing that was very characteristic of Saul was that being a man of action, he did not hesitate once he regained his strength and spent time with the disciples in Damascus, Paul went right to preaching in the synagogues about Jesus so powerfully and convincingly, just as he used to powerfully and convincingly spoke about how he wanted to and needed to have the authority to persecute Christians.

Everyone was stunned! Christians, those who gave him the authority before to arrest and imprison Christians for the purpose of being executed, as well as everyone else, regardless of what side they were on.

It is in Acts 13:9 that we are told that Saul was also known as Paul, the name which he was called from then on. There's no story about this name change, why or how it came about. Was

he also known as Paul and he decided to use that name instead because when people asked who he was and he said Saul it cause a panic? We are simply told that Saul was also known as Paul. But I'd like to guess with his incredible change and transformation, either he or others said he needed to use his other name, and he decided to do so.

We are shown that people can change, even those who seem like they never will. Does that mean that people who need to change do? Of course not. Even when we try to be change agents, when we try to help, when we get others to try and help, when we pray and pray a lot and a lot, sometimes it just doesn't happen.

That shouldn't stop us from praying for it as we as discourage us from doing what we can as we are able to help. However, one thing we can learn and remember, among many from the conversion of Saul, is that Jesus can do what no one can.

Though this is somewhat obvious, it does truly help us as we do our best to help, to plant seeds of God's love and salvation, and to pray always for those who need for Jesus to encounter them and even change them for the sake of Christ's love and saving grace.

I have seen people change. I've seen how God can change a person. I've seen for my own eyes how a rude, mean, even abusive person become gentle, humble, caring, loving, and a powerful disciple of Jesus Christ.

I honestly would have a hard time relating to Saul's conversion if I had not witness something like that in my lifetime.

God allowed me to personally witness such a transformation while I was in college. I ran into a classmate who knew I was as a Christian and gave me all sorts of grief for it. Interestingly, his wife was a Christian and he made her life difficult in so many ways I was tempted to call for help on her behalf once I learned from her some of what was happening. God allowed us to become friends, but it was a very strange friendship that over time became separate by distance and time. When we did depart at a significant point, he was being changed, and I could tell. But it wasn't until about a year later he called me and began to tell me of his transformation, how his anger that would get the best of him and hurt others was transformed by Christ to be passion to love others, starting with himself and his wife and newborn child. And I wish I could play you a recording of our conversation that night. It was so long ago I cannot remember the words. But I know at one point I said that he sounded like a preacher! I was still in an engineering program and struggling with whether to answer a call to ministry or not. And by the time he called me I had made the decision to enter ministry.

And what an incredible gift that stays with me today. Even when I've been told to avoid a person, of they give me evidence of being antithetical to Christ's ways when it comes to loving others, I do not fear, I do not judge, I do not walk away, but I do my best to be the disciple Christ wants me to be. Like Ananias, I feel we are all called to reach out to those who are combative, filled with rage and even hatred, of course without allowing ourselves to be harmed

or abused, and to care for, minister to, and witness Christ to them. This not only includes gentle and caring words, but also firm and loving truths that need to be heard that only a friend can say and a friend can listen to, even when they don't want to.

In being faithful as best as we can, we trust in Jesus to do the confronting, the saving, and the transforming.

For we are told in 1 Corinthians 3:6, 8-9, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building."

Though it doesn't happen as often as we'd like, let us not give up on praying for those who persecute others, who persecute those we love, and those who even persecute us as followers of Jesus Christ.

Let us not stop watering the plants, even those that have thorns and seem to want to choke the plants around it and it seems we can't do anything about it. Let us plant by throwing the seeds of the saving gospel of Jesus Christ as well as water generously with God's grace, forgiveness, hope, peace, joy, and love.

Let us not tire of doing God's work of sharing with our words, our actions, with everything we have and are the love and salvation found in Jesus Christ. Let us not tire of blessing those who curse us, feeding our enemies, and praying for God to do only that which God can do. May we pray so much and so hard that God hears our cries for those who are blinded by hate, rage, anger, and even murderous threats to be knocked down so that they can see, be saved and transformed for the sake of the Great Commission of Jesus Christ, which is from Matthew 28:19-20. Jesus said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Let's continue obeying Christ's Great Commission so that others, even those who seem to us to be impossible to change, will go from being persecutors to preachers of Jesus Christ. Amen.