

Acts 9:1-19

But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 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.

Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. 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. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

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.” 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, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay hands on him so that he might regain his sight.” But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.” 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. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”

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.” And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; and taking food, he was strengthened.

Introduction

Anyone who knows me knows I love politics. That was, after all, what I studied at Fresno State. I worked several campaign cycles for over a dozen candidates from as local as school board to as federal as a presidential campaign. I was living the life. Political campaigns became a

way of life for me, a way of life spent in bars and cigar lounges discussing the good of the Republic. By the end, I was a 21-year-old political science graduate, and wouldn't you know it, I had answers to every last one of our country's problems. So I thought. I am no longer involved in political campaigns, but I stay engaged in national news as a consumer.

I want you to imagine a hypothetical scenario. Let's go back to just after Donald Trump won the 2016 election when he began putting his administration in place. Among the first positions he fills is his White House Press Secretary. The day of the announcement arrives; Trump walks to the podium in the James Brady Press Briefing Room before a sea of reporters to announce who will be his chief spokesperson. The reporters are sitting on the edge of their seats, awaiting who will step out from behind the blue curtain, until they see none other than Hillary Clinton walk to the podium, and shake Trump's hand with a joyous smile. Her smile is met with joy from Trump who leaves the room, leaving the power of the podium to her on his behalf.

You can imagine the shock on the faces of these journalists who for months reported on their intense rivalry. Instead of sinking into obscurity like other losing candidates, she works for him as his mouthpiece and most prominent advocate to the press and public? Something radical must have happened for such a drastic u-turn to take place in her life.

This hypothetical scenario may seem ludicrously implausible. But this is the level of jaw-dropping, dumbfounded shock all who encountered Saul before and after his conversion would have felt toward his radical transformation. But to be frank, radical transformations like what we see with Saul in Acts 9 still happen even to this day. We do not need to rely on hypotheticals to consider the wonder and magnitude of what happened to Saul.

The One Who Came as an Assassin

I recently heard the following story from two separate sources, one from Voice of the Martyrs, a Christian organization that reports on Christian persecution around the world and provides legal protections where they can. The other was from a missionary to Iraq reporting back to his Pentecostal church. This story took place shortly before the geopolitically pivotal city of Mosul, Iraq was liberated from ISIS control in July 2017.¹

Our story begins with a former Muslim refugee named Abraham who was called to preach the Gospel to Muslims in Iraq. Many Muslims in Iraq were converting to Jesus through

¹ <https://vomcanada.com/mideast-2017-05-04.htm> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GbhPqUkiztE>

the ministry of pastor Abraham. Word began to spread among the Muslims about this Nazarene, they called him, which left him with many enemies.

“Pastor Abraham had been threatened many times for boldly sharing his faith with Sunni Muslims who were crossing the border from Syria” including an ISIS assassin who was ordered to kill Pastor Abraham. It became apparent to him, his family, and his church that his life was in imminent danger. Months of intense fear settled all around him.

“One day, while working outside his house with an electrical saw, the blade suddenly popped off and caught him on the mouth. Had the blade hit him inches lower, it could have severed an artery in his neck. If it had been inches higher, it could have blinded him. As he stood in shock for a moment, he sensed God’s Spirit impressing upon him these words: ‘I am in control of when your life will end. [Do not be afraid].’”

Shortly thereafter, the ISIS assassin, named Fadi, arrived to the area in which Pastor Abraham was ministering. ISIS sent him there to kill this Nazarene preacher and to convert or kill the former Muslims he had converted to Jesus. Fadi appeared, dressed in all black, wielding the weapon of an ISIS fighter, and began to approach Pastor Abraham’s house. When he got to the area of Abraham’s house, he let out a hefty scream so all in the area knew he had arrived. Abraham heard the scream, and stepped out of his house to see this ISIS assassin.

According to the witnesses, Fadi, the ISIS assassin, began charging straight at Abraham, screaming as he ran, with his weapon pointed right at Abraham. Abraham, on the other hand, began screaming as well, “You are driven by the prince of demons [but] Jesus is going to set you free!” As the story goes, Fadi, the ISIS assassin, got closer and closer to Abraham, but the closer he got, the more his body convulsed until he was shaking uncontrollably. Several feet away from Abraham, Fadi fell to the ground, he dropped his knife, and the shaking stopped. Abraham walked over to him and asked, “What have you come here for? What do you want?” Fadi, the ISIS assassin, looked up at Abraham and responded, “I want to know salvation.” With confidence, Abraham declared the Gospel to Fadi who put his faith in Jesus Christ on the spot; the forgiveness of all his sins left him in tears.

After retrieving his wife from Syria, Fadi was baptized in Abraham’s church. Fadi met for regular discipleship with Abraham. Fadi led his wife to Christ, who was also baptized, and Fadi became a Gospel preacher to refugees under ISIS control.

Hillary Clinton becoming the chief spokesperson for Donald Trump is a hypothetical scenario conveying the ludicrous implausibility of radical transformation, if not for a legitimate, significant reason. For the journalists in the Briefing Room, the questions burning on their minds would be “how could this be?” “There must be a reason for this, and we must know why NOW.” On the other hand, what happened to Fadi is no hypothetical scenario. The one who came as an assassin was sent as an evangelist. This radical transformation would leave all refugees he met with a burning question: how could this be? What could prompt such a radical transformation? I must know why NOW. Friends, Fadi’s story is Saul’s story.

Message

We are first introduced to Saul in the aftermath of Stephen’s sermon to the high priest. Stephen’s sermon to these high-ranking religious leaders is riddled with sharp language against the establishment leaders. And these establishment leaders responded just as you might expect them to. *Now when they heard these [words of Stephen] they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him (Acts 7:54).* They proceeded to stone Stephen. *And Saul approved of [Stephen’s] execution. There arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria... Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison (Acts 8:1-3).*

No one seemed to be more committed to the Jewish cause than Saul. He later wrote to the Galatians: *You have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my Fathers (Gal. 1:13-14).* This is who this man was. We read of a Pharisee among Pharisees named Saul who *went to the high priest 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.* Like Fadi, Saul received his persecution task and was en route to carry it out.

While en route, Saul had an encounter that transformed his life. Blinded by a flash of light brighter than the sun at midday, appearing before him was the risen Christ. Those traveling with Saul trembled all the more, for they heard the thunderous noise, but heard no words; they saw a light, but they did not see Christ. Saul saw the risen Christ. Saul heard the voice of the

Lord. This encounter is what later qualified him to be an apostle. He had seen the resurrected Christ. The man who killed Christians became the chief spokesman for Christ’s Church in the Middle East, starting churches, checking in on them with letters that have been preserved through the ages; letters that enabled him to reflect on the reality of the risen Christ as it pertained to himself and to others.

Saul was a leader amongst the Pharisees, taught by the most prominent Jewish teacher of his day. The likelihood of such a radical transformation is ludicrously implausible, if not for a legitimate, significant reason. What would motivate Saul to switch teams, to shift from ending the lives of Christians to putting his own life on the line as the Press Secretary for Christ, if the resurrection of Christ was fake news? The ludicrous implausibility of Saul’s conversion happening by chance is itself an evidence for the legitimacy of the resurrection of Christ!

And the resurrection of Christ is central! The New Testament writers are clear: all who declare Jesus as Lord and believe the Father raised him from the dead are born again! You may have come here this morning knowing full-well you are not a Christian. If that is you, I ask you just one question: Do you believe in the resurrection of Christ? Really consider that question; it trumps all other questions. If the answer is yes and if you therefore submit your life to Jesus as Lord of your life, then you are born again! It really is as simple as that.

And the New Testament writers are clear that those who are born again receive four gifts from God. Those who are born again receive the complete forgiveness of all their sins. Those who are born again receive a new heart, which essentially means a new worldview, a new value system. Those who are born again receive the promise of eternal life in the presence of the LORD in the restored New Jerusalem on the New earth still to come. And those who are born again, like Saul, receive the indwelling of the Holy Spirit who empowers you right now to turn away from sin and turn toward the LORD, and who empowers you with a variety of spiritual gifts and abilities to strengthen the faith of other believers. This is true for all who convert to Christ. Do you believe in the resurrection of Christ and therefore submit to him as your Lord?

And yet, there is but one more crucial piece to this story. There is but one more key character in our passage by the name of Ananias. And I think if we put ourselves in the sandals of Ananias, we can relate to the fear he so bluntly prayed to the LORD. Saul had the authority to imprison and kill Ananias in Damascus, just as he had done to the other saints in Jerusalem. The LORD sent Ananias directly to his would-be killer, who, by the way, was already in Damascus.

I can only imagine what must have run through Ananias’ mind at the prospect of this mission. I imagine Ananias may have thought at that point that Saul was unredeemable. I imagine many of us may consider certain groups of people to be unredeemable, people not worth sharing the Gospel to: the distracted employee not being as productive as you’d like them to be, the man in front of you in the grocery store reeking of marijuana or alcohol; the scantily-dressed, tramp-stamped woman buying lottery tickets at the gas station; that lesbian relative you only see every now and then; the new sex offender moving into town; the abortionist doctor at Planned Parenthood; the fringe Islamists on the other side of the world committing acts of terror in the name of a false god. But these are redeemable! For these Christ also suffered and died! Saul was redeemable, because it was not up to Ananias to determine who was too far gone. Only the LORD has that authority, and even though not all are saved, the LORD desires all to be saved, so that ought to be our standard as well as we obey in our task to share the Gospel to all people.

If your response to someone who sins differently than you or seemingly worse than you is to say, “They need Jesus,” but you are unwilling to give them Jesus, then who do you expect will? Nobody is in your life by accident. God has preordained every connection in your life, whether sustained or a passerby. “They need Jesus” is either an excuse to do nothing or a personal call to evangelize and disciple.

Ananias was a key player in affirming the newfound faith of Saul. Because Saul’s associates did not share in his full experience, one could suggest Saul had a private conversion. So much of the American Church is made up of private faith. “I can be a Christian without going to church,” some suggest. Sure, just as well as my thumb can function properly without my hand, my arm, my nerves, and the rest of my body. For Saul, a private conversion experience was incomplete. The LORD initiated the transformation in Saul’s life, but this transformation continued through discipleship, a divine-human partnership designed by the LORD.

Our English translations do not do justice to the grammar of the Great Commission in Matthew 28. Our English translations typically convey four commands: Go, make disciples, baptize, and teach. But there is only one command: make disciples. Make disciples, through going, through baptizing, and through teaching. Going, baptizing, and teaching: these are participles, which function in the Great Commission as verbal adjectives; they describe the verb. Going, baptizing, and teaching are *how* we make disciples.

In our passage, Ananias followed the Great Commission. Ananias obeyed Jesus’ command to make disciples by following God’s call to *go* to Saul, despite his relatable fears. Ananias obeyed Jesus’ command to make disciples by *baptizing* Saul. Ananias obeyed Jesus’ command to make disciples by authoritatively declaring to Saul that his encounter with the Risen Christ was legitimate, not just something of his imagination, and that he was a chosen instrument of the LORD to take the Gospel to the Gentiles. And what would drive Ananias to go on this mission if this directive to go to Saul was of his own imagination? The ludicrous implausibility of concocting such a suicidal mission is itself an evidence for its legitimacy. There are simply too many coincidences for it all to be a coincidence.

Saul’s newfound faith was no longer private, but affirmed by a brother in Christ. It was not until after the participation of Ananias that the Holy Spirit indwelt Saul. Without the LORD’s initiation, the participation of Ananias was a waste of time; it surely would have cost him his life. At the LORD’s design, without the participation of a willing disciple, the work the LORD began in Saul’s life was incomplete, or if anything, delayed until another willing disciple could be found. It was not until after the participation of Ananias that the impairment caused by Saul’s initial encounter with Christ was removed. By the LORD’s initiative *and* by a willing disciple’s participation, could Saul join us in that hymn: *was blind, but now I see. My scales are gone, I’ve been set free.*

It was not Saul by himself; he was discipled by Ananias. But not just Ananias; also by Barnabas, and eventually other apostles. Even in his ministry, he was not alone. We read in the introductions and conclusions to his letters of a great multitude of people involved personally in Saul’s life, relationships that gave him strength. This was no one-man show.

Personal Story and Conclusion

With no intention of puffing myself up, to this end, I relate to Saul. Now, you may not be familiar with most or any of these names, but I certainly hope you can relate to the various roles they played in my life. Back in 1991, as a very young boy, I was baptized at the Fairfield Christian Reformed Church. As a child, I briefly participated in a young boys discipleship group called the Calvinist Cadets, led by Kevin Sigler and Phil Hofland. As a child, so many from my congregation taught the Bible to me in Sunday School, children’s church, VBS, and other programs, people like Audrey Archer, Gina Kufhal, and Carol Wiedenmeyer, saints who have

gone to be with the LORD; Mike Hourigan, Becky Cowgill, Margaret Bacho, Jen Borges, Mark Hanneman, Jackie Hofland, and Tim LeFever, saints who are still with us. After months of study with Pastor Dave Zandstra and our youth director Walt Bales, I professed my faith before my congregation; study that continued as I made my way through my church’s youth ministry, with help from Kelly Miller and Ruth Navarrete; study that continued with our then-new Pastor Nick Blystra as I met with him every two weeks to discuss our denomination’s doctrinal distinctions as part of Bible class at Vacaville Christian Schools.

Despite putting my faith on the backburner during most of college, a regular piece of snail-mail found its way to me from Alice Addink with a copy of my home-church bulletin enclosed with her sermon notes. My faith was rekindled just before my last semester of college as other believers my age surrounded me to do life with me and me with them at the Well Community Church. I returned home after college and got plugged back into my church, participating in Bible studies led by Clark Sigler, then Mike Marsden, and Dave Harrington. I began to serve again, initially supporting the youth director with the high-schoolers, but then to teach the Bible to other believers in adult Sunday School, some of whom changed my diaper during my days in the nursery.

Throughout my life, disciples in my church went out of their way to come to me. Disciples in my church participated in my baptism, promising to uphold me in prayerful support, to participate in raising me up in the Lord, and to encourage me along the way. Throughout my life, disciples in my church were committed to teaching the Bible to me, particularly the Hebrew Scriptures I have now come to cherish these past several years. In other words, throughout my life, the LORD used disciples in the local church to make me into a disciple of Christ. I am no one-man show. I am merely a product of the discipleship of a Christ-centered-church. And my ministry endeavors are only strengthened by the relationships I have with so many from my congregation. I certainly hope the many young ones you have here will someday be able to reflect that they too share my story of being discipled by their whole local church.

While testimonies differ from person to person, supernatural truths are shared by all: you who were once utterly dead in your sins were made fully alive in Christ! You who once lived in the dominion of darkness were called out of bondage to live into the freedom of the Risen Christ’s marvelous light now and forever, something the Lord has called on us to do together.

Let’s pray.