

The Grace Awakening

Acts 9:1-19

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I begin with an excerpt from a Breakpoint commentary aired this week called, “*Self-constructed, Build-a-Bear, Buffet-Style Christianity is no Christianity at All.*” It’s posted on Sermon Extras if you’d like to read it.

In a pair of tweets that recently made rounds on social media, a young progressive woman issued her doctrinal creed: “I am a Christian and I believe proselytizing is violence...I am a Christian and I believe LGBTQ+ ppl are divine and should lead us...I am a Christian and I don’t go to church. I am a Christian and I don’t believe the Bible is the word of God.”

While one wonders why someone who already rejects church, evangelism, Christian morality, and Scripture would still want to keep the title Christian, this tweeter is merely a more extreme example of a very common approach to faith, including Christianity.

To be clear, this kind of self-constructed, Build-A-Bear, buffet-style belief acquisition works fine for some worldviews, especially the Westernized, New-Agey offsprings of Eastern pantheisms... “Christianity,” however, as a revealed worldview, has an objective definition. Christianity centers ultimate reality and, therefore, ultimate authority, outside (not within) the created order, locates it in a Divine Personal Being who has made Himself known through what He has made, through Holy Scripture, and ultimately made known Himself through Christ Jesus.

Today, we’re introduced to an enemy of the gospel, who had his own definition of Christianity until he came face-to-face with the reality of outside revelation and with the resurrected Christ Himself. In your copy of the Scriptures, please turn to Acts 9 where we will learn that *no one is too sinful to be saved.*

Since this antagonist of the faith was converted and became Christianity’s most ardent advocate, we cannot just pick and choose our beliefs like a spiritual smorgasbord.

In order to help us understand and apply this passage, I'm going to take on the character of Saul, later known as the Apostle Paul. I'll come back out of character at the end as we seek to pull out some principles and application.

My Hebrew name is Saul, which means, "tall." BTW, my Roman name is Paul. I was actually named after the first king of Israel, who was tall...and ruggedly handsome. I was born in a Roman town called Tarsus, so I understood pagan culture, but I was raised to be very religious.

At an early age, I studied under a famous rabbi named Gamaliel, who was a much sought-after teacher. I was from the tribe of Benjamin and later became a Pharisee. My religious resume was resplendent, but I was also self-righteous, spiritually smug, and filled with rage against a new religious sect, a group of fanatics who called themselves members of the Way.

I became obsessed with obliterating those who followed the cult of Christianity. When Stephen, one of their leaders, was arrested and stoned to death, I applauded his assassination. In fact, in order for the executioners to be unencumbered when they pitched their rocks, they took off their jackets and laid them at my feet. You can read more about it in Acts 7.

*I was glad Stephen was dead, but something snapped in me that day. Perhaps my conscience was trying to speak but instead, I became enraged. Looking back, I was suppressing the truth which only filled me with anger and bitterness. Can anyone relate? From that point on I began persecuting Christians. Acts 8:3 understates it: **"But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison."***

*The word for "ravage" was used of wild animals tearing into their prey. I saw this as a fulfillment of what was said about Benjamin, the leader of my tribe, back in Genesis 49:27: **"Benjamin is a ravenous wolf, in the morning devouring the prey and at evening dividing the spoil."** I thought I was simply living out my destiny.*

*In Galatians 1:13, I summarized my efforts this way, **"For you heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it."** In my mind, believers in Jesus were blasphemers and heretics. If I could eradicate this new religion, maybe God would bring the "real" Messiah to Israel.*

When persecution caused Christians to flee to Damascus, the capital of Syria, I made plans to chase them down. I was on a murderous mission, acting much like

the head of the Gestapo or KGB. I was so angry, I could feel heat radiating from my face as I hissed with hatred. Acts 9:1 says, I was **“still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.”** With every breath I cursed Christians and sought new ways to slaughter them. I didn’t care if they were men or women and it didn’t bother me to see mothers being separated from their children. I knew there were about 30 synagogues in Damascus and that’s where the followers of Jesus were congregating.

Recognizing I needed some official empowerment, I obtained letters from the chief priest to give me authority to travel some 135 miles to Damascus and arrest and extradite those **“belonging to the Way.”** This journey took about a week. I didn’t appreciate how they referred to themselves as belonging to the way because it made it seem they were the only ones who believed the right way.

When I was on the outskirts of the city, my heart began racing with excitement about what I was going to do to these people, when **“suddenly a light from heaven shone”** around me. It was around noon, so it was totally unexpected.

I was instantly blinded and knew this was a message from God because Psalm 104:2 says, God **“covers himself with light.”** 2 Samuel 22:13 adds: **“Out of the brightness of His presence bolts of lightning blazed forth.”** I remembered Jesus referring to Himself **“as the light of the world”** in John 8:12.

When God shot a laser beam of blinding light from the throne room of Heaven, I was immediately knocked to the ground. Some of your artists show me riding a horse but as a Pharisee I was averse to riding horses. All I know is I felt terror as I lay prostrate in the dust. I thought I was ‘tall Saul,’ but my name was eventually changed to Paul, which meant ‘small.’

My mind went to Ezekiel 1:28: **“Like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness all around. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. And when I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of one speaking.”**

I thought I was going to be vaporized and then I heard a tender, yet urgent voice in Hebrew (see Acts 26:14) calling my name twice, **“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”** I remembered reading that God said, **“Abraham, Abraham”** and **“Moses, Moses”** when He wanted to get the attention of these men before giving them assignments.

*I was confused when the voice said I was persecuting Him. I knew I was killing Christians, but what did that have to do with God? Later, I realized to persecute a Christian is to persecute Christ because Christians are **“in Christ.”** Jesus identifies Himself so closely with Christians that it is impossible to persecute them without persecuting Christ.*

*I got up the nerve to ask, **“Who are you, Lord?”** Somehow I knew this voice belonged to Jesus and there was no doubt He was Lord. This is the name ‘Jehovah’ or ‘Yahweh’ in Hebrew.*

*I couldn’t see anything, but I’ll never forget His reply, **“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”** This caused me to shake in my sandals because I thought Jesus was dead. I remember Him emphasizing the phrase, **“I am,”** which caused me to think of the answer God gave to Moses when he asked who God was in Exodus 3:14: **“I am who I am.”** I thought I was persecuting the enemies of God not knowing I was actually the enemy persecuting the great **“I am.”***

*Then, Jesus told me to **“rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”** Could it really be true that no one is too sinful to be saved? I was used to giving orders, but now I followed His orders, which is what following Christ is all about. Conversion involves a change from thinking you can run your own life to doing what He tells you to do.*

I went from believing Jesus was nothing to knowing He was everything. Instead of thinking I was everything, I was nothing. Later, I learned that I, who was nothing, could be filled with Him who is everything; and that would make my life something.

*The guys who were with me were **“speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one.”** They saw the light but couldn’t make out the words directed only to me. Perhaps you’ve experienced this as well. You’ve been saved by His grace but when you try to tell others about the gospel, it’s just noise to them.*

*I wasn’t sure I could get up, but somehow, I rose from the ground. My eyes were open, but I couldn’t see a thing. Later, when I shared this account in Acts 22:11, I recounted, **“I could not see because of the brightness of that light.”** Because I couldn’t see, I was led by the hand and brought into Damascus. Somehow God had turned this angry bull into a docile lamb. People lost their lives at my hand but now I was humbled and had to be led by the hand.*

I was brought to the home of a man named Judas (not the one you're thinking of). I don't remember much about him but will never forget his gracious hospitality towards a man formerly filled with hostility. For three days, I couldn't see and wouldn't eat or drink. I was in a crisis of the soul.

*So bright was the light of the Lord that I was blind for three days. In the darkness of sight, I realized how dark my soul was. I replayed my life during these 72 hours, remembering ways in which I had wronged God and persecuted people. My mind went to Deuteronomy 28:28-29: **"The LORD will afflict you with madness, blindness and confusion of mind. At midday you will grope about like a blind man in the dark..."***

I was filled with guilt and regret, but I was beginning to taste grace and restoration. During these three days, I was reminded that Jesus was in the grave for three days before His glorious resurrection.

*What I didn't know is Jesus had appeared to a disciple named Ananias in a vision. His name means, 'Jehovah is gracious.' He was about to find out the extent of God's grace. When Jesus called him, he immediately made himself available with these words of surrender, **"Here I am, Lord."***

*Then, the Lord gave him a difficult assignment: **"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."** Straight street was a well-known street that ran east and west through the center of the city.*

*It probably helped Ananias to hear I was praying, but he initially resisted going because my reputation was well known: **"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."***

*The Lord graciously listened to his excuse and told him for the second time to **"go."** Jesus told Ananias I was a **"chosen instrument"** to carry His name to three groups of people – to Gentiles, to kings, and to the children of Israel.*

*Then, I was told how Jesus wanted to use me when he added words which made me wince: **"For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."** I had slandered His name and in a short while I would suffer for His name.*

*I'll never forgot what happened next. Ananias “**departed and entered the house.**” I could hear him talking with Judas and heard his footsteps as he approached me. I couldn't see him, but I felt his hands as he laid them gently on my head. He then said two words which made me weep and worship: “**Brother Saul...**” This was a greeting of grace to a man filled with guilt.*

I was now included in the family of faith! No one is too sinful to be saved! Ananias and I were brothers in Christ! Through touch and tender words of inclusion, he gave me the support I needed.

*Ananias continued with more good news: “...**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.**”*

*Instantly, I felt some crusty scales fall from my eyes and my sight returned! Reflecting on this later, I wrote these words in 2 Corinthians 4:6: “**For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.**”*

I started my journey to Damascus physically seeing, but spiritually blind. I ended it physically blind but spiritually seeing.

*In order to publicly identify myself as a follower of Christ and as a sign of my conversion, I “**rose and was baptized.**” Clearly, baptism follows belief. I was born again and then I was baptized. Judas gave me some food and my physical strength returned.*

I persecuted followers of the Way, and now, I had found my way because I had trusted in the One who is the only way.

Brothers and sisters, I'm back now as Pastor Brian. It's not an option to redefine Christianity by taking a buffet approach to our beliefs. If you say you are a Christian, you must first be converted and then you must follow Christ by submitting to what the Scriptures teach.

Application

1. You are not too sinful to be saved. Since Jesus saved Saul, He can save anyone, even you. It doesn't matter what you've done or how you've been

living. You may be religious, you may be rebellious, or you might just be a regular person. Either way you need to be saved.

God may have knocked you off your high horse. If so, it's not because He hates you but because He loves you. He's not trying to pay you back; He's wanting to bring you back. God's not after retribution; He longs for you to experience reconciliation with Him.

2. Don't lose hope for others to be saved. Some of you have been praying for a loved one for a long time. Don't give up. Romans 12:12: ***“Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.”***

3. If you're saved it's time to serve. Both Judas and Ananias were faithful to the tasks they were given. Judas opened his home and Ananias opened his arms to Paul. Just as Paul was God's instrument, so are you. No one can do everything, but everyone can do something.

4. Prepare yourself for persecution. Like Paul, we will suffer for following the Savior. Persecution is a promise. Paul wrote in Philippians 1:29: ***“For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in Him but also suffer for His sake.”***

5. Never tire of telling your testimony. Paul couldn't stop talking about his salvation. Every one of his letters begins with a greeting of grace and he retells his testimony in Acts 22 and Acts 26. Here's a simple outline taken from his approach before King Agrippa in Acts 26.

- Be respectful (1-3)
- Summarize what your life was like *before* you met Christ (4-11)
- Describe *how* you came to Christ (12-18)
- Talk about your life *now* (19-24)
- Make an appeal for the person to be saved (25-29)

6. Hold on tightly to your relationships with your brothers and sisters in Christ. If you are in a saving relationship with Christ, you and I are spiritually related. I am your brother. You are my sister or brother.

Blessed Be the Tie

To make this point, I'm going to borrow a recent illustration from pastor David Platt. I have four ropes here on the platform. I'm going to ask four people to come up and hold the end of one of the ropes to form a physically distanced circle. One end of each rope is attached to the rock, which represents Christ.

During this season, we are not able to connect as closely as we'd like. Normally we'd shake hands or hug one another. We're not made to be distant from each other so during this time we want to be as connected as we possibly can. We have to be creative, don't we? Our methods have changed but our mission remains the same to equip people to live on mission by gathering, growing, giving and going with the gospel, all for the glory of God.

We're seating people six feet apart for our services. My Growth Group met outside Wednesday night. Several Growth Groups have relaunched with safety protocols. EdgeKids and Awana are now meeting with some safety protocols. We all long to go back to "normal," but none of this feels "normal," does it?

In a world which has divided, our church is in real danger of division as well. Every pastor I know is dealing with discord and disagreements related to racial issues, political views, regathering protocols, the wearing of masks and whether COVID is a hoax or a real health risk.

Edgewood has always been a united church but during this time, friction and factions have developed which threaten to unravel our unity. These four individuals probably have different views, but each one represents each of us as brothers and sisters in Christ, members of the same faith family.

We must hold on and not let go of these ropes! Ephesians 4:2-3 says, ***"With all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."*** I like how the Amplified Version renders verse 3: ***"Be eager and strive earnestly to guard and keep the harmony and oneness of the Spirit in the binding power of peace."***

As we humble ourselves and treat others with gentleness and patience, we can bear with one another in love. Let's be eager to strive earnestly to guard and keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Let's not allow our views of the pandemic, politics or any other polarizing issues to become more important than unity with our brothers and sisters in Christ!

We must strive side by side and not be filled with strife against one another. We must not, and we will not divide!

Hear my heart. As one of your pastors, 1 Peter 5:2 charges me to “*shepherd the flock of God that is among you.*” Proverbs 27:23 urges me to “*know well the condition of your flocks.*” Frankly, I’m concerned about our condition. Galatians 5:15 is a warning for us: “*But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.*”

In the spirit of Romans 14:19, I am committed to “*pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.*” Can I count on you to pursue peace, so we don’t devour one another?

Part of our problem is when we spend too much time looking at one another, we begin to see things we don’t like *in* each other. Instead of bearing with one another, we end up bothered *by* each other. Instead of giving the benefit of the doubt, we start doubting the faith of others who disagree with us. Instead of embracing our differences, we treat each other as enemies.

Do you know there’s another way to make a circle with these ropes? Can you think of how they can still hold on to the ropes and stay in a circle?

If they were to pivot and face outward, they would still draw strength from the Lord and each other, but their perspective would change. [go ahead and face outward]

Their connection is just as strong but now they are looking outward. Instead of focusing on the flaws of our brothers and sisters, now we look out and see over 300,000 people in the QCA who don’t know Jesus and are on the road that leads to an eternal hell. When we’re consumed with how to get the gospel out to those who are lost, it changes our conversations and what we’re concerned about.

As our eyes look out further, we see not only lost neighbors but lost nations. We see a world where 2-3 *billion* people have never even heard the name of Jesus! There are billions of people walking through a pandemic who are lost in their sins and have no hope whatsoever without the gospel of Jesus Christ.

When our eyes are outward it changes what it means to be in community with one another. We must stay together as we stand side-by-side as brothers and sisters on

mission for the fame of His name among our neighbors and the nations, all for the glory of God.

I pray this picture fills your mind during this season so you and I will do all we can to preserve the unity for which Christ gave His life! Let's be the answer to the prayer Jesus prayed in John 17:22-23: ***“The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.”***

Let's give it up for our rope holders!

Invitation

I want to give you the opportunity to respond to the Lord's leading by asking three questions.

1. Will you fight for unity within our family of faith?

2. Will you pray for your friend or family member to get saved?

3. Are you ready to be saved? If so, please pray along with me. *“Lord Jesus, for too long I've kept You out of my life. I admit I am a sinner and I cannot save myself. I repent of my sins by changing my mind about the way I've been living. By faith I appropriate your gift of salvation. Thank You, Lord Jesus, for coming to earth. With all my heart I believe You are the Son of God who died on the cross for my sins and rose from the dead on the third day. Thank You for bearing my sins and giving me the gift of eternal life. I believe Your words are true. I repent and receive You into my heart. Be my Savior and Lord, my Forgiver and Leader. I surrender to Your leadership in my life by saying, 'Here I am, Lord.' Make me into the person You want me to be. Amen.”*