

Four Life-Changing Truths  
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We're gonna be in Acts chapter 9 today. But before we get into that, let's pray.

*Lord God,*

*Thank You so very much for the privilege of being able to come and to spend time worshipping You, and to spend time seeing how You work in people's lives...even two thousand years ago. God, I ask that You would just reveal truth to us here as we look at Your word, that we would have ears to hear what You have to say to us today, that we would have minds to understand it, and ultimately that we would have hearts that hold on to the truth that You have for us.*

*And we pray this in Your name, amen.*

As I was goin' through and preparing for this sermon this week, Acts 9, I was reminded of my time in the military. A few years ago I spent some time in Afghanistan. And I was along the border of Pakistan working with the infantry. And so I had a couple of run-ins with Taliban, and everything else. And also had some instances where I would come face-to-face with the aftermath of what the Taliban does. They would...at times they would go into the villages at night, and they would haul somebody out of their house. They would go kick in the door, and maybe there was somebody that was perceived as an American sympathizer, or maybe they didn't live quite strictly enough to Sharia law. Whatever it might be, they would go in, they would kick in the door, they would haul this family out into the street. And depending on how they were feeling...I don't know what the rhyme or reason was...depending on how they were feeling they may just beat the person as an example. They may just execute them quickly there. Or they may do somethin'...one that stuck out in my mind was in Gardez, they took a couple of guys and they strung them up by their feet at an intersection, and tortured them to death and left them there as a demonstration of what happens to people who do not follow Sharia law.

That sticks out in my mind, because what we look at here in Acts 9 is a guy who, if he were living today in Afghanistan, he would be part of the Taliban. He was extremely zealous for his traditions, for the teachings of his ancestors...so much so that he is the sort of guy...when we're introduced to him what we're going to be looking at here is Saul. Later in life he goes by the name of Paul. Saul is his Hebrew name. Paul is the Hellenistic version of that name. And so if I switch back and forth, it happens subconsciously. Please bear with me if I say Saul or Paul...realize I'm talking about the same person.

But this guy...where we are first introduced to him is at Stephen's death. We talked about that a few weeks ago. Stephen was a Christian. He was the first Christian martyr, and he was...he was convicted of basically blasphemy, turning his back on the religion of his fathers, and saying that Jesus Christ actually came back alive, and is the Son of God, and is the only way that somebody can come to know God. And so the Sanhedrin, this group of rulers that got really upset, they haul Stephen out and they start stoning him. They pick up stones and they start crushing his body with stones, a very brutal process. Saul is there. What he does is...it's a very messy, brutal process. And he says, 'Hey guys, hey, hey, hang on. Give me your coats here, give me your cloaks. Don't want 'em to get messy. And I want you to be able to throw the rocks a whole lot harder without the restraints of your cloaks.' And so he stands by and cheers them on as he's holding their cloaks so they don't get messy.

That's the sort of guy we're dealing with here. In fact, what we see in Acts 9 is at the beginning, after Stephen's death, he decides, 'Hey, this is a whole lot of fun. I think I'm going to start hunting down a whole lot more Christians.' And so he starts hunting down Christians all over the place. In fact, what he ends up doing is he asks for permission...and he gets official authorization...to go to another town, Damascus, and start hunting down the Christians there—to haul them out of their houses, to throw them in prison, to beat them, to do whatever is required to restrain and confine this crazy new teaching that is not in line with the religion of his fathers.

And so, as he's on his way to Damascus, he ends up...he's on his way, he's with a few other guys, and all of a sudden there is this blinding light that appears before him. There's this man standing there, and he just falls down on the ground. And this guy who's standing there before him says, 'Saul, what in the world!? Why are you persecuting me? What are you doing to me?'

And Saul says, 'Who are you? I don't even know who you are!'

And the man who's standing before him says, 'I'm Jesus. I'm the one you're persecuting, Saul.' And then He tells him, 'Listen, here's what's gonna happen. When you get up I want you to go into Damascus. And you stay there until I send somebody to you, until I tell you what to do.' And the guy is gone.

The couple other guys who are with him, they didn't...they were aware that somethin' crazy and supernatural was going on, but they weren't a part of this exchange happening. They weren't listening to the words. They didn't see Jesus standing there. They were just aware that there was a supernatural event happening. And when, all of a sudden, it's over, Paul stands up and he can't see a thing. He's totally blind. So these guys, they take him by the arm and they take him into Damascus. He ends up staying in Damascus for the next three days, and he's just fasting, he's praying, he is wondering what in the world is goin' on here. 'Here's this Jesus guy, and I'm still tryin' to sort all this out.'

Now meanwhile, cut over. Imagine we're watching this movie, ok? And now we're cutting to a different scene. In a different part in Damascus there's this guy, and he's sitting here. His name is Ananias. He's a different guy than the Ananias—same name, different guy—than the Ananias we ran into earlier. This guy, Ananias, he's praying, he's just spending time...and all of a sudden God gives him this vision. And in this vision he's talking to God. The idea is actually it's Jesus Himself. He comes and He says, 'You know what? Hey, I've got a job for you.' And Ananias says 'Oh, yeah. That's right. Me, right here. Pick me. I'm ready to go. Tell me what it is.' And Jesus says, 'Ok. Here's the deal—there's this guy named Saul. And right now he's staying down on Straight Street, and I want you to go over there and pray for him so that he can receive the Holy Spirit and so that he can see again, because he's blind right now.'

Now, Ananias is not a dumb guy, ok? This is...I don't think I would sign up for this mission, if I'm totally honest. Because he looks at it and he says, 'Well, wait, um, hey...I might be missin' something here, God, but I'm pretty sure I've heard of this guy. He's the guy who was goin' around pullin' people out of their houses and killing them, throwing them in prison. He's just tearin' us up! It seems to me if he's blind that's not such a bad thing. It's gonna be harder for him to find me.'

That's basically this conversation that he has with God. And God turns around and He says, 'Listen, Ananias. I've got a plan for him. I want you to go and do this.' So Ananias goes and he shows up at Paul's house, at the place where he's staying. And he says, 'Hey, listen. Jesus said I have to come here and talk to you. And I need to pray with you.' And so he ends up praying for Saul, and the Holy Spirit comes in and lives in Saul.

At that moment Saul's life is radically transformed. And what he was blind to for his whole past life, he now can see—the spiritual reality all around him of the God of the universe. And so, as he gets up it's this very symbolic thing where it's as though these scales fall off of his eyes and he can see. And what we see here is, from that moment on, from the rest of Acts 9 and actually on through the rest of the book of Acts and much of the New Testament, what we see is it's like Paul—he was the most zealous guy this way, and all of a sudden it's like he does an about-face and he turns on the afterburner, and I mean he is just flyin' as fast as he can the complete opposite direction. And the gospel jumps into just high gear, and God uses him in a mighty way.

And what we see...we're gonna look at this conversion here, this time when Paul comes to know God, because this is one of the most crucial conversions in all of scripture. It is one of the most crucial conversions in all of scripture, and in fact, it's arguably the key conversion in scripture. It's probably the one that is most referenced. It's the one that people come back to most often. It's something that we look at and is used as an example in a whole bunch of different ways. In fact, what we're gonna cover here today is there are four life-changing truths that we can learn from Saul's conversion. There are four life-changing truths. So buckle up...we're gonna have to go pretty quickly here to get through these four truths. So stick with me.

The first one is this—God is going to spread the gospel. He will spread the gospel. I mean, think about this. Here is God, and He says, 'You know what? There's been this whole process of people witnessing, and then it gets clamped down, and oppression and persecution and everything else. It's like there's this move-counter move, move-counter move.' The thing is, God always has this plan, and He continues to work it to spread the gospel. Now, here's something that's interesting is...in here, it's nobody's idea to go tell Saul about the gospel. In fact, you look at Ananias and he's like, 'Whoa, wait a second. Are You sure we should be talkin' to him about this? I mean, if I go...prison. That's not so good. If I'm lucky.' It was God's idea to spread the gospel with Saul. In fact, it's kind of interesting, because he ends up tellin' Ananias, 'Listen, I've got a plan for him. I've got this plan that I'm going to work.'

So often in life what we do is we kinda do the same thing that Ananias does. We say, 'Hey God, that's a great plan and all, but you know, shouldn't we go over this way? Aren't there better ways to go about this?' And see, we expect God to get in line with what we think should be done, instead of us getting in line with what He says should be done. And if we ever want to know what He is gonna be about, He is gonna be about spreading the good news of Christ. He's gonna spread the gospel. That is His mission that we see here and all the way through all of scripture. He wants people to know Him.

And so it's kinda like...think about surfing, or body boarding, or whatever. Here's...you don't go down to the beach, and hop in the ocean, and say, 'Ok, I kinda wanna approach the beach from this direction, and in fact, I'd really like to move over here, so Ocean, if you could put the wave over here that would be preferable.' No. You get out there, you look at it, you study, you watch, you see how the waves are goin'; you wait, you watch the patterns, all this stuff. And then what you do is you get out there. And when you get out there you don't demand where the wave is going to go. Instead, you move yourself to get in line with the wave. And that's the only way that you are going to be able to ride it.

God's activity is the same way. God is going to be moving throughout history and in our world. And we don't tell Him how, and where, and when He is going to move. Instead, if we wanna be a part of it we have to move to get in line with what he's got goin' on. I can't help but wonder, ok, was Ananias the first guy? Or was there somebody else before him who said, 'No, God, I really think you should work this way,' or 'You know, I'm more concerned about this over here.' And God said, 'Ok, fine. You don't wanna be a part of what I'm doin', that's fine. Move aside and I will get somebody who does.'

If we really want to be involved in what God has goin' on, and if we really want Him involved in what we have goin' on, then we need to move to be in line with Him. And if you ever question what in the world is God doing, God is working to spread the gospel. He's gonna do it. The question is, will we move to be a part of it as He's doing it? That's God's whole mission here. That's the first truth.

The second truth is something that is related to the gospel as well. It's the idea that sincerity without truth does not save you. Sincerity...if you believe in something really a whole bunch, it doesn't matter how hard you believe in it if it's not true. It won't help you.

Picture this, ok? Let's say we're sitting in here, and there's a fire in here. Now, I know, hypothetically we wouldn't be sitting here having the conversation that I'm about to describe, if there was this fire and it was burning up and we had to get out of here. But let's just say there's this massive fire, and we're gonna die if we don't get out of here. And we look, and we say, 'You know what? We should probably get outside.' And you say, 'Hey, let's head for the door. It says EXIT, there's the door, we should go out this way.' And I say, 'You know, that's really good, but I'm a whole lot closer to right over here. So I'm just gonna go out this way. I'm gonna run right through the wall.' You would look at me and say, 'You're insane!' It wouldn't matter how much I told you, 'You know what? I really believe that I can get through this wall. This is a great way to get out.' If I ran as hard as I could out this direction, and I sincerely believed in my heart that I could get out this way, all that would happen is that I would end up with a sincere concussion, and sincerely end up probably on my backside as the fire is raging and you're heading out the door. That's basically what would happen.

See, the thing is it doesn't matter how sincere you are if what you're sincere about is wrong. Sincerity without truth isn't going to save anybody. Sincerity, in religion or belief, doesn't matter if somebody does not know God. We see this in Paul's own life, and in his conversion. Paul is talking in Philippians, chapter 3...he is looking back on his conversion and on how he came to know God. And he ends up saying, 'You know what?' in chapter 3 verses 5 and 6, he says, 'You know what? I was the model Hebrew. I followed the Law better than anybody.' But still yet, when it comes time when he comes face-to-face with God Himself, in Acts chapter 9, verse 5, he still says, "*Who are you?*" He did not know God, no matter how sincere he was.

Here's the point of application for us here today. If you're sitting here and maybe you don't...you're not a follower of Christ, the thing that Paul would say to you is this. 'Listen, I can speak from experience. It doesn't matter how sincere your belief is if you're believing in the wrong thing. If your trust is not in God...and here's the thing in this analogy that we made of the door...you would say it's insanity to try and get out some other way other than the way that the architect of this building designed for you to get out. That's why the architect put a door there and said, 'You know what? We should put an EXIT sign over it.' In the same way, God is the designer of this life, and of this world, and of this creation. It is insane for us to think that we can get past this without going the way He says we have to go. And that's why He said that Jesus is the way, the truth, the life, and nobody comes to the Father except through Him.

If you're here today and you are a follower of Christ, here's a point of application for us here. In our culture today we are very relativistic. We think that things are relative...I mean, something that is true for you might not be true for me. Something that you really believe might not really kind of have that much weight for me. And what really matters is what's true for you, that it's good for you, and what really matters is what's true for me, it's good for me. What matters is sincerity. And a lot of times we, as Christians, slip into that mentality without even realizing it, because of the culture in which we find ourselves. How does it come out? A lot of times, and I've heard this from all kinds of people in all kinds of circles...even here...where we say, 'You know what? I just have a hard time believing that God would send a good Buddhist person to hell, or a good Muslim person, a good Mormon person to hell. They really believe it, they really believe this, and they are trying to search after God. Surely God would not send them to hell.' Basically what we are saying is, 'You know what? Truth does not matter. What matters is that they have a sincere heart.'

And so we kind of use that as an excuse to say, 'Hey, it doesn't matter. I mean, surely God won't...' and we give ourselves an easy pass. We say, 'Yeah, I know that's the truth, and they're wrong, but surely God wouldn't send this person to hell because they don't know the truth.' The thing is, it is cruel and insane and just wrong if you're sitting in here, and somebody is trying to get out this way because they think maybe they can tear the wall apart, and you don't tell 'em, 'Look, there's an exit over here. Get there!' That's what Paul would say to us. We need to realize that sincerity without truth isn't gonna save anyone, and Paul is an example of that.

But here is this next truth. I love it, because it is one of the most beautiful truths in all of scripture. And I am excited about this third one. It's the fact that no one is beyond the reach of the gospel. I mean, think about this. Here you have Paul, and in Acts 9:1 it talks about how he is "*breathing threats and murder.*" I mean, everything about him is such that his whole mind, his heart, his thought processes, his life is bent on wiping out this people—men, women, and children. He is no different than the sort of guy who crashes a plane into a tower. He's the same sort of guy. He's gonna wipe 'em out at all costs.

That's why in 1 Timothy 1:15-16 he says 'You know what? Jesus Christ came to save sinners. That's why He came—He came for sinners. He didn't come for perfect people; he didn't come for people who have it all together; he didn't come for people who are just good, moral people, whatever else. He came for sinners. And guess what? I am the biggest sinner of all. I'm the chief. I am the top sinner of all time.' That's what Paul says. And here is an amazing thing...he goes ahead and he says, 'You know what? And the whole reason that Jesus decided to save me is so that I would be an example to others.'

See, Paul's message to you here today, if you are not a follower of Christ, is the simple truth that you may feel like you have gone too far, that there is no way that God could love you, that there is no way that God could forgive the things that you have done. And Paul would say, 'No, that's wrong! God will forgive you! He does love you! He loved me, and he saved me, even though I was like this. I'm the sort of guy who hauled men and women and children out of their homes in the middle of the night, terrified, and killed 'em, threw 'em in prison, whatever I had to do. I'm the sort of guy who grabbed these cloaks and held them so that some guy could be brutally beaten to death with stones, as blood is flying everywhere, and encouraging these people. I'm that sort of guy. And God saved me. He can save you, too.' There is nothing that you can do that takes you too far that God cannot save you. And that is a beautiful thing.

The flip side of it is this. For those of us who are followers of Christ here today, and we already have been saved by the beautiful grace, and sacrifice, and mercy of Jesus Christ, guess what? There are probably...there is probably somebody in your life that you look at, and they say, 'There's no way that this person is ever gonna come to God. I just can't picture it.'

I have a friend who, over the last few years, he's gone from being the point where he was a professed Christian to the point where he is now, at least with me, very, very expressed an atheist, and to the point where if you say there is sin, that is extremely immoral, ignorant, anti-intellectual, it's the root of all evil, basically. If we could just get over this idea of sin then the world would be a whole lot better place. Because that ultimately, people like me are why the world are as messed up as it is. And I look at him and I see someone who is running so hard from God, somebody who has told me, 'You know what? Even if this God of the Bible does exist, I would never worship a God like that.'

And the thing is, is I look at it and I say, 'Hey, if God could get a hold of Paul's life and transform him, I am absolutely positive that God can still transform my friend and come in and transform his life. Which is why I am still very encouraged. That's why I still pray for him. That's why I still...I hope that there is a day here in the not-too-distant future where I will be able to sit down with him and call him 'brother.'

See, here's the thing. If you are here and you have a loved one, a friend, whoever it might be, that you look at and you say that there's no way that they will ever come to God, Paul's message to you would be this—don't give up. There's nobody who's too far gone. Keep praying. Keep sharing. Stay faithful. Don't give up. That's a beautiful, beautiful thing.

But we've gotta move on. The fourth and final truth that we're gonna talk about here is this—when Jesus grabs a hold of you, when He grabs your life, you grab Him back. When Jesus grabs onto you, you grab Him back and hold on for everything that you're worth. Where is this from? Well, um, see, one thing that God told Ananias, and who knows? Maybe this is part of the reason that he said, 'Ok, I can get in with this,' is that He'd not only told Ananias, 'I've got this plan for him. I'm gonna use him to spread the gospel to all nations.' What He ends up doin' is He ends up telling Ananias, 'Guess what? I also am going to make sure that he sees how much he is going to suffer for My name's sake, for My reputation, for My story, for My truth, the thing that I am about for the gospel.' And Paul suffered.

There is, in the book of 2 Corinthians, in chapter 11, he ends up...this is a little bit later in his life...he end up recounting to the Corinthians some of his sufferings, ok? Paul suffered. I'm just gonna read this to you for a moment. This is in 2 Corinthians 11:24-27. Paul is telling them, 'You know what?'

*"Five times I received from the Jews forty lashes minus one."*

He was whipped.

*"Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned..."*

He doesn't put in here that he was left for dead, which is what happened.

*"...three times I was shipwrecked, I have spent a night and a day in the depths of the sea. On frequent journeys I faced dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my own people, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the open country, dangers on the sea, and dangers among false brothers; labor and hardship, many sleepless nights, hunger and thirst, often without food, cold, and lacking clothing."*

Paul suffered more than probably the vast majority of us will ever suffer in our entire lives. This is the sort of guy who, by the end of his life, his body would have been gnarly to look at from all the scars, all the broken bones, all the things that didn't quite heal right. He would have been battered and bruised and beaten.

But here is something that is amazing to me. In Philippians 8...or excuse me, Philippians 3:8...he looks, and he's looking back on this time. Now here's the thing. In Philippians he's in jail as he's writing this, and he's telling the Philippians about how they are to have joy. And something that he says is this. 'Listen. Everything that has come in the past, everything before, I count it as loss. It's gone. It doesn't matter. All the good stuff, all the suffering that I've had, everything—it doesn't matter. It's not worth anything.' In fact, he says it's the filth, it's the sewage, it's the stuff that you would...like...it's the sewage. 'Anything that is good in the past, any of the suffering, I'll tell you how much that is worth to me—it's sewage compared to knowing Jesus. Knowing Jesus is so worth it to me that everything else is sewage, whether it's good or bad.'

That's why he goes on and he says, 'You know what? That's why I am going to take everything that I am...I will forget what is behind me and it's in the past. I am only going to look forward to what lies ahead of me. And what lies ahead of me is Jesus. Jesus took a hold of my life; on the road to Damascus He grabbed my life. And He shook me, and I am holding on to Him for everything that I have worth. Everything that I have inside me, that's all that I am worth. I am ready to let go of everything else if it just means that I can hold on to Jesus.'

The encouragement that Paul would give us is this. 'Listen, you are not going to find self-worth or anything worth anything of any real substance in life anywhere other than in Jesus Christ.' If you want real worth it's not gonna come through your job. If you want real worth it's not going to come through your family. If you want real worth it's not gonna come through that person that you think if they just love you it will make life worth it. The only thing that is worth anything is Jesus. And for that reason Paul is saying, 'You know what? I am willing to let go of everything else if I have to, to hang on to Jesus. And these people who have beaten me and stripped everything away, these people who have done all of this, they can take everything from me, but they cannot take the one thing that is worth all of it—and that's Jesus.'

That is the beauty of the gospel. The very core of why we were created was to have a relationship with God, and Jesus is the way that we can do that. And He is the one thing that no one can ever take away.

We're gonna go ahead and pray, here in just a moment. If you have anything that you would like to talk about, any questions, comments, concerns, please feel free to come up and talk to me. Here's the thing...I'm gonna leave you with this one challenge that Paul would encapsulate this with. Realize the fact that there is no other way to know God except through Jesus. If you grab a hold of that one truth right there, whether you are not yet a follower of Jesus, or whether you are, that will transform your life. It will totally transform the way that you look at everything. There is no other way to know God, the Person for whom you were created, the One who created you, the One who made all of this, the One who you were made to have a relationship with. Everything else is worthless compared to that. And that's the same truth for every single person in this world. If we grab a hold of that, that will transform our lives.

Please stand.

*Lord God,*

*I thank You so very much for the truth that Your Son came and died for a person like Paul, and for a person like me. God, I ask that You would help us as a church, as a congregation, to grab a hold of that and allow that to transform our lives, that we would be totally, unalterably, transformed, and that we would live in the light of that truth.*

*We pray this in Your name, amen.*

Thanks. Go in grace.