

Title: For the sake of my name
Text: Acts 9.1-19a
Theme: The conversion of Saul
Series: Acts
Prop Stmtnt: God changes your life through Christ for a purpose.

Roman was a devout Muslim in Kazakhstan. He considered those who converted to Christ from Islam to be “betrayers of the real faith.” Therefore, it was part of his mission to confront, challenge, and even persecute these traitors. Two years ago during Ramadan (2017), Roman decided to take it a step further and visit a local Baptist church in order to disrupt the service. He hadn’t planned to do anything violent, but just interrupt everything by standing up and causing a large disturbance. As he waited for an opportune moment, he listened to what the pastor was saying and found himself overwhelmed. “For the first time I heard about a God who loved me. I never knew the Almighty God loved me even though I am not perfect. That thought seriously never entered my mind. I always felt guilty. I felt that I had to earn his attention.”

Sitting in that service, something happened to Roman that he did not anticipate. As he heard the gospel and learned about the love of Christ and the forgiveness of Christ, his heart was arrested by this truth and this tough radical began to melt and found himself crying, then praying repenting of his sin and trusting Christ. Two years ago, Roman became our brother in a way that sounds very similar to the account we are going to study this morning.

Read Text:

I. **Radical commitment is not always right.** (1-2)

Saipan was a strategic island in the Pacific theater during W.W. II. During the battle for the island it became obvious that the Japanese soldiers could not hold on to the island, but their code of honor did not permit them to surrender, even when they could not win. The final battle for the island was a suicide mission by more than 3,000 Japanese soldiers doing a banzai charge. For 15 hours they attacked until they were all dead. Their leader had committed suicide and they had all died according to their code of honor and accomplished nothing.

A. **It may seem right.**

Saul was raised in a devout Jewish home. His family knew that they were from the tribe of Benjamin and Saul carried the name of Israel’s first king who was from that same tribe. Saul knew both Hebrew and Aramaic and because his family was free, Saul was a legal Roman Citizen and therefore had the more Roman name of Paul that he would be known by later on. Saul grew up in Tarsus and eventually moved to Jerusalem. He was well educated in the Jewish faith and believed it sincerely and therefore made it his mission to destroy those he considered to be traitors to the faith. His commitment was not questioned. He was a Pharisee’s Pharisee. He was a radical. To him it seemed right. But, just because you are devoted to something does not make it right. Just because you are willing to make sacrifices and even die for a cause, does not make the cause right. I have no doubt that Paul looked back on his own life when he was writing 1 Cor. 13. Where was the love? You may be very committed to a cause. Is it right? Have you

examined it for yourself? Saul was serious about his faith, but what he believed and what he did was wrong. It was deadly wrong. What can further cloud the issue is when you are given authorization, titles, awards, recognition and advancement in what you are doing.

B. You may be authorized.

Saul had authorization from the high priest himself and had letters signed that empowered him to arrest and deport men and women who had converted to Christianity. Authorization, titles, degrees and awards can be very enticing and deceiving. Saul had authorization that “proved” and approved of his actions to persecute Christians. He had authorization to attack God’s people, which as Jesus says was an attack on Jesus. Saul had authorization to attack Jesus. What kind of authorization is that? But, we are so tempted to be impressed with these sorts of things. But again, being devout, dedicated, even sacrificial and radical does not prove that it is right. We hear of the accounts of radical jihadists, for example, and wonder, how could someone get so caught up in something like this where killing, raping, and brutality is celebrated? How can this be? Well, take someone who is hungry for affirmation, and finds a group of people who will respect them and promote them based on a twisted ideology, and many are vulnerable to it, not because the ideology is so convincing, but because the affirmation and validation is. Accolades and rewards are difficult to ignore. Saul was in deep. Humanly speaking, he was in too deep.

He was going to Damascus to search out and arrest these men and women who were followers of “The Way” as the church was known at the time. Some of these were probably people who had fled Jerusalem when the persecution had broken out and were in Damascus, which at the time belonged to Syria and probably thought that they were safe. Therefore, Saul had to get some kind of legal authority to do what he wanted to do. But, that was about to change.

II. Following Jesus completely changes your life. (3-9)

Saul’s travel plans were seriously disrupted, but this was more than a trip getting interrupted by an unforeseen circumstance. Saul’s entire life was changed by Jesus because that is what Jesus does. In Saul’s case, his job changed, his beliefs and message changed, and all of his plans changed. Saul was not looking for a career change. He was advancing pretty quickly with what he was doing. But nearing the city, all of a sudden, a bright light shone around him. Luke says it flashed. Later in 1 Corinthians 9 and 15, Saul tells us that he had seen Jesus. He saw the physical, resurrected, glorified Jesus. While those around him heard the voice, but saw no one, it was Saul who saw him. Like Isaiah, Daniel and John who each saw Jesus, Saul fell to the ground. No sinner can stand on his own in the presence of the glorified King. And Saul’s worst nightmare had just unfolded. He was wrong. He was attacking the very God he thought he was defending and God was taking it personally. Saul, Saul, (don’t miss the repetition of his name for emphasis) why are you persecuting me? Jesus initiated this meeting and now he starts the conversation. The question that the Creator asks is not because Jesus is curious and is looking for information. He’s not puzzled by what Saul is doing, he knows exactly why Saul is doing this, but he wants Saul to come face to face with his own sin. The question is confrontational, clarifying and devastating. Saul is not on the ground because he is repenting. He is on the ground because sinners cannot stand in the judgment. Saul could only wish that the ground would open up and swallow him. He was, in that moment, completely undone.

In this moment, Saul was completely exposed. All of the things that he had been proud of and hung on the wall of his heart as accomplishments were now seen for what they were. Every trophy and award were reasons to condemn him and Saul had no excuse, no defense and no way out. He laid on the ground and all he could do is anticipate his judgement. He could only hope that it would be swift. There is no defiance in his voice, only astonishment and fear. "Who are you, Lord?" The four English words are only three in Greek. This is the only thing that Saul is recorded to have said in this account. His head is spinning. His mission is over. His life is hanging by a thread. What is he supposed to do with this? The bright, gifted, devoted, educated, successful young man has just been blown up. He did not answer Jesus' question. He probably did not realize the answer to that question, just yet, but Jesus answered his and if there was any breath left in Saul, this would have taken it out.

In a similar scene, Moses was afraid to look at the appearance of God in a flaming bush. Moses asked a similar question. What is your name? The LORD answered, "I AM WHO I AM." Jesus often used that means of identification in his ministry when he said, "I AM the bread of life. I AM the light. I AM the way, the truth and the light. I AM the door. I AM the good shepherd. I AM the resurrection and the life. I AM the true vine. Here, Jesus answers the Saul's question by saying, "I AM Jesus and then, he says it again, whom you are persecuting. He already called him by his name twice. The emphasis is undeniable. "Whom you are persecuting." But there is more. Jesus says more. And it is amazing. "But rise and enter the city and you will be told what you are to do." What is that supposed to mean?

At this point Saul knows that what he has believed is wrong. What he has been doing is wrong. And this wrongness is not a matter of getting a problem wrong in geometry or a fact wrong on a history test. Saul has done some evil things to innocent people and he cannot change that. What was a trophy of accomplishment now almost crushed him.

Soldiers talk about the difficulty of re-entering life here. In the thick of battle you cheer when something bad happens to the enemy, but when you get back home and you think about what happened and your part in it, it doesn't go away. Did the looks on the faces of the men and women that Saul tore out of their homes haunt his memory? How could he ever face himself, much less them or their grieving families? True guilt is not our enemy. True guilt is the warning light on the dashboard of your life telling you that something is seriously wrong. Destroying the sensor through meds, drink, drugs, pleasure, food or trips may make the light go away, but it won't change reality. True guilt is a gift that makes us come face to face with how much we need to be rescued. When we like Saul understand the reality of our sin, we become undone. We realize that we cannot save ourselves. We cannot fix this. You are not ready to understand and embrace the good news of what Christ has done until you come face to face with the reality of what you have done. Seeing the toxicity of our sin and its abhorrent pollutive effects is the last thing we want to do, but so desperately needed. When I see how shameful my sin is, and how guilty I am, then, THEN, I am finally prepared to see how glorious Jesus is. But, at this point, Saul is not yet there. Jesus gives him time to consider the nature of his sin. Jesus only tells him to go into the city where he will be told what to do.

So now, this man, who came to arrest the followers of The Way, can't even find the way. The men traveling with him (likely men who were part of the temple police) heard the voice but did not see anyone had to help him walk. The man whose mission struck terror into the hearts of the Christians, now can't even see. He is helpless. And yet, in a strange way, his vision has never been more clear. He knows who Jesus is and he knows that these Christians are not the enemy. And he knows that he has been tragically wrong. For three days he doesn't eat or drink. I take that to mean that Saul is fasting because he is mourning over his sin. He is grieving over his guilt. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are they who mourn. Three days without sight gives you a lot of time to review many memories and re-think many things. Saul's conversion was deep. His repentance was real.

Jesus asked Saul why he persecuted him? Jesus could ask each of us, why do we follow him? Do you follow Jesus for the same reasons that Saul became a follower? Are his convictions deeper because he was special? You know, an apostle sort of thing? Perhaps his convictions about the gospel go so deep because Saul realized how serious his sin was. You see, we do not follow Jesus because we are doing him a favor, or because this is a trendy thing to put into my social resume. We don't follow Jesus to make others happy and to get some eternal life insurance just in case something happens unexpectedly. We follow Jesus because we have nowhere else to go. We have no one else to trust in. Our sin condemns us. And there is nothing that we can do that is good enough or sufficient enough to make it right. Until you have been undone by God, you are not ready to follow him. We run to Jesus because only God can save us from God. Only the mercy of God poured out through Christ's death in our place can save us from the judgment of God for our sin. You can see why Paul wrote so convictionally and convincingly about the doctrine of election. He knew that he had not been seeking Jesus. Jesus came after him.

III. **Following Jesus means to lay down your life.** (10-19a)

Following Jesus means to lay down your life because Jesus laid down his life for us. Our response to the surrender of Jesus to the cross is the surrender of our lives to him. When we follow Jesus, we follow Him. He is our Savior and Lord. We surrender our rights to him. I do not have the right to say who I will love or won't love. I do not have the right to say who I will forgive or won't forgive. I do not have the right to say who I will be kind to or won't be kind to. I do not have the right to make the final decisions about my life because when I become a follower of Christ I surrender my all to him. That is what it means to follow Jesus. Jesus tells you what the cost is, up front. He demands nothing short of total surrender. He demands your life, your all. Satan, on other hand, never tells you up front what the cost is. His promises always come with a cost that you cannot pay. He just never tells you that. Satan also demands total surrender. He takes your life. But, here is the difference. When Jesus takes your life, he gives it back and he gives it back so much better. Here is an example of that.

A. **Ananias had to trust Christ.** (10-17)

The first guy we met in Acts named Ananias was a grief. This one is pretty amazing. This Ananias has a vision and like Samuel says, "Here I am, Lord." It's a neat little contrast here isn't it? Saul has a vision and says, "who are you, Lord?" Ananias has a vision and says, "Here I am, Lord." So, right away, we like this guy. This is the response of a follower. Here I am, Lord. But

then he isn't sure if he heard what he thought he heard (11-13). Jesus tells him that Saul of Tarsus has had a vision of you. (2nd vision that Saul had) He is expecting you. In fact, I already told him that you would be going. Ananias's response is what we would expect. Uh, Lord, you sure about this? I've heard what this guy has done "to YOUR saints." And that he has authority to "to bind all who call on YOUR name." This is a lot for Ananias to take in. Here is a man who has done serious harm to brothers and sisters and has come to Damascus to find people, like Ananias. Ananias could be at the top of Saul's hit list. The very man that Ananias wants to run from, the Lord is directing him to go to. But more than worrying about himself, Ananias is concerned for the church. Saul may have already killed and imprisoned some of Ananias' close friends and perhaps family. The Lord answers him (15-16). The last phrase of verse 16 summarizes everything that is taking place in this account. Jesus calls Ananias to do something that the world would consider to be radical. Go to your enemy and heal him. Why on earth would anyone ever do this? Why would Ananias do this? Because, this is what Jesus had done for Ananias. Jesus had changed Ananias from being an enemy to being a friend and brother and now Jesus was in the process of doing the same for Saul. In fact, Jesus told Ananias that Saul was chosen to take the gospel to the Gentiles, to Kings and to the children of Israel. But, in so doing, Saul would suffer much, "for the sake of my name." Jesus was calling Saul to lay down his life for the sake of Jesus and Jesus was calling Ananias to believe in the power of the gospel for Saul. And he did. Ananias (17) went to see Saul. Can you imagine if word of this got out to his family, and to other believers? But, Ananias obviously goes in faith, because he says, "Brother Saul"

For the next 20 years, Saul, who became an apostle and became known as Paul has a major impact upon the spread of the gospel and the completion of the NT. Ananias had a hand in that! Every story that the early church heard about the spread of the gospel and the establishing of churches through the ministry of Saul, had to give incredible joy to Ananias. So, yes Ananias had to trust Christ and on that day, it felt like he was laying down his life for the sake of the name of Jesus by going to see Saul. But, Jesus gave Ananias his life back and every story that he heard, had to cause him to be overwhelmed with joy that the Lord had allowed him to be part of one of the most significant conversions in the history of the church.

B. Saul had to trust Christ. (18-19a)

Some of us take college football pretty serious, perhaps too serious. Where I grew up, in Ohio, you do not even say the name of the school in Ann Arbor. On the week before THE GAME, all M's in the city of Columbus are x'd out in red. The rivalry runs deep. A few months ago, the news broke that two of Michigan's coaches had left Ann Arbor because they accepted positions at Ohio State. For those of you who are diehard Wolverines, that hurts. Of course I can point out that Bo Schembechler used to work for Woody Hayes, but that doesn't really help too much does it. Recently video emerged of one those coaches now at Ohio State referring to U of M as the team up north. The hatred that erupted on social media was, well, expected. For many of you it is a deep betrayal and your dislike at the Buckeyes now feels even more personal.

Chapter 8 began with Saul physically attacking and persecuting believers. Chapter 9 makes it clear that this was a large-scale operation. There are two distinct sides: Saul, along with the officials of Judaism and the followers of the Way. Saul's side hates the followers of the Way and the followers of the Way are terrified of Saul. Now, Saul has to switch sides. Can he expect the

followers of the Way to embrace him? It's not reasonable. Can he expect his former associates to forget about him? That is not reasonable either. If Saul is going to follow Jesus he has to cast himself completely upon the mercy of God because humanly speaking there is no place for him to go. He has to know that if he publicly switches sides (which is what baptism is), he is going to be hated and hunted man. If he is going to follow Jesus, he has to lay down his life, and he does. He receives Ananias, he regains his sight, he declares his faith in Christ, he is filled with the Spirit, he is baptized and then he eats.

Want to know how to destroy an enemy? Look at what Jesus did. He made him a brother. Look at what he did to you? He made you a brother or a sister. Is it too much to ask of you to pray for that to happen to those around you?

- Who is on your "will probably never believe" list? Pray for them, right now
- Is there something in your past that makes you think, I can never be used by God?
- Is there a new believer who is wondering if he or she will be embraced by the family of believers? How do you intentionally embrace new believers?
- In this text, Saul did very little. It was Ananias. You may not have the gifting of a Saul or even his testimony, but you can be Ananias. Ananias was a chosen instrument too.