

Sermon: Acts 9:1-21

Good morning my friends! What a lovely day. What do the Scriptures say, “today is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.” Today is a day for rejoicing. For those of you who don’t know me or don’t recognize me, my name is Austin, and I’ve been called to children and youth ministry here at FPC. I realize I usually begin speaking or preaching without ever doing an introduction, so if any of you were wondering, “who the heck is this guy?” Well, now you know. And if you were wondering, please come and find me for a moment after worship, I would love to get to know you better.

Last week, we had our fall kickoff, and a lot of our programming started: Children’s church, youth group, we had our ministry fair, we made our move back into the sanctuary, you all of heard about Roots groups starting up, and if you’re unaware of any of the things we have going on, you can ask about anybody here and they’ll start getting you pointed in the right direction. We also started our fall sermon series last week in the book of Galatians, which Pastor Dan got us kicked off with. Galatians talks a lot about this Gospel of Freedom and the liberty found in life with Jesus. It’s a rich book that was written to correct the course of faith in practice for the people of Galatia, and there’s a lot we can gain from it as well as we look to hone and correct the direction of our own faith as we live it out. Last week Dan provided the context of Galatians and some of the tension that some of the early Christians were under with former persuasion from Judaism, but today, I want to give you the context of the writer. I want to tell you about Paul, and Paul’s story.

Usually, when I preach, I tell a personal story of mine that ties in with the Scriptures we’re reading, because I like to open up my life as a form of testimony and to draw a parallel so that you can see the stories of Scripture illustrated today. Today, I’m not telling any of my stories. There will be anecdotes from the Bible, and a lot of narrative, but none of my own. Why? Because today, my job is to let the Bible teach you, and I’m just going to do my best to stay out of the way. Fair enough?

Now, I’m not actually going to read out of Galatians today. See, the piece of Galatians 1 and 2 that I was going to read is primarily Paul referencing a different passage of Scripture, found in Acts chapter 9, which is Paul’s conversion story. Now Paul references his conversion story and encounter with Jesus for two reasons: he’s addressing Apostleship, and he’s addressing the Gospel.

Let’s start with Apostleship. If you go through the Epistles that Paul wrote, you’ll notice a pattern: he begins almost every one with some variation of “Paul, a servant and called apostle of the lord Jesus Christ.” And he does this because his apostleship is his ultimate credential. Technically, the word *apostle* just means “sent.” That’s it. In a way, we’re all apostles by the literal definition of the word, because we’re all sent by Jesus to do his mission and spread the Gospel. But traditionally, the title of Apostle was reserved for the disciples who had personally seen and experienced the life and earthly ministry of Jesus. This title of Apostle by association with the Jesus we read about in the Gospels was a source of credibility to speak with authority as to what God was saying and doing, especially after the outpouring of Holy Spirit at Pentecost. You’ll hear it when we read from Acts 9, but one of the key aspects of Paul’s credibility is in his conversion where he physically encounters Jesus. He hears directly from him. Like the other Apostles, Paul was getting his information straight from the source, and that’s what he was telling folks in Galatians, is that these weren’t his words, but that he was sent by Jesus and was getting what he was telling them directly from Jesus.

The second theme is Gospel. The word “gospel” just means “good news,” and we call the Gospels exactly that because they are centered around the living being that embodies and is the good news. So when Paul is talking about the gospel concerning God and His Son Jesus Christ, he’s just sharing the good news. This is important though, because part of the tension that Paul is addressing in Galatians is that certain folks of the Jewish persuasion are coming in and telling the new Christians, “well, you’re not *really* a Christian unless you’re circumcised.” Or, “you’re not *really* a Christian unless you’re going to the temple, or the synagogue, or following the law of Moses,” or whatever other piece of Jewish law was commanded. See, the good news Paul is addressing is the good news that’s made credible by his apostleship: He’s telling folks, “guess what! You don’t gotta do all that any more. Because you know all the ‘good news’ you heard about from Jesus? Well guess what: I’ve got the *update direct from the source*. And the update says that you don’t have to be circumcised, or go to the temple, or the synagogue, or do blood sacrifices, or any of that other bolognese, all you have to do is repent and believe. That’s it.”

So that's why Paul is referencing his conversion, is because he's saying "I'm qualified because Jesus has qualified me." His credibility to deliver this new and beautiful gospel of freedom comes from his encounter with Jesus and his being sent by Jesus. That's the context of Paul. So, I want to read the story of Paul's conversion, because besides establishing his credibility, there's a lot we can learn from it.

These are select verses from Acts 9:

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. ⁴ And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" ⁵ And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. 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." ¹¹ 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, ¹² and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." ¹³ And Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name." ¹⁵ 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." ¹⁷ 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." ¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized. And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." And all who heard him were amazed.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

There's a ton that we can learn from this story of Paul's conversion and encounter of Jesus, and a million different directions that you could take it to demonstrate some or the other message about the qualities of man, or the characteristics of God, but I have three in particular that I feel compelled to address that we see in this story. I'm going to first tell you what they are, and then I want to break them down for you. Three points. One: when God says, go, you go. Two: never discount anybody or what fruit they can bear Gospel. Three: people don't change other people's hearts. That work is for God, and God alone. Now, let me try to explain this without going too far off the rails.

One: when God says, go, you go. When he gives you a mission, it doesn't matter how weird or out there or unbelievable it might be, when He says go, you go, no matter to what place, person, or circumstance. In this case, we're talking about Ananias. Now, keep in mind, Ananias wasn't special—he was just a guy. He was Johnny Jump-up the sprinkler guy, or Maggie Muggins the cashier at Old Navy, or Henry Boloko who makes your burritos at Taco del Sol. He was just a guy who loved God and was listening when God called out to him. Remember? God said, "Hey, Ananias. I have a mission for you. There's this Saul guy, and I want you to go heal him." And Ananias did what any of us might do at first, he says, "now wait a minute. You sure you got the right guy? Because I've heard of this Saul guy, and in case you didn't know, he's out there arresting and killing people like me, who love you, and you want me to do what now?" And God tells him again, "Go." So Ananias went. When God says go, you go! Doesn't matter where, or to whom. *Genesis chapter 6*. There's a guy named Noah, and God says, "Hey. You're going to build a big-old boat on dry land." And what did Noah do? He started building. *Genesis chapter 12*. God says, "I want you to leave your land, your people, your family, and everything you know to a land that I'll show you." What does Abraham do? He goes. God said go, Abraham went. *2 Kings chapter 5*. Elisha and Naaman. Naaman had leprosy, and the prophet Elisha told him what God said: go and bathe seven times in the Jordan river. It didn't make sense. The Jordan is like a muddy, slow version of our Rattlesnake Creek. It was ridiculous. But what did Naaman end up doing? He bathed. And for the first six times, nothing happened. And on the seventh, he was healed. God said go. Naaman went, and God's Word was proved again.

Two: never discount anybody or what fruit they can bear Gospel. It doesn't matter how vile, or cruel, or bizarre, or tattooed or poorly dressed or young or old or out there they might be, your job isn't to pass judgement on them. Your job is to trust God if He says He's going to do something with them. Same story, God and Ananias. God tells Ananias that He's going to use Paul to spread the Gospel, and the Paul is going to bear fruit for the Gospel's sake. Ananias could have said no. Think about it: Saul was the baddest of the bad. You could not find somebody to be a worse representative for the Gospel at the time, but when has that ever stopped God? Unlikely odds are where God shines! *Genesis 37*: Who would have assumed Joseph, a slave, then a prisoner, would become the most powerful man in Egypt and the savior of the Hebrew people? Look at Paul's understudy, Timothy, who was entrusted several churches to care for despite his youth? Look at *1 Samuel 17*: David and Goliath! Who would have expected some teenage shepherd to take down a literal giant in single combat? I'm sorry, but if you put one of my high schoolers here up against Dwayne "the Rock" Johnson, my money's gonna be on Dwayne. But that's not how God operates! Need another? Look at the Gospels, the disciples! Jesus didn't hang out with the religious elite, with the lawyers or the doctors and their Ph.D's, Jesus picked some uneducated, smelly, crude fishermen. And those fishermen would become the Lord's best friends, and would go forward to give the first sermon of repentance and baptism on the day of Pentecost. They weren't qualified! They didn't have to credentials! But what does the Word say? We're told not to worry about what we'll say at the day or time, because God is going to give us the words we need. God is going to be our qualification, and He's going to be the qualification for the people whom we may otherwise dismiss.

Three: people don't change other people's hearts. That work is for God, and God alone. If you're in a situation where you're frustrated, or they're so stubborn, or whatever it might be, just know that the only time anybody has ever changed their heart towards God is because God planned it. The Bible tells us that God called us to Him before the foundations of the world, and He knew exactly who His people were since the beginning of time. Trust me, if someone is going to come to Jesus, it's because God's taking them there. Our work is to listen to what the spirit is doing, to hear where God is calling us, and to make sure that we're working alongside what He's doing. *1 Corinthians 3:9* says we're fellow-laborers with God—we're His coworkers, and if you want to avoid a hostile work environment, it's best not to be at odds with the upper management. Ananias didn't change Saul's heart or bestow him with the name Paul, God did. However, Ananias went where God called because his work to restore Paul's sight was still necessary.

So: here's the point—here's the call to action—first: to where or to whom is God telling you to "go?" God says go, we go. Sometimes it's uncomfortable. Sometimes you may think God almighty has lost His marbles. I guarantee you, He hasn't, and He's got a plan that's bigger than you can see right now. To what mission is He telling you to go? Second: where are your judgements? Who are you not trusting with the time of day because of some reason that you know in your heart doesn't matter to God? Do you want a challenge? Pick the politician you disagree with the most and pray for them. Right now. Close your eyes, swallow your pride, and pray for them. Pray that God would step into their hearts and that they would bear fruit for the Gospel. Finally, part three: who do you need to just trust God with? I know a few people off the top of my head who I would love to bring to the Lord, and that frankly, it's not going to be me who turns their hearts. I'm praying for my brother Michael. I'll speak the word openly to him and listen for how God tells me to be with him, but frankly, whatever happens is between Mike and God. Those are my challenges. Will you all pray with me? And as I say the words of this prayer, listen to what prayer God is pulling from you, and you pray too. Let's do this together.

Closing prayer.