

Acts 9:1-20

June 21, 2020

Eph. 3:1-3, 5-7

The Miracle Of Transformation

Two weeks ago we started this series on the miracles of Acts. Again, I remind you that the book of “The Acts of the Apostles” is the first church history ever written; authored by Luke, who also wrote the Gospel of his name. Some people scoff at the idea of miracles; others think “well maybe they happened back then, but today, through science, we can explain things they didn’t understand.”

Contrary to this, I believe that God performs miracles yet today and often when something unexpected and improbable occurs people still exclaim “It’s a miracle!” Further, I believe that the greatest miracles God performs are the spiritual healings of our souls. In the Bible, those physical healings of persons are signs of the spiritual healing taking place within, pointing to God who is the great Healer. Jesus’ miracles were signs of His power, where He came from, and who He really was.

Last week Darrell spoke about Peter hailed by a crippled beggar near the Temple in Jerusalem (Acts 3). And Peter said to the man: *“Look at us!” So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them. Then Peter said, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man’s feet and ankles became strong, Acts 3:1-10. It is reported of Paul, also in Acts, that: ... God did extraordinary miracles through Paul... Acts 19:11. ¹*

But like the other apostles, Paul didn’t really become a vessel for performing miracles until after a miracle was performed in him. Not only was there a physical occurrence, but also a very powerful change of heart and subsequently a transformation of his character.

The Dramatic Encounter

Early on Christians were persecuted by those who considered them heretics from the Jewish faith (read about it in the book of Acts). In Jerusalem, where Peter and James (the brother of the Lord were leaders), one of those leading the persecution was Saul (later called Paul). The first Christian martyr was Stephen stoned to death for proclaiming Christ was risen from the dead and that He was the fulfillment of OT prophecy.² At his stoning Saul held the cloaks of those who were throwing rocks and *“was in hearty agreement with putting him to death.”*

Saul was a zealous persecutor of Christians. As it says going from ... *house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison, Acts 8:3. ...still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples*

Saul traveled to Damascus with the blessing of the high priest in Jerusalem, to round up heretics in the synagogues. Saul's zeal to serve God, as he understood it, had become an obsession. Zealousness for serving God can sometimes be a form of idol worship. If our zealousness is for anything or anyone other than to be with God, it easily becomes an idol and we end up doing ungodly things believing we are serving God ... just as Saul did. Though we have been saved by Christ, our natures are yet riddled with sinful desires that pervert good intentions turning service for God into service against Him, really. Jesus said that we must remain in Him, as a branch connected to the vine (John 15) in order to bear good fruit.

So even though he was wrong, Saul thought he was doing exactly what God wanted him to do. Here's the lesson: God calls you, not when you're sitting around doing nothing for Him, but when you're trying to follow Him. Moses and Amos were tending sheep when God called them. Samuel was helping in the temple when God spoke to him. Nehemiah was doing his job when God called him. If you aren't doing what you know God wants you to do, if you're holding out on areas in your life, if you know you cling to something that displeases God, don't expect new messages from Him. Listen to what He's already saying to you.

Then came the dramatic intervention. Nearing Damascus on a mission to arrest heretics Paul was blinded by a light and heard Christ speak to him: *"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied, Acts 9:4-5.* Luke's version is what we read this morning: Acts 9. Luke also reports Paul's version in Acts 22 (where Paul speaks before Jewish authorities in Jerusalem) and again in Acts 26 (where Paul speaks before King Agrippa). Paul alludes to his dramatic experience of Christ in his letters. Some theologians call this Paul's Damascus Road Experience – a pivotal event in his life and also for the early Christian movement... God intervenes at key points in history.

When Paul's rage against Christians was at its full height God suddenly and forcefully confronted him ... and it was an act of the highest mercy. "He heard a voice" which was severe yet full of grace. Such is the case whenever God calls a sinner to account.³ Saul was blinded by the light and told to go into the city and wait. Three days he waited with his companions, unable to see. Without sight Saul was shown the blind state he had been in. Three days of this gave time for his thoughts to turn inward, where he might contemplate in a deeper sense, undistracted by outward concerns, the almighty power of Christ. I don't know about you, but I find my relationship with Christ is often blurred by outward distractions. His dramatic experience not only impressed Saul but was a sign to all others of the power of Christ.

Another miracle followed and that was the calling of Ananias, a Christian believer in Damascus, told in a vision to go to Saul and lay hands on him for the

healing of blindness. Of course, Ananias objected saying to the Lord that Saul is a known persecutor of the believers and has instilled fear in them all. Yet God assures Ananias that He has chosen Saul to *“... bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel.”*

God condescends to deal with us by men and women, like ourselves, sending Ananias to heal and teach Saul in which Saul is humbled to be cared for by one he would have wanted to kill.

Do such dramatic encounters happen today? Yes... and you can find testimonies of those who have been dramatically saved from error and evil by the Lord's intervention. The Lord is calling out to people each and every day, but most do not hear the call until they've reached a low point and cry out for help. Others hear when the Lord calls them from the brink of destruction because of the path they're on. Still others simply get called because God needs them for something. John Wesley called himself, “a brand plucked from the burning” (because of a dramatic rescue from a house fire as a child).

Speaking of hearing: A man was having difficulty communicating with his wife and concluded that she was becoming hard of hearing. So, he decided to conduct a test without her knowing about it. One evening he sat in a chair on the far side of the room. Her back was to him and she could not see him. Very quietly he whispered, "Can you hear me?" There was no response. Moving a little closer, he asked again, "Can you hear me now?" Still no reply. Quietly he edged closer and whispered the same words, but still no answer. Finally, he moved right in behind her chair and said, "Can you hear me now?" To his surprise and chagrin, she responded with irritation in her voice, "For the fourth time, yes!"

It's funny: we accuse God of not hearing what we say, what we pray. We figure He's up there not listening to anything we say. In truth it's more like this: As we holler up, “Can you hear me?” He hollers back, “Yes! But can you hear me?” I think the deaf ones are down here not up there.

The Transformation

Saul – later known as Paul – went from zealous persecutor of the people of Christ to becoming their champion and leader. How did this happen? Remember: sin is always a personal issue with God. And when Saul was sinning against the church and attacking God's children, Jesus, the Head of the Church rose to the occasion and pierced Saul's darkness!

Although at times the voice of God comes as an encouragement to lift us up, the most important word from Him is for our transformation. God wants to make us like His Son, Jesus. Romans 8:29 says: *For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son.* It's the 2nd purpose of our church: to increase in the knowledge and image of Christ. To know more of Him and to become more like Him. In truth, if you and I really listened to God's

voice, we would not always like what He would tell us. It wouldn't always be John 3:16 or Psalm 23. It would involve our attitudes. It would involve our actions. Beware of the voice that says you're OK; that says you don't need anything else. If the Bible doesn't back it, then the voice you hear is likely from your own passions and desires or from the devil.

The appearance of the risen Christ to Paul in a great flash of light was a miracle. The voice of Christ he heard was a miracle. The opening of his eyes after being blinded by Christ's appearance was a miracle. Yet these were just preparatory to the greatest miracle: Paul's transformation from a seething persecutor of Christ to the world's greatest evangelist for Him. Has your transformation begun?

Paul's past did not dictate his future. Rather, Jesus Christ transformed his life! He gave further testimony of this great work of God: *... I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ...* Phil 3:8.

The same can hold true for you. Your future need not be dictated by your past. Regardless of the mess you've made of your life to this point, in spite of unholy thoughts and deeds prior to today, in spite of regrets you have from decisions and relationships in the past, in spite of it all, when you yield your life to Christ Jesus your new life begins. Then the real transformation starts as Christ displays His power in you.

For those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, miracles occur all around us; from dramatic physical healings, to life-transformation that unfolds over time perhaps unnoticed.

It's a miracle when the hearts and souls of sinners are transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. For you it might be to consciously give your heart and life to Jesus Christ and start that journey of transformation. For some it might be a miracle that they became more loving and compassionate toward their spouse, their children, a relative, or a neighbor or co-worker. The miracle might be reconciliation with someone after you've had a falling out.

Last week Darrell mentioned in his sermon that the miracles in Acts are invariably followed by a proclamation of the Gospel – the life-transforming power of God's word.

Think of this: It might be a miracle if suddenly you got on fire for Jesus, hungry to know the word of God, eager to proclaim His saving grace to others.

You will find that God's grace overflows in you through His salvation. His power transforms skeptics, doubters, detractors into those whose lives reveal God's mighty purposes and from our lips bring forth His praise. Hallelujah ... what a Savior.

God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will, Hebrews 2:4.

¹ Paul reported of himself: *I persevered in demonstrating among you the marks of a true apostle, including signs, wonders and miracles*, 2 Corinthians 12:12.

² Acts 7

³ John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*