

## Acts 9:1-20

**9** Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest <sup>2</sup>and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup>Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. <sup>4</sup>He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" <sup>5</sup>He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. <sup>6</sup>But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." <sup>7</sup>The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. <sup>8</sup>Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. <sup>9</sup>For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. <sup>10</sup>Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." <sup>11</sup>The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, <sup>12</sup>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." <sup>13</sup>But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; <sup>14</sup>and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." <sup>15</sup>But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; <sup>16</sup>I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." <sup>17</sup>So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." <sup>18</sup>And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, <sup>19</sup>and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, <sup>20</sup>and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."

## The Road to Conversion

Acts 11:36, team taught for a year in Antioch with Barnabas.

I am, by nature, an introvert. My mom can tell you of how I would cry if anyone tried to talk to me in a grocery store. And while I serve in ministry, I am able to believe the best in people and remain optimistic, that isn't always the case outside of the church for me. Truth be told, if I don't feel safe around someone, I'm never my true self with them. If I don't feel safe, I don't open up, I don't share. I might allow for surface level dialogue. But I never truly open up if their reaction to my initial conversation isn't received with the purpose I intended it to be received. And from that point on, I'm always on guard, never allowing myself to relax and simply be who I'm created to be around that person. Now yes, there can always be a breakthrough moment to change that space so it is a safe space. But safety matters.

Safety is important within relationships. You can ask our youngest of children here or our oldest of teens and they will tell you, my top guideline I expect everyone to follow is to make sure our spaces are safe. And yes, you could argue it's human dignity and respect I'm seeking, but I feel it's deeper than that. If youth group isn't safe, nobody will open up and share. If Dinky Disciples or JYF isn't safe, the kids aren't going to enjoy themselves and they aren't going to come back. Safety is important to us. And I want to dwell on the fact that Saul was not a safe person for Christians. He was the

one everyone feared. He was the one people avoided literally as if he had the plague. Saul was not open-minded. He was not compassionate. He was dedicated to one purpose, to remove those who believed in Christ. To remove them from society, from places of influence, and make them an example of what would happen to people who believe. This is who Saul was. That's why Ananias responded the way he did.

Yesterday was Star Wars Day. May the Fourth be with you. (Sorry, a day too late.) Today's May the fifth, otherwise known as Cinco de Mayo, also known as Nathan and Thomas' bday. (Happy birthday, gentlemen.) So in honor of these three events, let me ask you three questions. 1) If Yoda had told Luke Skywalker to go to Darth Vader and help him out, there's no way Luke would do it. Luke's made some poor choices, sure, but that's a no brainer. 2) If you were a Mexican soldier in 1862 and your commander told you to go over to the French to help them, you wouldn't do it. Nobody's going to help their enemy during times of war. And 3) if you were a delicious bubbly root beer would you walk over to creamy vanilla ice cream on Nathan & Thomas' birthday? No, because you'd know you would be eaten alive as a root beer float. (Floats will be provided following the service today. That's real, btw.) I know, all three of those sound silly, but they make an excellent point. There's no way it was easy for Ananias to visit Saul. It would be as absurd as Luke helping Vader. As absurd as Mexicans helping the French during war time. And yes, even as absurd as our food running from us.

I know what some of you are thinking. Yeah, yeah, but is this text just about us? Is it just about Ananias? And you're right, it's not all about us or Ananias. Every time I've read this text since Tuesday night, I've thought about one person, Gary Fox. He isn't here this morning, he and Mary Jo are visiting grandkids. But Tuesday night Gary Fox had the pastors and music director help him point the track lights on the chancel area of the new sanctuary. Now in order for him to do this he had to get up on a lift and literally be at the light (while it's on) trying to shine the light where we're guiding him to point it. In the process he was literally blinded by the light, repeatedly, and couldn't see anything. Of course Gary's sight returned to normal shortly after engaging with those bright lights. And that temporary blindness didn't prevent Gary from continue doing what he was doing. Saul's experience was different. On this road to Damascus he not only was blinded by a light, but the resurrected Jesus spoke to him. The Christ that he is 100% against, believing it was false rubbish, that Christ is the one who spoke to him. Now I have no idea what Saul thought in that moment. I have no idea what thoughts or experiences he had during those three days he was blind. But I do know it was enough time for him to not simply go through the motions and transform his life to support Christ in the same manner he had disputed Christ. But his whole self changed, permanently. He was no longer the same person. He lived for something else, someone else. When Ananias prayed over him, scales shed from his eyes. The old was made new again. The old was dead. The new alive. He wasn't transformed into something else. He converted to a believer. During the time he was blind, he could see more clearly what was real, what was true.

As we know, after Saul's conversion, he is given a new name, Paul. He continues to serve and support Christ with all the passion and conviction he had previously used against Christians. Paul would at times discuss this thorn in his flesh. I always thought Paul had a pulled back muscle that was never without pain. Or perhaps he had digestive troubles that were always a pain. But this week I started wondering if it could be his reputation always following him? I started to wonder how churches felt who reached out to Paul for help knowing that he was once on the other side. How those churches, those Christians had to trust the best would come from him. They had to trust he was a safe place for them. Even knowing our background, Christ continues to welcome us and love us. Good people, none of us are ever perfect. We've all been horrible, but we've also all been a great blessing. Let's take the time to convert to becoming people passionate about Christ and living our lives loving others with the grace and goodwill that only comes from Christ. Amen.