

Empowered for Transformation | Acts 9:1-22

Over the past several weeks, we have been walking through Acts, watching the Holy Spirit empower ordinary people and steadily remove barriers: fear, selfishness, comfort, and assumptions about who could belong. This morning, Luke shifts from barriers between groups of people to the transformation of one individual life: Saul on the road to Damascus.

If you've been paying attention, you may have noticed something. Every week another wall has been coming down.

- **First, the disciples had to let go of fear.**
- **Then they had to let go of selfishness.**
- **Then they had to let go of comfort.**
- **Then they had to let go of prejudice and assumptions about who could belong.**

The Holy Spirit has been steadily preparing the Church to become the kind of community God intended it to be. This morning, Luke shifts our attention from barriers between groups of people to the transformation of one individual life: Saul on the road to Damascus.

And yet I think there's a danger in that familiarity.

We've heard this story so many times that we can begin to think of it simply as the moment Saul became Paul. But that's really only part of what's happening. This isn't just a story about one man's conversion. It's a story about what happens when the grace of God collides with a human life.

It's about how God transforms people. It's about how He transforms communities. And it's about what happens when the Church is willing to believe that no one is beyond the reach of Jesus Christ. Because if there was ever someone the early Church would have considered beyond hope, it was Saul of Tarsus.

I. Transformation Begins with an Encounter with Christ

Luke doesn't introduce Saul as someone who is searching for God. Quite the opposite.

Acts tells us that Saul was "still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord." That language is striking. Persecution wasn't simply something Saul occasionally participated in. It had become part of who he was. It consumed him. Every breath seemed filled with hatred for those who followed Jesus.

He wasn't traveling to Damascus to have a religious conversation. He wasn't curious about this growing Christian movement. He wasn't wrestling with doubts.

He was traveling with official authority to arrest believers and bring them back to Jerusalem. The Church knew exactly who Saul was, and they had every reason to fear him.

In fact, if we had been members of that first-century church, I suspect most of us would have prayed that God would stop Saul. We might even have prayed that God would remove him altogether.

Instead, Jesus did something no one expected. He met him. That is one of the most remarkable truths in all of Scripture. God didn't wait for Saul to become interested in Him. God took the initiative. Before Saul ever sought Christ, Christ sought Saul.

Isn't that true of so many of us? When we tell our stories, we often talk about the day we found Jesus. But if we're honest, the greater miracle is that Jesus found us long before we ever thought we were looking for Him. Jesus was not lost in need of being found—we were.

Saul's encounter wasn't subtle. A light brighter than the midday sun surrounded him. He fell to the ground. Then he heard a voice. "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

Notice what Jesus does not ask. He doesn't begin with a theological debate. He doesn't argue doctrine. He doesn't humiliate Saul or list every wrong he has ever committed.

Instead, Jesus reveals Himself personally. Everything changes because Saul comes face to face with the risen Christ. **Transformation always begins there.**

Christianity is not primarily about self-improvement. It is not about trying harder, becoming nicer, or making better decisions. Those things may follow, but they are never where transformation begins. **Transformation begins when a person encounters Jesus Christ.**

Because every one of us knows someone we have quietly decided is beyond hope: someone trapped in addiction, someone hardened by anger, someone whose choices, words, actions, or who are have convinced us they don't really belong, or they will never really change.

But Acts 9 reminds us that we should be very careful before deciding who is beyond God's reach. The Church had written Saul's story. Jesus had not. There is an important distinction here.

The gospel never asks us to pretend evil isn't evil. Saul really had persecuted Christians. Jesus Himself confronts him directly: "Why are you persecuting me?" Grace does not deny the truth.

But neither does truth prevent grace. **The cross teaches us to tell the truth about sin while refusing to believe that sin gets the final word.** That is where transformation begins—not when people become good enough for God, but when they encounter the One whose grace is greater than their past.

II. Transformation Requires Surrender

As dramatic as Saul's encounter with Jesus is, it is only the beginning of his transformation. In fact, after the light fades and the voice becomes silent, Saul doesn't immediately begin preaching. He doesn't suddenly have all the answers. He doesn't stand up as the confident leader we meet later in Acts. Instead, he discovers that he cannot see.

The man who arrived in Damascus with authority now has to be led by the hand. The man who came to arrest others is now completely dependent upon those traveling with him. The confident Pharisee who believed he understood God's will now spends three days in darkness, neither eating nor drinking. It is a remarkable reversal.

I don't think the blindness was simply a miracle to get Saul's attention. I think it became part of God's work of transformation. For years Saul had believed he saw clearly. He knew the Scriptures. He knew the Law.

He knew exactly who God's enemies were—or so he thought. Yet the truth was that the man who believed he saw most clearly was spiritually blind.

Sometimes before God can show us something new, He has to strip away our certainty. Sometimes transformation begins when we finally admit that we don't have everything figured out. That is difficult for most of us.

We like to feel in control. But very often, God does His deepest work when we reach the end of our own strength.

That does not always happen through dramatic encounters on dusty roads. Sometimes it happens through illness, failure, disappointment, grief, or circumstances we never would have chosen. Yet those painful places often become the places where God teaches us dependence.

Saul's blindness was not merely punishment; it became preparation. The same man who had relied on his own knowledge, education, and religious accomplishments would now spend the rest of his life saying things like, "When I am weak, then I am strong," and "By the grace of God I am what I am."

Those aren't words you learn in a classroom. Those are words you learn when Christ has transformed your heart.

III. Transformation Happens in Community

One of the things I appreciate most about this story is that it doesn't end with Saul's encounter on the Damascus Road. If it did, we might come away thinking that transformation is simply a private experience between an individual and God. But that isn't how Acts tells the story.

Instead, God brings another person into it. The Lord appears in a vision to a disciple named Ananias and tells him exactly where Saul is staying. At first, Ananias responds the way most of us probably would. "Lord, I've heard about this man." He knows Saul's reputation. He knows why Saul came to Damascus. He knows friends who have likely been imprisoned or forced to flee because of this man's actions. His hesitation isn't rooted in prejudice; it's rooted in very real fear.

Jesus doesn't dismiss those fears. He doesn't tell Ananias that Saul's past doesn't matter. Instead, He simply says, "Go, for he is my chosen instrument." In other words, "I know exactly who he has been. Now trust Me with who he is becoming."

That may be one of the hardest things God ever asks His people to do. It is one thing to believe that God can forgive people. Most Christians would say they believe that. It is another thing entirely to welcome someone whose life has genuinely been transformed, especially when that person has caused real pain.

Notice that the church never pretends Saul's past didn't happen. There is no attempt to minimize it or rewrite history. The believers didn't gather together and say, "Well, maybe he wasn't really that bad." He **was** that bad. People **had** suffered because of him. Jesus Himself confronted Saul over his persecution of the church. The gospel has never required us to deny reality.

At the same time, **the gospel refuses to believe that a person's worst chapter has to become the final chapter.** There is a world of difference between holding someone accountable for what they have done and declaring that they can never become anything else. That distinction is becoming increasingly important in our world.

We live in a culture that is very good at assigning permanent labels. But the gospel tells the truth about sin while refusing to believe that a person's worst chapter has to become the final chapter.

If it did,

- Peter would forever be remembered only as the disciple who denied Jesus.
- Thomas would forever be remembered only for his doubt.
- Zacchaeus would forever be remembered as a corrupt tax collector.
- The woman caught in adultery would forever remain defined by her sin.
- And Saul would forever remain the persecutor of the church.

Instead, the gospel tells a different story. It tells the truth about sin, but it also tells the truth about grace.

I think one of the most beautiful moments in this entire chapter is found in just two words. When Ananias arrives, he says, "Brother Saul." Imagine hearing those words if you were Saul. Just a few days earlier, he had been hunting Christians. Now one of those very Christians walks into the room, lays his hands on him, and calls him "brother."

That doesn't erase the past. It doesn't eliminate the need to rebuild trust. But it does say something profound. It says that Christ has the authority to redefine a person's identity. If Jesus now calls this man His own, then the church must learn to do the same.

That, I think, is one of the transformations taking place in Acts 9. Saul is not the only one being changed. **The church itself is being changed.** The Holy Spirit is teaching believers that they cannot proclaim a gospel of redemption while deciding there are people who are beyond being redeemed.

We've actually been watching this happen for several chapters now. Last week the barrier was the Ethiopian eunuch. Religious tradition had convinced many that someone like him could never fully belong among God's people. Yet the Holy Spirit sent Philip directly to him. Even today there are many who make a point to say who is excluded from the radical grace of Jesus. Because of who they are, because of where they have been, where they come from, or what they have done. The gospel deliberately breaks down those walls and loudly proclaims, WHOSOEVER is thirsty can come and drink freely from the water of life. Recently someone commented on one of our TikTok videos, "You are trying to force DEI into the Bible." My only response is, there is no "forcing it" needed. It is the very nature of the gospel!

Next week, Peter will stand in the home of Cornelius and discover that the Gentiles, too, have received the Holy Spirit. Another barrier falls.

Now, in between those two stories, Luke gives us Saul. This time the barrier isn't ethnicity or ceremonial law. It's reputation. It's history. It's the question of whether someone who has done terrible things could ever become part of the family of God. Again, the Holy Spirit tears down another wall.

That doesn't mean Christians abandon discernment or accountability. Quite the opposite. The New Testament repeatedly calls the church to truthfulness, repentance, and holy living. But every act of accountability must ultimately have the same goal that God had with Saul—not simply to condemn, but to restore whenever restoration is possible.

The Church is called to be that kind of community: truthful about sin, serious about repentance, and still willing to leave the door open for the Holy Spirit to do what only the Holy Spirit can do.

The Church is called to be that kind of community. We are called to tell the truth. We are called to name sin for what it is. But we are also called to leave the door open for the Holy Spirit to do what only the Holy Spirit can do. Because if Christ is still pursuing someone, the Church should never be the one standing in the doorway saying, "It's too late."

IV. Transformation Leads to a New Purpose

After Ananias prays for Saul, Luke tells us that something like scales fell from his eyes. His sight was restored, he was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. What happens next is remarkable.

Luke doesn't tell us that Saul spent years trying to figure out whether he was really forgiven. He doesn't describe Saul living under the weight of shame, wondering if God could ever use someone like him. Instead, almost immediately, Saul begins proclaiming that Jesus is the Son of God.

That doesn't mean Saul's spiritual formation was complete. We know from his own writings that there were years of preparation still ahead. But it does tell us something important about transformation. When Christ changes a life, He doesn't simply remove the past. He gives that life a new purpose.

Notice that God doesn't erase Saul's personality. He doesn't make him into someone completely different. Saul is still passionate. He is still intellectually gifted. He is still courageous. He is still completely committed to what he believes.

The difference is that all of those gifts are now pointed in a new direction. Before meeting Christ, Saul used his intelligence to argue against the gospel. Now he uses it to explain the gospel. Before meeting Christ, he traveled from city to city hunting believers. Now he travels from city to city planting churches.

Before meeting Christ, he was willing to suffer for what he believed was right. After meeting Christ, he is willing to suffer for what he now knows is true. God didn't throw Saul's life away. He redeemed it.

That is one of the beautiful things about God's grace. He has a way of taking the very things we once misused and placing them in His service. Sometimes our greatest failures become the places from which we are able to minister most effectively because we know firsthand what God's grace can do.

That should encourage every one of us. Some people believe that because of mistakes they have made, God may forgive them, but He could never really use them. Others believe they are simply too ordinary to make much difference in God's Kingdom.

Saul reminds us that neither of those assumptions is true. The question is not where you've been. The question is what Christ is doing in you now. The Holy Spirit doesn't transform us merely so that we can feel

better about ourselves. He transforms us so that our lives become instruments through which others encounter Jesus. Every transformed life becomes part of God's mission.

Conclusion: Leaving the Door Open

As we have walked through Acts, we have watched the Holy Spirit steadily removing barriers and pushing the Church beyond the boundaries it had grown comfortable with—not by changing the gospel or lowering God's standards, but by reminding God's people that the gospel is for everyone willing to receive it.

That raises a question for every one of us. Who have we concluded will never really fit in? Who have we quietly decided is beyond hope? Who have we concluded will never change?

Perhaps it's someone in our family. Perhaps it's someone we work with. Perhaps it's someone whose life choices have hurt us deeply. Perhaps it's someone whose beliefs or actions have made us angry. Perhaps it's someone we simply cannot imagine sitting beside us in worship.

Acts 9 reminds us to be careful. The Church looked at Saul and saw only a persecutor. Jesus looked at Saul and saw an apostle. The Church saw an enemy. Jesus saw an enemy who could become a brother.

None of that means we stop telling the truth. Grace never asks us to pretend that evil isn't evil. Saul had to face the truth about what he had done. Repentance mattered. Accountability mattered. But grace had the final word.

The Church must always be a place where truth is spoken honestly, repentance is taken seriously, and forgiveness is offered freely. It must be a community where people are invited not simply to be accepted as they are, but to be transformed by the living Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Because that's exactly what happened to every one of us. None of us are here because we earned our place. None of us are here because we had everything together. We are here because somewhere along the way, Jesus met us, called us by name, and began the work of transforming us.

And if He has done that for us, then we must never close the door on what He may yet do in someone else. May St. John's always be a church that speaks the truth, loves deeply, welcomes the work of the Holy Spirit, and never forgets that the grace which transformed Saul is still transforming lives today.