

Let's open our Bibles tonight to Acts 9:1.

The book of Acts, as we've been telling you if you've been with us on Wednesday nights, is really God's report to us through His servant Luke - his second letter. And we've, I think, told you as well Luke, by volume, has written more of the New Testament than anyone else - just in the gospel of Luke and this book. But it is the report after the ascension of Jesus, of the outpouring of God's Spirit, of the birth of the church and of the first thirty years or so of the church's growth. In fact, thirty years into the church, Paul was able to write and say, "The gospel has come to you as it has gone out through all the world" (Romans 10:18). The early church was phenomenally a tool and a vessel through whom God worked, as the Holy Spirit is poured out. He's still the One that we rely upon. We need to be obedient and go out and share, but it is really God's work to save and God's work to talk to the hearts of the people.

So we've been going through the book fairly slowly. The first seven chapters are really all about God's Word going out to the Jews. Everyone kind of camped and stayed in Jerusalem, although back in chapter 1:8 the Lord had said, "I want you to start here but end up at the ends of the world." In chapter 8, there was a murder. One of the seven deacons that had been appointed, Stephen - a faithful guy, was murdered by the religious leaders for his preaching of the gospel, really, for nothing else. And they were frustrated with him, and they went after him and took him out. But his death led to the going of the church to the next step, if you will, to Samaria and some of the other areas, outlying. It drove Philip, one of the other deacons of the seven that God had raised up, who had also been a faithful guy, he went to Samaria. So the church expansion was not chosen by the church as much as it was forced upon them, and it is exactly what the Lord wanted for them.

We spent a couple of weeks in chapter 8 (actually three weeks, I think) with Philip. Philip was a fellow who went to preach. He wasn't an apostle, just an ordinary guy like us who just took God's Word and began to share it; bold guy. He was a Hellenist, which meant that he was used to dealing with not necessarily such religious institutions as the Jews would have in Jerusalem but the Greek influence, the Roman influence over those who were believing in the God of Israel. And so he

would have been a lot more tolerant as far as having to deal with, if you will, the Samaritans who were kind of a big admixture of a lot of different things. And God gave him great favor. He ministered, people got saved, the devil came out. The city was run by a false prophet named Simon, who was a sorcerer. It was so exciting that the church in Jerusalem - at least the apostles who had stayed in town to continue to organize - sent Peter and John to check it out. They came, and they prayed for people to be baptized in the Spirit, and there was a real revival going on. And last week, we talked about how do you hear God's voice when you're in the midst of a revival? And God told Philip to go to the middle of nowhere, 100 miles away, and, "You'll get further instructions." And he went. And we talked about last week how that the Lord led him out there to talk to an Ethiopian eunuch. He had traveled hundreds and hundreds of miles - 1200 - to pursue his relationship with the God of Israel. But he hadn't been satisfied in terms of what he found there. So he was leaving, still reading his Bible but just as hungry as ever. And the Lord had Philip joined to him. He was reading out of Isaiah 53. God set this whole thing up. He was invited into the chariot. He began to preach Jesus, and this man, this powerful man, went home with the gospel. And he might very well have been the first - certainly the first Gentile - missionary; in fact, for that matter, the first missionary that the church sent out, if you will, with the gospel. And so Philip and he parted company, and Philip preached on his way back to Caesarea, where he would settle in. He would raise a family there - four daughters that would be prophets like he was. He will be in town when Peter comes to preach to Cornelius. He will be part of that church thing in Lydda and in Joppa, where Peter would also go. So we don't have him mentioned in the Bible until towards the end of your Bible, at least towards the end of this book, but he was obviously active in the early church where a lot of the things were happening and going on.

Tonight we're just going to take nine verses because we want to give you a good introduction to Saul. We have entitled this message "Losing My Religion." R.E.M. for those of you that remember. (Laughing) In any event (and those of you who don't, don't worry), we want to turn to Saul. Now we met Saul, you might remember, back in chapter 7:58 where we only get one mention of him. We read that the people that were stoning Stephen to death had someone that watched their clothes and their coats as they were firing away these rocks. And there was a young man there named Saul, "consenting to his death," onboard. We will learn later that Saul was a part of this Sanhedrin, these deciding folks, this powerful religious organization, if you will. And then we read of him, in the first couple of verses in chapter 8 (which kind of set the background for what was coming), "Saul

was consenting to his death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles." And so we read in chapter 8:3, "As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison." Now that's all we've heard about him so far, but tonight we get to know this guy a whole lot better.

He's the "most unlikely" guy in the Bible to get saved, or one of them. There're a couple "most unlikely." He makes the top five. Maybe you were one of the "most unlikely" folks to get saved. I had a guy tell me, "You're the most unlikely guy to get saved." That wasn't true. I got saved almost right away after he told me that. (Laughing) But this is an unlikely guy, right? And I should just say, and maybe one of the things you walk away with (with Saul's introduction in nine verses) is that God delights in saving those who can't be saved. He's really good at going, "Look what I can do," and He'll get to the worst of them, the chief of sinners. It brings glory to His grace. And if you ever have stopped praying for somebody because you were just sure that they were the most stubborn, hard-headed, rebellious people, then just think about Saul. And don't stop praying because I don't think anyone in the church really believed at this point that this murderer of Christians was ever going to come around. In fact, I would say that the reaction for the years that would follow - and there were years that would follow - was that no one believed him, or very few folks. I mean, there were some gullible people who trusted the Lord well enough to trust Paul. But he is a "most unlikely" character, and he goes from losing his religion to finding eternal life. So, I would just say if you're, for years ..... I prayed for my dad for twelve years; four years he wouldn't speak to me because I had wasted his Catholic education money by getting saved. And no Christmas, no birthdays, just don't come talk to us. And so there were those four years of grief in the middle of twelve years of praying. But God saved him. God has a way. Just don't stop! I don't know who was praying for Saul. I wouldn't have been. I think I'd have been praying he just wouldn't come to my town. But God had an eye upon him. His state of mind, if you look at chapter 8:3, was he was creating "havoc." The word for "havoc" is a description in Greek of a cornered animal who was wounded. It is almost that panic that comes from, "I've got nothing to lose." And driven by rage and his conviction (at least at the time), his plot was to destroy what God had done. In fact, in chapter 9:21, you will read of him that the church described him as "destroying" them. The word "*portheo*" means to ravage or to lay waste. His goal was very simple: "I want to wipe out Christianity. I want to lay it waste." That was what he was driven by.

We read in verse 1, here in chapter 9, "Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem." In chapter 26, where Paul stands before King Agrippa, and he explains how he had come to know the Lord, his own description was that at this point before he was saved, he was "exceedingly" mad (verse 11). Those are pretty strong words. "I was out of my mind with rage. I was furious. I wanted to persecute the saints. I wasn't satisfied that I'd gotten them out of the headquarters in Jerusalem. I wanted to find wherever these guys had run." Here we read he was "breathing threats and slaughter." The word "*phonos*," in Greek, means murder, and that's exactly what that word is translated there. It is murder. This wasn't an accidental killing. This wasn't unplanned. This was planned first-degree murder. And he was after the disciples of the Lord. He wanted to wipe out the church. He wasn't satisfied with Stephen's death. He wasn't satisfied that everyone in town - the church - had disappeared, except for their headquarters where the apostles were still meeting and planning. He came and he asked of the chief priest letters, extradition papers, I guess, that he could go to exterminate these believers in other towns. And I suspect that he got them very quickly. You know how if you know somebody, you get whatever you want? I think he got something - whatever he wanted. So his determination was, "I need to go kill some Christians 140 miles away." Not the next town over. He's gonna go to San Diego and halfway back just to get some Christians "because I hear there're a lot of 'em down there." And off he would go to Damascus. His hatred for the body of Christ was such that he got all of the support he needed from the Jewish oversight - from the Sanhedrin - who just were so thankful they'd have somebody else to do their dirty work. "Just hand him papers. Let him go and do it."

I'll tell you what, and you've probably noticed from the news as well, religious hatred is the worst kind of hatred in the world. It will cause you to do things that nothing else will. We watched a special the other night on the regular, normal, everyday people that live in Syria, who lived in Aleppo and homes and these places that have been just bombed out. And Sarin gas dropped on them and chlorine bombs. It's an amazing thought that anyone in their right mind could look at little children sucking for their last breath, as they're dying. Or beheading children for their lack of obedience and say, "Well, that's what the Lord wants." But sinfulness, when it comes through a religious system, is the worst of all. It knows no bounds. Jesus said, "There's coming a time when they're going to string you up and kill you,

and they're going to think they're doing the Lord some service" (John 16:2). Well, that was Saul. Things haven't changed very much. Right? To him, slaughter was the work of God. "They think they will put you out of the synagogue and serve the Lord." Notice that his target audience (verse 2) were those that would be found of "the Way." Great description of the early church. It is used six times in the book of Acts to describe the earthly walk that believers had with Jesus; they walked in "the Way." I don't doubt that it came from Jesus' own words, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). So the early church took that on. "We're going to go in the Way," and "the Way" spoke of their faith in Christ, if you will. The Way, today, and I should just tell you if you happen to be looking it up or something, is a declining membership cult. It was around when I got saved in the early 70's. It's been around for a long time. They don't believe that Jesus is God. They are very cultic in their practices. If you run into them, just stay away from them. Don't send them anything, don't give them anything. They are an abomination to this day. But, in the days of Saul, they accurately described the church. Their walk was just in "the Way" of the Lord. They were following Jesus. And so Saul gets the okey-dokey as he breathes threats. "I'm gonna go kill 'em. Give me authorization." And, "Here you go headhunter, bounty hunter, Christian hunter. Go get 'em." And he heads off to Damascus.

By the way, Damascus is the oldest city in existence. You can trace Damascus' existence all the way back to the time of Abraham, whose servant lived there. So, in the 1<sup>st</sup> century (which is what we're reading about), there was a huge population of Jews. In fact, history tells us there were more than fifty synagogues in town.

So there were a lot of Jews living in Damascus. Saul would have had his choice how he could get help. He could have stayed where he wanted, eaten where he wanted. He'd have been the hero in town. It was a ten-to-twelve-day walk from Jerusalem to go to Damascus. So, that's a long time to walk. And I only mention that because Saul is chafing under everything he's seen. The Lord mentions that Saul was there at the death of Stephen. The Lord will say to him, "It's been hard for you, hasn't it, Saul?" So we realize that between the death of Stephen and his ugly behavior before and after, and then this two-week walk across nothing, Saul has to everyday get up and think to himself, "I'm gonna go kill some more Christians. And yet they keep smiling at me and blessing me, and telling me they're going to pray for me. And they die with smiles on their faces like that Stephen. What is wrong with these people?!" It's a long time to think about what you're doing, especially when the Holy Spirit has been leaning heavily upon you. Outwardly, you would say of

Saul, he's unreachable. But inwardly, man, all kinds of stuff was going on. It always encourages me when I share with people, and they seem to just cut me off. I'm thinking, "Yeah, the Lord's probably dealing with them." I have this personal belief - it's not biblical, necessarily - the madder they get, the more God's dealing with them. Like people that don't care, they usually don't get too upset. But people that it's really rubbing the wrong way, that is usually someone God's speaking to. Well, if that's the case, the Lord is really speaking to this guy because he can't sit down. Right? And now he's on this march - 140 miles across all of Israel and into what today is Syria - just to kill and maim and arrest and make miserable. He's haunted every step of the way. The lives of the people he persecuted, the determination on the faces of these Christians, the surety in their voices. "Why don't they give up? Why don't they turn away? Why would they choose a life like this, to die at my hands, when it's obviously so wrong?" And here's a guy that is educated and is probably as wise as anyone on the planet when it comes to the Jewish faith, and yet doubts and fear plagued him, and it fueled his rage because he wasn't ready to give up or to give in. He had to go through Samaria, where a big revival of Philip's had been. I don't know if he talked to anybody. I suspect the church was in hiding. "Who's coming to town? Yeah, we're gonna be out for the weekend. We're going somewhere else. We're going to Galilee, to the lake." In Galilee (he would have had to pass through there), Jesus had ministered to thousands. Don't know who he heard. Don't know if he spoke to anyone. But a week and a half of your conscience flaring up as you headed north to Syria would have, I think, had its effect upon you. And when he finally came to the slopes of Mount Hermon, he could have descended the steps and the slopes and had a view of the capital. He could have seen it in the distance. "Finally here." On our trips that we take to Israel, we take you to the Syrian border where, on a clear day, you can see Damascus. You can get a feel for how far Saul walked, how hateful you must have been to make that kind of journey, how you didn't run out of gas in a week and go, "Aw, forget it." He was just determined to destroy, and the synagogues would have helped him. And I think that Saul probably said to himself as he saw the city, "All right. It's time to toughen up now. I will get a warrior's welcome. I'm the champion of the religion." The hero would have certain expectations of him. And then he goes. If you read in chapter 22, which Paul stands before the crowd in Jerusalem before he's arrested, and he makes his defense before the crowds who call for his arrest, or you read chapter 26 of this book before King Agrippa, you'll get three accounts (with this one) of the same story. So I'll try to refer to those for you, but if you're taking notes or something that you can write it in the chapters or in the margin so that

you'll know where it is. There're really those two places where Paul gives a pretty good defense.

Well here's what we're told by Luke, as he writes in verse 3, "As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?' " We are told (in Paul's speech to Agrippa) that it was high noon; that's what Paul said (Acts 26:13). Couldn't have been brighter. When Saul was surrounded, he was engulfed by this great light in the middle of the day that shone down from heaven, and he fell to the ground (we are told in chapter 26:14), and so did everyone that was with him. So whatever the contingency was, everyone hit the ground. And it appears that Jesus had called a face-to-face meeting with one of His chief opponents, and the meeting had begun. Saul just didn't have it in his day timer. So he lays on the dirt, or on his face, or however he ended up on the ground, and that's the way Saul would meet Jesus. In fact, in the years that followed, whereas all of the other apostles and disciples would speak about Jesus of Nazareth (which was a reference to His humanity), Paul would always refer to Jesus as "the Lord from heaven" because that's how he met Him. 1 Corinthians 15:47 says, "The first man was of the earth, made of dust; the second Man is the Lord from heaven." And Paul would refer to Jesus like that a lot because he didn't know Jesus in the flesh, didn't hang around with Him for those three and a half years. He wasn't a gospel guy, if you will. He came around later. And so this is how he meets the Lord - on his face, light shining in his face, hearing a voice that calls his name, questioning him to his behavior. And the meeting wasn't his to call; it was the Lord's to call. From this brightness, a voice boomed (according to Acts 26:14) in Hebrew. We even are told what language he was spoken to, and He uses his name, Saul, twice.

I know that it's just a sidelight, but I like sidelights sometimes. Most of the time when God speaks to men, He has to say their name twice. He doesn't do it for women. I don't know what that says to the women. I would be proud of that and brag if I were you. It just says guys don't listen. And my wife would tell you, "Amen." (Laughing) And I mean to listen, I intend to listen, I just don't listen. I usually start listening when it gets closer to the subject, but (Laughing) not always. Sorry, honey. Stop! (Laughing) Give people across the country a bad ..... they're just kidding, it's just a joke.

"Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" Twice. "Saul, Saul." Not, "Why are you persecuting My followers?" Not, "Why are you persecuting My disciples?" Not, "What are you doing here, messing with the believers in Damascus?" Any attack on God's people is an attack upon God Himself, and you will find that the Lord always aligns Himself with His people. You and He are one. Right? And He's your heavenly Father. So it is helpful, I think, to realize if you ever are targeted for being a believer in Christ that if you've been offended, God's offended; that if you're being singled out, then the Lord knows what you're going through. And the truth of the fact that God would stand for you or defend you releases you to just respond in love. If you have no defender, you've got to fight for yourself. Right? If nobody's going to take up the cause, then, "Hey, I'll meet you in the alley, and I'm gonna do my best to take you out." But if God is your defender, then you just let Him fight, and you go love others. And the Lord says this to Saul, "You're persecuting Me." But he was going after His people. There's nothing better than letting the Lord fight your battles if you can just get away from them and die to yourself. It's also a pretty good warning if you're into speaking evil or demeaning or mistreating God's kids. Don't do that because you might end up with God, and He wins all His fights. He's a good husband. He will protect His wife, and you're His bride. So, be careful what you say and how you say it. But like His people in Egypt, the Lord intimately shares in their suffering. And here's the persecutor. Here's Saul the murderer, lying on his back in the light of God's presence, and it's almost like you hear the Lord saying, "So, tough guy, what were you saying again?" His thumb on his chest, you know? It's a great picture of God's protection. I love it plenty. I like the idea of the Lord being our defender.

Saul's first response was, "Who are You, Lord? I don't know who You are, but You're the boss. I'm down, You're up. I can't move, You seem to be winning." Verse 5, "Then the Lord said, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'" Not seeing due to the light shining in his eyes, Saul quickly acknowledges that whoever just knocked him down is the boss. "I don't know who You are, but You're tougher than I am," and it is the first crack in the armor that you see in Saul. He's run with bravado, he's gotten letters from Jerusalem, he has no problem putting people in jails or worse, and yet now he finds himself unable to defend himself. And I think when he said, "Who are You, Lord?" the last thing he ever thought he would hear are the words, "I am Jesus." "You're who?" "Jesus." "Jesus? The One that these crazy members of the sect of the Way have gladly suffered and died for? That's You? The One that I'm here to annihilate?" You can only imagine what it might have done to this crusader. In

fact, verse 6 tells us that "he trembled and he was astonished." This did not go well for Saul. You see, Saul probably shouldn't have been completely overwhelmed because God had been working on him for quite some time. The words "hard for you to kick against the goads" - the word "goads" is "*kentron*," and it means spurs. It's the kind of thing you'd wear.....or pricks, but it usually then refers to those sticks that you use to move oxen. So whether you have pricks for the oxen or spurs for the horse, the idea is if you resist the leading of whoever is holding the stick or the spurs, you suffer, you're pained. And that's what Saul's life has been. At least from chapter 7 forward, it has been a painful existence for this crusader of his religious beliefs. That had been his experience. "It's been hurtful for you to go in the direction you've been going, hasn't it? It's difficult, isn't it, to know that you might be wrong; to fight against the conviction that is in your heart and in your conscience?" And Saul had tried to put it all away through anger. "If I just keep at it, and I'm angry, and I'm violent, and I'm driven with rage, then I won't have time to think about it. So the more I do, the better it'll be." What he was doing was running from himself. In his heart, there was the torment, and God knew it. Saul responded by setting his jaw and redoubling his efforts, and he moves along silently, and he wants to quiet his conscience. And the Holy Spirit just works overtime. Now, outwardly you stand and watch, you have no clue. You're still thinkin', "This guy'll never get saved." But look at the damage going on within. Look at the destruction God's bringing to this wicked heart.

And I always remember that when I run into resistance. People just say the most awful things when you share with them sometimes. But I have to believe that God is doing something in their heart. And you can rest in that. You can't always see it. But the Bible tells us about the story of the planting of the seeds in the different soils and how the reactions sometimes are. You just have to wait it out. So sometimes we, as believers, seek to silence the Holy Spirit because we've determined to go the wrong direction. Well that was what Saul has been doing. The problem for Saul was somewhere along the line in these goads of God's Spirit was always those same questions, "What if I'm wrong?" or "I'll just put it out of my mind." And there was Stephen's angelic face; he watched him die like an angel, praying for the forgiveness of the stoners. And Saul is cheering on his death. And then he watches this guy die. "Father, don't lay this sin to their charge." And he doesn't know what to do with that, the kind, merciful words. And he saw it repeated over and over as he apprehended or took out. And the Lord says to Saul, "It's been hard for you, hasn't it? You've been fighting Me. You've been lashing out against Me."

I think sometimes we mistakenly believe that our lives have but little influence over others because we don't see immediate responses. The difficulty in believing that you have an influence is that you believe, in the long term, that's what God says will happen. Because in the short term, you might just get told to take a hike, "I don't want to talk to you anymore." And yet God's digging His spurs in, if you will. God doesn't sleep. Did you know that? "He who watches over Israel never slumbers, and He never sleeps" (Psalm 121:4). So He's always about the business of saving. Always. When you're in bed, when you're tired, when you're watchin' TV, He's still workin' to save.

And here, in the dust, Saul finally relinquishes control. He hands over his will pretty quickly. I mean, he's only gotten knocked down. He hasn't gotten beat, he hasn't been crucified, he hasn't been threatened with death. He just got knocked down. Light shining. He's on his face, "I can't see. It's way too bright. Turn off the light!" And he's already saying, "Lord, I give up. You're the One." Because he'd already been brought down that road for quite some time. He gives up the fight. He surrenders. He raises the white flag. Now there are people in his position that are foolish enough to continue to fight, but it's kind of like trying to beat a cement wall down with your fist. Every time you hit it, you hurt, and the wall just stands up and looks at you. The harder you hit, the worse you feel. You don't change, and God won't change. There's a battle. Surrender, though, that brings rest. Which is why, I think sometimes, when you come to the Lord finally, and maybe some of you came pretty harshly and hard before you gave up, usually the first thing people experience when they are saved is peace. More than anything else, there's rest, there's peace. Your war with God is over, and He's won, and you've surrendered. I remember the first night I was saved (on a Thursday night in Bellflower at a Bible study that I had actually not gone to for a Bible study, I had gone to buy some drugs, but they fooled me). And I remember lying in bed that night, thinking, "Man, me and God are gonna be all right." I had plenty of stuff to worry about God before but not so much anymore. So Saul, here, gives up. The goads did the work. Perhaps you're in a position where God's been goading you along. The only solution, by the way, is that you just give up because He's not goin' away, and He's gonna win. "Your Arms (Are) Too Short to Box with God." That's a Broadway play. R.E.M. That's a Broadway play, right there. But it's true.

So here's the tough guy. "Trembling and astonished," he then says (as he hears that it's Jesus who he's been persecuting, and the Lord knows about the struggles in his conscience), " 'Lord, what do You want me to do?' " Trembling in fear - a new

experience for him. Astonished literally means at wit's end. For a smart guy, he didn't know what to think or what to do. And he asked the question that I think reveals the fact that he's given up. He says, "Lord," (for the second time) "what do You want me to do?" That's a long way from verse 1, isn't it? Well, okay, it's just a couple inches up in your Bible, but it's a long way in purpose. In one minute, Saul set aside everything he valued, everything he had decided upon, everything he had followed, everything he had pursued for his entire life. It all went up in a cloud of smoke. Thirty years later, he writes to the Philippians (3:7), and he says, "But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ." "Whatever I thought I had, I realized I have nothing until I have Him." And he talked about the "loss of all things for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish," (as garbage) "that I may gain Christ." That happened over the course of one verse. "Who are You?" "I'm Jesus." "What do You want me to do?" He gives up. And his question, I think, witnesses to the fact that this is where his born-again experience takes place - on the dirt road outside of Damascus. He calls Jesus his Lord. He asks Him what He wants to do with his life, and he just wants to submit.

You should know, and I guess you probably do, that Jesus wants to be the Lord of your life. It's not easy for any of us to be under anyone's lordship. We like to be the captains of our own ship. We like to make our own decisions. We don't like to answer to anyone. It's not in our nature to do so. A lot of people in church treat Jesus like a servant. They give Him orders, and they get mad at Him if He doesn't deliver. They obey when it's in their best interest. They make excuses for their lack of obedience by some kind of rationale that hopefully convinces you to excuse their behavior, and then they come back to say "Lord" when they need something again. I would say this to you - if you want to be sure that you have salvation, make Jesus your Lord. Because the very act of vacating the throne of your life and asking God to sit upon it makes Him Lord. So if you're the boss, He's not; if He's the boss, you're not. Then you answer to Him. Then you're a servant. Right? Then you subject yourself. Jesus, in Matthew 7:21, said to His disciples, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!' " Lawlessness literally means not to bend yourself to the law, or you're a law unto yourself. So Jesus, speaking to the disciples (even early on) about His lordship and of the necessity of submitting to

Him, uses two examples as you read through the Sermon on the Mount, there in chapter 7. And He speaks about the example of building your house or your life either upon the rock or upon the sand. And He uses those who build their house upon the sand and says, "In their life, you find great inconsistency because they ignore God's Word, they disobey God's commandment, they refuse His counsel, they take lightly His promises, and then they get on their knees, and they say, 'Lord,' " and the Lord said, "That's deluding, and that is hypocritical, and that's deceiving." And then He goes on and says, "The house that stands is the house who hears and does what the Lord commands. But the house that falls just hears and won't do it, and when the pressures of life set pressure upon the house, it fails and its fall is great because it's built upon deception and self-delusion." Which means, "I really thought I was doin' okay, but I've never made Him my Lord." You always have to ask yourself is Jesus the Lord of your life? You want Him to be the Lord of your life. You don't want to play with that too much. You don't want to cut too many corners. Right? I know that there's a natural, sinful inclination to just, "Let's make Him as little Lord as possible. If I can just be the Lord with the capital, He can be the Lord with the little 'l.' That'll work for both of us." But it won't work for Him. If you're seeking first the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33), if in everything you're giving thanks (1 Thessalonians 5:18), if you're loving your enemies and blessing those who persecute you (Matthew 5:44), if you're laying up treasures in heaven (Matthew 6:20) - go down the list of the things that the Lord would say to do - then you can say, "He's my Lord." Not that we're always going to obey or not fall a lot, but our intention is that He can be the Lord. The word "Lord" is a title that describes a positional relationship between two people. You can't both be Lord. You both can't be the boss. You both can't rule. One or the other. Who's the boss? Who's in charge? Saul converts here. He's been the lord of his life all of his life. He's been a champion and well respected and a member of the council, and very influential, probably wealthy as well, and now he's got nothing! Except he sees Jesus as the Lord. "What do You want me to do, Jesus? I'll do whatever You want." Be careful that you don't fool yourself into thinking that He's the Lord if He's not the Lord. Saul was broken and suffering and trembling and willing all at once. Saul was being saved, right here, right now.

The church, early on, lived with the horrible practice of slavery which, because of the days in which they lived, both the Greeks and the Romans had; 60% of the Roman population were slaves. But they believed in the absolute ownership of a master and his slave, that he had the right to do with you (if you were a slave) whatever he wanted. Now that's something that offends all of us, as it should. But

interestingly enough, when the church began to get this understanding of Jesus being the Lord, they chose the term "*doulos*" for themselves, and it literally is a word that describes someone who is a bond slave by choice; not by force, not by debt, but by choice. You could be sold as a slave, you could be arrested as a slave, you could be taken as a slave. You had no rights as a slave. But the church began to say of themselves, "We are slaves to Jesus by our own decision," and they called themselves "*doulos*." That's a decision we have to make. We have to let Him be the Lord. And Saul, here, makes it, and he never goes back from it, at least not in the Bible accounts that we have. He sticks with it from this day forward. It was a one-time, one-day change of heart and character, and you won't find him struggling much beyond that with his commitment to the Lord. But these guys were servants who saw their lives as no longer belonging to themselves but belonging to the Lord.

There're a lot of people who don't have Jesus as Lord. They come to church every week. And I don't just mean here. They just go to church. But their religion, because that's what it is, is kind of like a sidelight. It's an addition, it's a part of their life. They fit it in on Sunday and maybe during the week. But their attitudes and their actions say that they're really not under the lordship of God, and their frustration that they don't see the power of God at work in their life is explained by the fact that He's not the Lord. If you really want to see what God can do with your life, you make sure He's the Lord. I remember hearing a story I liked, and maybe I've told it to you before, but I always remember it in this context - of a fellow that was in a very fancy restaurant, and he was eating chicken, and a bone got stuck in his throat. And he began to wheeze and cough, and his eyes began to water. Whoever was with him didn't know what to do, and this guy just looked like he was going to panic. Well, there was a doctor sitting about three tables away, and he ran over, and he helped the man, and he did the Heimlich, and this bone came flying out of his mouth. And the guy sat for a while and tried to get his breath, and he finally said, "Doc, what do I owe you?" And the doctor said, "Whatever you thought I was worth when you were lying there, choking on a chicken bone." Because the minute you breathe again, you don't feel you have a need. But this guy, the doctor, was pretty smart. "Give me what you think I deserved when it was life or death for you." And that's exactly what it was for Saul. He realized what he deserved, how wrong he had been, how this offer of forgiveness was coming in his direction. The Lord wasn't killing him. He's still alive. And then he sees the lordship of Jesus in his life, not as a choice or even of a chore but of a privilege. "Of course He's going to be the Lord. I was choking." Saul would never go back.

Well, the Lord gives him the same direction He gave Philip. He gave him one sentence. Verse 6, "Then the Lord said to him, 'Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.'" That's all he got. First things first. Verse 7, "And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one. Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank." Those who were with Saul (Paul), Paul mentions in his speech in chapter 22:9 to the Jerusalem inhabitants, and he says that they heard a voice, but they didn't understand what they had heard. It wasn't clear to them. It was very clear to Saul. It just sounded like noise to the others. They weren't the ones that God was speaking to. Saul was. I always liken it to people that go to church, and sometimes, as folks come into church, you'll see folks that just walk out like, "That was boring and ridiculous." Untouched. Whatever God was saying, it just didn't get through. And then there'll be the guy sitting right next to them gets saved. It's just crazy to me. You watch one person just relinquish their life and have eternal life, and the next person just goes, "Yeah, we gotta get out of here." Nothin'. And I know it has to do with the condition of the heart and the openness to what God is saying, but there're some that respond in faith to life, and the same words have a completely different effect on somebody else. And I think if you go back to the soils, it's how ready are you to hear. I don't know if the people with Saul were ready to hear; they were ready to kill. Saul was ready to hear. He was more than ready to surrender. And if God is speaking, and you're hearing it, then respond.

Well these men go with Saul, seeing with their eyes. Here's an interesting picture. He's got a whole bunch of guys with him - tough guys, I imagine - who can lead him into the town because they can see with their eyes, but they can't see with their heart. And here comes Saul who can't see with his eyes, but he's never seen so clearly in his life. His heart has been opened. Right? He's been touched by the Lord. And so, for the first time in his life, he sees clearly. The bright light and the voice of Jesus is the last thing Saul experiences for the next three days. He gets stuck in a room. Didn't matter if it was bright or not. He was blind. He was left to himself. He had to experience being led into the city, being taken to somebody's house that they knew (whoever that might have been at the time). And he arrives in Damascus but not at all in the way that he has planned. Far better than he could have ever hoped for, in reality. He didn't know that yet. For three days (verse 9) he sits alone in the dark. He's a scholar, he's a rabbi, he's an expositor, he is a zealot. He has made himself judge and jury. And now he gets to

quietly sit and assess his life - every face that he dragged out of a house, every person that he killed or consented to, and he can't get it out of his head. He's just left for three days to consider his way of life, the damage that he's done, his belief that had driven him. I don't know what went through his mind. I'm sure that he asked himself a hundred times, "How could I have been so wrong? How could I have been so lost?" And I suspect after three days, he was extremely sorry, but he didn't feel there was any way that he could rectify his actions. I'm sure he went over all of the Scriptures he thought he knew. "How did I miss this? How could this be?" I doubt if he slept very much. He wasn't very interested in eating or drinking. "Leave me alone. I don't have any interest in that at all." All of his misconceptions. Which is why I said Saul is losing his religion here, but he's coming into a new relationship with Christ.

And for you and me, that needs to happen. Right? I grew up Catholic, and I always like the Catholics because, to me, the Catholics have the right Jesus. He's born of a virgin, He died for my sins, He rose on the third day, He ascended into heaven. That's all the gospel as far as I'm concerned. Now they've buried Him under a lot of works and saints and Mary. But that's easier to let go of than if you start with the wrong Jesus, where your whole concept of God has to change. So I think a lot of Catholics get saved quickly because they're pretty close to having the gospel. And I think we've asked before - that I think 75% of our congregation came out of the Catholic church. Which is pretty amazing. But you still have to change. When my dad got saved, I said, "Dad, how are you doing?" and he said this to me, "I have such a hard time letting go of things I've had confidence in all my life." He used to pray the rosary on his way to work every day - for me. He goes, "I'm not taking that to work with me anymore." I said, "Well, that's good. You don't need that." And he'd say, "It feels so weird." He had struggles. It's just changing over to things.....that were biblically based. I suspect that Saul would have that struggle for him as well. But he was ready to be changed. He was ready for God to change him. He was losing his religion. When I got saved, I did a good thing and a bad thing. I called in sick to work for five days. But I wasn't sick. So I lied. But I stayed home and read the entire New Testament. I don't think I got anything out of it, except I wanted to read every word. "I'll just stay home for the rest of my life and read this Book. That's what I'm gonna do." And I started to think about how much off I had been about not just being a Catholic - because a lot of that was all right - but just my idea of God and how God treated me. I was so wrong. And part of growing up is losing your religion and coming to see what is God saying that

I need to line up with. Because He's not changing. He's already laid it out. I just have to line up with Him.

I don't doubt that Saul, at some point through all of this, must have been overwhelmed by God's grace. And if I were Saul (I try to put myself in his shoes), I might have wondered why He didn't kill me to begin with. "Is He just settin' me up to slaughter me on a Tuesday? Is He waitin' for Tuesday?" I don't know. I think I would have been really worried about what God might do to me, having realized what I'd done to Him. "You've been persecuting Me." He was sitting and seeing himself in the light of God's goodness, and that usually isn't a very pretty sight. When you get saved, the worst thing about seeing things is seeing yourself. Don't you think? I remember when I was 18 (when I got saved), I thought by 20 I'd have it all figured out. Now I'm almost 65, and I realize I don't know anything. But God hasn't given up on me, so that's a good thing. But you do seem to get older, and you see yourself more clearly, and it isn't always such a pretty picture.

Saul didn't know that God had any plans for him at all. He would say years later to the Galatians (in chapter 1:11-16) that "the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ." He was personally called. God had a plan. He wrote to the Galatians, "For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it." That was his testimony. "And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers. But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles." That's what, ultimately, Paul would learn. You would say, "Well, let's send Peter to the Gentiles. He's goofy. But let's send Paul to the Jews. He knew everything about them." But God had other ideas. For now, Saul just sits, waiting to hear about the grace of God. But he had invited Him to be the Lord, and he wasn't going back on that. He wouldn't go back on that. I think there is something to be said for the day that you come and say, "Lord, You can be Lord. I give up. I surrender. I let You just have Your way with me." And it does change you. Saul was going to be changed. But three days from now, God was going to meet him and fill him with His Spirit, and then Saul would start off on a journey that would take years before he'd really preach to most anyone. I know if you read through the book of Acts, you go, "Well, then he just showed up in the next chapter." Oh, no. It's years. And we'll try to go through that timeline for you so

that you get a feel for how many years Saul spent out of the limelight, in the middle of nowhere, away from anyone. Sometimes it was forced upon him because no one really trusted him. Other times it was just because God drove him away.

Next week we want to watch this picture develop as the Lord sends an unknown saint to pray for a recently converted murderer, and the Lord said, "I want you to go pray for Saul," and the guy says, "No." (Laughing) "Oh, he's praying." "Well, good. I'm praying, too, that he's dead. I don't trust him." Can you imagine being sent to this guy, who has done so much damage? And we'll watch Saul kind of begin to move in the direction of what God has for him. But it's a tough sell considering his reputation that preceded him. It took a long time for anyone to really believe him. Maybe that's your case as well. You get saved, and you've been such a goof that no one believes you now. But keep at it. They'll believe you eventually.

Submitted by Maureen Dickson  
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