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The Unstoppable Church

From Persecutor to Proclaimer

Acts 9:1-31

Pastor Bryan Clark

To realize the level of intensity, the radicalness of the story that we are going to study in Acts chapter 9, those of you who can remember back to World War II, just to get some sort of a comparison, imagine what it would have been like at the peak of the war for Adolph Hitler to have stood before the German war machine and said, “Because of an experience I had last night, I have decided to convert to Judaism and I’ll spend the rest of my life trying to enrich and build the Jewish people.”

Or move it to a modern-day example. Imagine Osama bin Laden standing before a gathering of the most fundamental Islamic Muslims and telling them that he has made a decision based on an experience he’s had to convert to Christianity—that he’s trusted Jesus as Savior and he will give the rest of his life as a missionary to convert the Muslim world. That would be the same level of intensity or radicalness as what took place in the story in Acts chapter 9 in the first century.

Just to go back and pick up the flow a little bit, imagine that we removed all the chapter divisions and verse divisions and just see this as a running account. Going back to the story of Stephen, just before he is stoned to death, he gives this magnificent sermon to a group of highly religious people who had boiled God down to a religious system with the do’s and the don’ts and the rituals. God was in this little box and that was their religion. But Stephen comes back and says, “You can’t do that to God. Nobody’s ever been able to do that to God. God has always had a plan and a purpose. He’s done the most unexpected things, the most unimaginable things to accomplish His plan and purpose and frankly, through the most unexpected people. That’s just the way God is.”

Of course, the whole Old Testament culminates in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. So there is this sense that God is unpredictable, God is mysterious, God is doing something special and there’s no reason to think that’s going to change in this New Covenant called the Church.

So the Jewish believers are in for some stretching of their faith. The first would probably be that the message went outside of Jerusalem to a group of half-breeds known as the Samaritans. I don’t think these Jewish believers ever imagined that these Samaritans would be part of this thing God is doing called the Church. I think that was a great stretching of their faith. But it went beyond that in chapter 8, out to this Ethiopian that’s clear on the other side of the world. And I think that stretched them. But what they’re about to encounter in Acts chapter 9 is beyond their wildest imaginations.

We were introduced to Saul at the stoning of Stephen. As Stephen was being stoned to death, which would have been an ugly, bloody, messy death, we’re just told that the robes of those involved in that were laid at the feet of a young man by the name of Saul. In the flow of Acts 7, it’s as if after Stephen is done telling about how radically God has used unexpected people to change the world, it’s Luke’s way of saying, “If you think that’s something, you haven’t seen anything yet.”

You go to Acts chapter 8 in the first three verses, as Mark told us last week, the words used to describe Saul are the words used to describe a wild animal. He was out of control. He ravaged these Christians like a wild animal would tear a prey apart. Saul lived for one thing and that was

the death of Christians. I think he was wired in such a way that this point in his life was so scary that not only were the Christians terrified of him, I'm guessing even his friends were a little bit scared around him—he was in that frame of mind.

And that brings us then to chapter 9 verse 1. Now remember, as the reader we're in this frame of mind where we understand: We've been introduced to Saul, Saul is the persecutor, the church is in this war—it's not a cruise ship; it's a battleship—and there's going to be this war between the church and the persecutor. We understand that, and that's how chapter 9 starts.

Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. (Acts 9:1-2, *NASB)

When it says Saul was “still breathing” the Greek there is “breathing in.” It's as if murder and threats were the very air that he breathed. You have to understand this is what Paul lived for. He was obsessed with this. He was wound so tight that the air that he breathed was murder and threats. We know from Paul's own account in the end of the Book of Acts, that when these Christians were being imprisoned, they were being put to death. He says, “Not only did we arrest them, we murdered them.” Only God knows how many people Saul was responsible for killing.

But this wasn't just put them in prison and shake them up a little. Most of these people died. This was a blood bath and Saul was at the point leading the way on this. It isn't enough that these people were just chased out of Jerusalem. Saul wants to get extradition papers from the high priest so he can track them down. His mission is to find every one, track them down, men and women, bring them back, imprison them, kill them. So he goes to the high priest and he gets his papers.

He refers to the movement as “the Way.” We refer to ourselves as Christians, but it's helpful to know that term doesn't even show up until Acts 11 and it's actually only used three times in the New Testament. This idea of “the Way” was the more common reference. I don't think the followers of Jesus called themselves the Way. I think it was a title imposed on them by the enemy—by those who were opposed to them. Maybe it was a reference to Jesus saying that He was the Way, a different Way, another Way. Whatever it was, it was a common label on the first century Christians.

As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” And he said, “Who are You, Lord?” And He said, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do.” (vs. 3-6)

Saul has traveled about 150 miles, which would be about a six or seven-day journey, and about the time they're nearing Damascus suddenly this light from heaven forces Saul to the ground and this voice says, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” And Saul's response to that is very interesting. He says, “Who are You, Lord?” There is this sense in which Saul knows this is God, but there is another sense in which Saul doesn't recognize God.

You have to back up and realize that Saul was a very religious person. He had dedicated his life to his religious studies. He was the poster child for the Pharisees. He dotted all his 'i's, he

crossed all his 't's; he was *the* religious man. And Saul was absolutely convinced with all of his heart that what he was doing was the right thing to do. He believed this is what God wanted him to do. So suddenly when he is struck on the road and God Himself says, "Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" he's really confused now as to who God is. He didn't even know what to do with that.

It's a reminder of what religion does to us. It gets us to a frame of mind where we stop learning, we stop growing, we stop seeking truth and we just hunker down in a religious system. And we can actually find ourselves opposing God instead of serving God, but with all sincerity.

This text is a reminder that God doesn't give extra credit for sincerity. I hear this all the time from people who say, "You can't tell me that all these religions in the world could all possibly be wrong when those people are so sincerely serving God, and only Christianity is true."

But that is exactly what God is saying. God isn't granting points for sincerity here. He's saying, "Saul, you're wrong." God made it very clear that there's only one way to Him and that is through Jesus Christ, and if you deny Jesus Christ, then you're wrong. And He pins Saul to the road and says, "Saul, when you're persecuting My followers, you're persecuting Me."

Saul had dedicated the most recent part of his life to this belief that Jesus was not the son of God, Jesus was not the Messiah, Jesus had not risen from the dead, and all those who believed that must be exterminated. And with all sincerity of his heart, he believed he was serving God in doing that. Can you imagine the sobering reality of suddenly standing face-to-face with the resurrected Jesus, knowing He is indeed both God and alive—and you had been wrong? I mean, that had to have been quite the moment for Saul.

The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice [or the sound] but seeing no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

(vs. 7-9)

This terrifying leader by the name of Saul, this wild animal of a man, is suddenly rendered helpless like a poor wounded puppy and he's blinded and they lead him into Damascus. Perhaps the blindness is metaphoric for the reality that Saul's eyes had been blinded to the truth concerning Jesus Christ. I think the statement related to the fact that for three days he didn't eat nor drink was saying he was so stunned by what he experienced that he in essence was dysfunctional—he couldn't eat, he couldn't drink, he couldn't even function. He was just absolutely stunned by what happened.

Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." And the Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying, 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." But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name." But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake." (vs. 10-16)

Saul is brought to Damascus and God comes to a man by the name of Ananias. He says, “Ananias, I have a job for you.

But just before we talk about that, one thing to note as kind of a side note, is how many historical details are in these stories. There are those who claim that the stories of the Bible are based on fables and myths. But when you read fables and myths, they aren’t filled with historical details. They’re just kind of general, and they kind of float out there. But one of the things that characterizes the stories of the Bible is they’re filled with historical details. The first readers could have gone back and verified whether or not these stories were true. And that’s the value. It’s a very specific thing: He’s on Straight Street, which is the main arterial through Damascus east and west—which is still the main arterial through Damascus today east and west. And there’s a specific house: It’s the house of Judas where it says they will find Saul of Tarsus. There is a lot of historical detail there.

But beyond that, imagine that you’re Ananias and God comes along and says, “Ananias, I have a job for you. I’d like you to go to such and such a house and I’d like you to welcome Saul of Tarsus into the family.” And Ananias says, “You know, God, I’m not sure this is really a good idea.” It’s interesting how much he was aware of. Saul was not sneaking around. Everybody knew who he was. Everybody knew what he was doing. And he quickly says, “You know, this guy was in Jerusalem and he was doing great damage to the church and he’s put a lot of people to death. Now he’s come to Damascus, he’s got papers to find any Christian and haul them back, and you know, Lord, I’m not thinking this is a good plan.”

Imagine if you were a Jewish person during World War II and you’re hiding out and somebody comes in and says, “Adolph Hitler’s a couple buildings down and he’s converted to Judaism and he’d really like one of you to come down and pray with him.” I mean, that’s the level of what’s being asked here. It had to have absolutely terrified Ananias. The fact of the matter was, if Saul had not truly been changed, Ananias was dead, and he knew that. So he mentions that to God. And God says, “You know, I want you to go. Everything’s changed.” And really with great courage and faith, Ananias goes.

One of the things I love about this part of the story is it reminds us how much God longs to use people as his instruments to accomplish His purpose. The reality is He didn’t need to do it this way. As a matter of fact, He just showed us on the road to Damascus frankly He doesn’t need any of us. If I’m not faithful to share Christ with my neighbor, God may just pin him to the road and do it Himself. People say, “Well, what about these people in these tribes in Africa and no missionary’s ever been there?” God’s not limited to that. God can reach these people any way He wants and He probably does, in ways we’ve never heard about.

But He *wants* to do it through us. That’s His desire because He wants us to be a part of what He’s doing that will change the world for eternity. So it’s not like God has to use us. It’s God saying, “You know, I’d like you to be a part of this. I’d like you to be My instrument. I’d like you to be a part of something that will change *your* life forever.”

God looked at Ananias and said, “Ananias, you are a great man of faith and I love you. And this is going to be one of the greatest moments in the history of the Church and I’d like *you* to be the one that’s part of it.” Wouldn’t you imagine that Ananias remembered this first meeting with Saul for the rest of his life and thanked God over and over again that he was the one who was called to be a part of this moment?

That's the heart of God. He wants us to be a part of it. He wants us to experience the joy that will last a lifetime. Even what God says about Saul—He doesn't just want to get Saul out of the way as the persecutor. If that was the case, He could have just killed him. But He wanted to take Saul and turn him into the greatest missionary in the history of the Church. He says, "I want him to be My instrument to take the message to the Gentiles, to the kings and to the Jews." That's the heartbeat of God. He wants to work through us. He wants to use us to change the world.

So Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized; and he took food and was strengthened. (vs. 17-19a)

Ananias obeys; he goes in. You would have to believe that the anxiety meter was pretty high at this moment. He steps in and probably was immediately struck with the fact that something had radically changed. This was not the terrifying Saul that they knew before. And really with great faith, he reaches out and he embraces him and says, "Welcome to the family." "Brother Saul" is his way of saying, "Hey, I hear you're one of us; welcome to the family." And these scales fall off Saul's eyes. Again, maybe there is some symbolism, some metaphor there, that the scales had fallen off Saul's eyes and for the first time he had really seen the truth concerning Jesus Christ.

The first thing he does is he's baptized. It's interesting through the Book of Acts how clearly that pattern is followed over and over again. When someone determined to be a follower of Jesus, it was not a secret thing. It was not, "Hey, I hear you're a follower of Jesus; let's just keep that between us." As a matter of fact, it was just the opposite. The first thing was a public declaration that, "I'm changing teams. I'm changing teams; I'm now a follower of Jesus"—realizing that for these first-century believers that often cost them their lives. You can imagine Saul and all that he stood for, that it was not a little thing for him to step out and be identified now as a follower of Jesus.

There are some of you who have trusted Jesus as Savior, you're following Him, but you've never taken that step. It's a critical step to publicly say, "Hey, I'm not a secret agent. I am publicly saying I'm a follower of Jesus. I've changed teams." And I would encourage you to consider taking that step of obedience.

Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." All those hearing him continued to be amazed, and were saying, "Is this not he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and who had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?" But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Christ. (vs. 19b-22)

Now imagine this. It's obvious from the crowd that they all knew who Saul was, they all knew what he had done in Jerusalem, they all knew why he came to Damascus, and they are terrified of him. This was one scary guy. And suddenly within a matter of days he's in the town square and he is declaring, "Jesus is God. Jesus is the Messiah." This is a familiar phrase: "Jesus is the Son of

God”—but it’s the only time it shows up in the Book of Acts. All along, Saul was convinced that Jesus was *not* God, Jesus was *not* the Messiah, Jesus had *not* risen from the dead, and he was obsessed with stopping this movement. Now suddenly he’s standing before his peers and he’s saying, “Jesus *is* the Son of God. Jesus is God in the flesh and He’s resurrected and He’s alive” and later in the speech, “Jesus is the Messiah.” I mean, that had to have absolutely stunned these people. They could not even process what they were hearing.

It’s interesting to notice that Luke tells us that he was confounding the Jews and he was proving that Jesus is the Christ. This is very similar to the language used of Stephen—that through an argument related to the historical facts and what God is doing, creating such a solid argument that Jesus is God, that Jesus is the Messiah, that he could not be debated, he could not be defeated in his argument.

One of the things that we need to really understand is that over and over again in the first century, the antagonists, the opponents, simply could not dismiss the message of Christianity. They could not win the argument. Now, these were the contemporaries of Jesus. If the message of Jesus is not true, there were thousands of witnesses that could have testified to that. All you had to do was walk to the tomb and show the bones. It would not have been difficult to disprove it if it wasn’t true. But over and over and over there is this same pattern that the historical facts were so heavily weighted in favor of Christianity that they simply could not be disputed.

Now what happened with Saul? Three or four days earlier, Saul didn’t believe any of it. Did the historical data suddenly change? No, of course not. When he got to Damascus did he find a whole stack of books that he poured through and said, “You know, I’ve been studying for three days; I’ve changed my mind”? And the answer is no. What happened is God removed the scales. The evidence was overwhelmingly in favor of the truth, but Saul’s eyes were closed to the truth until God removed the scales and he saw what was there all along.

That reminds us that even though we have a well thought through argument for the case of Christianity, we cannot argue people into the kingdom of God. At the end of the day, the only thing that ultimately changes their heart and mind is when God chooses to remove the scales and they see the truth for what it is. We have our part. But God has to do His part or there will be no transformation.

When you read Galatians chapter 1, you find out that early in Paul’s conversion experience he left and went to Arabia for three years, then he came back. Most scholars would put that in verse 23 when it says:

When many days had elapsed [that’s probably that three-year period, then he comes back], the Jews plotted together to do away with him, but their plot became known to Saul. They were also watching the gates day and night so that they might put him to death; but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a large basket. When he came to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples [the verb tense is “trying over and over and over again to associate with the disciples”] but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had talked to him, and how at Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus. And he was with them, moving about freely in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord. And he was talking and arguing with the Hellenistic Jews; but they were attempting to put him to death. But when the

brethren learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus. (vs.23-30)

Saul is so bold in his proclamation of the gospel that the religious Jews of Damascus want him dead. The persecutor is now the persecuted. He learns of this death plot, they put him in a basket, they lower him over the wall and he flees for his life. He ends up in Jerusalem and he wants to become part of the church in Jerusalem. But they don't want him. They're hiding from him, they're terrified of him and for good reason.

A couple of weeks ago I mentioned that there's nowhere in the New Testament where God embraces this idea of a maverick out there acting independently of his church. And this is a good example of that. Saul was trying to penetrate within the church, within the followers of Jesus, to become a part of what they were doing. But they didn't really want him in. They were terrified of him, but it was more than that. You'd have to imagine that some of these people that were put to death were the husband, the wife, the children, the parents, the dear friends of these Christians. They probably not only were terrified of Saul, they probably hated Saul. This would have been packed with emotion.

But think about poor Saul. Saul now has declared himself as a follower of Jesus, but he doesn't feel accepted by the church. He no longer fits with his friends and his peer group—they want to kill him. So he's a guy out there on an island with nowhere to turn. I think that's how a lot of new believers feel. They don't feel like they're accepted at church. They don't feel like they belong with their old crowd anymore. They just feel like they're all alone out there, and it's a very discouraging place to be. And that's why over and over again God raises up people like Ananais and people like Barnabas who have the courageous faith to believe that God radically changes people's lives. And regardless of what this person has been, God can change this person and we take them by the hand and we bring them into the church and we welcome them to the family.

That's exactly what Barnabas does. He reaches out, he brings Saul in and he says, "You know, this guy has been radically changed." Now, you can understand how hard that would be to believe, but it's limiting the power of God to change a life. I understand that a week or so ago this guy was terrifying Christians, but God has changed his heart. He walks through, he's been baptized, when he was in Damascus he was boldly proclaiming the gospel to the extent that those religious Jews wanted to kill him. This isn't a guy playing a trick. I mean, this almost cost him his life.

Now he's in Jerusalem, he continues to boldly proclaim the gospel, and now the Jews in Jerusalem want to kill him. The evidence that this is a genuine conversion is overwhelming. And the disciples recognize that and they welcome him to the family. They fear for his safety, they go down to the port, they put him on a ship, they send him to Tarsus and he will stay there for the next seven years and doesn't show up again in Acts until chapter 11.

So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase. (v. 31)

First of all, notice that Saul was such a dramatic player when it came to the persecution of the church, that when Saul was converted the church actually experienced peace for a period of time. It was not Saul among many others who were doing this. He was the one who was obsessed with

wiping out Christians. And once Saul was converted, the church had a period of time where things were quiet and peaceful.

Also, the last statement in verse 31 is a familiar statement: "...and the church continued to increase." We've seen this as a pattern throughout the Book of Acts—that after Luke tells us of some great offense, some great happening, it closes with the statement, "and the church continued to increase, and the church continued to increase." That is a reminder of the mission of the church: *growth*.

One of many criticisms that we often receive is, "The church is too big and it's all about numbers." Well, the reality is growth is a part of the mission of the church. Some people say, "Well, I like a small church better." Well, that's fine; I spent a number of years in a small church. But a small church can't determine to stay small. The mission is to grow—that people are reached with the gospel of Jesus Christ, they're brought in, they're built up, they reach more people, those people come in, they're built up, they reach more people. Anyway you slice it, if a church is not growing, a church is not reaching people. That is the mandate. That's the mission. That's the calling. And Luke reminds us of that over and over and over again, when he keeps saying, "The church was increasing, the church was increasing..."—meaning more and more and more people coming to know Jesus as Savior.

There is a reminder in this story of the radical life-changing power of Jesus—to take someone who was so obsessed with wiping out Christianity, so blood-thirsty, so murderous, so terrifying, and in a matter of days becomes a proclaimer of the gospel of Jesus Christ. That isn't being changed a little; that's being radically transformed. How else do you explain that?

You know, religion has the ability to change people a little. But the gospel of Jesus Christ radically changes people forever. And regardless of what you've been in the past, what's relevant to God is who you have become in Christ. The reality is if God can use a blood-stained persecutor of the Church to become the greatest missionary in the history of the Church, God can use you regardless of your past.

But we struggle to believe that. We sometimes get hung up over things in our past, and we convince ourselves that because of our past, God could never use us for much. We sometimes think, *I could never be a leader in the church or anything because I have this and this and this in my past and Bryan, if you only knew. I could maybe be somebody who sweeps the parking lot or I could help mow the grass or something, but that's really all I could be. And I understand it's my fault. I mean, I've made my bed; I have to lie in it...and that's my sob story.* We're limiting what God could do through us based on what we were—which is irrelevant to what we have become in Christ.

I mean, it's shocking, but God could actually use someone who used to be addicted to drugs, someone who used to be an alcoholic, someone who used to be addicted to who knows what? Someone who used to be a prostitute, someone who used to be a homosexual, someone who had an abortion, someone who provided an abortion, someone who did who knows what? Someone who was a wife abuser, someone who was a child molester. Whatever is back there in your story is irrelevant to who you now are in Christ. You have been radically changed and there is no limit to what God might want to do through you regardless of your past. You just have to believe that.

Now, I'm going to share something with you here and in the upper room and everybody has to kind of keep it quiet—it's our little secret. This may shock some of you, but I have actually known God to use people who have been divorced. (I can hear the audible gasp!) But you

know, it's true, we seem to have certain categories of issues that somehow are isolated from the grace of God. They are like in this impenetrable bubble and grace bounces off and they still won't go away. And we put this red "D" on people's foreheads and say, "Uh, oh, you can sweep the parking lot. I understand that Saul was a ravenous, blood-thirsty, murderous persecutor of the Church—but at least he wasn't divorced." Where do we get that stuff?

The reality is all of the qualifications for leadership that are given in the New Testament are present tense. God isn't dredging up the past and saying, "Well, you know what you were 20 years ago." It's irrelevant! You've been radically changed by the gospel of Jesus Christ and all that's relevant to God is who are you today and how might God want to use you to change the world?

I don't know what you think of when I say the words "the unstoppable Church." We keep saying that. Maybe in your mind you're thinking, *We're going to have services every weekend and you can't stop us.* That's not what we mean. We mean that this is the unlimited power of God to accomplish His purpose in the world through His Church. You can't stop Him and you can't box Him in—God is going to accomplish His purpose through the most unimaginable means through the most unexpected people. And God will take someone who one day is a blood-thirsty persecutor of the Church and the next day make him the greatest missionary in the history of the Church—because that's what God does. He's unstoppable!

Regardless of what's in your past, it's irrelevant. People say, "Oh, Bryan, if you only knew. I did this and this and this." "Fine, thanks for sharing that; now let's move on." It's not relevant. God has radically changed you. All that matters is who are you today and do you believe that God through His power could use you to change the world?—because that's what God does. That is the unstoppable Church.

Our Father, we're thankful that You are such a gracious God that our past doesn't have to define our future—that what we were doesn't define who we are. Lord, if you could take a terrifying, blood-thirsty persecutor of the Church like Saul and so radically transform him that he became a proclaimer of the gospel, you can use every single one of us to change the world. Lord, help us to believe that. Help us never to limit what you have called us to do based on something that lingers from our past. Lord, help us to celebrate the reality of this life-changing grace that is the unstoppable Church. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
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Study Questions
The Unstoppable Church
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Acts 9:1-31
Pastor Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. While salvation is always instantaneous and miraculous, some spiritual stories reflect more of a slow gradual change over a period of time while others are obviously radical transformations—the kind of transformations that cause people to respond in shock and disbelief. Share some stories of radical transformations that you are aware of.
2. Who are the people in your world that seem unreachable because they are so antagonistic toward the gospel?

Do you really believe that next week they could be sharing their story of how Jesus has transformed their lives? How does this belief affect how we treat such people?

3. We're all aware of people who claimed to have a radical conversion to Jesus only to see them fade back away into their former ways again. What are the evidences of someone who has truly been changed by the power of Jesus?

Bible Study

1. Read Acts 7:58, 8:1-3. What is the picture Luke paints of Saul?

In the midst of such persecution the unstoppable Church marches on. The hated half-breed Samaritans are converted, an Ethiopian is converted, but who could have expected that the most feared persecutor of Christians is about to become a proclaimer of the gospel?

2. Read Acts 9:1-9. Before this encounter on the Damascus road, did Saul think he was fighting God or serving God?

Is there more to serving God than sincerity and commitment?

People today often look at the level of commitment of people in other religions and say, "You can't tell me all those people are wrong!" How does this text help us respond to that question?

3. Read Acts 9:10-31. William Barclay referred to Ananias as "one of the forgotten heroes of the New Testament Church." Barnabas served in a similar role for Saul in Jerusalem. Why do we need people like Ananias and Barnabas in the church?

What does this look like on a practical level?

What are the risks of welcoming people like Saul into the church?

4. What were the evidences that the conversion of Saul was genuine? Compare this with James 2:14-26.
5. What does this text teach us concerning the radical power of the gospel to change lives?
Does our past behavior disqualify us from any area of service for Jesus? Why or why not?
6. In what ways might the radical nature of Saul's conversion have actually enhanced his effectiveness in proclaiming the message?

Application

1. What would it mean for you to be an Ananias or Barnabas in the church?
Are there people right now that come to mind that need to be loved and accepted into the body? What is your role in making that happen?
2. Identify one person in your life whom you would consider to be the most unlikely person to trust Christ. Do you think God can do a miracle and radically change that person's heart? Would you commit to praying regularly for that person's salvation?
3. Is there anything in your past that disqualifies you from a high and holy calling from God?
Do you sometimes limit yourself more than God does? What do you learn from this text?