

# Paul

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 05 May 2024

Preacher: Pastor Scott Johnson

[ 0 : 0 0 ]     Good morning. Today's readings comes from Acts chapter 9 verses 1 through 16 and Matthew chapter 22 verses 23 to 33.

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?

Who are you, Lord? Saul asked. I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting, he replied. Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.

The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless. They heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes, he could see nothing.

[ 1 : 1 2 ]     So they led him by the hand in Damascus. For three days he was blind, and he did not eat or drink anything. In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias.

The Lord called to him in a vision. And Ananias? Yes, Lord, he answered. The Lord told him, Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying.

In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight. Lord, Ananias answered, I have heard many people report about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem.

And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name. But the Lord said to Ananias, Go, this man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.

I will show him how much he must suffer for my name. And from Matthew we read, That same day in Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question.

[ 2 : 3 4 ]     Teacher, they said, Moses told us that if a man dies without having children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up offspring for him. Now there were seven brothers among us.

The first one married and died. And since he had no children, he left his wife to his brother. The same thing happened to the second and third brother, right on down to the seventh.

Finally, the woman died. Now then, at the resurrection, whose wife will she be of the seven, since all of them were married to her? Jesus replied, You are in error because you do not know the scriptures or the power of God.

At the resurrection, people will neither marry nor be given in marriage. They will be like the angels in heaven. But about the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what God said to you?

I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at his teaching.

[ 3 : 44 ] This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. So would you pray with me? Loving and gracious God, thank you for the gift it is to have this moment.

And Lord, as we come with our hearts open, we ask that the Holy Spirit fall fresh on each of us. Touch us in a new way. Let us see something new. Let us hear something new. And Lord, as we leave this place, let the light shine so bright in us that people we encounter will be drawn to it, knowing that it is you who shine in each of us.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. So like I said at the beginning, sounds like you got some folks who agree with me that change can be hard.

And if change is hard, then we're really in trouble because change happens all the time. So the thing about this is what we want to talk about today is when Jesus shows up and changes things and how not to fall into the trap of resisting that too hard.

And we got a perfect example, a perfect example of how that looks and what to do and what not to do today. Many folks are familiar with Paul's story.

[ 4 : 57 ] The Apostle Paul is the author of quite a bit of the New Testament, so much as we understand as the Word of God was written through him. And we also know some things about Paul's life.

Now, when we look at who Paul was, he's born as Saul, the city of Tarsus, which is in modern-day Turkey.

Now what happens is he grows up, he learns to trade, he becomes a Pharisee, you know, one of these people who's pledged to follow the rules of the church to a certain degree. He moves to Jerusalem, he's a student, and he studies under one of the most well-known rabbis and teachers of the time.

And he believes in the faith so strongly that he wants to get into the world and protect it from people he thinks are saying the wrong things. He believes it to the point of leading stoning.

Two chapters before what we read, he's involved in the stoning of Stephen. Now, some people would say that the verse only gives us that he stood there and held the coats. But, you know, that's still kind of like participating to me.

[ 6 : 10 ] And even if he didn't actually throw a rock, he was clearly in on it. So that being said, this is who he is. You also heard that when we encounter him in the story, he's on his way from Jerusalem to Damascus, which is a pretty heavy trip.

But he's on his way from Jerusalem to Damascus with orders and permission to arrest Christians that he finds there. If anybody's preaching this Jesus stuff, he has the authority of the temple priests to bring them back to Jerusalem under arrest.

That's why he's going. Now, here's the thing. On his way, those of you who've been in church for a while are familiar with this story, but those of you who are not, I want you to hear it again.

And on his way, Jesus interrupts him pretty profoundly and starkly. That he's literally walking or maybe even on a horse or something like this, but he's got two people with him.

And Jesus appears dramatically in the middle of the road in this bright heavenly light. And he falls down. Kind of knocks him backward, if you want to give it that way.

[ 7 : 25 ] Okay. And he has this conversation. Now, I want you to follow along with me if you want to grab your Bible.

We're in Acts chapter 9. And I just want you to hear this again. Okay. So, we're going to pick up in verse 3. Acts chapter 9, verse 3.

As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?

Who are you, Lord? Saul asked. I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. He replied. Now, get up and go into the city and you will be told what you must do.

How long did that conversation take? I mean, that wasn't even 20 seconds. How long did that conversation take? And his life was irrevocably changed because of that conversation.

[ 8 : 32 ] I want you to think about that. How on the other side of that few sentences, how different his life became. There was nothing about his life that was the same after that.

That's a scary idea. That you could have a flash interaction with Jesus like that, that could take that little bit of time and your life be completely different on the other side of it.

Most people are like, I didn't sign up for that. But that's us and change. And that's what we got to really talk about today.

That's us and change. Right? And this thing about change is a big deal for us. Because I'm going to give everybody the benefit of the doubt.

I know most of you, love all of you, and I know that most of you are in this camp, that we are pretty cool with Jesus. Yes? All right. I see some of y'all didn't nod.

[ 9 : 41 ] That's kind of scary. That's kind of scary. All right. We're going to leave that alone for now. But that being said. All right. So that being where we start. The thing about this relationship with Jesus part is that when we bring that, plus this other thing we're talking about with change to the table, that most of us love this idea of Jesus being in our lives, love what Jesus can do and what we believe Jesus to be about.

The challenge here is that we kind of like Jesus to do what we want him to do. So this whole change thing is kind of like, Jesus, you can change stuff.

Just change what I tell you. Don't change anything else. Right? So when he shows up, it's like we kind of want Jesus to do the nips and tucks and kind of this stuff on the outside.

But don't come in and really mess up the whole thing. Like if Jesus showed up in your living room and it's like, well, okay. And Jesus said, hmm, he pointed at something in the corner.

You'd be like, okay, you can fix that. But if Jesus said, no, we got to turn this whole thing around. We'd have a problem with that. But that's just our issue.

[ 10 : 59 ] Because Jesus shows up in our lives, not just with maybe a sentence or two, Jesus shows up like he shows up at the temple and turns over all the tables.

And that's a problem for us. Because most of us don't want our tables messed with. So we get stuck.

Now, I want you to put yourself in Paul's position. Right? Because Paul literally has his whole life turned upside down by Christ and turns into the Paul we know because of it.

Right? So what's the difference? How does that happen? Because literally, before this conversation, Paul was out to destroy the church.

He was arresting people. He was in on killing the preachers. And then, in that 20-second conversation, he turns into the Paul we know.

[ 12 : 21 ] So what's the difference maker? That's what we need to talk about. So when we talk about this change thing, the thing that's really interesting to me about it, and I'm not getting this from some big guru or something like this, this has just been my experience with it, that people tend to resist change because of two things.

The first thing is, how big is the change? So if it's not a huge magnitude or significant change, most people can roll with it. Like I said, if he nips and tucks in the corner, that's one thing.

Right? So like, say you're on your way to work and you hit road work that makes you have to take a detour. You don't like it. You deal with it. And you may have to do it for a few weeks.

Right? It's a change, but you take it. That's very different than say if you get a new supervisor who comes in and wants you to do like half your job in a very different way.

Right? So it's the magnitude of the change. Everybody still with me? So like, if you have to do something radically different, something huge and big, that's when that resistance kicks in.

[ 13 : 35 ] The other thing about it is how welcome is the change. I mean, is this something you wanted? So for example, say that supervisor job opens up at your job and you are going for that promotion.

It will change your world. Right? You'll make more money. You'll have to do different things. So it'll be a really different life if you get it. But it's something you want.

So that change lands differently. As opposed to a change you don't want. Say that same job ends up laying you off. Right?

So this is where the change thing comes in. And as we just were talking about, how you think Jesus hits our life? Jesus usually hits our life in big ways.

And then we really have to wrestle with how welcome those changes might be. That's a really deep conversation. But that's what we got to deal with.

[ 14 : 44 ] Right? Because when Jesus shows up and says, I want you to see this in a different light. or I want to send you over here to do this thing.

Those are disruptive changes. And if we're in this place where we're comfortable, if we're in this place where we think we got it all figured out, if we're in this place where it's like, nope, I got my trajectory, I got my plan, and Jesus shows up and turns over tables, we may not say yes to Jesus.

We heard that in our second reading. That story is not one that we tend to dwell on a whole lot.

But in Matthew chapter 22, we're dealing with, Jesus is getting attacked. I mean, different groups are around him and they're trying to trip him up. They want him to say something that shows the crowd that he's not a real teacher.

So there's one group that hits him in the first part of the chapter. And then here come the Sadducees. They're a group of temple leaders. They're a group of religious elites.

[ 15 : 55 ] And they don't believe in full body resurrection. That's part of who they are. They don't believe in it because they only believe in a part of the Bible of their time.

Okay? And because it's not talked about in that part, they don't believe in it. So, they want to expose Jesus from their point of view.

And so they throw him this hypothetical, which is really ridiculous. It's possible, but it's ridiculous. Let's just be clear about that. Right? I mean, y'all heard the story. It's possible, but it's ridiculous.

Right? So, we go through this whole thing with the seven brothers and the wife. and they're thinking that Jesus is going to not know what to say.

But Jesus, being Jesus, I want y'all to hear this line because this line cuts really deep. Okay? This is Matthew chapter 22 verse 25, 29, sorry.

[ 17 : 01 ] Verse 29. So, they run down their whole thing and Jesus says to them, you are in error because you do not know the scriptures or the power of God.

Whew, that's a deep cut. Especially when you think you got it all figured out. And I mean, these guys had studied, they had done all the homework, they got to these places on purpose.

They knew what they were talking about, but they were in error because they didn't know the scriptures scriptures and they didn't know the power of God. Maybe a better way to say that is they didn't know the scriptures as well as they thought they did.

And that is the rub. Because after Jesus shows them that they don't know what they're talking about as well as he thinks, as well as they think they do, they get madder at Jesus.

As opposed to Paul who actually makes the change. And what's the difference? See, the difference for us is this.

[ 18 : 17 ] There is a well-known writer who talks about leadership and change. His name is Ronald Heifetz. He's a Harvard law professor. He's not a law professor. He's a Harvard professor. And what he says in a book is this.

Is that people don't really resist change as much as they fear loss. I want you to hear this again. People really don't resist change as much as they fear loss.

And what does he mean by that? Is that when something comes and changes in your world? Something is different. What happens is that makes us put our defenses up and make us fight back against it is we feel like something is going to be lost.

So let's look at the Saul piece. So Saul's walking along the road and he thinks he's got it all figured out. Right? What does he lose in that? He loses his sense of who he is as a Pharisee.

He loses his sense of security and thinking well here's how I know God here's how I understand God and because I'm in this place now I got it all figured out but wait here comes Jesus and telling me that I got to let that go because Jesus is telling me this is the truth.

[ 19 : 39 ] That is a loss. Whereas the Sadducees same deal. Jesus shows them hey you didn't see it this way did you?

And he shows them that their understanding of resurrection is off in the part of the Bible that they want. In the part of the Bible that they like. When he says God says I am the God of Jacob I am the God of Abraham I am and he says because he is talking about people in the present tense I am their God then we know that they lived all those times ago so there must be something to this resurrection thing.

And they don't know what to do with that. They don't know what to do with it but they also don't like being exposed and embarrassed. They don't like the idea that well I may have to give something up and admit I was wrong in front of all these people.

They don't resist change so much as they fear loss. How about you?

What is it that God may be showing up in your life and saying hey have you done it this way? Have you thought about it like this? And maybe you're just holding on to something with both hands super tight.

[ 21 : 13 ] God because that's our deal guys. That's who we are. That when we say yes to Christ it is not the end of our story.

We know that to be true. That when we say yes to Christ it is the start of our journey with Christ. Right? That Jesus works on us, teaches us, keeps molding and shaping us into who he wants us to become.

And what do you think that means in practical terms? That means that well maybe one thing you thought about this way Jesus is going to say well maybe you ought to think about it like this. Maybe this thing you used to do Jesus is going to say no you can't keep doing it like that.

You need to do it like this. That is all change. All of it. And because we feel how we feel about changes.

The question is will we go with it when Jesus is doing that in our lives? Because if we can't hear that from him, if we can't move with him as he goes in these different directions, if we are going to sit and push back and fight every time he says no let me help you, being the parent of three, when they were small I dealt with my fair share of falls and cuts and bruises.

[ 22 : 48 ] You ever tried to put a band-aid on a toddler? I see there's people who know what I'm talking about. Okay? You see where I'm going with this.

the question is how do you let Jesus make those changes in your life?

Will you keep fighting, resisting, running away even though it's Jesus? See the thing is this, is that everybody we've talked about in this sermon series, Mary Magdalene, Peter, Thomas, the disciples on the way to Emmaus, everybody had their life profoundly and inalterably changed because of their encounter with the risen Christ.

They became different people on the other side of it because of who Jesus is and what Jesus taught them, showed them and opened up in their souls. and the thing is, is that we like to say the same thing, right?

That when we had our moment with Christ, when we said yes to Jesus, we used those words, we used those stories, I'm not who I used to be, right?

[ 24 : 15 ] I've been changed. We say all sort of stuff like that. Church, if the Jesus who brought you to where you are now and made those changes in your life and made that good stuff that you are so proud of happen because you said yes to Jesus, if that's your story, tell me why if Jesus shows up now and says I want you to make a change, you think that he's going to steer you wrong.

Maybe y'all didn't hear the question. If Jesus who brought you from there to here and that was good, okay, and he shows up now and says I want you to follow me over here, I want you to change like this, what makes you think that now he's going to steer you wrong.

Because if that's your story, then why are you fighting him as he's trying to make changes? Change is hard.

We're not going to say it just magically becomes easy, it becomes easy to swallow, it becomes easy to digest, and all these new habits just happen. That is not the deal.

Like I said, check your own story. How many of those changes that Jesus made in your life just happen like that? but they did happen, didn't they? And I'm willing to bet that as you sit here, your testimony is that they were worth it.

[ 26 : 10 ] That your life is better because you said yes to Jesus. And if that is your story, then when Jesus shows up now, when Jesus shows up tomorrow, tomorrow, why would you resist the changes he wants to make?

Because that is exactly what Nancy was talking about. That process is this big fancy church word called sanctification. We become more and more like him.

That's what it is. So when you look at your life right now, those things that you hope will be different, those things that you wish Jesus would do, those things that you hope will be better tomorrow because they're struggles today, those are changes, folks.

And when you want those changes to happen, when Jesus shows up and is ready to make them, and when Jesus shows up and wants to change something you didn't ask him to change, will you love him enough?

to let him. Because if you know that he has brought you this far on the way, and it has been good, let him love you enough to keep taking you on the way.

[ 27 : 46 ] Amen and amen. loving God, thank you for the gift it is to know that you continue to mold us into the people you know we can become. Lord, we thank you that you don't give up on us even when we resist and fight.

Help us to keep our eyes open to what you are doing and the ways we see you at work. Lord, help us keep our minds open so that you will continue to teach us new things, show us things in a different light, and we can see the world the way you see it.

Lord, help us to tap into the gifts you pour into us. Help us to listen for your call so that we will walk where you tell us to go, that we will do the work you have given us to do, no matter how hard it seems, no matter if it's so unexpected and we're like, no, God, that's not what I asked for, but we know it is right.

Lord, God, let us not be afraid of that dangerous prayer. When we say, use me, or even what we say so often, and take for granted that your will be done.

Lord, God, let us surrender our hearts, let us surrender our stubborn and sometimes arrogant beliefs, and let us simply say, your will be done. Your will will take us places we don't expect.

[ 29 : 13 ] Your will will ask us to do things we are not ready to do. But Lord, if you have taught us anything, if you have shown us anything on this journey, is that you love us in spite of that, and your way is the way.

Let us trust you enough to follow. Amen. Amen. That song speaks such powerful truths to us. I'm going to invite everybody to take a seat.

We've got a couple of announcements. If you don't want to stand for them, that's fine. You can keep standing if you like. All right, Teresa, come on up. So, first thing we want to talk about is the celebration for Pastor Jennifer, and Teresa is here from our SPRC.

She's going to fill you in on some details. Hi there, I'm Teresa, and what an amazing sermon to precede this announcement, talking about just not fearing change because of the loss.

And as Pastor Jennifer moves on to her new appointment, we wanted to have a farewell celebration for her, and it is going to be Saturday, May 18th at 6 o'clock, following the Saturday evening service.

[ 30 : 30 ] Just light refreshments, just a time for us to celebrate all of the ministries that she has participated in here, and to wish her well as she moves on.

There will be a spot on our website where you can upload any photos, because we would like to chronicle her time here for her. There's also a sign-up in the connection site for food.

We're just going to do light refreshment reception, so if you could sign up for that. And also, start looking next week for a memorial book, so that if you just want to, if you can't make the celebration, you just want to write her a letter, or if you just want to get me one, and I can slip it inside, just so that she knows the love and support of our congregation here.

So, thank you so much. Thank you, Ben. Okay. Also, coming up this week, we have Feeding Hope meal on Wednesday. And so, Sandy has put out the call for a little more help, and so if you want to be a part of Feeding Hope, where we go downtown and feed some folks who are unhoused, all you have to do is talk to Sandy.

If you don't know who Sandy is, Sandy, just wave your hand real quick. And so, you can get in touch with her directly if you'd like to be a part of that ministry. Also, Bible studies are in full effect.

[ 31 : 47 ] We also have some other things that are laid out pretty clearly in the bulletin for you. So, your bulletin is a resource. Do not hesitate to use it. Final thing. Many of you are aware that the general conference was just adjourned this past week.

There's a lot of information out there that some of which is completely false, some of which is also completely accurate. And trying to sort through all of that has been a challenge for some folk, I know.

For those of you who have social media, if you're part of our fellowship group, I posted a video from our bishop that lays out the truth of what happened at the general conference. I would advise everyone to watch that.

However, that being said, for those of you who want to hear more, want to follow up more, I'm going to be having some conversation times where we can come and sit and I will walk you through what all of it means.

And so, I haven't scheduled those yet, but I want you to look forward to them. Because as I said, there's a whole lot that's being said that is simply not true. And so, if you, you know, to make sure you hear the accurate stuff, either come to those times of conversation, listen to the bishop's video, and even if you have questions, we'll talk about those things on the other side.

[ 32 : 58 ] But for now, please, do not fall for a lot of what people are spinning and seeing out there. People, there are deliberate attempts to mislead United Methodist people.

I'm just going to say that for a fact. So, if you want to know what's really going on, talk to me, listen to what the bishop has said, and we will see you through it. Okay? So, that's it.

Watch for those times to talk. For now, I invite you to stand as we receive our benediction. loving God, we do know that you are with us.

And no matter how crazy and how strange it feels, that you will always lead us through. You will ask us to do things different. You will ask us to make changes.

But as our lives are already a walking testament to, you are worth it. And so now, in the name of God, our King and Creator, in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord, and Redeemer, in the name of the Holy Spirit, our advocate and sustainer, may God bless us now, as we leave to love and serve God and all God's children and all God's people said, Amen.