
A Touch of Jesus

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • Dominos • 19 July 2026

Acts 9:1-9



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

This is one of the great stories in the Bible, about Saul, walking towards Damascus, and encountering Jesus Christ. That description of him as “still breathing threats and murder” is such a great one. I always think of him with a mean scowl on his face and his fists clenched, muttering under his breath and glaring at anyone he meets. I can hear him shouting “Get out of my way!”

Because Saul was serious. He wasn’t going to Damascus to find out about this new Jesus movement, which people were calling “the Way.” He wasn’t going there so that he could report back to the Jewish leaders on what was going on. He was going there to arrest the new Christians, to put them in chains, to march them back to be tried by the synagogue leaders. The Bible tells us that

Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. (Acts 8:3)

He didn't care if they got hurt. He had stood by calmly as Stephen was stoned to death (Acts 7:54-60). Whomever he caught was going to suffer, and would receive no mercy from Saul.

And then, walking down the road to Damascus, "minding his own business," as they say" — Jesus struck him. Literally, he was struck blind. Jesus reached into the world and touched the one he wanted, the one who was going to help get the whole Jesus movement going. He would change his name to Paul, and go on to set up a whole string of new churches.

But why Saul? What possible reason could Jesus have to choose the very worst persecutor of Christians? Even besides the fact that Saul had been arresting Christians right and left, what made him suitable for the work that Jesus would put him to? Saul was, by his own admission, a great Jew. Here is what he writes in Philippians 3:

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless. (Philippians 3:4-6)

He was a super-Jew, a Jew among Jews. He had the ancestry, the legal knowledge, the zeal; he was a Pharisee; he obeyed every little bit of the law of Moses, and was proud of it. He was a righteous Jew, and hated what Jesus was trying to do. What he saw as blasphemy made him furious. No one had to make him go after the new Christians; he volunteered. I bet he put more Christians in prison than anybody.

And so Jesus, looking for someone to lead the Gentiles to Christ, chose — him?

In a few moments, Saul's life does a 180. He is completely turned around. At first, of course, he is simply stunned and bewildered, and it takes him three days to recover from the shock. But then he gets right to work. We are told that he went out immediately to the local synagogues and began preaching Jesus as the Messiah. He called Jesus the Son of God. All his former anger at the Christians was gone. He was a new man, dedicated wholly to the service of God in Jesus Christ.

Which just goes to show that God can use anybody to accomplish his purposes. We know that God does use us. We are God's hands and feet and voices. God loves working through his people. Why did God invent the church for teaching people the way of Jesus? God could easily just plant the faith into everyone's hearts, and there'd be no need for us to go out and spread the Gospel. Actually, God does plant things in our hearts. Way back in the Old Testament, when God

made a promise to Israel to be their God and for them to be his people, God said:

This is the promise that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

(Jeremiah 31:33)

His law is written in our hearts. For some reason this reminds me of Toy Story, where Woody has Andy's name written on the bottom of his boot. And it's not so different; Woody was Andy's toy, and we are God's people. And God put his law in our hearts, so that we know right from wrong.

But God does not want to just *make* us do things. God wants us to work *with* us. Even with Saul — who changed his name to Paul — what Jesus did was to appear to him and tell him what he wanted him to do. That was enough to bring a new understanding to Saul, after which Saul wanted to follow Jesus. All of Saul's natural talents were unchanged, but they were now focussed on helping the new church and not on destroying it.

Could what happened to Saul happen to you or me? Of course it could. It did happen to me. Not as dramatically, of course — unfortunately. If I had seen a blazing light and been struck blind for three days, my sermons would basically be written for the next thirty years. But Jesus did reach out to me, and change me from a closed-minded non-believer to an active and grateful Christian, and eventually (amazingly enough) a preacher. And Jesus can touch you too.

Maybe he has already.