

Acts 9:1-31 - DiCicco

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[0:00] I was talking before the service with some others who mentioned that today is the first day of summer, which is true by the calendar.

It's also the longest day of summer, so we might as well have our longest sermon of the year. Seems like a good way to start. It caught me by surprise that today is the first day of summer. I think I knew that somewhere in the back of my head. But one thing I really love about summers is the crazy summer storms that we get, which we got a lot of last week, five in a week or a couple weeks ago.

And one moment in particular from the last few weeks stands out because I walked outside at about 8 p.m. And it was like walking into a bath of orange light.

It was just everywhere. And we'd been sitting inside watching these storms roll by. And I had gone to the front window to check out the purple clouds down south and to the side window to look at the red clouds out west.

[1:04] And it was amazing. But walking out into it was a little bit different because when I stepped out to take the trash, it took me a full couple of seconds to get my bearings. It was actually disorienting how incredibly orange the world was.

I spent about a minute staring at my neighbor's tree because the greens on the leaves were just so green. And then I started looking around my lawn because this orange light also really brought out how much dead grass there was all over the lawn.

And it brought things into a contrast that wasn't really there before. And as I was preparing for the sermon this week, I was struck by the similarities of my experience in my backyard and the experiences of Saul and Ananias and all the Christians in our passage this morning.

Because we all see the world through a filter. And whether Christian or not, we view the world sort of tinged with the color of our own perspectives.

What struck me was that for Saul and these others who follow the call of Jesus, what our text calls disciples, is that to follow the call of Jesus is to see the world in a whole new light.

[2:18] And our passage puts this into sharp focus. It's just as true for us as it was for Saul. When we follow the call of Christ, our whole life becomes tinged by the light of the gospel.

And as we hear this story this morning, the same truth is presented to us as was presented to the first readers of this book. To follow the call of Christ is to see the world in a whole new light.

I'll admit this is not an earth-shattering insight. I don't have anything particularly profound to say this morning, except that as I have read and reread and meditated on this text, I've been challenged by just how true this was for Paul and for Ananias, for the believers in Damascus and Jerusalem.

And their example forced me to ask myself the question, do I really see things that differently? If I was a Christian in Damascus comparing myself to Saul before he met Jesus on the road, I think it would be pretty easy to answer that question, yes.

Yes, I see things pretty differently than this murderous person who was coming to take Christians away and put them in prison. Because up until verse 3, Saul is the last person we would expect to become a Christian.

[3:39] Imagine I had a box up here on the platform, and I had scribbled across the front in Sharpie. Imagine you could also read that. Unlikely convert.

Saul of Tarsus would be the first name we put in that box. If we fast forward 2,000 years, I wonder who we would put in that box. What kinds of people or what person comes to your mind who would fit in there?

I mean, we all have some category of people who fall into that box in our minds. The least likely to... Maybe you might put yourself in that box. Anyway, the point is that if I compare myself to the ones

who I think are least likely to convert, then it makes perfect sense that I would view the world in a totally different light.

But what if we flip this? Imagine the person who is most like you. In personality, in disposition, in values, or politics, but not a Christian. It's the person who is most like you, but not a Christian. How differently do you see the world from that person? How much of a tinge has the light of the gospel given to your outlook on life? It may not be a particularly profound insight, but I want to walk through this passage and just highlight three things in this narrative that confront us with this claim. [4:58] That to follow the call of Jesus is to see the world in a whole new light. We see this first in the undeserved call of a man named Saul in verses 1-9.

Secondly, as a follower of Jesus, obediently displays an uncomfortable compassion in verses 10-19. And finally, the new light of the gospel is shown in the example of uncompromising commitment to Christ in 20-31.

Let me pray for us before we come to the text again, because we need the Lord's help to do this. Almighty God, would you give me the tongue of one who has been trained by you, that I may with a word know how to sustain those who are weary.

And would you give us the ears of those who have been taught by you, that we may hear the words of eternal life. Through Christ Jesus, our Lord, we pray. Amen.

Amen. Amen. The light of the gospel illuminates this truth, that to follow the call of Christ is to see the world in a whole new light.

[6:07] And that the call of Christ is by its very nature undeserved. Our text is one of those places in scripture where this undeserving call is brought into sharp focus. If you were here last week, we saw that the gospel is a message of grace.

Grace that expands as the church flees persecution in Jerusalem, and it spreads throughout the ancient world, even to the point of Samaria. It expands to a sinner named Simon.

It expands even to an outcast. And now Luke, in verse 1, reintroduces us to a character we met before. He was there when the persecution that scattered the church was started.

Saul of Tarsus was there when the very first Christian was killed. But Saul wasn't just there when the persecution started. He approved of it.

And it was Saul, Luke tells us, that was ravaging the church. Entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. Which is not like, you know, three meals in county jail kind of a thing.

[7:11] This is ancient prison. It's not a good time. Saul had probably been there and had heard the advice that we saw in chapter 5 to just leave this group of Christians alone. Actually, it was his mentor Gamaliel who gave this advice.

Gamaliel said, if what these Christians say is true, then, or wasn't true, if what they say is false, then they'll just fizzle out. We don't have to worry about it. But if what they say is true, then you won't be able to stop them.

You might even find yourself working against God. Well, Saul knew the truth. Saul could see it clearly.

He knew that God was on his side. I mean, he had the very word of God to tell him that God was on his side. And so Saul was passionately pursuing pure worship for the people of God by stomping out these followers of the way, these disciples of Jesus.

I want us to try imagining this is our first time reading the book of Acts. Imagine you don't know who Saul is or who he's going to be. And imagine we really catch what Felipe showed us last week, that the light of the gospel is going out through all the world, shining as grace even toward the sinner, even toward the outcast.

[8:26] And then Luke drops verse 1, but Saul. And what's the first thought that goes through your mind? What do you expect to happen in the narrative? More persecution?

First, it seems like that's where the story goes. Saul has just gotten permission to go house to house in Damascus the way he had in Jerusalem, to drag disciples back from Damascus, to force the followers of Jesus to Jerusalem to be imprisoned.

Saul is the epitome of the enemy of the church. He's the picture of persecution. But then all of a sudden, a light shines from heaven in verse 3, and Saul is confronted with Jesus himself, calling Saul by name.

And if we've been listening carefully, we're primed for what is coming. Because the light of the gospel shines even on sinners, even on outcasts, and now, even on the enemies of the gospel itself.

The light of grace expands to Paul. And as readers, for the first time, who don't know who Saul is, we might think, really? Him?

[9:31] This guy? Imagine how Paul must have felt. He's probably asking the exact same questions. Him? Paul's passionate persecution of the church had been wrong.

These people's claim that this rabbi from Galilee was the Christ had been true? How could Saul have missed this?

Him? Really? Jesus? Saul is confronted with the light of the gospel. And the reality of the resurrection demands a response.

This Jesus calls Saul, first to go and to wait. And to follow the call of Jesus will demand seeing everything differently, which, for Paul, is made painfully clear.

Blinded by the light, led by the hand into Damascus, Saul is left for three days to consider the implications of this experience. That if this Jesus is who he says he is, nothing is the same.

[10:41] And for one, he thought he had seen so clearly, he's been shown that he really is blind and he's made to feel it. The light of the gospel illuminates this truth.

That the call of Christ is by its very nature undeserved. Felipe emphasized for us last week that the message of the gospel is one of grace.

That grace is shown to us not because we are great, but because it is grace. And grace, by definition, is a gift. And so it's undeserved. Do you ever forget this?

There were a couple of moments when I was in my backyard in the orange glow of the sunset that it started to seem normal. Like, my brain was starting to make sense of things, and then I would, I don't know, notice a different wall, and everything would switch back to how strange this thing was. But do you ever forget that the undeserved call of grace colors everything? Do you ever get too used to it? Like, sometimes we can think too highly of ourselves as Christians.

[11:54] I mean, we have heard the call of Christ. We have followed. We have cornered the market on truth. But we can forget this is all undeserved. We, like Paul, were rebels, enemies of God, who were shown grace in the cross of Christ.

Paul, in hearing this call, is shown grace, shown to be blind without the light of the gospel. And so we, as Christians, who have been shown this same undeserved grace, ought to be humble.

Christians, out of all people on this planet, should be the most humble. The call to follow Christ is undeserved. On the other hand, we can think too little of ourselves.

We can push humility too far. I mean, we sing amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. We can focus so much on this wretchedness that we color the way we see things in a different light.

Have you heard this preach before, that we can never think too lowly of ourselves? I mean, yes, next to God, we are poor and pitiable, but because he's the one who made us, we have worth and value.

[13:14] So not only does the undeserved call call us to humility before others, it calls us to recognize honor in ourselves. There is no one too far gone for grace.

After all, the call is undeserved. And if the light of the gospel can shine on Saul, to follow the call of Jesus is to see the world in a whole new light, starting with yourself.

The undeserved call of Christ kills pride and pity. The light of the gospel colors the way we see ourselves. The undeserved call of Christ should shade our outlook with both humility and honor. Humility before a God who invites us to be his enemies and honor as those who have been invited to be his friends. We may be comfortable with the idea of grace.

We understand it, I think, pretty well. Again, this is not the most profound sermon you'll hear from this pulpit. We might be comfortable with the idea of grace, but how far have we really taken its implications?

[14:30] When we start to feel at home with the idea of grace, I think what happens next in our passage will help stretch us out a little bit. See, because the light of the gospel changes more than how we see ourselves.

There are understandable consequences to this undeserved call. And one of the implications is an invitation to a life of uncomfortable compassion.

Because if the gospel changes the way we see ourselves, then it has to change the way we see others. To follow the call of Jesus puts everything in a new light, including the people around us. And the response of Ananias that we see, this uncomfortable compassion in verses 10 through 19, really illuminate this. Because Paul wasn't the only one called in chapter 9.

There's a disciple in Damascus who gets a vision, a 2 a.m. kind of phone call from Jesus. He goes to Ananias and he tells him to go to Saul.

[15 : 34] Now, Ananias had heard about Saul. Apparently his reputation had preceded him. He knows of this radical rabbi from Tarsus. And so his response to Jesus is, really?

Him? Lord, don't you know who this is? That's right there in verse 13. Ananias says, he's here to imprison us.

He's here to capture all who call on your name. But the Lord in verse 15 says to Ananias, go. If we follow the call of Jesus, we have to start seeing the world in a new light.

Because if God is going to extend mercy to his enemies, then the church must be ready to welcome them. See, Ananias is a prime example of what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Plain.

Acts is volume 2 of Luke's book on the life of Jesus and the ministry of Jesus. In the first volume, Luke chapter 6, Jesus preaches this, love your enemies and do good to those who hate you.

[16 : 42] And Ananias paints a picture of this for us. Be merciful, Jesus preached, even as your father is merciful. If Ananias is a follower of Jesus, he has been shown mercy.

If you and I have been shown mercy in this undeserved call of Jesus, how then are we to live?

Mercifully. I think Christians in this way ought to be the most open-minded people around.

There is no one too far from the reach of God. I believe that. I think I probably always have, but how often do we act like it?

Of course, there are people who will never follow the call of Christ, but until God starts turning them fluorescent pink, I can't tell who is who. And then the implication for us is that we ought to have a disposition of expectation.

We ought to be ready for compassion, ready to get a little bit uncomfortable. Do you remember that box of unlikely converts?

[17 : 52] Saul of Tarsus was the first name in there this morning. And as I ran through this exercise myself this week, I could put a lot of people in that box. Specific people or whole categories of people that just seemed to me like the most unlikely kind of person.

This passage shows us that God has a tendency to think outside the box. Just not a theological statement.

It's just a pretty bad paraphrase of Isaiah 55, right? His ways are not our ways. His thoughts are not our thoughts. They're higher than our thoughts. As higher than our thoughts is, are, as the outer reaches of our atmosphere are higher than the dust gathering on the floor of this warehouse even now.

So who came to your mind when we brought out the box? What kinds of people get categorized in your mind as unlikely converts, as the least likely, maybe undeserving or unqualified from the call of Jesus?

My question for us is, are we as a church ready? Are we willing to welcome anyone through those doors who is here to follow the call of Jesus?

[19 : 12] Maybe that's another way we can just ask the same question. Who would make you most uncomfortable if they walked through those doors? And are we ready to show them the same mercy God has shown us?

Are we ready to get uncomfortable? I mean, it is a reasonable response that Ananias has. The idea of compassion on Saul is a little bit uncomfortable, mostly because Saul is in Damascus to capture Christians.

But God says, go, and so Ananias does. And he finds Saul, he lays hands on him, and in verse 17, he says, brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road has sent me so that you may regain your sight.

And be filled with the Holy Spirit. As I was studying this week, a question kept nagging in the back of my mind. Why send Ananias?

Why send somebody? I mean, wasn't the vision on the road clear enough? And if Jesus can do that, why send somebody? What does Jesus gain by sending one of his servants to show mercy to another?

[20:23] Well, how has God worked up until this point in Acts? Does Jesus normally make himself known like he does to Saul in these like private visions, spectacular moments?

Not really. I mean, Acts kicks off with the sending of the Holy Spirit, which is a big moment. But as the Spirit indwells the followers of Jesus, God then makes himself present by the Spirit and empowering his people to do his work.

And the disciples, the followers of Jesus, are sent out to witness to the resurrection of Jesus. I mean, Acts 1 chapter 1, Luke tells the person he's writing to that in the last book, he dealt with all Jesus began to do and to teach.

And the implication is in Acts, Jesus is somehow continuing to do and to teach things, but he does these things and he teaches his gospel through his people. When we could look at Peter at Pentecost, proclaiming the promise of the Holy Spirit, we could look at the name of Jesus, which heals the beggar at the gate of the temple.

We could look at Jesus providing for the needs of his people through his people. At the Spirit of Jesus being poured out on the Samaritans when the apostles come to lay hands on them. We could look at Jesus showing compassion to the Ethiopian eunuch by sending Philip to speak to him on the road.

[21:49] But we have here in Ananias, a perfectly fine example of Jesus getting his work done through one of his people. choosing to go through one of his followers to show his mercy to Saul.

He could have sent Saul another vision and healed him remotely. And that's how we would do things today in our AI generation, right? A Zoom call, a direct deposit, and telehealth.

Right? Vision, Holy Spirit, healing. Everything would be done. Fine. No need for anyone to get their hands dirty. But Jesus sends Ananias because Jesus gets his work done through his people.

I mean, you can even see this in the accusation of Jesus to Saul. Saul, why are you persecuting me? When you go after my church, you go after me. And by implication, when Jesus wants to show mercy to his enemies, he sends his church.

To be fair, Ananias does also receive a vision. It's also a bit spectacular. But it's what this vision demands of him that's uncomfortable.

[22:57] Yet if the call of the gospel really is undeserved, then we can expect in our own lives the invitation to show compassion ourselves, even when it's uncomfortable.

It's one thing for us to just acknowledge that the grace of the gospel maybe carries the implication of uncomfortable compassion.

It's another thing entirely for us to leave these doors and to actually reach out our hands and help others, to show the mercy of Christ by loving our neighbor in ways that show mercy.

But these two are inseparable. Ananias just can't acknowledge the theological reality that God wants to show mercy. He's sent to show mercy. If you remember back from the very first sermon in Acts, or you have one of those little stickers that we got to put in our journals, Dave said that one of the six key points in the book of Acts is that it challenges our paradigm of generosity, hospitality, and belonging.

And this episode, this uncomfortable compassion in the obedience of Ananias is just one instance of this. And it challenges us to show where we might be called to show the same compassion.

[24:20] I don't know exactly how this might work itself out in your life, but you might. Is there a person who comes to mind who could use compassion from Jesus?

Is there someone you know in need of mercy? Is there a way that you, as one of God's people, as a follower of Jesus, could be that hand that reaches out to the one who needs it?

Or that you could be the one who shares the promise of eternal life in Jesus, even to the most unlikely, even to the least expected, even to an enemy? The undeserved call of the gospel has implications.

And one of those implications is this invitation to an uncomfortable compassion. That's what we see given to Ananias and really to all who follow Jesus. You see the same thing in the churches at Damascus and again in Jerusalem a little later.

It's an invitation to all who follow Jesus because to follow Jesus is to see the world in a whole new light. We see ourselves differently. We see others differently. The light of the gospel also forces us to see the whole world differently, to see everything else in a new light.

[25:42] What we see in the rest of the chapter in verses 20 to 31 really sets this up for us. We see Paul's uncompromising commitment to Christ. So you can see because Saul goes from persecuting

the church to proclaiming Christ in the space of about a centimeter.

Saul rises and is baptized. He takes food and is strengthened and then he's with the disciples and proclaiming Jesus in the synagogue. Once the light of the gospel shines on Saul he sees everything differently.

Christ has colored everything and the light of the gospel brings things into contrast. Paul can't keep running in the same direction. Neither can he keep this light to himself.

If the resurrection is true then it changes everything. If Jesus is the Christ it changes everything. If Saul was wrong before then so is everyone else who was on his side when he left Jerusalem.

In the very synagogues that were the target of his persecution Saul steps in and I would imagine they were expecting him to I don't know side with them but when Saul steps in he starts preaching that actually this Jesus that he's here to persecute is actually the Christ.

[27:03] Something has changed in between Jerusalem and Damascus and Saul is confounding all his new opponents by proving that Jesus was the Christ. Did you see that in verse 22?

He confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ. This is the very message the apostles had back in chapter 5. Jesus is the Christ. And Saul is so good at this that the Jews in Damascus who thought they were getting an ally plot to kill him.

Saul is too effective not only because he reads the scripture now through the lens of Christ with the rest of the apostles but because there's something really powerful about the kind of turn he has made.

they plot to kill his life and he has to escape they let him down through a basket and he escapes Damascus and makes his way to Jerusalem where the Christians respond just like Ananias did they don't believe it at first they think this is some kind of double agent sort of thing two things convince them first Barnabas vouches for Paul he tells them that he really did make a change he preached boldly for Christ in Damascus and then secondly Paul displays this change there in Jerusalem and is still passionately preaching Christ in Jerusalem and not just in back corners but as passionately as he pursued the Christians before he preaches Christ now he preaches to those who were his friends to recognize this Jesus as Lord this Jesus as Christ Saul cannot stay the same he has heard the call of Jesus and to follow the call of Jesus is to see the world in a whole new light if he was wrong before then so are all his old allies so now he tries to convince them of this message because to borrow a quote from a couple of

Methodists the message which sustains the church is not for itself alone but for the whole world the church is the means is God's means of a major offensive against the world but for the world and Saul has seen the light and he cannot be silent he speaks out against his old world but not in judgment not in pride not the same way he persecuted the church but for the sake of the world Saul speaks out as one who has seen the light of the gospel it's like what we heard earlier in the gospel reading Jesus said I have not come to bring peace but a sword there's a real offensive to the Christian message there's there is truth at stake the gospel is in one way against the world but on the other side of that it is for the sake of the world our gospel passage concluded with whoever finds me finds life whoever will follow me has life lose yourself for my sake and you will have it the light of the gospel has implications and we like

[30:22] Paul must be radically for the world uncomfortably compassionate yet we cannot give up an uncompromising commitment to Christ where the world is against Christ we are against the world against the world for the world ready to have compassion for everyone but refusing to compromise for anyone and the outcome of this kind of commitment is what we see in the final verse God uses his people to do his work even to show mercy to his enemies to shine the light of grace on their opponents that's what we see in verse 31 so the whole church had peace and was being built up and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit it multiplied as we close let me just say it's easy to read Acts and see the special work of God these really incredible things that we probably shouldn't expect to see in a one-to-one kind of way today our passage is kind of one of those places

I would guess that most of us here were not called to faith the way Paul was I mean there are Damascus road kinds of Christians right whose life before and after Christ are as different as night and day but for others especially for those of us who have grown up in church it's more like the difference between morning and afternoon or 11 55 a.m.

and 12 05 p.m. there's a difference one is morning one is afternoon I mean some of you are growing up in church right now some of you teenagers you middle schoolers you might not relate to

Paul's day and night experience I know I didn't still don't if to follow Jesus is to see the world in a whole new light what do I do if I feel largely unchanged if I haven't had this I was blind but now I see moment I want us to look at Saul again actually how different is he really he switched sides so to speak but he's the same person isn't he you could even say his goals haven't changed much at all he's still passionately pursuing pure worship for God's people it's just that the light of the gospel has changed what that means he's still the zealous and passionate person he was before the difference is that now he sees the world by the of the gospel there's a cross colored tinge to the way he views reality so if if like me sometimes you struggle to think of yourself in terms of a day and night kind of change be encouraged because

Saul stayed Saul he didn't become this new different person in the way that we sort of expect or we see in movies sometimes right to think that he became!

! God took who Saul was and used him in a new way in fact I think it's a mistake for us to think that God only started working in Saul once Jesus called to him on the road when Jesus says that Saul is his chosen instrument it's not as if God chose him in the last week because he realized a problem that needed fixing and he decided to use Paul to his own advantage no God had been preparing Saul his whole life for this moment to follow the call of Christ to see the world in a whole new light and it doesn't matter how dramatic the change was what matters is that we see the world by the light of the gospel what matters is that we have this uncompromising commitment to Christ that we stand against the world for the world we stand for the world because the call of Jesus is not just for us but for the whole world it's for the world because

[34 : 32] Jesus shows his mercy through his people and so what matters is our might demand this gospel demands this because all who have followed the call of Jesus have followed an undeserved call we are a people marked by grace and it colors the way we see everything to follow the call of Christ is to see the world in a whole new light so friends let's live each day by the light of the gospel would you pray with me almighty god would you continue to open our eyes that we might see you open our hearts that we might have the compassion that you have and open our hands that we might show the mercy that you have shown to us Christ

Jesus our Lord amen