

I. Introduction

- A. Welcome to part 7 in our Summertime Scripture Stories series. I hope you're having a great summer, and that Neighborhood is a part of what's making it great. Let's get right into our story for today.
- B. I invite you today to think with me about:
 - 1. The Stubborn One

II. *Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. (Acts 9:1, 2)*

- A. This is the day the lights went on for a man named Saul.
- B. The time is two thousand years ago. Jesus was crucified. Jesus rose again. Jesus went up into heaven.
- C. Now, on earth, his little band of followers is multiplying. Hundreds of people were beginning to put their faith in him. These people were gathering in little groups they called churches. Many of them were Jews, because, well, Christianity sprang out of Judaism, historically. But to be more accurate, Judaism sprang out of Christianity, theologically.
- D. But either way, there were lots and lots of people gathering to learn more about Jesus, the Son of God, and to worship him. So this is the situation.
- E. Meet Saul. He will one day be called Paul, but now he is Saul. Saul stands against the message of Jesus Christ. Saul stands violently against the message of Jesus Christ.
- F. Saul is also an extremely intelligent person. He ranks with the most brilliant teachers and writers of history. He also has been named after the first king of Israel, King Saul, who lived a thousand years earlier.
- G. He is tough, and brilliant, and strong.
- H. Saul hates Christians with a passion. He wants to wipe Christians off the map. So Saul goes on a rampage. He goes around arresting, jailing, punishing, persecuting, and killing Christians, mainly in and around Jerusalem.
- I. When, Saul hears there's a large group in Damascus, he asks the high priest for a warrant for their arrest.
- J. Saul is dedicated to erasing Christianity from the earth. He is obsessed with this. He is a rabid enemy of the church.
- K. Nothing will change his mind. His opinion is set in stone. Don't even talk to him about it. Christian must go.
- L. Saul is the stubborn one, a stubborn as stubborn can be.
- M. I really like the way Christians are identified in Acts 9:2. Christians are called "people of the Way."
 - 1. Christians are people of the Way. A road. A pathway. We call it the Grace Pathway. And this leads to lesson number 1.
 - a) *Lesson 1: Every life is a journey and your path is your choice.*
 - 2. We do not believe in determinism. We do not believe in randomness. We do not believe in luck. We believe that conscious choices determine our outcomes in this life, and your destiny in the next. Yes, there are plenty of forces you cannot control. But which path you walk you can control. It's your choice.
 - 3. And above all that, we believe the universe rests in the hands of a caring and powerful God. His oversight, his providence, his planning is involved in everything. That includes the fact that you are here, today, hearing my words. You brought yourself here, yes. But God brought you here too. He has a plan. God's plan is to start your journey on the pathway that leads to life.
 - 4. There are basically in all of history only two ways. One is the way to God, with Jesus. The other is the sum of all the other ways put together — every religion. Every un-religion. Every philosophy. Every form of indifference.
- N. I want to pause here to say I have an agenda for my talk today. I'm being up front about it. My agenda is simple. I would like to invite you to step onto this way of Jesus Christ.
 - 1. This first step is called being saved. This means choosing to trust in Jesus, and all he did on the Cross, to bring you to God. Don't worry. It won't be weird. I won't pressure you. I won't single you out. I won't have you come forward. But I'm giving you a heads up. No pressure.
- O. So, Saul, the stubborn one, is on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians.
 - 1. What happened next?

III. *As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" (Acts 9:3, 4)*

- A. When Saul was persecuting Christians, he was really persecuting Christ... Jesus takes it personally when anybody messes with his people.
- B. I took Josie, my daughter, to tour Baylor University in Waco Tx, one of the schools she was accepted into. It's about a 2 hour drive from Dallas. On the way back to the airport, we made great time. Meaning I drove like a maniac. We got to the airport in really good time.
- C. We turned in the rental car. Grabbed our stuff. And went to the big screens to find what gate our flight was at, but there was something wrong. Our flight wasn't on the screen. No flight was going back to CA at the time on our boarding passes. The flight number wasn't there. The flight time wasn't there. We had rushed and rushed to get to the airport for a flight that simply wasn't there.
- D. We were so confused. Until it hit me. I had driven us to Dallas-Fort-Worth airport. But it turns out that's not the only airport in Dallas. There's also Dallas Texas Love Field Airport.
- E. And it also turns out I had driven us to the wrong airport. But I made good time!
- F. See, our flight was out of Love Field. But I drove us to DFW. And I realized it too late.
- G. I don't know how you define the path you are on. I am sure you think it's good for you. You're choosing it after all.
- H. But what if you've neglected the one path that leads to life?
- I. I think God brought you here today. And I think he brought you here to discover there is another way, another path. A path that will get you where you need to be, and where, on your good days — when you're in your right mind — it's the path you really, really want to be on.

- J. And this is lesson 2:
1. *Lesson 2: God is orchestrating your life and your world to bring to you to the path of abundant and everlasting life in Jesus Christ.*
- K. He is calling you. Today is part of that calling. This is called Providence. Providence is God's invincible, yet gentle, way of working in the world. It's hard to see God's providence, except in the rearview mirror.
- L. And the beautiful thing about Providence is that God doesn't force you onto his path. He works alongside and within your free will choice. God honors that. Your path is your choice.
1. I hope you make that choice today — you don't even have to be ready. Just be willing.
- M. But God is calling.
- N. For Saul, that calling was dramatic. In an epic moment of tough love, God lit him up, blinded him, and knocked him to the ground. Here is this stubborn man groveling on the ground.
- O. And here is this voice from heaven.
- P. Do you know what was the most shocking thing about this? Not the blinding light. Not getting knocked off his horse. Not even the voice from heaven. The most shocking thing happened in the next verse:
- IV. *And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads." (Acts 9:5)*
- A. Who are you?
- B. I... am... Jesus....
- C. Jesus? You mean... Je—sus??? Of Nazareth?
- D. Uh oh.
- E. Well that had to fry his circuits!
- F. Jesus continues... "Whom you are persecuting..."
- G. Uh oh.
1. *Lesson 3: The path you choose is in essence Personal — it is a choice about how you will relate to God through the person named Jesus.*
 - a) This isn't just academic. It isn't abstract. It isn't just theoretical or theological. It's personal.
 - (1) What will you do with the One who loved you, and shed his blood for you, and died and rose again for you, and who is calling you today? What will you do with Jesus? It's personal.
 - (2) You can have all the logic, and all the science, and all the cultural viewpoints in the world, but the question won't go away. What will you do with Jesus? Who is he to you?
- H. Everything changed for Paul on the road to Damascus. As he groveled in self-imposed darkness, God asked him one big question and offered one weird statement.
- I. The question God asked (in v. 4): Why are you persecuting Me? This is not to say that God was his victim, or that God felt threatened. In the biblical language, the word persecuting can also mean prosecuting, like a district attorney. Saul's whole life was a lawsuit against the grace of God.
- J. So God forced Saul-soon-to-be-Paul to consider the sheer ridiculousness of prosecuting his case against heaven.
1. There's Jesus. Sitting on the clouds of heaven. Shimmering in crystal blue robes of righteousness and glory. Angels singing his praise. A throne radiating his splendor.
 2. And he tears a little hole in the veil that separates the heavenly plane from the earthly plane, and lets some of that blistering light shoot through...
 - a) Right on the the head of stubborn Saul.
 - b) And Saul glimpses Jesus in his splendor, and is blinded.
 - c) And Jesus asks the question he asks everyone sooner or later.
 - d) Why are YOU prosecuting/persecuting ME?
 - (1) It's just unthinkable.
- K. Then God served up a weird statement: "It is hard for you to kick against the goads."
- L. The Greek word, *kentron*, could refer to the tip of a spear, the sting of a scorpion or bee, the quill of a porcupine, or to an iron goad to motivate oxen or horses to move along. It was also used metaphorically to refer to any force that would spur action, or incentivize progress.
- M. All life long, your loving Father in heaven goads you toward grace. He uses experiences. Teachers. Scripture. Trials. Blessings. Sermons like this one.
1. *Lesson 4: The sum of your life experiences is a divine conspiracy to hem you into grace.*
- N. God uses both the good he causes, and the bad others cause in and around you to bring you to the end of yourself. He nudges. He pokes. He prods. He goads you along. He proves the lies of artificial happiness. He disintegrates false crutches and foils foolish resistance to grace.
- O. At the end of it all is an encounter in which you say, "Jesus, my Savior." That's the plan, at least. These are the goads.
- P. Saul, the stubborn one, resisted all that.
- Q. We've all done it. We've all kicked against the goads. We're natural-born mules. We are stubbornly determined to save ourselves, and bless ourselves, and serve ourselves by the sweat of our moral superiority.
- R. Thank God that he never gives up.
- S. A life spent kicking against the goads can be summed up in one word: *hard*. "It is hard for you to kick against the goads."
1. It is a seductive path. But at the end of the day, it is not a good path. It is needless drama. Self-inflicted sadness. Frustration. Hypocrisy. Irrationality. And narcissism, because you can't not make yourself your own God. Honest people know all this deep inside.
- T. God sent you to hear me today, so I could say...

1. Stop it. Quit kicking against God. Quit veering of the path. End your resistance.
 - a) You're racing headlong to the wrong airport. A loving God is pleading with you to change course.
 - b) I want to help you do that today.
 - c) Because at the end of the day, your resistance isn't against an idea, it's against a Person.
 - (1) You are resisting a person who knows you well.
 - (2) You are resisting a person who loves you.
 - (3) You are resisting a person who sees your good, your bad, and your ugly... and loves you with a boundless love anyway.
 2. Give up the fight. Just like Saul did...
- V. *So he, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" Then the Lord said to him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one. Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank. (Acts 9:6-9)*
- A. Saul's fight is over.
 - B. He's been calling his own shots all life long. But now, he turns to God. He asks Jesus — what should I do?
 - C. And Jesus tells him. And this is...
 - a) *Lesson 5: All life long, God has been ping-pong-ing you and beckoning you to the path that brings you to him.*
 2. The human heart hungers for a truth, a reality, that is bigger than space and time. We crave something transcendent and eternal. God has "put eternity" in our hearts (Ecclesiastes 3:11).
 3. He has been ping-pong-ing you all life long. Calling out to you.
 4. Wooing you. Beckoning you. Pulling away the distractions, and breaking the crutches, and lifting the blinders.
 5. He did it for Saul.
 6. And I know what you're thinking. You're thinking... I'll believe in Jesus when a) he knocks me off my horse with a blinding light, and b) he speaks to me from heaven.
 7. Okay. He's doing b) right now. What do you think this message is, but God calling out to you?
 8. And, honestly, if you were thinking right, you don't want him to do a). You don't want him to get your attention the hard way.
 - a) So Saul is trembling and astonished. Saul is blinded. And then he's shocked to hear that his posse heard the words from heaven, but nobody saw the vision. Just Saul.
 9. Because when God calls your heart home to him, it's a voice and a time, and a method, and a place customized and designed for you.
 10. Even as I preach, I have to believe that God is tugging at your heart today if you've not yet trusted him.
 11. None of this is an accident.
 12. Saul did that. Let me summarize what happened next.
- D. Ananias
1. God finds a man named Ananias. Ananias is a solid believer. God tells him, Go to this specific house. In this house, you will find a man. He has been blinded. Explain the gospel to him, touch him, and he will be saved, and he will receive back his sight.
 2. God tells all this to Ananias. And then God adds... "One more thing. His name is Saul."
 3. Ananias was no dummy. He knew who Saul was. He pushes back a bit. Saul! God, not me. He's a killer!
 4. But God convinced him, and Ananias goes. Here's how the story ends.
- VI. *And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized. (Acts 9:17, 18)*
- A. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound / That saved a wretch like me. / I once was lost, but now am found / Was blind but now I see.
 - B. This is how the greatest missionary, and the most brilliant thinker the world has ever seen, was born into the family of God.
 1. Ananias told him how Jesus was the Lamb of God, how he died on the cross to take away the sin of the world, and how he rose again. And how salvation wasn't a reward for keeping all those laws and rituals. It was a gift just for believing.
 2. And suddenly it all made sense for him. The whole Bible, which he had studied so diligently, snapped into focus.
 3. And he saw Jesus the Savior on every single page.
 - C. In the ancient world, people would often change their names to reflect their life's greatest accomplishment.
 - D. Saul changed his name to Paul. Saul was the name of a king.
 - E. But Paul — well, Paul means little guy. When he finally understood the magnitude of the love and grace God gave him, his arrogance melted away, his self-made status melted away, his moral superiority and self-righteousness all melted away.
 - F. God was everything in his salvation. He was nothing.
 - G. And they said, Saul, what should we call you? Every time we say your name, all the Christians freak out!
 - H. And he said, Call me little guy.
- VII. The Stubborn One
- A. I'm kind of playing a trick on you today.
 - B. I called my talk The Stubborn One, because that's what Saul was. And that's what he had to rise above in order to be saved. Saul is definitely the stubborn one.
 - C. But there's another person in the story. This other person is even more stubborn than Saul.
 - D. He wouldn't quit.
 1. He wouldn't give up.
 2. He wouldn't stop trying, even when everyone else had turned their backs.
 3. You can tell him to get lost, but he'll never give up on you.
 - 4.

5. You can turn your back on everything he holds dear, but he'll keep waiting at the head of the road, looking for your return.
6. You can insult him, but he'll forgive you.
7. You can hate him, but he'll still love you.
8. You can offend him, but his compassion for you will never flicker.
9. You can ignore him, but he'll never stop his care for you.
10. If you hide, he'll find you.
11. If you run, he'll follow you.
12. If you nail him to a cross, he'll stretch out his arms to embrace you.
13. You can turn away from him, but he'll never turn away from you.

a) *Lesson 6: The love of God is a stubborn love and he will never give up on you.*

- E. What is keeping you from receiving Jesus, the stubborn one, today?
- F. God is chasing you with his grace. Stop running like a maniac and let him catch you. I am here today to declare to you that God is a fully devoted follower of you, and will be till you die.
- G. The Psalmist wondered, "Where shall I run from thy Spirit?" Nowhere. God is your fully devoted follower, and will be till the mountains crumble into the sea.
- H. And today, he wants to do for you what he did for Saul. He wants to be your Savior.

VIII. Invitation

1. I could go on, but it's time to call for the decision.
2. You see, the sad truth is that we all start life on the wrong path. But there comes a decisive moment step on the pathway and ask God to save us.
3. This is your decisive moment. I'm going to talk you through the steps, right now.
4. I won't embarrass you. No coming forward. I won't single you out. It's just a silent prayer.
5. God loves you. Christ died for you. Christ rose again for you. He is alive reaching out to you right now. Let us go straight to his pathway.
 - a) The path of forgiveness of sins.
 - b) The path of freedom from guilt and shame.
 - c) The path of power to live the life you were created for.
 - d) The path of the certainty of heaven and everlasting life.
- (1) If you believe Jesus can do those things for you, switch paths.
6. I'm going ask you to bow your head and to close your eyes. The reason I ask this is to create a quiet space for yourself. And to extend that courtesy to the people sitting around you.

B. Prayer

1. ADMIT: God, I admit I'm on the wrong path. I've been here longer than I should be. I need you. I have let you down. I have not followed your ways. I have created gone my own way, away from you. And I admit it.
2. BELIEVE: But God I believe you sent Jesus to fix all this. I believe he is your son. I believe he died on the Cross for me. I believe he rose again for me. I believe he is alive right now, calling out to me. He is my pathway, my way to you now and forever, God, I don't get how all this works, but I'm telling you as best as I can that I believe in Jesus.
3. CHOOSE: So God, right now, I choose to receive Jesus, and step into his way. I choose to trust in Jesus as my only hope. I'm asking you as best as I can, because of Jesus, please save me. Please forgive me. Please make me your child forever.