

Pastor Kyle Mercer
Pray. Guess. Go.: The Conversion of Paul

September 10, 2023

Series: One

Acts 9:1-22

**BIG IDEA – GOD CAN SAVE ANYBODY, AND EVERYBODY NEEDS
JESUS**

All right. Do you guys want to see a magic trick really quick? No. Guys, it's so embarrassing. I was in my early 20s still doing magic tricks. Anyway, it was what God used to build a relationship with Brian. The most important thing about that video and that story... I am so humbled that God used me in the life of another person. It never gets old. That's the most exciting thing to happen in your life: for God to use you to reach somebody else.

I've had the opportunity over my life to lead several people to Christ, and it's one of the great honors of my life, but, honestly, it has been a long time since I've done that. One of the reasons we're launching the ONE Initiative... This is an initiative about repentance in our church. When I talk about repentance, you probably think, "I need to repent of some dark, secret sin." I'm talking about repenting of our lack of reaching other people for Jesus.

What happened is, a couple of years ago, we started an initiative called the *FORWARD Initiative*. Thank you to those of you who were part of it. You gave generously. The FORWARD Initiative was about generous giving. The ONE Initiative is about missional living. The FORWARD Initiative got us our new home and hub, and we're hoping to be in there in December. We'll give you more updates. That was great, and that helped us go deeper and wider and grow stronger. Okay.

The ONE Initiative is about missional living. Here's the whole thing about the ONE Initiative. I'm going to try to say this every week. Here's the goal. When we had the FORWARD Initiative, we said, "Here's the goal, guys. We want you to meet with God and have an experience. We want 100 percent participation of everyone who calls

Two Cities Church home to give a one-time gift above and beyond normal tithes and offerings." That was the FORWARD Initiative.

There's no financial component to the ONE Initiative. Here's what we want. We want you to take personal risks to bring Christ to one relationship. We understand that the only way... I think this is true whether you're talking about world missions or church planting or Dad and Mom leading their son or daughter to Christ. It happens the same way. You know you've gotten to the bottom of something when it applies everywhere.

Here's how it happens every time, all the time. The gospel moves forward one relationship at a time and one gospel risk that I'm going to take in that relationship that I don't know what's going to happen. We're asking you to do that with us. Here's what's happening, guys. We are so grateful for how our church has grown. We're so grateful for all of the new people who are coming around, but there are three types of new people who come to your church, just to bring us all together on this.

The first type of new person comes to your church because they left another church in your city. That has happened to us, and that happens to a lot of other churches. People leave churches to come to your church instead. That's one way the church grows. Praise God. Another way the church grows is people leave other cities because they move to Winston-Salem, and when they get to this city, they need a church in that city. So, they move from another city, and they come to your church.

Guys, it's no accident that the fastest-growing churches in the nation are often in the fastest-growing cities in the nation. People are like, "Wow! That church is exploding in Charlotte." Charlotte has 20,000 people moving there a month. Most of the churches that are growing in Charlotte are growing because people from California move to Charlotte and need a church.

We're thankful that we've had people come from other churches and come from other cities. So, people transfer from other churches and transfer from other cities, but what we want to see happen is people transfer from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of God. Our goal... So, we have a church goal, and we have a goal for you. I'll tell you both of them.

Our church goal is that, going forward, in the future, over the next year and the years to come, 10 percent of the growth in our church would be conversion growth. It's people who do not know Jesus right now, who are not in a church, who do not say they are Christian...in a year from now they're a Christian. We would love for that to be the story of 10 percent of the people who come into our church.

We're so serious about it, guys, that we put this booklet together. If you see Kari Wilson (she's on our staff), thank her. She did the heavy lifting for this entire book. If

you'll grab this book for a second... That book is going to be your passport. We're on a journey together, guys. This is not merely a sermon series. We do four to eight sermon series a year. This is way more than a sermon series. This is an initiative.

I hope your booklet is worn out by the end. I hope you take a ton of sermon notes. I hope you do all of the tools and helps we put in there. I pray that you'll bring this back and put it in your Bible or get an electronic copy if that works more for you and bring it to Community Group. The more important thing, actually, is *this* little card because of what it represents.

This is your version of the card. I want you to write... You don't have to do it in this service; you can do it when you go home. We want you to write the name of just one person. Just one, because if you try to reach everyone, you reach no one. Who's the one person who's far from God and close to you whom God is calling you to tell about Jesus?

We want a culture where everybody... This is what I'm hoping happens by the end: everybody in our church who calls Two Cities Church home is always talking about their "one." I was at a church recently, and that's exactly the culture they had. I met one of the staff guys there, and I found out that his son is getting his MBA at Wake. I said, "Why isn't your son at Two Cities Church? We're connected." He goes, "My son is my one." I realized, "Okay. This guy is trying to reach his son for Christ."

I was at another event, and Pastor Dave was there. We met this guy there, and the guy says to Pastor Dave, "I..." And he points to someone at the other end of the table. He goes, "I was his one." Could you imagine someone saying that to you in a year? They're sitting next to you. They're in your Community Group. "I was her one."

We are trying to have a culture where each person reaches one other person. We're so serious about this that next week we're going to give you the same... You don't have to bring your card back. Put your card in your Bible. Put it wherever you want to put it.

We're going to give you another small card, and next week, we're going to ask you to come up and put it on the stage in a bucket and say, "God, I'm going to do my best and trust you with the rest." We really believe this could be an initiative that transforms our church and transforms our city. So, let's start with prayer.

Lord, would you do it? We want to put up the sail, but you have to send the Spirit. You have to make the wind come. I genuinely believe from Scripture that the only way the gospel goes forward is one relationship at a time, one gospel risk at a time. Lord, would you bring to mind even right now the one person for each person in this room who needs to be their one?

Lord, would you use this series, would you use the book of Acts, which is the church at its birth, which is the church at its best... Would you use the book of Acts to put steel in our spine and a spring in our step, and we would be so eager to live out this mission with you, Jesus? We pray this in your name, amen.

Guys, I am a sucker for a good reality TV show. I've seen all of the episodes of *Undercover Boss*. Have you ever seen that show before? The guy is the CEO and goes undercover, and at the end he reveals, "Actually, I'm the boss," and he rewards people and corrects others. That's a great show.

My favorite reality TV show, which in both the Saturday night and the Sunday morning 9:00 a.m. service almost no one has ever seen... Who here has seen *Extreme Weight Loss*? Put your hand in the air. There is, like, no one who has seen this show, guys. This show is so incredible. This show is so incredible that I was telling my kids about it. I was like, "Hey, we need to watch just a little bit of it." We watched three episodes in a row.

Here's what happens. There's a guy named Chris Powell. He's an incredible guy. Very severely, morbidly obese people write to him. I'm talking about 350-, 450-, 500-pound people. They write to him, and they say, basically, "Will you take me on? I can't help myself. I need to lose weight." He chooses one person per episode because what he does is so comprehensive.

What he does is he always... Tell me if this doesn't remind you of the gospel. He always meets them in the environment in which they're getting fat. So, say there's Tony and Tony eats pizza. He goes, "I'm going to go to the pizza shop, and I'm going to catch Tony eating pizza." So he does this. In fact, a lot of times, he'll bring out the pizza, and Tony sees him, and immediately Tony cries.

Then he says to Tony, "Tony, I choose you." Tony cries. It's like, "Dude, yes." "Get on the plane. We're leaving right now." He takes him to California where they go to this special institute. He has to kind of show them their sin. So, he says, "You have to strip down to your underwear and stand on this freight scale," which is humiliating for them.

It's a massive freight scale, because they're so big they've not been on a scale in forever. He asks them what they think they weigh, and they're always saying way less than what they really weigh because they've not weighed themselves. He makes them stand on the scale, and then at the end, he shows them how much they weigh. "You're 432 pounds. How did you get like this?" And they cry again.

He takes them back to their house, and while they've been gone for about a week, he has the whole house transformed. He puts a weight room in there, a working room.

He gets rid of all of their food, all of their drink. He restocks their fridge, and he says, "I'm living with you for three months." Discipleship. He literally moves in.

He sets quarterly goals, and the average person who goes through this program with him loses half of their body weight in one year. Imagine going from 400 pounds to 200 pounds in a year. They lose so much weight that part of what he gives them as a gift is skin removal surgery at the end.

At the very end, my favorite part of every episode (and I've seen every episode) is they have the big reveal. They invite family and friends. They actually show the picture of them in their underwear back when they were really big, and then they walk out from behind the stage, and it's the new version of them. Everybody goes crazy, and everybody is crying. Why? Because we love life change.

If you'll turn to Acts 9, I want you to see life change on display that's more significant than any *Extreme Weight Loss* episode. We're not talking about external transformation, which is powerful. When you see someone lose 200 pounds, everything about them changes. But when a person meets Jesus Christ and is made into a disciple, it's an internal transformation.

I actually believe what we're going to read today is the second most important event in the New Testament. Obviously, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the first. It legitimizes his life and ministry and tells us that God was satisfied with his death on the cross. So, the empty tomb is in a category of itself.

I would say, after the empty tomb, the conversion of the apostle Paul is the most important event, maybe in all of human history, because it was such a catalytic conversion. Paul is going to go on to write 13 books of the Bible. He's going to go on to do many missionary journeys and plant many churches.

Here's what you need to say about people. At one level, we need to look around this room and go, "Everybody is equal," in the sense of everybody is made in the image of God, so they're equal in value, significance, dignity, and worth, but not everybody is equal in skill, intellect, ability, and how God might use them.

Think about this. This is true for a Christian or a non-Christian. Think about Arnold Schwarzenegger. Did you know Arnold Schwarzenegger was Mr. Universe? I would say that's pretty hard to do. Most of us struggle to get to the gym on a regular basis. He was voted the most fit man in the world. So, that would be good enough. If he just did that, we'd be like, "Life well lived."

Then he goes on to become an actor, and he becomes, at the height of his career, the most sought-after male lead actor in the world, though he's doing movies in his

second language. Well, that's pretty good. If you did one of those two things with your life, you'd be like, "That was a very successful life." Then he goes on to be governor of California.

Here's what I'm trying to tell you: the apostle Paul is the Arnold Schwarzenegger of Christianity. There you go. He is uniquely used by God. You'll be introduced to him here in verse 1. "**But Saul...**" By the way, I'm going to use *Saul* and *Paul* interchangeably because Saul becomes Paul. I'm going to mostly call him Paul.

Here's what I want you to know about Paul. The big idea for this first message is *God can save anybody, and everybody needs Jesus*. Paul actually tells you, "Hey, guys..." He'll say this later. He's like, "Guys, the reason God saved me is to actually show he can save anybody." Why? I want to make a case for a minute that Paul is the most unlikely person to become a Christian.

I want you to think in your life. Who do you know who is literally the most unlikely person to become a Christian? Why is Paul unlikely? First of all, he's wealthy. How do we know he's wealthy? His parents sent him to private school in Tarsus. That's wealth. He's a Roman citizen. That's wealth. He's from the tribe of Benjamin. That's wealth. He's from a Pharisee family. That was wealth. He was a very wealthy guy.

A lot of times, we look at somebody, and if they have money, we think, "Well, they don't need Jesus." It's like, "Yes, they do." They don't *think* they need Jesus. He's not just wealthy; he's very, very smart. I just told you he went to school in Tarsus. It was one of the three best schools in the known world at the time. Not only that. He was a Pharisee. When we think Pharisee, we think religious leader.

Every time you read the word *Pharisee*, I want you to think, in that culture, successful lawyer, because that's what it was. It was somebody who understood the law. I mean, there was no difference between government and church and state and all that. It was like, "I know the law very well, and I know how to apply it to complex situations; therefore, I'm paid very well for that." That's what Paul was.

So, he's very smart, he's very wealthy, and then remember when he says he's a Pharisee of Pharisees? He says that in Philippians 3. He goes, "I'm a Pharisee of Pharisees." We think that means he's saying, "I'm the best Pharisee." That's not what he's saying. He was saying, "Guys, I'm a Pharisee of Pharisees. I am from a family of Pharisees. My dad was a Pharisee, and his dad was a Pharisee, and his dad's dad was a Pharisee."

Okay. Here's what I want you to understand. When you think about Paul, he's the most unlikely person to ever be converted because he has three things going for him

that make it very hard for that person to come to Christ. He's wealthy, he's smart, and he's from a family that believes differently than Christianity and has for a long time.

Then look at what he's doing. He's living a sinful lifestyle. **"But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest..."** That's going to be Caiaphas. **"...and asked him for letters..."** He wants a hall pass. **"...to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem."**

I mean, this guy is passionate. He wants to go and find Christians way up in Damascus. By the way, what happens in chapter 8... This is interesting. Acts, chapter 8, is the first time where persecution moves from the leaders to every Christian being persecuted. Up until Stephen, the apostles and the church leaders are the ones who are persecuted, and then in chapter 8, they start to persecute everyone.

Paul leads the way in this, and he says, "I need letters. I need to go up to Damascus." You can see how violent he is. Most commentators note it's very interesting that he says, "I want to go after men and women." There was kind of a rule back then, like, "Leave the women alone." When it would come to persecution, it was like, "Leave the women alone. Go after the men."

Paul was so angry... This is what happens, by the way, when you give yourself over to sin. You know this. You've had a night like this before. When you give yourself over to sin, you basically become like an animal. I think Paul is at the height of his sinful activity. He is persecuting Christians.

Here's another thing I want to say that I think we need to understand. Paul is sincere about what he believes, but he is sincerely wrong. We live in a time where, in our culture, everyone is like, "Well, if they're sincere..." "Honey, if our daughter is sincere in what she believes, as long as it makes her happy, as long as she really believes it..." It's like, "No!" You can be sincere, and you can be sincerely wrong.

So, here's what happens with Paul. Here's Paul. He's about to head to Damascus, and his whole life is about to be changed. Look at verse 3. **"Now as he went on his way..."** So, he's thinking, "This is going to be another normal day for me." **"...he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him."**

Here's what we're going to talk about for the rest of our time: conversion. I know that's a scary word today. We don't use that word. The only time we use the word *convert* is, like, "How do I go from Celsius to Fahrenheit? Convert that. How do I go from inches to centimeters? Convert that. I'm traveling. I need to convert my currency." We don't use the word *convert*. I want to talk about what conversion is for a minute.

Conversion is not coercion. We need to say that to the world. We actually do not believe... This is unbelievably freeing for the Christian and should put the world at ease. We do not believe faith can ever be forced. We don't believe that. This is why the Christian state (whatever that means) has never worked. Conversion is a heart transformation, which leads to the second thing: conversion is not being convinced.

You can be convinced that Christianity is true and not be converted. Conversion is when you give all of you to all that Christ is...your mind, will, and emotions. Conversion is not intellectually assenting to doctrine. That's just the mind. Conversion is not having an emotional moment, crying at camp. Sometimes people think, "I'm a Christian because I had this really emotional experience when I was 12." It's like, "I don't think so."

It's not just an act of the will. "I decide. I have decided to follow Jesus." It's actually all three. The mind, the heart, and the will have to come to Christ. Conversion is not changing religions. People do that all the time. "Well, I was Muslim, and now I'm Mormon." Conversion is not changing religions. Conversion is not leaving some religion to join Christianity as a religion. Conversion is "I now have a new relationship with Jesus Christ. I've been converted to him."

Here's what I want to show you also. This is what makes this a little interesting. Paul's conversion is dramatic, to say the least, so I want to talk about what is essential. When we look at Paul, I'm like, "This is what's essential in every person who ever comes to Christ, not what is exceptional with Paul." I don't think anyone here was knocked off their horse, heard an audible voice of the Lord, and was blinded for three days. That's not how we came to Christ.

But, actually, all of the principles are the same, which are these. Here's the first principle of conversion: God meets you where you are in your sin. We have to tell people this. Religion is "Clean your life up." Religion is our reach; the gospel is God's reach down to us. I believe that God... And this is often the story of people's conversion. God reaches them at their lowest moment when they have completely given themselves over to sin.

Paul is the persecutor, the blasphemer. He's about to go kill Christians, and God is going to meet him right where he is. I heard one guy say God is like a good fisherman. He cleans his fish after he catches them. You don't clean yourself up before you come to Christ. That would be like cleaning yourself off before you jump in the shower. The point of the shower is to clean you.

So, the first thing he does is he meets Paul where he is. Paul didn't see this coming. Paul was going his own way. The second thing he does is he gets Paul's attention. See,

the problem is most of us are not thinking about God at all, and before we can ever come to Christ, we have to start to think about God.

There are three ways I see God get people's attention today. There are probably more than three, but the number-one way I see God get people's attention is through a life event. Have you ever seen that? Unfortunately, sometimes it's a very tragic life event. It's like, "Dad died." "My first marriage didn't work, and it ended in divorce." "My daughter was born with severe disabilities."

Sometimes there's a life event, and God gets our attention through it. Sometimes the life event, by the way, is just "I'm in a new season and stage of life that I was not ready for." When's a great time to reach out to somebody to share Christ with them? Usually, when they've entered a new season and stage of life they weren't ready for. They weren't ready for their marriage. They weren't ready to have this kid. They weren't ready to graduate college.

By the way, this is interesting. The most likely time for a person who leaves church to come back to church is when they have their first kid. They grew up in the church, and then they kind of were rebellious. Then they dated that guy or that girl. Then they got married. They didn't have kids for many years, and then they had kids, and they were like, "What are we going to do? Oh my goodness! How am I going to raise my kids?"

The second thing God uses is somebody is really struggling with a sin that has overtaken their life. They are caught in some addiction, and they don't know how to get out of it. This is why Alcoholics Anonymous and all of the "Anonymous" programs are all the exact same. The first thing you have to do is admit that your life has become unmanageable and that you need a higher power. When you can't get yourself out of something, then, for the first time in your life, you might look up.

The third thing God uses is good Bible teaching. Almost everybody's testimony I've ever heard... They finally got in some environment. It could be a friend who did a Bible study with them. It could be a men's breakfast. It could be a podcast a friend shared with them. It could be a church they went to. For the first time, they heard Bible teaching that made sense to them and spoke to their lives, and it woke them up.

So, here's Paul. God gets his attention, and it says a great light came. In fact, Paul tells this story. Paul's testimony is so important it takes up 10 percent of the book of Acts. We get it in chapter 9, but then in chapters 22 and 26, Paul shares it again. When he's sharing it somewhere else, he actually says, "Guys, the light was so bright it was brighter than the sun shining at noonday."

Here's what I think. God gets our attention, and he hits the lights in our lives. Now, sometimes God hits all of the lights. In my life, I feel like that's what happened. I came to Christ over the course of a two-week period of time where I went from not caring about God, the Bible, the church, and never thinking about heaven and hell to being a sold-out believer in two weeks.

Becoming a Christian is both a process and an event. Sometimes God hits all of the lights. Sometimes he uses a dimmer switch. The process is I have to learn that God made me on purpose for a purpose. I have to learn that I'm sinful by nature and choice. I have to learn that Christ lived and died and rose on my behalf. I have to learn that I need to respond in repentance and faith. You could learn that in two minutes or two decades.

So, what happens with Paul is he has this dramatic moment, but I want to show you something. Look at verse 4. ***"And falling to the ground, he 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.'"***

When a person comes to Christ, what they realize is their sin has not been primarily horizontal in nature but is vertical in nature. They realize their sin is not just against other people but their sin is against God. Anybody can feel bad about how they live. That's normal. That's what it means to have a conscience.

Everybody can admit they fall short and they're not who they could be and they don't do what they should all the time and they're not the dad or the husband or the wife or the father or the mother, or whatever, that they could be. It's something completely different to realize, "I've been sinning against Jesus Christ himself." This is what the Puritans used to talk about as *coming under conviction*.

So, Paul has this moment where he meets the real, risen, reigning Lord on the road to Damascus, and he's completely convicted. I want to show you this. If we go to Acts 26:14, we are told a part of this story that Paul tells us later that we don't get to see in Acts 9. I want to show you this. Here's what happens. This is Paul talking about what happened to him.

"And when we..." When he says *we*, it's because there were guys traveling with him. We'll talk about them in a second. ***"...had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language..."*** God speaks to us in a way that we can understand. ***"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads."***

What are the *goads*? The *goads* were really long, pointed sticks farmers would use to poke their oxen when they would be plowing the field. If they stopped or got

distracted or were lazy or were going in the wrong direction, you would poke them or prod them with these goads, and then they would go in the right direction.

Every once in a while, you can imagine, an ox would get a little unhappy that he was getting poked, so he would kick back and hurt himself even more. I know what you're saying. "This sounds a little bit offensive. Is God comparing us to oxen?" I agree. This is very offensive...to oxen. They have never sinned.

Here's what God is saying. I think this is really encouraging. He's saying, "Paul, I have been at work in your life, and you know I've been at work in your life. You've been trying to kick against it." Now, that's interesting, because nobody who looked at Paul's life would have thought that.

This is why I do not think Paul's conversion is as sudden as we think. I think the process started earlier. Why? I think there were at least two goads in Paul's life. The first was Jesus Christ himself. We don't know this for sure, but there's a very good...I'd say more than highly probable...chance that Paul met Jesus Christ during his earthly ministry.

Why do I say that? They're almost the exact same age. They were committed Jews, and all of the committed Jews went to the temple area on the holy days, and Jesus had a time and a ministry of popularity. So, the chance that during his ministry of popularity they were both at the temple and Paul saw him is highly probable. So, that's the first goad.

The second goad, though, and probably the more impactful one for him, was Stephen. If you know Acts 7, the longest chapter in the book of Acts, Stephen preaches an unbelievable sermon on how Jesus Christ is the center of the Old Testament, which, by the way, is what Paul will spend the rest of his life talking about.

So, he hears. Interesting. Is good Bible preaching a goad in a person's mind that's Christ centered? Yes. Then he sees Stephen suffer and die well. Can watching a Christian suffer be a goad in a person's life? "How can they do that? I couldn't do that if I was going through cancer. How do they still have hope?"

Then he watches Stephen forgive his enemies. Goad. Then he watches Stephen pray to Jesus as he dies. Here's the thing, guys. You don't know how God is using you or will use you in the life of your one. Only God sees the goads. It's how the Holy Spirit is using something in that one person's life who's in your life.

For example, say you invite someone to church, and the experience you have of inviting someone to church... You do it, and they go, "Nah, not interested. Thanks for

the invite. Not going to come." They leave, and you get in your car and go, "Dude, that was so embarrassing. I feel like an idiot. I was just rejected."

What you don't realize is they got in their car and thought, "I probably need to go. My mom has been telling me for a long time I should get back in church. Maybe this is a sign. No, it's not." And they go on. Goad. You go to somebody and decide, "I'm going to take a step. I'm going to share something that's on my heart toward them" or "I'm going to share my story with them."

You share it with them, and they seem kind of disinterested. You're like, "Oh, I feel like an idiot." You have no idea how God is using that in their mind and heart. You don't know if they go home and tell their spouse about it. You don't know if they wake up thinking about it. We have no idea. God is working through goads in a million different ways in people's lives.

That's what's happening in Paul's life. Look here. I'm in Acts 22:10. I'm going to go to one more place to show you something. This is the other place. I'm putting the whole story together for us. **"And I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?'"** We don't get this question in Acts 9. We get this question in Acts 22. Paul asked two questions: "Who are you?" and "What should I do, Lord?"

Look at what he says. **"And the Lord said to me, 'Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do.'" That's the exact same thing he says in chapter 9, verse 6. "But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."**

Okay. This is interesting. Unfortunately, we all know this story, but if you think about it, he's saying, "Okay. I spoke to you. I gave you the audible voice. Now go to Damascus, and you'll be told what to do." So, you think, "Okay. I know what's going to happen. He's going to go to Damascus, and then God is going to re-show up and talk to him." That's not what happens.

You go, "Okay. I know what he's going to do. He's going to go to Damascus, and this is what God loves to do: God is going to send an angel." That's not what God does. This is the whole point of this whole series: God always decides to send a person to reach another person. God uses saved people to save people.

I'll show you. We're going to get there in a minute. First, look at verse 7. **"The men who were traveling with him..."** Who, we found out, also fell to the ground. **"...stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one."** Here's what I think is the point of this. There can be people who are in church and who are around the things of God and who hear the gospel, and they can respond...

Two people can be sitting right next to each other, and one can be totally trusting Christ, converted, born again, and the other person can be feeling nothing. Every time our church gathers, like right now, I always know there are two groups of people in here. There are the converted. They're born again. Their mind, heart, and will are the Lord's. Their lives have been transformed. Then there's the crowd.

You can't see the difference as you look around like this. That's why theologians have talked about the *visible* church (that's what we're seeing right now), and the *invisible* church is the true church that's in here that we can't see. So, the travelers represent the crowd. Look at what happens in verse 8.

"Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank." What's that about? So, he's blind for three days, and he doesn't eat and drink for three days? Most of us have not had three waking hours in which we haven't had something to eat or drink. He goes three days.

I think there are a couple of things about this. First of all, when you meet Jesus Christ, it wrecks you and changes you. Like, if I got up here this morning and said, "Guys, listen. It has been a crazy morning. The craziest thing happened to me. As I was getting ready this morning, I was walking across the street, and this massive 18-wheeler truck hit me going 60 miles an hour..."

If I told you that, you wouldn't be concerned. The reason you wouldn't be concerned is you wouldn't believe me. The reason you wouldn't believe me...hear this...is because somebody who had that experience doesn't look like me. If you've met the risen, reigning Jesus of Scripture, it's going to change and transform who you are.

For a lot of people, conversion is very, very painful. For Paul, it was painful physically. For a lot of people, it's painful, and the reason it's painful is, well, everything you believe at the deepest levels has to change. I remember when I was doing ministry at Duke (I've told you guys some of these stories before), my pastor at the time... This is not hyperbole. Really, I've never seen anything like this. There are almost no Christians at Duke. I mean, think almost none.

My pastor at the time was trying to encourage me in college ministry. He said, "Kyle, here's what I want you to know. When you go in there and talk to these Duke students and share the gospel with them, you are messing with everything they love, everything they value, everything they're pursuing, everything their parents ever taught them, and everything that's being reinforced in the classroom. When you step on with the gospel in their life, you are messing with all of that."

So, I think Paul needed time to process. I mean, think about Paul. I don't know this for sure. I'm imagining with you. This is always a good thing to do as you read the Scriptures. Imagine a little bit. Paul is blind, and we're going to see in a moment he's praying. He's probably thinking, "I guess I'm not a Pharisee anymore. I guess I'm not going back to Caiaphas. I think I need a new set of friends. I guess I was wrong about Jesus. How am I going to tell my family?" He has to process all of this.

Then look at what happens in verse 10. **"Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, 'Ananias.' And he said, 'Here I am, Lord.'"** Why does God use Ananias? This is a question commentators try to answer. Why Ananias? We never hear about this guy again. This is not the Ananias of Ananias and Sapphira. That guy is dead already. This is a different Ananias.

We never hear about him again after this. Most people don't think he's a church leader. He's just a Christian in a city. Why did God use Ananias? I think there are two reasons. First, he was available. "Here I am, Lord." This is not just a saying; this is true. God cares way more about your availability than your ability.

The other reason I think he uses Ananias is Ananias was the closest Christian to where Paul was. That's why he can go. You'll see this in a minute. He's going to go, "Go down Straight Street and go to Judas' house. That's where he's at." That's not a lot of directions. That means I live very close.

It matters who you know and who you're around, and those are the people you're responsible for. You're not responsible to lead people in Africa to Christ. Maybe, as a church, we'll send a missionary or a team there. You're responsible for the people you're closest to locationally or relationally.

Location is... I mean, who else is going to reach your neighbors? Is it an accident that you're there? Who else is going to reach your coworkers? You're their coworker. Then there's also *relational*. Who else is going to reach your son? You might be like, "Well, he lives in New Mexico." You're right. Locationally, you're not close. Relationally, you're super close.

So, he uses Ananias. Look at what Ananias says here. **"And the Lord said to him, 'Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul...'"** If it hasn't been clear to you, the whole point of this message and this series is to say, "Let's be like Ananias." Here's what Ananias does. He says, "Here I am, Lord. I'd like to be used by you." Then God says, "Great. There's somebody I'd really like you to reach. His name is Saul."

So, what does God do? God puts someone on our heart, and he gives us his word (we have the written-down Word of God) of how to reach them. We know how to reach

people. You share the gospel with them. You share your testimony with them. You introduce them to the Scriptures. We know all that. That's all in the Bible. What I love about Ananias is what happens next. Here's what happens.

"...for behold, 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 evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.'"

I love how honest the Bible is. This is what happens to us. Hopefully, you're going to make a commitment (you already have in your heart or you'll do it at the end of the service), "Lord, I'd like to reach one person." God says, "Okay. Great. Then this is the one person I want you to reach, and this is how I want you to do it."

What I love is the Bible says this is what you're going to do next when God puts that on your heart. You're going to say all of the reasons you can't reach that person. You're going to bring up all of your excuses. This is what we do. I love it. We have to be honest with Ananias. We've got to give him some credit here. It's going to be scary to go after Saul, from what he heard.

It would be like you being at some high school or some college, and God giving you a dream and vision and saying, "Hey, you know the head of the atheist group on your campus, the guy who's really passionate about his atheism? I want you to reach him."

You'd be like, "God, I don't think he's interested. He's kind of building a whole platform on not being interested in you and not believing in you." Or you're in North Korea and God says, "I want you to share the gospel with Kim Jong Un." You're like, "If I do that, we'll be having this conversation face-to-face, because it's not going to go well for me."

Here's the honest truth, guys. God is going to put somebody on your heart...your dad or some friend. Then you're going to think of all of the reasons they're not interested and are not the right person and are never going to believe. You forget the whole point of this passage: God can save anybody, and everybody needs Jesus.

What are our excuses? I think our two excuses... The first one is we don't think they're interested. We say "No" for people. Evangelism is not sales. They're very different, but let me make one connection. I have a couple of friends in sales. The number-one rule in sales is you do not say "No" for people. You will not be a good salesman at anything if you think, "They won't want to buy. They don't need a car." You don't say "No" for people.

Can I encourage you? Let that be the number-one rule in evangelism. We're not doing sales. We don't believe we can force faith. We want to tell people about Jesus, and we are committing, "I am not going to say 'No' for this person. If they say 'No,' that's fine. I am not saying 'No' for them."

The second reason we don't share is we're afraid of the social implications. We're not afraid we're going to go to jail. I want to be careful, because I realize the work environment is getting crazy...HR departments and all that kind of stuff. I know all that. So, you have to be careful...wise as a serpent, innocent as a dove.

In most situations, what we're really worried about is it's going to be a little awkward and there's going to be a little bit of a relational or social implication. We don't fear the raised fist; we fear the raised eyebrow. We're going to look at what Ananias does in a second, but here's what I want to encourage you to do.

I want to encourage you (I'm going to try to do the same thing) to be foolish for Christ. Could you do something foolish that looks foolish to the world but is wise in God's eyes? If you want more spiritual power in your life (I think you'll know this is true if you know the Scripture)... If you want more power, you're going to need to be willing to look a little bit more foolish.

It's like, "Well, I'm going to go up, and I feel like God has put this person on my heart, and I'm going to say something to them." Like, "I feel like that person is going through something, and I'm going to do something really foolish. I'm going to ask if I could pray for them. I'm going to feel like a fool to say that." Or "I'm going to do something really foolish. I'm going to tell them what God is doing in my life. I know it's going to make no sense to them."

What would it look like if you were willing to do something foolish? The Bible says it's through the foolishness of preaching that God saves people. It's like, "We're going to get up here and talk about Jesus and how he lived and died and rose from the dead, and most people aren't going to believe, but some people are going to believe through the foolishness of preaching."

I want to show you what happens with Ananias in verse 15. I think this is how it works. I want you to think about this as maybe a paradigm to help all of us, because I really want us to grow in this, myself first and foremost. God puts someone on our heart. We pray to God and tell God all of the reasons it won't work. Then here's what God says: **"But the Lord said to him, 'Go...'"** That's it.

Actually, the rest of what he says to him is just how he's going to use Paul. He has one word. It's two letters. It's one syllable. It's "Go." I think God would say... You go to God. And, honestly, you should. "All right. God, I want to reach my sister." Then you

start thinking about it, and you go, "Well, actually, she's cohabitating with this guy, and we don't have the best relationship." I don't know. You go into all that.

I think God would say, "I'm so grateful for you sharing all that. We can continue to process that together in prayer. Go." It's action-oriented. The Great Commission is "Go into all the world." I go. I take a risk. I enter the relationship. I have no idea what's going to happen, and I'm willing to look foolish.

See, here's the problem. I had to settle this a long time ago. I know I'm not cool. I've never been cool. I never will be cool. But I want to be thought of as a normal person. Yeah, I'm a pastor. You know, people find that out. "But I'm normal. Yeah, I'm a committed Christian. I believe the Bible, and I believe in the historic Christian faith, but I'm normal!"

I think we're going to have to have some of this, like, "Look. I'm not normal. I do some foolish things for Christ." I think they're wise in God's eyes, but they're going to look very, very foolish in your eyes and in the world's eyes until it's the power of God in someone's life.

Look at Paul. I'll show you something. In verse 15, it says, "**...for he is a chosen instrument of mine...**" Here's the thing. He's going to say, "I'm going to use Paul greatly in the lives of other people." We love verse 15. We don't love verse 16. Look at verse 15. Here's what he's going to do. "**...to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.**" That's awesome. That's the life I want.

But then look at what he says. "**For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.**" They're connected. I think this is true from Scripture and from church history and from personal experience. Converts (people coming to Christ, people you lead to Christ) and hardship and persecution come into your life at the same measure.

Most of you, I'm guessing, would say, "You know what? As a general rule for being a Christian, I have almost or, maybe, I have 0 percent persecution in my life right now." I would bet you have 0 percent converts. Do you know that 92 percent of Christians in America say they have never shared the gospel with anyone outside of their family, ever, and 95 percent of Christians say, "I've never led one person to the Lord in my entire life"? That means 5 percent of American Christians are doing all of the evangelizing.

Open doors and opposition grow at the same level. The problem with us is we want Paul's legacy, but we're not willing to live Paul's life. We want to die and go to heaven and get all of the rewards the apostle Paul will get. Why was Paul before kings? Because he was suffering. That's how he got in front of kings. Both are connected.

So, he says this to Ananias, and in a great encouragement, it says this: **"So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said..."** These are the first words Paul hears from another Christian.

"'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; and taking food, he was strengthened." And we never hear of Ananias again.

Have you ever heard of Edward Kimball? Of course you haven't heard of Edward Kimball. No one knows who that is. Edward Kimball was D.L. Moody's Sunday school teacher. D.L. Moody is one of the most famous evangelists America has ever seen. D.L. Moody started schools and all that kind of stuff.

D.L. Moody used to love to tell the story of Edward Kimball. He would say, "I was a small boy." Thank you, those who serve in the kids' ministry. Edward Kimball, in a Sunday school class, noticed that D.L. Moody had some questions about the love of God. Edward Kimball leads D.L. Moody to Christ, and we never hear of Edward Kimball again.

Ananias goes off, and we are introduced to what Paul's life looks like now, as a new believer. Look at verse 19. **"For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus."** Okay. What is the reason we know we need a local church? Because Paul needed a local church. If the apostle Paul needed a local church, you and I need a local church.

Paul doesn't immediately become this incredible apostle who ends up writing Scripture right away. In fact, Galatians tells us he spends three years in Arabia, and there are a lot of other things. The first thing Paul needed to do was be part of a meaningful Christian community and be disciplined.

It says, **"And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God.'"** How do you know you're really a believer? You start to care about the spiritual needs of other people. That's it. Look. You don't have to be born again, you don't have to be a Christian to care about people with disabilities. You don't have to be a Christian to care about food insecurity in our city.

You don't have to be a Christian to care about homelessness and poverty. You could be an atheist and care about those things. But you know you're a Christian when you care about the spiritual needs of others. I remember being in Spanish 3 class, a brand-new believer, looking around the classroom, going, "Who's going to heaven, and who's going to hell in this room?"

I had never had that thought for 16 years of my life. I started to care about the spiritual needs of others. Well, that's what Paul does. Then look at what happens. ***"And all..."*** Not just some. ***"...who heard him were amazed and said, 'Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?'"***

When a person comes to Christ, those around him notice. Those around her notice. The late great Tim Keller, who pastored in New York City for 30 years... He had all of these great observations. They had a very fruitful evangelistic church in New York City. What he found (and I think this is true)... He said the most evangelistically fruitful time in a person's life is the first two years that they believe.

Here's why. Think about this. It makes sense. That means everybody who was in their life saw them become a Christian. When somebody meets you... If they've never met you before, and you've been a Christian for several years, they meet you, and they're like, "Well, you've always been this way. I bet you grew up in one of those religious homes. You're probably kind of naïve or maybe you have a temperament or personality to be a religious person. Good for you."

When somebody sees their freshman roommate come to Christ at the end of the first semester, it's like, "What happened to you? You are a different person." The reason the first two years a person becomes a Christian is their most fruitful is they still have all of their non-Christian relationships. They haven't fully made the jump to where the church is... As you're a Christian longer, you tend to have more Christian relationships than non-Christian relationships. It's just how it works a lot of times.

Why am I telling you that? Because what happens is when you start reaching new people for Jesus, there's a flywheel effect, because other people see their lives changed, and then *they* come. Part of them is going, "Man, maybe life change really is possible. I've seen my friend's life change. Maybe this could change *my* life."

Guys, this story is to remind us that God can save anybody, and everybody needs Jesus. Paul is a reminder that you cannot be too bad or too broken to come to Christ. Jesus does not care what you're addicted to. You can come to Christ. Jesus does not care what you've done. You can come to Christ. Jesus does not care what you have believed in the past or what your family was like.

He cares about all of those things, but I'm saying he doesn't want any of those things to hinder you from coming to Christ. The way you come to Christ, if it hasn't been clear, is you respond the exact same way Paul did. I know his conversion was dramatic, but what wasn't dramatic was the two questions he asked. "Who are you, Lord?"

I used to say to Duke students when I'd speak at fraternities, and stuff, "Hey, guys, do you know Jesus Christ is worshiped by a billion people on earth? He might be worth four hours of your consideration over the next four weeks." Yeah, maybe that's the first question. Who is this man who walks across history and Scripture who's worshiped by a billion people on earth, who is undoubtedly the most famous person who has ever lived? Who are you, Lord?

Then the second question is, "What do you want me to do?" I believe Jesus will answer the first question, "I'm the risen Lord." The answer to the second question is "Repent and believe. Trust me and follow me." Guys, what we're hoping here is to have the spirit of Ananias. The spirit of Ananias is a spirit that prays and says, "God, what do you want me to do?" and then listens to the voice of God and goes.

It's interesting. I was at a church this week, and this church is doing incredible things. We always try to learn from other churches that are ahead of us. This church is reaching a ton of adults who were far from Christ, and they're baptizing them. We're talking about legacies and lineages changed.

I got some time with the senior pastor, and I was trying to figure out, "What is it? What are y'all doing? How?" He said, "We have a motto in our church. Here's our motto: *Pray. Guess. Go.*" He said, "That's how we run everything. We pray about it. 'Lord, what do you want me to do?' Then we guess."

It's like, "All right. I don't know. There are 10 ways to reach my brother. There are seven different ways I could do this. I could write a letter. I could call. I could knock on the door. I could invite them over. I'm going to pray, I'm going to guess, and then I'm going to go. I'm going to do something about it."

We are hoping for that spirit in our church. If you remember only three words from today, I pray you will remember *pray, guess, go*. I want us to have the heart of Charles Spurgeon. Charles Spurgeon was a pastor who reached a ton of people in London. He led the first megachurch in the history of the world.

He wrote this: "Oh, my brothers and sisters in Christ, if sinners will be damned, at least let them leap to hell over our bodies; and if they will perish, let them perish with our arms about their knees, imploring them to stay, and not madly to destroy themselves. If hell must be filled, at least let it be filled in the teeth of our exertions, and let not one go there unwarned and unprayed for." That's our heart.

When I think about what God allowed me to do 15 years ago...lead Brian to Christ (that video we saw at the beginning)...I think about how I could have never led Brian to Christ if I wasn't somebody's one. It's a weird thought. This is not about me at all. This church wouldn't be here if someone didn't reach me. I'm sure someone else

would have planted another church, but I'm saying this church would not exist if this guy didn't reach me.

The guy who reached me is a guy named Joe Dutko. He was 17 years old. I was 16 years old. We were in public school in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. When I found out we were going to show this video about Brian, I thought, "You know what? Wouldn't it be really neat...? Let me text him."

I've not talked to him in, like, 10 years. He's a pastor in Vancouver, Canada. I was like, "I'm going to text Joe and see if he'd send a video and tell the story from his perspective of meeting me and reaching me 22 years ago." So, I have the video for you. I'm going to pray, and I'm going to pray that you will pray, you will guess, and you will go, and we will be on this journey of repentance together. Let's pray.

Lord, that's our heart. We want to pray, guess, and go. Lord, when it comes to "How do we reach our kids?" pray, guess, and go. When it comes to "How do we reach a prodigal?" pray, guess, and go. When it comes to "What do we do with a complex work environment?" pray, guess, and go.

Lord, would you give us the spirit of Ananias? We want to process with you our fears and our anxieties about reaching our one, and then we want to hear you lovingly but loudly saying, "Go. I'm going to be with you. Don't say 'No' for them. You have no idea the goads I've put in their life and the way I'm working in their life. I want you to have a front-row seat at what I'm doing."

Lord, we just thank you. The reason you work through us is not because it's easier and more efficient but because you love to do things with your kids because you're a good father. May we get to know you more deeply as we reach out to our friends and our family. We pray this in Christ's name, amen.