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90 Day Challenge II: The Acts of the Holy Spirit
By the Spirit We Are Grace-full
Acts 9

Cyndi is one of those who persons who, five minutes into the murder mystery, sees the plumber walk across the screen and says, "He did it!" And 99% of the time, she's right! For us who lack her superpowers, it's not until five minutes from the end of the show that we realize what she knew all along... that the guy we glimpsed early in the show was actually a big player in the story. It's good writing.

Well, Luke is a great writer. And he does the same thing. Not once, but twice. First, back in chapter 4 we hear how the early Church took care of each other by sharing everything they had. And we read an example in verse 36: Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet. After that brief note, Barnabas disappears from the story. Or does he?

Luke does it again in chapter 7. When Stephen is hauled by a mob outside the city to be stoned we read this: Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. And after Stephen is dead we read this in chapter 8:

¹And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. ²Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. ³But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.

So we get a glimpse of this Saul who seems determined to crush the followers of Jesus, and then he, too, disappears from sight. Ahh... but once again, Luke is teasing us. Both of these guys who made cameo appearances early on are about to walk back on the stage. Let me tell you the story of the most important conversion in Christian history.

¹Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest ²and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

³As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" ⁵"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.

⁶"Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

⁷The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. ⁸Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus.

⁹For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

¹⁰In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. ¹¹The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. ¹²In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight." ¹³"Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. ¹⁴And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name." ¹⁵But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. ¹⁶I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

¹⁷Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, ¹⁹and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. ²⁰At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. ²¹All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" ²²Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ. ²³After many days had gone by, the Jews conspired to kill him, ²⁴but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. ²⁵But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall.

²⁶When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. ²⁷But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. ²⁸So Saul stayed

with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. ²⁹He talked and debated with the Grecian Jews, but they tried to kill him. ³⁰When the brothers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. ³¹Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.

If you had to pick one doctrine unique to the Christian faith, which would you choose? Love? No, the Jewish faith teaches the love of God. Justice? Certainly not; Allah is all about justice. No, the unique Christian doctrine is grace. Grace is the unmerited favor and kindness of God. Grace is way more than mercy. Mercy is withholding the punishment we deserve. Grace goes beyond that. Grace is the love of God in action. God looks upon us, sees us in rebellion and, in his great love, takes the initiative to save us through Jesus, but more than that, He pours out kindness and goodness and purpose through his Holy Spirit when what we deserve is scorn and punishment. When mom says, "No cookies," and we steal one anyway, mercy would be not getting the spanking that was promised. Grace happens when mom goes to the cookie jar and gets us another... completely undeserved, unmerited kindness.

You can hardly find a more grace-filled chapter than Acts 9, and we see it in three persons. First, the grace of Jesus. Luke has already painted Saul as a ruthless enemy of the Church. Saul guarded the coats of the men that bashed in Stephen's head, and he approved. Just pause there for a moment. Saul watches a man be pummeled to death with rocks, and he nods his head and says, "Good, that's good. That's what should happen; he deserves it." And Stephen's death just primes Saul's pump. He becomes a religious vigilante, dragging Christians—men and women—off to prison.

But he wasn't content to persecute Jerusalem Christians. No, he knew that some had escaped his dragnet by fleeing to Damascus. He wanted them, too! So he goes to the high priest to get extradition orders and sets out to drag back every single one of those heretics from Damascus. Ruthless.

And when you read the Greek, you discover an even more vicious portrait. In 8:3, when Luke writes that Saul began to "destroy the church," the word for "destroy" is normally used of a wild animal ravaging a body with its fangs. And when we hear that he "raised havoc" in Jerusalem, that word is translated, "mauled"—he mauled the Christians in Jerusalem. Do you get the picture? Saul was like a rabid beast... obsessed, fanatical. He viewed Christians as a disease to be wiped out.

Can you think of a modern equivalent? Let me take you back to this image of 21 Ethiopian Christians who were terrorized and beheaded because they refused to deny Jesus, and if you want to catch a glimpse of Saul, look into the eyes of this man. [*Pic of face of a beheader*]

So off Saul goes on his murderous mission, and suddenly, he is knocked to the ground by a lightning bolt. Aha! His moment of judgment, right? After his brutal treatment of the disciples, Jesus is going to strike him down dead in his tracks just as he deserves. But no, Jesus offers grace. Listen to this tender question. "Saul, Saul... why are you persecuting me?" Not only does Jesus not slay Saul, he calls Saul to be his apostle! Despite Saul's brutal record, Jesus reaches out, trips him up, and prepares the Butcher of Jerusalem to be the greatest evangelist the world has ever known. That is grace.

But just the first glimpse of it... Now we come to the greatest unsung hero in the New Testament—Ananias of Damascus. Jesus appears to him with an outrageous request: go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and lay hands on Saul of Tarsus to heal him and give him the Holy Spirit. Ananias cannot believe his ears! "Lord, I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to the saints in Jerusalem." This would be the equivalent of God telling one of us to go to Iraq, find Jihad Johnny and tell him that Jesus has sent you to pray for him. How would you respond to that call? It was a suicide mission. But Jesus insists. "He is my chosen instrument!" So, brave Ananias goes. He enters the house and sees Saul, this murderer of his friends, sitting there blindly... helplessly. What went through Ananias' head? "Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul..." and with that prayer, Saul's sight is restored, he is filled with the Holy Spirit, and the Butcher of Jerusalem is baptized into the Christian faith!

Thursday, I sat in my chair in the early morning quiet and read this passage out loud, and I came to two words that overwhelmed with emotion as I sat there. Which words? "Brother Saul!" I wept at the grace. I sat there by myself with tears coming down my cheeks. Brother Saul! There was nothing "brotherly" about Saul. He was an enemy, but because of what Jesus had done in Saul and in Ananias, the past was past. And Ananias could utter those supremely gracious words: "Brother Saul!" Gracious Ananias.

There is one more display of grace. After his followers lowered Saul over the wall in a basket to escape assassins in Damascus, Saul goes to Jerusalem. He wants to join the disciples, but they are terrified of him. They think it is a scam; he can't possibly be a Christian! Pastor Megan tells me of a time she worked in the admissions office at Gordon Conwell seminary. A Chinese woman showed up saying she wanted to apply and asking lots of personal questions about other Chinese students: names, where they were from, when they expected to return to China. It bothered Megan so she told one of the Chinese students about this woman. "Oh yes," she said, "she's likely a spy from the Chinese government. Please be careful with our names and don't mention our pastors back in China. She wants to collect information to use against us when we return."

The Jerusalem disciples thought this was a trick. It is likely that many of them had been arrested by Saul. How could he now possibly claim to be a Christian? Unbelievable, so everyone ostracized him except for one man... the Son of

Encouragement. It was Barnabas who believed what others could not... Barnabas who took the chance to reach out to Saul, Barnabas who advocated for him, who told the apostles of his encounter with Jesus and his "fearless" preaching in Damascus. Again, an act of incredible grace toward one that everyone else held in suspicion and even contempt. Gracious Barnabas.

I read a story last week about a missionary in dangerous part of the Middle East. He was contacted by a friend to meet. When they did, the friend had brought someone else along. He introduced this man as an ISIS fighter who had not only killed Christians, but as he put it, enjoyed doing so. Now if you were a Christian missionary in the Middle East, that would be quite a blind date, wouldn't it? But the conversation continued. One of the Christians this man had murdered had told him, "I know you are going to kill me but I give you my Bible." The terrorist did kill him, but he took the Bible and began to read it... and began to have dreams of a man in white who came to him and said, "You are killing my people." He started to feel sick about what he was doing. In another dream, Jesus asked him to follow him. So now, this ISIS terrorist stood before this missionary to become a follower of Christ and be discipled. (Taken from CP Living, June 3, 2015)

This is the power of the grace of God—the amazing grace that saved a wretch like me and you—unmerited favor. A God who has every right to judge and punish, but instead, takes the punishment upon himself and saves his killers. Grace—offering kindness to those who despise you, loving your enemy, forgiving, enduring, humbling yourself, taking risks on people who will most likely disappoint you.

Grace flies in the face of American religion. American religion says, "I will work hard, be good, observe the rules and earn God's favor." But the gracious Holy Spirit declares, "God loves you when you are wretched and putrid and foul... and he calls you to himself. He is not only ready to forgive you, he wants to fill you, gift you and send you on his mission. That is grace. No one else in the world offers it... only Jesus, and Holy Spirit-filled disciples of Jesus like Ananias, like Barnabas, and who else?

I wonder, who is the person here this morning that needs to dispense grace but refuses to? Perhaps like the disciples in Jerusalem, you are suspicious or so angry or betrayed that you cannot imagine ever making peace... ever being reconciled. Like Ananias, do you need to obey Jesus, go to some unlikely person, lay your hands on them and say, "Brother Saul (Sister Sarah) God wants to heal you and fill you with the Holy Spirit."

Or who here this morning, like Saul, needs to receive God's unbelievable grace? Who here is stricken by the decisions of your life? You realize you have been on exactly the wrong path. You live with regret and shame and are blinded to the possibility that God could love and forgive you. Whatever you have done, whoever you are, whatever your choices, it is not too much for the grace of Jesus.

After my Lifegroup on Friday, when we studied this incredible passage, I got an email from one of the businessmen. He told me, "I wept when I got in my car after our group. Not sure why. I feel sadness about my past and yet a sense of happiness and blessing. What a chapter! It stirred me deeply."

What a chapter! What a savior! What grace!