

Sermon Title: Transformed By Christ
Scripture Text: Acts 9:19-31 (Acts #23)

Speaker: Jim Harris
Date: 9-24-23

I'm so glad that we can open God's Word together, and I invite you to join me in Acts Chapter 9, where this morning we are going to finish up this record of the momentous conversion of Saul of Tarsus to turn him into a follower of Jesus Christ (Gal. 1:15-16); and then we get to know him later in the book as Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles (Rom. 1:5; 11:13; Gal. 2:8; 1 Tim. 2:7).

Saul led that first wave of persecution against Christians that extended outside Jerusalem and the immediate surrounding area. A number of Christians were scattered because of that persecution; and there, in the providence of God, is part of how the Gospel was taken some places: moving Christians around to escape persecution. We know that Saul was present, and we believe the text infers that he was actually in charge of the stoning of Stephen in Acts Chapter 7. And then Chapter 8 explains the scattering that ensued, and God used *that* to spread the Gospel, even to Samaria.

Eventually, word came to Saul and to the leaders of the Jews in Jerusalem that there were a number of believers among the Jews in the city of Damascus in Syria, about 200 miles away from Jerusalem. So Saul went and secured papers from the High Priest to authorize him to go to Damascus and scour through all the synagogues there to seek out and arrest any Christians he found there, and bring them back to Jerusalem to be judged—perhaps to be executed (Acts 26:10). And that means that the High Priest must also have authorized a cadre of temple police to travel with Saul and to bring those prisoners back. No one man could possibly have done that.

So he takes his entourage on a several-day journey. They arrive just outside the gates of Damascus, and there Jesus Himself appeared to Saul in a blinding light, and knocked him to the ground. We saw that in the first nine verses of this chapter. Saul remained blind for three days, and he had to be led by the hand into the city.

During those three days, God gave two visions: He told Saul that a Christian man named Ananias would come to him, restore his sight, and pray for him. On the other end, God told Ananias what the plan was, and He answered the questions that Ananias obviously had—like, "You want me to go visit *who*, and do *what*?" And God prepared his heart, and he was the one brought to meet Saul.

God arranged for the meeting to take place in the home of a man named Judas. Now, for some unknown reason—well, I know what the problem was; it was me—I called Judas Jason a couple of times last week. And many of you blessed me by saying, "Isn't his name 'Judas'?" *You're listening!* I like that! Apparently, Judas did not tell me his name three Sundays in a row. If you are not new to Heritage, that's my standard: If you come up and tell me your name face to face, initiated by you, three consecutive Sundays, I usually remember it. If you miss one, you reset; you start over, alright? But apparently, Judas didn't do that.

The meeting went exactly as planned, and last Lord's Day we saw the new life of Saul launched. We observed that the same principles that were in play in *his* salvation—spectacular as it was, with as many miracles as were involved—the *same factors* were in play when *you* came to Christ, or are if you come to Christ. Even though we are not

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Apostles, even though we are not struck blind, even though we are not confronted by Jesus in a physical manifestation, it is the work of God from beginning to end to bring a soul to faith in Christ (e.g., Jer. 24:7a; Jn. 3:3, 5; 6:37, 44-45; Acts 16:14; Titus 3:5).

One of those unstated matters is a point of curiosity, at least for me: What about that group that traveled from Jerusalem with Saul to arrest Christians? Nothing is said of them here. Later on in Chapter 22, we are going to be told that they "saw the light," they heard "the voice" (vs, 9), but they didn't hear the words that were being said to them. But what of them? My best guess—which is worth exactly nothing—is that most likely, they turned and hightailed it back to Jerusalem, at least most of them. But it is also possible that maybe one or more of them were *also* converted in that encounter.

We are told that Saul was led into the city to the home of Judas "by the hand" (vs. 8). *Whose* hand? Did somebody come out of Damascus to meet him? We are not told. Maybe it was one of those that were with him who was converted; and maybe Saul said, "I'm supposed to go into town and meet a guy named 'Ananias' at the home of a guy named 'Judas'; would you take me there?" We don't know.

We *do* know that God orchestrated it all (Eph. 1:11b), and we saw last time what God does when He transforms a life. Today, we are going to continue the story of Saul's new life, but we are going to flip the perspective from which we look at it, and we are going to look at it from the point of view of the one who is transformed. When God transforms your life, and you become a Christian, I want to suggest to you that you will find at least four new characteristics in your life:

A New Focus (vss. 19-22)
A New World—upside down from your old one (vs. 23)
A New Need To Be Circumspect (vs. 24)
and A New Spiritual Family (vss. 25-31)

Let's look first at this New Focus. I just skimmed these verses last time, so we need to look at them again. The point is that when you become a Christian, it makes Jesus Christ the center of your life (Deut. 30:6; Eph. 6:24); it makes Him what you want to talk about.

So, Chapter 9, starting at Verse 19 through Verse 22—"Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God.' All those hearing him continued to be amazed, and were saying, 'Is this not he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and who had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?' But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Christ." (NASB-1995—and throughout, unless otherwise noted)

Just imagine the joy, imagine the celebration of the Christians in Damascus over the conversion of Saul! Some of them might have been packing; they might have had their stuff ready to go, if they needed to flee from him and run away and hide. And now, they were enjoying sweet fellowship with him.

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I love how, in the great brevity of few words, Luke simply says, "He was with the disciples." And it says he was "*several days* with the disciples." That phrase "several days" isn't specific; but we know, just reading the rest of the verse, that it had to be, at a minimum, a matter of weeks, because it says "he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God.'" Well, the main synagogue meeting is always on the Sabbath. So [it was] however many weeks that would take a week per synagogue for him to go around. So he was there for some time. I'll be talking to you a little bit about the timeline of this passage, and there is more here than you might think.

But one clear evidence that a person has been transformed is the desire to be with the disciples, the desire to *be with* fellow Christians (Ps. 16:3; 119:63; Eph. 1:15; Col. 1:4). First John 3:14 puts it this way: "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death." A New Focus, when you become a Christian, is to want to be with Christians. You show me a person who prefers the company of the world to the fellowship of Christians, and I will show you someone who *belongs to the world*, not to the Savior (cf. Jas. 4:4). John says *that's how "we know"*! It's very clear.

Now, that does not mean that you *shun* unbelievers (1 Cor. 5:9-11), but *if it is your preference* to be with unbelievers rather than to be with Christians, there is a serious problem with your testimony of faith in Christ, because He transforms your life and gives you a New Focus (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17).

Another clear evidence is that a person's life is transformed, such that he or she cannot stop talking about new life in Christ. I know one guy who quit practicing piano when he heard about Christ, and he practiced every day of his life! That is a New Focus.

In Saul's case, he had the rare privilege—it's one I don't have, but he could use his status as a rabbi, from his training in Pharisaism, so that he could be invited to speak in synagogues; and it's almost by their own rules, *they had to listen to him!* And he began in Damascus, and he did that his entire ministry: Wherever he went, when he arrived for the first time, [he would] find the synagogues, find the Jews, take the Gospel to the Jews "first" (Rom. 1:16; cf. Matt. 10:6; Acts 13:46). That was always what he did.

So, in Damascus, Saul shocked the Christians by his conversion; and then he shocked the Jews by proclaiming that Jesus "is the Son of God." Talk about a New Focus!

Well, another thing that changes when you are transformed by Christ is: You have A New World, and I called it "Turned Upside Down."

A characteristic of a person whose life is transformed by Jesus Christ is that when you declare your faith in Him, it turns certain friends into enemies (cf. Matt. 10:34-36). Now, the good side of that is that it can also turn former enemies into friends.

When I came to Christ, it was the last week of my high school career. The encounter happened on Monday night, and we didn't have bus service where I was; but, being seniors in high school, every once in a while, one of us could get our mom's car and drive

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to school, and we did that; and then, however many people wanted a ride that day, you would fit as many as you could into the car. We had one of those carloads of people going home from school, and I had been a Christian now for probably 72 hours or so, and the person who led me to Christ was in the car; and we were saying some things—you know, kind of "Christian talk." And we dropped off this guy, and I had known him all through junior high and high school; we were on the same academic track, we took the same nerdy classes together. I can't say he was enemy; but, to me, there was something *weird* about him, and I didn't know what that was. We were friendly, but not friends, and we were not enemies. But he was hearing this conversation, and he got out of the car, and before he closed the door, he said, "Are you a Christian?" And I said, "Well, yes." "Since *when*?" "Monday night." And he said, "Why didn't you tell me? I've been praying for you since Eighth Grade!" Then I knew what was weird about him, and it was no longer weird! I wasn't mature enough to say, "Why didn't you *tell me* you were praying for me in the Eighth Grade? Maybe this day could have come sooner."

But you see, it *changes* relationships, and it can turn your world upside down. So look at Verse 23 of Chapter 9—"When many days had elapsed, the Jews plotted together to do away with him."

Now, there is more here than what immediately meets the eye, and I want to help you understand the timeline here in the Book of Acts. Remember, when we got to Chapter 9, I did a little bit of timeline background to give you an idea how long it was from Acts Chapter 2, when the Holy Spirit came, until the conversion of Saul. And we will do some things like that as we work our way through the book.

We know that Saul began going to synagogues in Damascus, and it says "after several days" back in Verse 19. *Now* it says that "when *many* days had elapsed," there was this plot "to do away with him."

Now, Luke was not writing a *detailed* chronology; he was *summarizing* and recounting the big picture of the conversion of Saul—which was extremely important. And you get the sense of the time that is involved here *only* when you read what the Apostle Paul later wrote about himself.

So, let me take you on a short side-trip to the Book of Galatians, Chapter 1, Verses 16 through 18. He is writing now about when he came to Christ, and he says: "I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus. Then *three years later* I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas"—that's the Aramaic form of Peter's name—"and stayed with him fifteen days."

Put that together, and here is what the deal is: "Three years" elapsed between Verse 22 and Verse 23 in [Acts] Chapter 9. After spending an unspecified amount of time in Damascus—that was "several days," it says, which we know had to be *at least* several weeks—then, Saul went away for a while. Those Christians in Damascus had immediately become Saul's first friends in Christ, and obviously a strong bond was formed with them. And so it is not a surprise that he went back to his new spiritual family in Damascus after

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he was away. But in the meantime, Saul went to a nearby region of Arabia. We are not given a city name or an address, or anything like that. We are not told specifics about the location at all. We are not told, specifically, what the Lord taught him while he was there. We are not told exactly what all he did while he was there, though I will show you one inference in our text. We *do* know that he makes a point that he "received" his teaching from the Lord Himself (Gal. 1:11-12).

The Pharisees and all the ones who were under the bondage of their teaching needed to know that Sau's doctrine came *straight* from the Messiah and their Savior, who is Jesus Christ. Christianity is *not* a reformed, improved version of Judaism; it is the "New Covenant" (Jer. 31:31; 2 Cor. 3:6; Heb. 8:7; 9:15; cf. Matt. 9:16-17). The "old things" are "passed away" (2 Cor.5:17; cf. Heb. 8:13). Israel is set aside for a time (Matt. 21:43), and they *will* be restored in the future (Rom. 11:25-27). But this was all "the New Covenant" initiated by Christ (Lk. 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25; Heb. 12:24), and it was taught *directly* to Saul—whom we will soon know as Paul. Not only did the Jews need to know that, the Gentiles likewise needed to know that Pau's doctrine was the *real thing* from the only Savior, Jesus Christ (Is. 49:6; Acts 26:16-18).

So, those enigmatic "three years" got it all started—turning a self-righteous, legalistic, hateful, murderous Pharisee into the soul-loving Apostle Paul (Acts 26:29; Rom. 9:1-3; 10:1; 1 Cor. 9:19-22; 2 Cor. 5:20; 1 Thess. 3:12; 2 Tim. 2:10).

When he returned from Arabia, Saul continued—picked up where he left off, continued to preach in Damascus—but quickly, that caught the attention of the Jews, just as we read in Verse 23—"When many days had elapsed, the Jews plotted together to do away with him." And you know, that was the beginning of the "new normal" for Paul. He was at war against Christians; then he came to know Christ, and now he is on the defense, and the Jews are at war against him; and there would be a few angry Gentiles along the way, as well. The rest of his life, he would be pursued in this New World that was turned upside down.

Well, that leads to a third new perspective: A New Need To Be Circumspect. Pay attention to what is going on around you—that's what "circumspect" means. Verse 24—"but their plot became known to Saul. They were also watching the gates day and night so that they might put him to death." They had him *surrounded!* They knew he was in Damascus *somewhere*, but obviously the Christians were keeping him under wraps. And this is another event that Paul later mentioned when he was recounting a portion of his testimony to the Christians at Corinth.

Another little side-trip, over to Second Corinthians Chapter 11, Verse 32, where he said: "In Damascus the ethnarch"—"ethnarch" means "the ruler of an ethnicity"—"under Aretas the king"—that would be a king within Arabia—"was guarding the city of the Damascenes in order to seize me"—that's the people who lived in Damascus. There was an APB out for Paul: "Wanted: Dead or alive, preferably dead." That was the orders. So, from the description of this guy—this "ethnarch under Aretas the king"—he must have been an Arabian who also had influence in Damascus. When I show you a map soon, I'll show you that it was very close to Arabia. And from that, we surmise that not only were the Jews in

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Damascus out to get Saul, but apparently, while he was in Arabia—I said we don't know for sure what he did while he was there; well, I think he preached the Gospel to the point that people *there* grew to hate him, whoever hated Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 2:14). And the point is that another characteristic of someone whose life is transformed by Jesus Christ is that now, with your new identity in Christ, that turns the hatred of Jesus into the hatred of *you* (Jn. 15:18-19). And when there is a plot by religiously zealous people to kill you (e.g., Jn. 11:47-53; 16:2b), it's a good idea to get out of town!

Saul famously did that with a little help from his friends—actually, with a lot of help from his friends—which brings us to the fourth new perspective, this new focus in your life: The New Focus, The New World, The New Need To Be Circumspect—but it all settles down into your New Spiritual Family.

The fourth characteristic of a person transformed by Jesus Christ is: becoming a part of the family of God. Your union with Christ puts you in union with His Bride, with His Church—the "household" in the family "of God," as it is called (1 Tim. 3:15; 1 Pet. 4:17). And even if you come from a *terrible* family, in Christ you have an *extended* spiritual family (Mk. 10:30; Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 1:2; 12:13).

Now, there were spies, there were guards on high alert to seize Saul any time he was spotted trying to leave the city of Damascus. Well, look how it worked out for him, by God's providence: Verse 25—"But his disciples took him..." Now, I have to stop there: "*his* disciples"? *Saul's* "disciples"? Well, rabbis always had students. *Saved* rabbis—especially if they become Apostles—have always led people. They teach; they do what we would call "discipleship." He already had "disciples"—people that were following him, learning from him. "His disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a large basket."

Now, look at that: Do you see the spiritual symbolism of "night" and "down" and "opening in the wall" and "a large basket"? If you *do* see symbolism in that, we need to have a talk about how to interpret the Bible! I have heard sermons—people *love* to take off on those words like that, and make them into allegory. No. They had somebody in their midst who had a house on the wall of the city with an opening to the outside; they put Saul in a big "basket"; they "lowered him" down at "night" so that he could escape.

I have to admit, I thought of that incident when, a little over a year and a half ago, I was in Russia the day that Russia invaded Ukraine. And about lunchtime during our class, I heard about the invasion. I got back to the apartment where I was staying a few hours later, and I had a note that my departure flight back home—which was going to be five days later—was *cancelled*. So I spent the night talking and staying on hold with Delta Airlines, who told me their plan for me getting home: "Good luck, buddy! *We're* not going to do anything about it! Your flight is cancelled." "Well, okay. Will there be any charter flights in and out?" "Well, you can call the consulate; maybe they'll do something." And then they notified me that day that I had missed my connecting flight on the way home—thank you very much for *that*! Well, I am glad to say that I was not in danger. No one was trying to "do away with" me, but I had just a couple little funny feelings about that, like: "When *will* you get back home?"

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And that, by the way, was the very same week that the Women's NBA star, Brittney Griner, was arrested and jailed in Moscow, and they were making a big deal about that; and I did not want to be the next one in line. But her situation was quite a bit different: She was famous; she has a big social media presence, and people can make a great big fuss about her, and parlay her bondage into a great big prisoner swap. Well, oh, yeah: And I didn't bring marijuana in like she did, either.

But I *got a little taste* of being hung out to dry! You know, does *anybody* care if I get home? Well, my spiritual family cared. And they never blinked! Some of them were up *all night long*, studying all the intelligence and the options and everything; and they told me the next day that I was their *number one priority*: Get Jim out of Russia! I am ignoring the fact that it might have been: "We don't want to take care of *that guy*, long-term!" It might have been some of that. But, no, they wanted me to be safe.

So on that next day, I was able to book a flight. They said, 'Find *any* airline based in a non-NATO country.' So I found one. I booked a flight. I packed in less than a half-hour. And with the help of missionary friends, I was escorted on a *lovely* seven-hour taxi ride to Moscow. Then I tested for Covid; I proved I did not have Covid in two different languages—Russian and English. And they put me on a plane, and I came home.

Now, in reality, I was not in danger. I *cannot* claim that I was persecuted—*except* by an American airline. They put their virtue signaling as a higher priority than taking care of their customers. That was okay, but *that* is not persecution for being a Christian. But it was a strange experience. Happily, I never had to crawl into a basket, and I *did* get home.

I hope it does not ever come to this in our country, but there is a lesson to learn here: When zealous people who believe that God is talking to them, and He is telling them they are to kill you (Jn. 16:2b), *it is time to flee!* It is time to get away (cf. Matt. 10:23).

So at this point, Dr. Luke mentions Saul's first visit as a Christian to Jerusalem—but interestingly, making a deal out of [the fact that] they "lowered" him out in a "basket" through "the wall."

In a couple of sentences, Luke summarizes that "three year" period mentioned in Galatians. And by the way, that phrase "three years later I went up to Jerusalem" (1:18)—you can make yourself absolutely brain-cramped, trying to fit together all of the different pieces of the mentions in the Book of Acts and in Paul's writings, to know this chronology exactly. I would submit to you: If we were supposed to know it exactly, it would be exactly in the Bible.

But that "three years later" does *not* have to mean *three full years* elapsed. The reckoning of time is analogous to what I said a few weeks ago in our "Provoke The Pastor" series: the question about "three days and three nights" in the tomb (Matt. 12:40)—How could Jesus be crucified on Friday, be buried Friday afternoon before dark, and then raised first thing on Sunday morning, and that's "three days and three nights"? Well, any part of a day was counted as a day, and the day began at sundown. So, Jesus was in the tomb

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before sundown on Friday—check off "Day 1"; He was in the tomb all day Saturday—check off "Day 2"; He rose after sunrise on Sunday—that is "Day 3," which began at sundown on Saturday. So, that is the "three days and three nights." Well, the same reckoning can be done with years. Saul may have been converted in—I don't know; pick a year: let's just randomly say 34 [A.D.]. Then, he left for Arabia later that year, after a few days, after a few weeks of preaching in Damascus. He stayed there through the year 35, and then he returned in the year 36. So, he was there in the year 34, in the year 35, and in the year 36—"three years," okay? The idioms do not have to perfectly match the way we say things in order for them to be clear. The *sequence* of events is clear, and the precise dates are not important—or God would have told us.

So, Saul was saved; taken into Damascus, where he stayed for "several days," according to Verse 19; went to Arabia for an extended time; then returned to Damascus and spent another period of time there, which is called in Verse 23 "many days." So the plot to "do away with him" then heated up, and he is going to get out of town. *That* is when he made his first Christian visit to Jerusalem—sometime after the over-the-wall-in-a-basket routine.

Not surprisingly, when he got to Jerusalem, the immediate reception was not all warm and toasty from the people who had watched him oversee the murder of one of their first deacons, Stephen! So, Verse 26—"When he came to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples." Now, the verb tense there that is translated "was trying" is imperfect; it implies that it went on and on. It took him a while! He kept "trying" to break into the fellowship with the believers in Christ there.

So, "he was trying to associate with the disciples; but *they were all afraid of him*, not believing that he was a disciple." It's not hard to figure out *why* there was suspicion, *why* there was apprehension, *why* there was fear about Saul coming into the love feast, coming into the worship service with the Christians in Jerusalem. That story, "I'm one of you now!"—that could be a *great* way to infiltrate so that you could do *all the more* damage. Humanly speaking, it is not at all a surprise that they were not thrilled to see him there.

Well, enter "Barnabas." Barnabas, who we met back in Chapter 4—his name means "Son of Encouragement" (vs. 36); and whenever you see him, he lives up to the meaning of his name by his actions, and he builds the reputation of always being an encouraging, peacemaking kind of guy. He will go on to become a beloved coworker of the Apostle Paul; and so, as such, we are going to see a lot more of him in the Book of Acts; and then you hear him referred to a number of times in Paul's writings.

We don't know if Barnabas had connections with the Christians in Damascus. Or, maybe he just stepped up and introduced himself to Saul, and took the time to get to know him and hear his story. We don't know if God used some other way to connect Barnabas and Saul, but He did it; and that was used to bring all these parties together. I like to think that Barnabas had either been to Damascus after Saul was converted—so he heard the stories fresh, firsthand—or at least, he had probably heard from Christians there, and he learned about that spectacular conversion of this former persecutor.

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But, Verse 27—"But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had talked to him, and how at Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus." It took the testimony of this highly-regarded, beloved man Barnabas to win over the Apostles—and win them over, he did.

As soon as he was free to do so, Saul immediately got busy doing what he now does: proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord. He used his background as one of the Hellenistic Jews, and a rabbi among the Hellenistic Jews—the Greek-speaking Jews—to get into their synagogues. And there were Hellenistic Jews in Jerusalem, and there were synagogues around the city, in addition to the Temple there.

So we read in Verses 28 and 29—"And he was with them, moving about freely in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord. And he was talking and arguing with the Hellenistic Jews; but they were attempting to put him to death." *Again*, already! The hierarchy of the Jews—I mean, they already had the papers drawn up for Jesus, for Stephen, for anybody else they did not like; just cross out the name and write in "Saul of Tarsus"—they just drew up another "hit" contract for one of their enemies.

You know, Saul just got saved on this page in the Bible, and he has already been forced to flee for his life *twice*! Welcome to Jesus! "God loves you, and has a wonderful plan for your life!" No. Remember the message that God gave to Ananias? "I will show him how much he must *suffer* for My name's sake" (vs. 16; cf. Acts 14:22).

As it was in Damascus, Saul's new Christian family looked out for him, and they got him to safety. This time, he wound up back in his hometown of Tarsus: Chapter 9, Verse 30—"But when the brethren learned of it"—learned about the desire to put Saul to death—"they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus."

"Caesarea" was a seaport built by Herod the Great; it was one of his crown jewels of his building interests. Let me show you a little look at the travels of Saul—or, Paul—just before his conversion, to the time described in Verse 30: He started out in Jerusalem. Then he made that trip, about 200 miles—mostly to the north—to Damascus. He got saved right outside the walls of Damascus. He spent weeks, months there—we don't know. Then he goes to nearby Arabia; and if you look at the little arrow on the map there, it doesn't show very far into Arabia because Arabia is right next door, and we don't know where he went. But he went there; he was in Arabia for "three years." Then back to Damascus; then back to Jerusalem, from whence the brethren took him to Caesarea.

If you will notice in our text, it said, "They brought him *down* to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus." If you look at your map: from Jerusalem to Caesarea does not look like "down"—it looks like "up." But understand: That is not a *geographical* reference, that is a *topographical* reference. Jerusalem is the highest point for a long way all around it, so *every time* you go to Jerusalem, you go "up to Jerusalem" (e.g., 1 Kings 12:28; 2 Kings 12:17; 2 Chr. 2:16; Ezra 1:3; Is. 7:1; Zech. 14:17; Matt. 20:17; Gal. 1:17-18; etc.)—doesn't matter whether you are coming from: north, east, south, or west. And if you leave Jerusalem, you go "down" from Jerusalem, no matter which direction you go.

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So they took him "down to Caesarea," booked passage, and got him on a ship headed to "Tarsus," where he was from.

Then, we are going to see, as we piece together the chronology, about *14 years* are going to go by until Saul's ministry is launched. Now, does that 14 include the three in Arabia? Does it *not* include the three in Arabia? That is where scholars have meltdowns, trying to put the pieces together. And, do you know what? *It doesn't matter*, or God would have told us!

The next events in the Book of Acts return us to the ministry of Peter. There's this marvelous, seamless connection from Peter being the main actor to Paul being the main actor in the Book of Acts. It is all the same Gospel (Acts 15:11), it is all the same ministry (Gal. 2:7), but the emphasis shifts from the Jews to the Gentiles (e.g., Acts 13:46), and that is primarily through Paul (Gal. 2:8). We are going to reconnect with Saul—or, Paul—in Chapter 11; and starting in Chapter 13, from 13 to the end of the book, Paul is the main one in focus.

But first comes this little summary of a period of time that the Christians enjoyed relative peace, now that the leader of the opposition was converted. It's in Verse 31, the end of our pericope for today: "So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase."

Now, again, keep the big picture in mind: Do you remember that Acts is one of those books that has an inspired outline? In Acts Chapter 1, Verse 8, Jesus says, "I am going to ascend to the Father; I'm going to send the Holy Spirit; and when the Holy Spirit comes, 'you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest parts of the earth.' "

You can check off "Jerusalem" and "Judea"—that was done. You can check off "Samaria"—the Gospel was taken to Samaria for the first time; we have already read that in Chapter 8. Now, the whole unfolding of this plan of God is poised for the Gospel to go "to the remotest parts of the earth"—to go to the *Gentiles!* And *that's us!*

I said it last week, Sam: I don't think we have any Jews in the room. You can be the exception. You know, we are *happy* to share our tokenism with you. The point is: There have *always* been Jews in the Body of Christ (e.g., Rom. 11:1-5; Eph. 2:11-22; 3:5-6). The Gospel *always* goes "to the Jew first and also to the [Gentiles]" (Rom. 1:16). This is the era "of the Gentiles" (Lk. 21:24; Rom. 11:25), and we are ready for that to begin to *explode* out of the Book of Acts.

But, let's focus on what we have been seeing here in this spectacular transformation of Saul:

When you become a Christian, you have a New Focus: It makes Jesus Christ the center of your life, and He is the One that you want to talk about all the time.

Sermon Title: Transformed By Christ
Scripture Text: Acts 9:19-31 (Acts #23)

Speaker: Jim Harris
Date: 9-24-23

When you are transformed and you become a Christian, you have a New World. It might be upside down from what you have known: Former enemies are friends; former friends might be enemies.

You have a New Need To Be Circumspect, because, don't be naïve: Those who hate Christ hate those who *represent* Christ—and that is you and me.

But you have a New Spiritual Family, and that transformation includes cementing your place in the family of God.

Let's pray:

Father, we come to You as one part of the gathering of the family of God today, hearts overflowing with thanksgiving for all that we have in Christ. I pray You would not let anyone leave here today not having been transformed by our risen Savior. And Father, You have work to do—be it in the hearts that need to be transformed, or in the hearts of all of us, that we will take our New Focus into our New World with a new conviction to proclaim our Savior, in whose name we pray. Amen.