Exploring and Proclaiming the Depths of Scripture
FOCAL POINT MINISTRIES

Amazing Conversions-Part 1
Saul: Fighting God
Pastor Mike Fabarez

I'd like to remind you that the most important thing about you, the most consequential thing about you, the most significant thing, the thing that matters the most about you has nothing to do with how smart you are, how beautiful you are, how many kids you have, what your family is like, how much money you make, where you work, where you live. The most significant thing about you, if you sit here this morning as a Christian, is that you are no longer right now the person you used to be before God. That you came to a place where God did something in your life that flipped your status before your creator.

To use some biblical words, there was a day on which you were regenerate. There was a moment when you were converted before God. There is an actual minute when you were justified before God. To use John 3, there was a time when you were "born again." That amazing event is the most important thing about you. As a matter of fact, Jesus said in light of everything else, nothing else matters. In Matthew 13, he said, It's like the day you acquired the great treasure that before that was hidden in a field but it was so important you sold everything you'd acquired up to that point to get that. That you were looking perhaps for something and you found this pearl of great price, he goes on to say in verses 45 and 46 of that chapter and says you took everything that you owned and you said, I'm trading all of this for that. And you acquired it.

The entrance into the kingdom, the status before God, the fact that you became a child of God. That really is the most important thing about you. But sadly, we don't value things or appreciate things the way we ought to unless we think about them, think about them a lot. Unless we pull them out of the drawer and appraise them and figure that this is important compared to everything else. We have to make that comparison. We have to evaluate that. And that's my hope for the next 10-weeks as we continue our study through the book of Acts. That in this 10-week series, in chapters 9 and 10 of Acts, that we would learn to appreciate what God has done in our lives, that we would look at our own conversion, our regeneration, the day of our justification, and say that was way more important than I thought. I value that. I thank God for that. It brings joy to my life, no matter what my circumstances might be, whether I'm having a good day or a bad day, a great season or a hard season, I am converted. I am regenerate. I am like the people in Chapters 9 and 10 of Acts. Those things have happened to me.

Everyone's got a different story. The testimony and circumstances that we're going to see in these conversions in Chapters 9 and 10, they're all different and they won't exactly apply to you. But the truth will. The principle will. The point that you became a child of God and that God did something to flip your status before the creator, that you're justified, that you're regenerate, that you're a Christian. But that is something you are going to say I can identify with that.

Ten-week series, I said we're going to take because of the significance of the first character in the list, we're going take four weeks to look at his conversion story. He's introduced to us in the book of Acts as Saul from the city of Tarsus. He was an up-and-coming Pharisee. He had been very well trained in a very strict sect of Judaism and he was so frustrated with this new thing called Christianity, we call Christianity, at that time it was called The Way, this way of following this teacher, this rabbi from Nazareth, that he was wanting to shut it down. And that's a mild way to put it. As we'll read this morning in the first nine verses of Acts Chapter 9, he wanted to kill people. He started by arresting them. He got extradition papers from wherever he could find them, and he was going to bring them to Jerusalem and try them on charges of blasphemy, just like their leader was before Caiaphas, the high priest. We need to eradicate the world of these Christians. That is how much he hated the Christ of the people called disciples, the people of The Way.

And yet God gets a hold of him. It will take four weeks to look at the conversion story. This week, only the first nine verses in dealing with who he was and how God says we're done with that. He puts a big halt to his life and says, time for you to sit down and think about what you're doing. And I think all of us, if you sit here this morning as a genuine Christian, there was a time when God halted your life and said we got to think about what you're doing. So I want to identify with that so that at the end of our sermon, and we spend some time this week kind of processing and reminiscing on what we did here, that you would say I value my conversion more than ever before.

So take your Bibles, if you haven't already, and turn to Acts Chapter 9 and let's give some thought to Saul of Tarsus, who would become Paul the Apostle, and let's understand what God did to him, that we might be able to value what God has done to us. Acts Chapter 9, verse 1. It says Saul, who we met holding the cloaks of those who would throw rocks at Stephen until he died, "Was still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest," that's Caiaphas, "and he asked for letters to the synagogues at Damascus."

Now they're in Jerusalem, that's where the high priest is, and he's going to go to Damascus in Syria, that's in the old roads, which really patterned themselves after the new roads that are paved in the Middle East. It's about a 150-mile trek. You're on horseback, you've got an entourage with you. So that's a journey for the week. That's like us walking from here to Santa Barbara. It's going to take some time. So that's how even in that sense of what's happening there is a commitment of the apostle Paul to stamping this out. And because there were a lot of Jewish people living in the first century in Damascus, Syria, as Josephus tells us, the Roman historian, Jewish historian conscripted by the Romans to write a history, he says lots and lots of Jews in the first century living in Damascus. And so he knows that this sect that's following Jesus of Nazareth had already gotten there because of Acts Chapter 2, the Day of Pentecost. They'd all come in this pilgrimage feast in Judaism in the calendar to celebrate there. Peter had preached. Thousands were converted and they went back to their home.

So there was certainly an enclave that was starting to grow in Damascus and Saul of Tarsus says we're not going to have that. And the whole point was, there's the purpose clause,

middle of verse 2, "So that if he found any belonging to The Way," which is great, it's a great name for what Christianity is. Remember, Christianity is not going to be adopted as the label for who we are until later in the book of Acts. It was a term of derision, "little Christ," Christian, a little Christ and that was not a compliment. They hated Christ. Then they were going to hate you because you're a Christian. A little Christ. It became a term of endearment that we say we are Christians, we love to be associated with Christ, but at this point they were called People of The Way, used repeatedly throughout the book of Acts.

It was the way that they identified with Christ because Christ said, you might remember in the gospel of John, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." And they said, we're going to get on your road, your path. He talked a lot about paths. The gospels recorded in a couple of situations where he says, "there is a broad road and it leads to destruction." Then there's a narrow road, there's a way, there's a small way, and it's got a small gate. And that's the one while everyone else may reject that, you need to get on The Way. You need to be following me. I'm the shepherd. You're part of my flock. We're going to go down this pathway here as hard as it might be, as narrow as it might be. So everybody belonging to The Way." It didn't matter, he wasn't going to sit there and go to war against just the men of the culture, it didn't matter. "Men and women," anyone who is affirming that they're part of The Way, I'm going to have them bound as prisoners "bringing them bound to Jerusalem."

"Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus." So he's almost at the end of his journey, probably four or five, maybe even six days into this. "Suddenly a light from heaven shone around him." He goes on to describe this, by the way, and I don't want to get too much into any of that, but he describes this and gives us more detail as he tells this before the Roman officials, because he's arrested and having to answer why he's preaching all of this stuff about Christ and he talks about this more. We'll get to that, Lord willing, later in the book of Acts. This was noon we find out from his later description of this. So this is something super bright because it's already the middle of the day and the sun's right overhead.

Whatever it was, it knocked him to the ground. Apparently a vision of some kind of appearance of the glory of God, much like on the Mount of Transfiguration perhaps. We don't have the detail on that, but it knocks him off of his horse. "And he heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul,'" remember this becomes the Apostle Paul, "why are you persecuting me?"

Well, he's not here. He left in Acts Chapter 1. He's seated at the right hand of the Father. And yet Jesus is saying now as he breaks into time and space here, at least vocally and says you're persecuting me. You can see the identity and affinity that Jesus has to his people. "Why are you persecuting me?" "And he said, 'Who are you, Lord?'" A weird response, especially if you take the word "Lord" and narrowly define it the way we're use to defining it, like we do in verse 1, "disciples of the Lord." Right?

We think, OK, well that can be an appellation for Christ. That can be an appellation for God the Father, the Lord. Well, what does he mean by this? If you know who it is, are you not sure who it is? It's coming out of the sky. You're seeing some kind of bright light. I think it's important for us to realize that the word "Kurios" in Greek that translates "Lord" is also

translated elsewhere and rightly understood, much like we might go to England in the right context and talk about lords and ladies, we know that it applies to people in positions of authority. Certainly, if there's a voice coming out of the sky at midday with a big bright light, you're going to speak respectfully thinking it's some kind of divine messenger. You could call an angel, for instance, Lord and it would make sense in context to say and use the Greek word kurios.

That's why some translations even translate this, "Who are you, sir?" I think it's more than just you're an important guy who popped out from behind a tree. This is like, wow, some messenger from heaven is speaking and who are you person of authority? You might want to say it that way. And Christ answers, he said, "I am Jesus. I'm Jesus, whom you are persecuting." That's an interesting way to even identify himself, right? Not the Lord Christ, but I'm Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth, the one that you keep deriding. You don't like his titles. His name is just a very common name in the 1st century. It's the Hellenized form of the word Joshua. It's like, "I'm Joshua. I'm the one who you think is nothing more than just the guy, a carpenter from the northern part of Israel. But you're persecuting me. You thought I was dead, I'm not dead, I'm speaking to you now on this road to Damascus.

I got some instructions for you," verse 6, "but rise and enter the city, and you'll be told what you are to do. Now, the men who were traveling with him stood speechless," they knew something big had happened, "hearing the voice, but seeing no one." And by that, as we'll learn later, as he recounts the story, they heard it. They didn't understand it. They heard the sound. They heard the voice. Like sometimes we talk about they heard it, but they didn't hear it. Right? Your kids hear you talk but a lot of times they don't hear you, right? They didn't hear him, but they did hear him. That's what was going on here, as Paul will later explain as he gives his testimony in a couple of situations in the book of Acts.

They didn't see anyone. "Saul," verse 8, "rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing." So he's blinded. This reminds us of the first chapter of Luke where Zacharias starts to spar with the angel and God strikes him to where he can't speak. And so there's a physical malady, there's a physical handicap here given to him. So the big hotshot who's leading this posse, riding on his high horse, literally, they had to take him off of his horse, right? He's on the ground at this point. They have to pick him up and "lead him by the hand," like he's a helpless child, and they "brought him into" this city into "Damascus." "And for three days," now he's in Damascus, "he was without sight and neither ate nor drank."

Now, verse 10 and following, we're going to look at, Lord willing, next week how Ananias is appointed by God to connect with him, be the agent of the clarity of the gospel when we get more information. Right now, he's knocked off his horse. He gets the fact that the Jesus that he's thinking should be tried as a blasphemer is actually alive from the dead. And we're set up now for a conversion of the Apostle Paul. He halts Saul in his tracks and says, you've got to think about what you're doing. And to do that, you going do it in darkness and you're going to do it in such a profound way you're not even to want to eat.

I think all of us can appreciate the greatness of our salvation when we start to appreciate the greatness of the problem, and that's what happens, we often call it conviction, when we are just prior to our conversion, we have a sense of how grave the situation is. And again, I'm a preacher on a Sunday morning in a Bible church, I'm assuming most of you have this recollection. If you don't, I mean, you can pick up what we're talking about just by hearing me, or maybe you've been convicted in the past that you don't have a conviction about sin. But this is something that Paul is getting hit with and I want us all, I'm going to preach particularly to those of you who have this testimony. I just want you to start to dust off that reality of "I came to a place of really getting halted in my life and God had to say, 'Stop, you're going the wrong way. Here's The Way.'" That's important for us to catch.

And you need to realize this, as subtle as you may think it is in terms of a moral grievance or crime, for you to just do your own thing in life. The Bible's very clear. If you're not on The Way, if you're not part of The Way, if Christ is not your shepherd in life, then you are in open rebellion to God. And that's a hard way to put it. But that's an important thing for us to catch. Some of us think the word rebellion against God should only be reserved to those that make our news feeds and do horrible crimes. But in reality, the Bible says if you are not on The Way, if you're not following Christ, if you don't hear the shepherd's voice and follow him, if that's not your submission to the King of kings and Lord of lords, well, then really you've chosen to go your own way.

And while that sounds very cute, even in Isaiah 53 to talk about the sheep, each of us has turned to our own way like sheep. Right? We haven't followed God. We think, well, that doesn't sound too bad, that the Bible says is bad. It's horrifically bad. It's rebellion against God. And whatever form that might take and for the Apostle Paul, you think, well, he's a terrible person, he's arresting people and having them killed. Well he's doing it all with a very sincere, zealous motive. You know that, right? So you cannot say he's sitting there, you know, rubbing his hands together, saying, "How can I do more evil in the world?" He's trying to do the right thing. He's trying to be Phinehas in the Old Testament who takes a spear and goes after the sinning Israelites who are engaging in immorality with the Moabites and say, "I'm going to end this play I mean, Phinehas killed someone and God said, finally, someone who has enough zeal to stand up for me, has the same zeal for my name that I have. Phinehas is a hero. Saul thinks he's a hero.

Guess what? Every non-Christian you ever meet thinks they are a hero. When I ask them, "are you a good person?" The answer is "yes." "Do you think you're going to heaven when you die? The answer is "yes." I mean, that's what I get time after time after time after time. And we got 93, 94% of the people in our country who are still theists. They believe there's a God. Most of them believe in the afterlife. And there's some kind of good place and bad place. Most of them still do. And if you ask them, "which one are you going to?" They say, "I'm going to the good place." Why? "Because I'm a good person."

The reality of it is, the Bible says, is that sin is simply us being on the wrong path. It can express itself as some horrific pimp or drug dealer in some creepy part of town, or it can manifest itself as a religious zealot who's trying to do what he thinks is right, but he's missing

the point. Either way, you are a sheep who is going his own way. That's rebellion against God. Number 1, if you're taking notes, we need to "See the Rebellion in the Pre-Christian Life." You need to see the rebellion in EVERY pre-Christian life. You need to see the rebellion in YOUR pre-Christian life. Before you became a Christian, you had to get to the place where God had said, wait a minute, what you're doing is not right. No matter how socially acceptable it might be, it is not right. Because it is not in association and submission to the Son of Man who has all authorities to submit all people to himself.

Even that. And I remember being rebuked by people after coming and visiting the church and talking to me about how my sermons are bad because I keep talking about submitting to Christ. And they saw themselves as very good religious people who say, "I don't think anyone should see themselves as having to submit themselves to Christ." It reminded me of the parable of Jesus when he says in talking about the king going away, sending his son, and the people on that place, which was not even their own, that field, that property said we do not want this man to rule over us. What's wrong? Is he a bad man? He's not a bad man. We just don't want him to rule over us. Why? Because we like to rule over our own selves.

And here's the thing each of us has turned our own way is by definition an act of rebellion against the leader, if, in fact, that leader is justified in being our leader. And here's the thing about God. He is God and we are not. And until you recognize that and live that out in your life and say, "Yes, I submit to the Lord, I'm confessing him as the Lord, that means I am not the Lord," then we are in open rebellion to God. No matter how bad that is to your neighbors. It doesn't matter. In that regard, you need to understand that sin in the Bible is primarily a state and not just an act. Some of us don't see it that way, but you need to start seeing it that way.

In the Bible, it says, "The day you eat of the fruit, you shall surely die." Die means that there is this relational separation, just like death in the physical realm is you being separated from your body. And the reality is you and I are in nice, close, intimate relational contact here, God and his creation. And now as moral agents, you've chosen to rebel and say, "I'm going to go my own way," because Satan shows up and tempts you and says, "Did God really say? Why don't you just do what's good for you?" And you think the apple is good, the fruit on that tree is good for food. It looks good. "It's beautiful, it's going make me wise. I want to do it even though God says, don't do it, I'm going to choose my own way." That is an act of open rebellion and all she did was have lunch. It wasn't even lunch, it was a snack.

What kind of moral rebellion is that? Very simple, you no longer saw God as God. You chose to do your own thing. And that act of rebellion is one that we need to recognize takes many shapes and sizes, but it's a state, primarily a state. It is a state of being. Isaiah 59:2. Right? We have had a separation because of sin. And it started, according to Romans Chapter 5, way back in Genesis 3 in the Garden and that has made every successive generation be born in a state of separation from God.

Matter of fact it's put this way in Romans Chapter 10 that we are at enmity with God. We're his enemies. Christ dies for us while we're enemies. Some say, "I don't think we're enemies. I

mean, come on, human beings aren't... Did you see the cute kids on our platform this morning? There's no way they're enemies of God." But the Bible says from the very beginning, Psalm 51, from the very beginning, from the point of conception, the human being is at enmity with God, hostility with God. And what does that look like? They want to go their own way. They want to do their own thing and ask any parent about that. Grandparents may not see it, but parents see it very clearly. Kids want to go their own way. "I want to do whatever I think is right to me, whatever pleases me."

And while that becomes more sophisticated and perhaps more immoral by social standards, it is basically the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life. Those are the things in open rebellion to God. And Paul is now being knocked off his horse because of The Way which is Jesus, right? That's what he says he is "the way, the truth, the life," Jesus is The Way. And these followers, the disciples, the learners, the sheep of The Way, the John 10 Good Shepherd said, "hey, follow me." And those who say, "Nope, I'm going to follow myself." That's very important for us to recognize that that is a decision of rebellion against God.

Now jot this down, we won't take time to turn there. But Psalm 2 says that everyone is in that state. That they are in a place of living with an underlying impulse to no longer be shackled by the King. "I don't want the King to bind me with his moral strictures. I don't want the Lord and his anointed to shackle me with anything that I don't want." And that's helpful for us to see, because in that passage, it says, "The Lord sits there and holds them in derision." Why? Because they choose to go their own way. Can you be like the president of the Rotary Club? Can you be a person who donates to the Salvation Army and be at enmity with God? Of course. Can you help old ladies cross the street, change somebody's flat tire on the freeway, get your hands dirty and be late for an appointment and still be in enmity with God? Of course you can. Of course we can, until we submit our lives to the King. It's called reconciliation, there's another biblical word for it, that I finally get right back in relationship with God when he says, "Don't eat of the fruit," then I say, "OK, I get it. You're in charge. You make the rules. I do what you say." And you know what the average person grates against? That truth right there. We don't want this man to rule over us.

I can pick and choose whenever his will seems to kind of line up with my will, then I'm in, I'm cool with that. But soon as you start telling me stuff that I don't like, well, then I'm not cool with that. There are a lot of things the disciples of The Way were saying that Paul would agree with. But Paul did not agree with their understanding of Daniel 7. He also did not agree with their understanding of Isaiah 53, which we already saw Steven explaining to this Ethiopian in the previous chapter. Paul didn't agree with all that. He should have agreed with that because Jesus comes on the scene and proves that. But he says, "I don't want to believe that. I'll believe this part. I believe that part, but I don't believe that part."

And if you've never watched that in an accelerated fashion, just watch the headlines about religion in America today. That's exactly where we're at. "It's all really cool, I was in for about 90% of that, but everything in culture has shifted. Now I'm into about 70% of that, and next week I'll be into 60% of that. And eventually I'll basically say I don't like but just 10% of that."

We've seen that going on for all of human history. "Did God really say?" "I don't like what he said there because it impinges on something that I want and something that I like and something I think is reasonable."

So that we get to the Isaiah 50 place of saying, "God, I think if he were who I think he should be, he would be just like me." I mean, that's the paraphrase of Psalm 50. We thought God was altogether like us. That's how it's put. But why? Because he didn't judge us immediately. They ate the fruit and nothing happened. "I might have felt guilty for a minute, but I'm OK. I wasn't zapped dead, so I'm going to keep going my own way and I'll have that fruit again tomorrow."

We are in a position as regenerate people to look back and say, "Yes, God at one point halted my life and said, 'You're in rebellion against the Good Shepherd. You do not follow in this flock. You don't hear his voice and you have not been following him. You've just been following your own dictates. You've been the master of your own soul, the captain of your own fate. You have been in charge.'" And you can see why this is a fundamental tenet of Christianity that we have to, as Jesus said in Matthew 13:44-47, we have to say here's a treasure, it's worth having and it requires that I give up everything that I've accumulated to that point.

Rich young ruler Matthew 19. "Hey, give up everything and follow me." Luke 14 verse 33, "No one can be my disciple unless they give up everything." What does that mean? Where do I cash it in? I don't get it. Is there a deposit slip, you know, in the back of the track that I read? No, no, this isn't a literal turning in my money, right? It was for the rich young ruler, Matthew 19, because Jesus was there saying it. If he shows up and says it to you, then it's a literal thing for you. But it's got to happen in your heart, according to Luke 14:33. And here's the thing. I want to be in charge of my money. "I'll even maybe agree," at least they used to, "maybe if 10% is his, great I'll give him that 10%. But I don't really see my whole of life under the lordship of God, in particular the lordship of Christ." Think about Paul, he had so many things right. "I see myself as under the lordship of Yahweh, the Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament, but I don't see myself under his messiah. I just don't want to buy Daniel 7, Isaiah 53, Isaiah 40. I mean, the prophets. I don't want I want to buy that."

Question. Was Saul very sincere in his rejection of The Way? Absolutely. Matter of fact, he's the only kind of rebel I can respect because you're all into that rebellion. You think you're doing right and you're all in. You don't live with this dichotomized hypocrisy. You think it's wrong and if it's wrong, it needs to stop. And he is a sincere zealot. But here's how he puts it later, after his conversion, as he writes to the Romans about the lost people that he grew up with, he says in Romans 10, 9 and 10, both these chapters he starts with the idea of his concern for the lost. He says, in one case, "I have an unceasing anguish in my heart for these people." And he said, "Here's why. Because they have a zeal like I had, but it's without knowledge."

Paul had a lot of knowledge as he grew up sitting at the seat of Gamaliel, the great teacher and mentor of rabbis. But he wasn't willing to submit his whole life to the Scriptures that

Gamaliel had taught. He wasn't willing to really buy everything when it got hard. "I believe 80% of it. I don't believe all of it." You've got to see that for what it is. It's certainly is an act of rebellion in a position of us being separated from what is right. Psalm 2, Ephesians Chapter 4 starting in verse 17, there are so many passages for us to digest in this regard to make the simple truth that I don't think I have to spend much breath convincing you of it, if you sit here as a regenerator person this morning, and that is you're right, I was, no matter how socially acceptable I might have been, even ecclesiastic acceptable, the church accepted me, but my heart was in open rebellion to God because I only went so far. I wanted him to fill in the check before I signed it. I wasn't willing to sign the check before he filled it in. And that is the problem of wayward sheep who aren't willing to submit to the shepherd.

Well, he gets knocked off his horse. I even like the way in English it's put here between verses 2 and 3, he's going to find people belonging to The Way, quote, unquote. Now he went on his way. We'll find that as clear as a play on words in Greek as it is in English, but he didn't go on his own, he didn't do his own thing. Jesus tells him, "Well, you know when you do your own thing you're chafing and grading against me. What you're doing is actually damaging my people." So Saul gets thrown to the ground in verse 4. He asked the question in verse 5, "Who are you, sir?" Who are you heavenly one? Jesus says, "I'm Jesus, whom you are persecuting."

Now look at verses 6 and 7. I got some things for to do. "'Arise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.' The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice, but seeing no one." I just want you to recognize what's happening now. "The one I thought was dead and I rejected him, so I was believing 80% of the Old Testament, but not 100%. Now I see this one in the 20% is actually real. And he actually did rise from dead, just like he said he would, just like the Old Testament says he would in Isaiah 53. But I rejected that. Now I accept it. Now I embrace it. And now he's speaking to me and he says, go to Damascus." And then we're going to learn in verse 10 and following, "I'm going to get this guy named Ananias, he's going to come as the vessel and messenger and tool, instrument by which you're going to come to faith in Christ. But you're now convinced intellectually and you should do what I tell you. And he does. He gets up in verse 8 and he goes. He does what he was told.

Speaker 1 And I would argue that later, not only in his recollection of how his testimony plays out, but even as we'll see in the rest of Chapter 9, here is Ananias bringing him a message which we don't have a record of what all he said. But it leads him to do what Ananias says, and that is to call on the name of the Lord to have his sins washed away and to be baptized. The first statement of identification, the living out of my identification with Christ. I mean, think about this. The one who was wanting to kill people who had been baptized is now going to say, "I stand with Christ, I'll be baptized."

But between here and there, what's happening? He's doing what Christ said. Follow me now on this. He's doing what Christ said. But being intellectually convinced that he ought to do what Christ said is proceeding what he's going to do later, and that is to call on the name of the Lord. As he says in Romans Chapter 10, "Call on the name of the Lord and you'll be

saved." He's going to be saved. Right now he's intellectually convinced enough to say, "I'm going to do what he says." Not only that God put an exclamation point on it by blinding him. That kind of helps you do what he says.

And so he is obeying Christ, and I would argue, but not yet saved. And I just want you to understand that, because that will help you figure out a lot about your testimony. Number two, "Let's Understand Pre-Christian Obedience." I want you to think about that. Even if you want to argue with me, "Well, I think he was saved right here because he said the word Lord." Well, I would argue with that. I don't think that's what's taking place here. But even if you want to... if I want to grant you that in this debate, great, fine. Let me ask you this, did Judas ever obey Christ? Answer? Yes. Of course he did. It wasn't a trick question. I know you're the nine o'clock crowd. I get it. You're not very interactive but my favorite crowd. (no audible response from the audience) See, the 11 o'clock, if I ever said that to 11 o'clock, which I never would, they would have audibly moaned, "Oh..." But I say that to you guys, you're thinkers, right? "I'm not going to show my soft side on a Sunday morning." But I don't take it back. All right.

What in the world was I talking about? (audience laughter) Judas, thank you. Did Judas, that's what got me off, right? Was Judas ever obedient to Christ? Now you can start to get esoteric and think you're super spiritual, and say, "But not really." But really... when Jesus says to Judas, "Pair up with this guy and go into that village," did he pair up with that guy and go into the village? I'd say that's obedience. That's obedience. And you can say, "Well, let's parse that out. He might have been, as my old illustration says, he might have been sitting on the outside, but he was standing on the inside. OK. But when my kids as kids did what Ephesians Chapter 6 says, verses 1 and 2, which is to obey your parents, "Children, obey your parents." And I said be home by 10:00. And they were home by 10:00 because they knew that that's what dad said and that's what the Bible says and that's what God wants. And so they did it. They may have not done it as happily as you might want someone to do it, but they obeyed Christ.

And I just want to say this. Whether you're buying the point of conversion that I'm trying to articulate about Saul here, Saul is obeying Christ before he's a Christian. Judas obeyed Christ and never became a Christian. There are a lot of people like Cornelius who we're going to meet in the next chapter. He's a Roman, he's fearing God. Here are the three things said about him. He's giving alms generously to the people of Israel. Right? And he's praying all the time. Those are things that God wants you to do and God has said you should do. He's doing all those things. He's obeying the Scriptures. Do you think Paul was obeying the Scriptures? Sure he was. Now he's even obeying Christ. But he not saved yet. Now, you're going to think this is a contradiction of what you've heard from this platform many, many times. But it's not, so just hold... we can hold two thoughts at one time.

Here's the first one. Just because you started obeying Christ does not mean you're a Christian. So when you look back in your testimony, a lot of people can be fooled. "Well, this is when I started going to church. This was when I started going and reading my Bible, this is when it all started making sense to me. I must have been saved then." And I'm saying, hmmm. It made a lot of sense to Paul at this point to obey Christ. It made a lot of sense to

Paul that what he thought about Christ before was wrong. It made a lot of sense to a lot of people to do a lot of things that were biblical and Christian, but it didn't mean they were Christians.

So if you're looking at your testimony and saying, "Well, I want to celebrate my testimony." Well one thing about it, if I'm going to dust it off and polish it up and set it there, not as a revisionist, I'm not trying to rewrite history, but looking back at my testimony, I want to be able to say, 'Well, the first thing I know is this, that no matter what kind of life I lived, I was in open rebellion to God. I was not following the shepherd. Christ was not my Lord." And then I want to say, well, when did he become my Lord? When was I regenerate? When did this thing happen, this born-again experience that Nicodemus was struggling with in John 3? Well, I'm going to say don't get confused that the points of obedience when you started to see a pattern of obedience, well, that was when I became a Christian." That's thought number one.

Thought number two is, "Don't you always say that obedience like James 2 says is an expression of fruit and that is the proof and verification of my salvation?" And the answer is yes, of course it is. Now, how can this be true? Think about this now. Here's what I know. Unconverted hearts can obey the dictates of Christ, right? But converted hearts are going to obey the dictates of Christ, and I'm going to say, if we start looking in Scripture, there's another layer beneath all this. I can't be fooled because one doesn't have the motive of devotion to Christ, at least not the way that it will as born-again Christians. If we abide in the vine we'll bear fruit. There's something organic about my connection with Christ AFTER my conversion that produces fruit that's different than the quote unquote plastic fruit that I get prior to my Christianity.

if you've heard me talk about this before, you might have heard about an external conformity to Christianity and an internal organic conformity to Christianity. Right? To obey the dictates of Christ because of the external pressure, which can be a lot of things -- to fit in, I don't want to displease my parents, I don't want my wife to think I'm a jerk. Whatever your reasons for external conformity, you can do those things that Christ said. "I'm going to pray. I'm going to do devotions. I'm going to go to church. I'm going to give my money." OK, well, that's external conformity. And I say it with that kind of tone because I'm like, yeah, even if it's done with a willingness, there's a sense of "Yeah, it's what I should do."

There's a should and ought and then there's a want and an organic expression of my love for God. Those are different. And I'm not saying that Cornelius wasn't praying sincerely before he became a Christian. But I am saying this, that when I start looking at my life, I know this about a lot of my prayers. There are good motives and there are selfish motives. James Chapter 4 says one of the reasons "you ask and don't receive is because you ask with wrong motives, that you might spend it on your pleasures." So I know that. That's an extreme example of something saying here is a good deed, it's a good deed, but it's done with an imperfect motive. Matter of fact, it's a bad motive.

When Mary took the spikenard and poured it out and Judas stands up and says, don't, it could have been sold for a lot of money and we can "give it to the poor." Everyone believed what he

said at the time. So much so did they trust him that no one suspected him at the Last Supper when Jesus said, "One of you is going to betray me" and everyone trusted enough for him to be the treasurer of the disciples. But John looks back in retrospect and says, I realize now he used to help himself to the till, no wonder our budgets never balanced because he didn't really care about the poor because I see later in his apostasy, I get what's going on in his heart now. So he puts the pieces together and says the motive of caring for the poor is not really for God, it's not for God completely. And even him pairing up and going into villages and sharing the message of the kingdom because Christ was coming, all his obedience and missionary efforts, not really coming from a converted heart.

I could go all morning long with characters from church history that you know, Spurgeon, Augustine, I can go down the list. Augustine might be an example, but contrast that I even put his confessions on there as a reading book this week. But the idea of people like the Wesley brothers who were engaging in the work of ministry prior to their conversion. So if you say, well, I've always been a Christian because I've always gone to church and I've always sung the songs, I had a few goosebumps when I sang the songs and I learned the verses. I've never, you know, I never had sex before I got married. I never took drugs. And I came home on time. I was a Christian. I've always been a Christian. You're equating obedience to Christ, no other things in the equation, just obedience to Christ, I'm obeying Christ, I must have been a Christian.

That's why it's harder for church kids who are listening to me right now who grew up in the church. They go and they hear the testimonies that I heard growing up because they only picked those guys to give their testimonies. You stood on the stage and they say, "I was the worst person ever. I killed 18 people and I hooked everybody in sin and on drugs. And I was a pimp." And, you know, they went on and on. "But now I'm teaching Sunday school. Like, whoa." You have a testimony. I don't have a testimony. I've never been a pimp. I mean, I've never sold drugs, I came home on time. So you've always been a Christian? No, that would be the fallacy of saying conformity to the commands of Christ, that means you're a Christian. Are you tracking with me on this?

Because last night I preached it so poorly, a lot of people asked me a ton of questions afterwards, like, "I didn't get that second point." Do you get the second point? You're the nine o'clock crowd. You get the second point, right? (audience laughs) You understand it, right? You need to understand that because you're going to have so many people who are going to have such confusion about when was I... They'll say, "You talked about, I mean, even the way you put it in the intro, I didn't like it. There was a DAY that you were converted. There was a MOMENT you were justified. There was a TIME when you were born again. Regenerate." Yeah, all that's true.

Even if you leave here going, "Well, I know I'm a Christian today, I can admit that sometime early in my life I can see there was rebellion against following God. I get that. My heart was not there. But I still don't know. I don't know exactly when it was." If you're going to tell me that, I'm just going to say this. Does God know that there was a time? Because the Bible's very clear about conversion, regeneration, justification. It happens as a point in time. There's

a time in which you wholeheartedly, as Paul puts it to the Romans, you commit yourself to the teaching delivered to us. And it's more than just, "I'm going to do it today." It's a whole heart change. Your heart of stone becomes a heart of flesh. That happens in a moment of time.

It may have been ordained from eternity past, but it happens at a moment. So if you say, "Well, I'm not sure when I got... I was 22 sometime in 2019." Great. Do you think God knows the minute that you weren't saved and then you were? OK. So let's just all agree you may be fuzzy about it. Maybe because you're so old you can't think back to it. I don't know. Maybe because you were a church kid like me and like, "I don't know, it was hard to see what the change of the motives were because it wasn't like I stopped with my drug route. Well, what are you saying? There is no... I just kind of... it was a process for me." Don't tell me that. Because if it's a process for you, it sounds like you are on your own path because Jesus' path is it's a point in time.

So there's got to be a point in time here. "Well, I'm not sure about it." OK, great. I'm not kicking you out of the church because you don't know the point in time. I've been accused of that recently. That's not what I'm saying. But I'm saying there is a point in time. We are evangelical, we believe in a born-again, those are Christ's words, experience. That you have a point of conversion. That's what we're here to celebrate in the next 10 weeks, is that and we learn to value that. So I hope the series helps you kind of figure that out. And I don't want pre-Christian obedience to confuse the matter. And some of us understand what it is to have the change.

I was reading the Bible every day before I became a Christian, but then there was the day I became a Christian. I don't even know what I was doing. I had bad theology all around me and I thought I was rededicating my life or turning in from my junior varsity to get my varsity jacket. I thought... I didn't know what it was, so I didn't memorialize it. I didn't put it down in a book. But guess what, I read the Bible the next day from a completely different, at a profound level, a completely different reason, completely different mode. A completely different experience. Because my heart of stone had turned into a heart of flesh. Those are Ezekiel's analogies. God's analogies to Ezekiel. I was going to say, "does that help?" But I don't want to say that because I don't want some of you to say no. Because it didn't help everybody last night.

Verse 8. Are you still there in Act 9? "Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were open, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him to Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank." To get to the place of seeing Christ as our hope, we have to get to the place of seeing our own hopelessness, right? To see the worth of our salvation we need to see the worthlessness of everything else. Whether it's going to church with their unregenerate heart, or whether it's living a flagrantly socially rejectable illicit life, you got to say what I'm doing is not right, it's not going to end well. It is not what other people have who are saved. I need God's grace, to hear his voice and follow him. And there should be a sense in which you recognize I cannot do this.

Paul says later in his sanctification in Second Corinthians 1, the bad things happen even in our sanctification oftentimes so that we would no longer trust in ourselves. Trusting in ourselves is a bad bet and people sing songs about believing in themselves. And then, oh, that sucks to be you, if that's really is what you're doing, right? To believe in yourself is a bad bet. Because that ends in a place that is not good. But you should say, you know what? I'm done trusting myself. He says, sometimes those bad things happen so that we will, in our sanctification, learn to increasingly trust in Christ.

Well, there is a profound, categorical shift where non-Christians get to the place saying, "I can trust in myself." Because you asked them, "Are you a good person?" They say, "Yes." "Are you going to heaven?" "Yes." Then you ask them, as Kennedy taught us in the EE program, "Why would you be accepted in it? If you say to God, if God says to you, "Why should I let you in?" What are you going to say to God? If you start saying, well, "look at what I've done," well, then you know that you have trusted in yourself. If you think about, you know, "I was good. I was generous. I didn't cheat, I didn't steal, I never cussed anybody out. So I should get to heaven."

The whole point of Paul's testimony to the Philippians is that I was trusting in myself and my own righteousness and now I'm going to trust in Christ completely. One thing that helps is having to be led into town as a blind man. You can't even trust in yourself to get into town. You never can trust yourself to get into heaven. You've got to stop with that. So God puts this exclamation point on his hopelessness and his helplessness and gets him to the place of real conversion. For three days he feels such despondency and self-reflection. We can only imagine if you want to psychoanalyze Paul at this point, I'm not sure what all for those three days, but he didn't even eat. I mean, we don't have the command from God, don't eat, don't see and don't eat. No, it's like reflexive, I just can't. I'm realizing my life has been all wrong. I've been saying Christ is dead. He's alive. I've been saying these people are wrong. I think they're right.

And he went from the intellectual convincing which took place on the road to Damascus, to being in Damascus at Ananias' house on Straight Street saying, "You know what? I now need to call on the name of the Lord." And for some of you, you can't clarify your testimony because you think that when you were intellectually convinced and things made sense, well, that must have been when I became a Christian. But, you know, it's more than understanding with the mental assent because, as James says, even the demons have their theology right. It's about you knowing what it is to put your faith in Christ. And that is the shift that in our own hearts we know comes through the portal of hopelessness.

Put it down this way if you're taking notes, you need to "Recall the Non-Christian Hopelessness." Recall that. That really if you think about non-Christians, here's how Paul puts it in Ephesians, to think of my life alienated from God on the wrong path, it might be a good path, everyone's cheering me on, employee of the month, but it's the wrong path, that he says being alienated from God is being without Christ and without hope in this world. Hopelessness.

It should feel and look like this. And if you have a testimony you're going to think back to this. Was I led up to real conversion? There was a period of me being intellectually convinced, and then there was that sense of, wow, I've got to respond to this. It ought to look like one of the psalms. Let me give you a psalm, Psalm 116. Let's turn there real quick. Psalm 116. This is where we get, and while God didn't use blindness in your life, perhaps he did, I don't know, someone that I'm speaking to, but maybe he did use some physical ailment. It's funny how when we are getting rolled in on a gurney into E.R., you start praying a little differently about your mortality and your dependence upon God, and this fear grips you. Circumstances have a way of doing that.

I don't know what the circumstances were, but regardless of whether it happened without any physical ailment in your life or any threat or any divorce or any bankruptcy, there was that sense in which God convinced you that without Christ being your savior, you're in big trouble. And that's what the first few verses here in Psalm 116 illustrate so well. Look at the joy. This is the whole goal of the series, although it may defy what you've heard so far, is to be excited. "I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice and my pleas for mercy." I can say it like that because I want to emphasize the first time I read that verse, that great sense of, wow, I'm so glad I love God because of what he's done. But let me read it again. "I love the Lord, because he heard my voice and my PLEAS for mercy." There's a strong verb there. I mean, I was crying out for mercy. What is mercy? I know I deserve punishment. I know I deserve to be castigated, to be accused, to be sent into outer darkness. Speaking of blindness, right? A great symbol of that.

But I love the Lord, why? "Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore, I'm going to call him as long as I live." I'm so excited about my Christian life to view it from a New Testament perspective because of my salvation, it's a great thing. Here's what I felt. "The snares of death encompassed me," and I had the weight of that. I felt that "the pangs of Sheol," that's the grave, they "laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish. And then I called on the name of the Lord: 'O Lord, I pray, deliver my soul!'" I pray, it's a strong word too. I plead, I want, I beseech you, Paul is having this experience for three days. The distress. "I was wrong. I'm on the wrong path. The guys on The Way are right." I need to call on the name of the Lord which is exactly what Ananias is going to tell him to do. And then we value that, "Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; our God is merciful, the Lord preserves the simple." I'm ready to just to say I got nothing now. "When I was brought low, you saved me."

I don't know if you were to write your testimony out, and let's do the long version, you're going to write a book. I don't know who is going to read our stories, right? We're just normal people. But let's just say we're going to write a book about our conversion. I don't know what the circumstances that are attendant to that are, but there has to be that "that." That's a component part of this thing we're celebrating, our testimony of conversion, that we were like, I needed the mercy of God. I knew in my distress, the distress of my soul. I got to have Christ.

If you've not had that experience, again I'm talking to people primarily that I assume have, but if you haven't, that's what real Christianity does, confronts you with the truth. You get intellectually convinced. You now say I've got to do what Christ says. And in doing that, you

say, OK, I got a heart problem, a moral problem, and you call out to God. And the light/darkness here is so good. He could have done a lot of things. Because Paul, you know, walk with a limp. They are going to have to drag you into town. No, no, you're going to be blinded. Such a great picture.

And it's used throughout the Scripture. Light - truth, darkness - error. Light - God, darkness - life without God. Judgment, outer darkness, judgment on Egypt, darkness. I don't love it, it just it's dramatic the way it's presented, a darkness in Exodus, this is Chapter 10, that could be felt. Horrible. Christ dies in judgment and it's dark from noon to three. Darkness. See, but we're celebrating the fact that we're not in darkness anymore because of the darkness of Christ, we get brought into light, we get transferred into the kingdom of God's beloved Son. Out of the domain, I love the way it's translated in a lot of translations, "the domain of darkness," to quote Colossians 1. That transfer, that's what I want to spend the next nine weeks getting excited about. We've been transferred out of that and we have hope. It's the most important thing. You're sick, cancer, you're going to die soon, spouse left you, death in your family, bankruptcy, the world's out of control, you hate life. Hey, are you saved? Do you have a testimony, are you converted? We've got to get that out. We've got to celebrate that.

Well, one of the passages I'm going to take you to in your small groups this week is John 9. And while I only make you read the punch line to the passage in John 9, it'd be great for you to prepare for your small groups by reading a whole chapter. A man cured of blindness by Christ, miraculous curing of blindness. He then turns to the Pharisees of which Paul was one, I'm not saying he was there at the time, and he says, you guys think you see. But I've come into the world for judgment. What is that? To change things. That those who think they see can understand that they're blind. And that those who are blind, and I hope it can work with those same people, they think they see, but they know they're blind, can now become seeing.

Like those two men in Luke who go up to the temple to pray and one thinks he sees, "I got it, it's OK, I'm fine. I'm glad I'm not like this guy, a tax collector," who says, "I'm blind." He beats his chest, he says, I just need the mercy of God. And Jesus asked the question, which one do you think went home justified? I'll tell you who, the guy who knew he was blind. The hopelessness of it all. That hopelessness breaks forth into "I love the Lord because he answered my plea for mercy."

A really difficult period in my ministry life years and years ago. Let me call it a dark time, I suppose. I said, I need a hobby. If you know me, I'm not great at hobbies, but I thought, I don't know why, I don't remember what the attendant circumstances were, something I'm going to... I know, don't laugh at me. I'm going to start collecting coins. So I went on eBay and I did my thing and I spent way too much money in like a six-month period buying coins. And it's one thing to buy coins that, you know, like this is a rare, you know, whatever dime from whatever Buffalo headquarter, whatever. Those didn't interest me as much as the coins that depicted things.

Either one's representative of, like New Testament times or Old Testament times. And I got a few of those. They were too expensive, out of my price range. But those were super

fascinating. I read about them and I bought some. But I like the coins that had, of course, that had preachers on them, right? You get out there and there are Calvin coins and Spurgeon coins and, you know, I've got George Whitfield coins. Just cool coins. Well, life started to pick up again and I'm like, OK, well, I got no time for coin collecting. So I slowly as I collected these over a six-month period, I kind of put them in boxes and because I have a safe, not that I have anything worthy of putting in it, but I put everything in the safe. That was a long time ago, over a decade ago.

And I started thinking I came across something and I was frightened by something, or when I saw a coin, it was a coin that made me think of the coin that I bought that was like it. And I thought I have a bunch of coins back in the day. Well, I've had no time to think about the coin collection I have, but I thought, I'm going to go through those coins. So before I even went through them, I knew I had enough cool coins in there, that I went on Amazon that night and I bought a coin display case. Talk about a coin nerd. Right? You know, just a case. It was about like this glass case and these places you put the coins. I bought it because I got enough gold coins, I'm going to display these. Not that anyone else is probably interested in seeing them. Now you're going to want to see them, a couple of you.

I went through my coins a little at a time and I put those in this display case and I put them on my shelf. I'd forgotten how many cool coins I had. And I don't even have... I mean, I don't want to buy two cases and be a super nerd, so I just have one, I'll have to switch them out at times. I thought how cool that these coins that have not seen the light of day for years and years, I now literally put them by where I study, I get to see them and enjoy them. And until someone comes in my office and steals them, I get to have the experience of something that, I mean, for me at least, are semi-evaluable that are super cool.

The whole point of this series is for you to see what a cool thing it is. That's an understatement. That you have been redeemed by something more precious than silver and gold, but the blood of Christ, and that on a day he washed you clean. Your testimony is to be put on display. I want it out of the drawer, out of the safe. I want it in your mind. I want it in your mouth. I want you to tell your story. I want you to get excited about it, I want some of you to write history. But I want you to talk as you identify the waywardness of the rebellion of your pre-Christian life. You understand that there was this process perhaps of coming to understand what Christ is and how you ought to respond to him, but then there was that change that came on the heels of the hopelessness of knowing without Christ, alienated from him in this world, you had no hope.

And that's just the foundation, part one of four within our 10-part series of God's work with Saul of Tarsus. But as we continue in our series learning about the great conversion of Paul, I hope that you pull it out and put it on a shelf somewhere where you see it every day. Amazing, valuable, most important, significant, consequential thing about you. Do you have pictures of your family up? Great. This is even more important. You got a business card holder on your desk? This is even more important. Your salvation in Christ.

God, please give us more cherished, praise-filled thanksgiving for the fact that there was a day when we were lost and hopeless. And because of your work and mercy and grace in our lives, we became your children. I can't help but think about some who hear me say that and might even be chafing against even the idea of having to have a testimony. I pray they would become like us and be able to say, I love the Lord because I cried out to him. I made my pleas for mercy and he responded. God help us to celebrate that afresh in a new way in our lives.

In Jesus name. Amen.