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“We All Have a Story”
Pastor David Pranga

Acts 9:1-22

Good morning, my name is David Pranga. I am one of the pastors here at Brewster Baptist Church. Pastor Doug and Jill are gone this weekend. They are attending their future daughter in-law’s college graduation this weekend, and visiting family and friends as well.

This morning, I am very excited because we have 3 people being baptized this Sunday, and at least 4 more people being baptized next Sunday. Then on June 4, we will have 21 people joining our church. There are some great things happening in the next few weeks here at BBC.

In order to become a member at Brewster Baptist Church, you have to attend our membership seminar (one night class) and then we have a follow-up session where we meet with people. It is during this follow-up session where we have four to eight people come together and share. It is a warmer, more intimate time where you really get to know each other in a deeper way.

One of the things we talk about is that everyone has a “story.” Every person in this room who is a Christ-follower has a “spiritual story.” By far my favorite part of the class is when I ask the class to share their “story.” **What is your spiritual story?** *How did you come to know Jesus? What happened in your life that made Jesus real to you?* How did you encounter Jesus?

I have to be honest, when I ask that question, for some, there is panic in the room. They are unsure what to say. For some, there is excitement and they know what to say. And for some, they feel lost? They are not sure where to begin. What to say or not say. I also share with the group that I will go first, and I can help them if they need it. I am not looking for a long story. Just tell me your story of when Jesus became real to you.

You would be amazed at the stories people have shared in our time together. No prep time is given. Yet every person who shares has a unique story of when Jesus became important to them. People just share how God has met them, how their life is different and how their life has been transformed. To me, it is the most refreshing, encouraging, and life-changing way to see God at work in the lives of our people here at BBC.

Let me ask you this question this morning, **“What is your story?”** If a friend or family member asked you, “What is your spiritual story? When did Jesus Christ become real to you? How did you come to put your trust in Jesus Christ? When did you make Jesus Lord over your life?”

That is the subject of our message today. See, I believe every person here has a “story.”

Currently, we are in a series in the books of Acts. Every month, our challenge as a church is to read a book of the Bible. This month we are asking people to read the book of Acts. Acts is a great book because it’s about the early church.

The early church is just starting out. It is growing in numbers and multiplying rapidly. The disciples were healing people, miracles were happening, crowds gathered, and the disciples were sharing their faith in Jesus. Great things were happening. More people were being saved and putting their faith in Jesus. It was an exciting time.

Yet at the same time, as the early church continued to grow and multiply, they faced opposition and persecution. There was a group of people that did not like them at all. You may have heard of this group – Pharisees, Sadducees and the high priest of the day did not like what was happening. The

religious leaders of the day wanted to put a stop to this new sect called “The Way.” The religious leaders of the day wanted to put a stop to people who followed this man named “Jesus.” They had people arrested, thrown in jail, some were flogged, and even one was stoned to death.

Did this stop the disciples and the early church from telling people about Jesus?

Not at all. The early Christians shared their faith even more – even though some were being persecuted. The people went to the temple courts, house to house, and they shared the good news of Jesus with everyone.

Who was Saul? Saul was a Jew, a Rabbi, a very well-educated man. He spent time with the Sanhedrin Court. Saul was zealous about his faith. Saul’s major purpose and mission in life, at this point, was to “destroy the early church.” Saul was there when Stephan was stoned to death, and gave his approval in chapter 7. Saul got a court order to drag off men and women, and put them in prison. Saul was on a mission.

In our passage today Saul is on his way to Damascus. Let me read to you Chapter 9:1-23. Follow along in your bible or on the screen.

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priests² and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.” The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything. In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, “Ananias!” “Yes, Lord,” he answered. The Lord told him, “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.” “Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.” But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.” Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. All those who heard him were astonished and asked, “Isn’t he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn’t he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?” Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

Wow, what a story about Saul. In Chapter 9, we see Saul's conversion story. Saul encounters Jesus. Saul's life is changed forever. There begins a transformation in Saul's life and in the rest of Acts you see that Saul has a new purpose and mission: to preach the good news about Jesus Christ, and to share with everyone that Jesus saves. Jesus is the Messiah.

This week as I pondered about what I was going to share with you. Three things jumped out to me about Saul's story.

1. God never gives up on people (including you).

Have you ever felt that God could never love you? There are things in your past you're not proud about? Are there things that you are doing right now that make you wonder how could Jesus possibly love you? You may think to yourself, there is no way Jesus could love me, and forgive me of things I have done wrong.

Everybody has those struggles. If you struggle with those thoughts, I promise you that you are not alone. I have heard this many times from many different people. My hope is that this story gives you encouragement and hope! May you realize that God loves his people, which includes you. That God does not give up on people.

Let me take you back to the story. Chapter 9:1. "Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples." Saul is locking up men and women who were worshiping Jesus. Saul's great mission and purpose was to destroy the early church. Yet, God never gives up on Saul. Despite everything Saul is doing in persecuting the early leaders of the Christian church, God continues to pursue Saul. God still loved Saul despite Saul's actions, despite Saul going after Christians and persecuting them. God did not give up on Saul. God had a great love for Saul. God has great love for you as well.

The question that was percolating in my mind this week was, "Why does God pursue people that on the surface would be the last people you and I would expect that God would care about?" I could see God caring about the average person or the person who loves God. Why does God care about his enemy? The person who is out to destroy Christianity. Someone who is causing harm to his people who Jesus loves.

Yet, in only God's loving way, God never gives up on the people that we may assume are very far from God. Our minds say to ourselves, there is no way God would bring this person to faith in Him. Yet, God surprises us. The people we least expect turn their lives over to Jesus.

In our way of thinking, we don't want to believe in the impossible. Yet, God loves his people. God is a God of second, third and fourth chances. God continues to pursue his people. God often does the impossible. The people you and I may least expect, turn to Jesus.

Let me go back to something I said earlier: how many of us struggle with the thought that God can really love me. We struggle because we know the things we have done wrong. We know the many times we went our own way. We know when we have turned our backs on Jesus.

We join a great group of characters of the Bible that mess up. Yet God still loved and cared for these people. In the Bible we see that God pursues and loves people despite their mess ups:

- Abraham – liar, forgot God's promise, and tries to do everything in his own way
- Moses – he had bad temper, lied and murdered

- David – murdered and committed adultery
- Jonah – God gives Jonah a message and Jonah runs away
- Peter – denies Jesus 3 times, cuts off ear of a Roman soldier

The list could go on and on. The Bible is filled with people who messed up. God continues to pursue each and every person to Him. God is a God of love. God loves each of us despite the many times we mess up.

How do we know? Ephesians 2:8-9. **“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourself, it is a gift from God – not by works, so that no one can boast.”**

God gives this gift of grace and forgiveness to Saul. God gives this gift of grace and forgiveness to us as well. God is willing to forget our past actions. God is willing to forgive you of your deepest sins. I want you to realize that God never gives up on you. The only thing that God wants from us is to trust him and follow him with our whole heart.

The first point I get from this story is simple – **God never gives up on people (including you).**

2. **“Each of us has a story!”**

Acts chapter 9 is all about Saul’s conversion story. What was Saul’s story? How did Saul’s life change? How did he go from persecuting Christians to becoming one of the great leaders in the entire Bible?

To help us, I usually ask 3 questions.

- Life before Jesus Christ?
- When did Jesus become real to you?
- How has your life changed (transformation)?

Those are three important questions. Let’s look at Saul’s life?

i. **Life before Christ?**

- Saul was a Jew by birth but a Gentile by citizenship.
- Saul was a rabbi, and was trained in the Old Testament scriptures as well as Greek philosophies and Roman laws. He found great favor from the Sanhedrin – the governmental board.
- Saul was responsible for the outbreak of persecution in the early Christian church. He gave his approval to having Stephan stoned, and men and women put in jail. Saul did not want people to believe in Jesus. His mission was to destroy the early church.

ii. **When did Jesus become real to Saul? (Acts 9:3-6) / Saul’s conversion experience...**

- Saul’s conversion story was unique and simple. Saul was on his way to Damascus and a bright light flashed from Heaven. Saul fell to the ground. Saul heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Saul asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The voice says, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Now get up and go into the city and you will be told what to do.” As Saul got up, he was blind. He was blind for three days. Saul went to the city and fasted for three days.
- Obviously, Saul’s encounter with Jesus was real to him. Saul knew he was speaking to God. Jesus revealed himself to Saul. Saul became blind for three days. Can you image

if you were Saul what that must have been like. Since it was so real for Saul, I think that is why when persecution came his way, he was able to withstand it. Saul had an encounter with Jesus like no one else has.

Let me move on to the third question:

iii. How has your life changed? Once accepting Jesus into his life, how did Saul's life change?

- Saul's name would later be changed to the Apostle Paul. Saul would be one of if not the greatest leader of the early church. Saul would go on and preach, and share the good news of Jesus to the Gentile world. Saul would go on and write 13 of the 27 books of the New Testament.
- Saul's life was forever changed because of his encounter with Jesus.

I want to say not everybody has their life changed in such a significant way. What I can tell you is that each person has a unique story of how and when Jesus touched their life.

I mentioned earlier, we have three people being baptized today. I called them up this week, and I asked each of them if they would share their "story" with you today. To my amazement, each person said yes. With the help of Sharon Kautz, we made a video of each of their stories. Each testimony is 1-2 minutes long.

I love hearing people's stories. I love that Jesus meets each of us in a different place.

Ron – dependency on drugs. God filled the void with love, comfort and hope in a new life.

Justin – loss of his mom. People showering him with love and support; Justin felt God's love and peace.

Linda – cancer and being alone. Linda put her faith in God's hands. God was there for her in her times of trouble and sickness.

I really believe each person who calls themselves a Christian; a Christ-follower has a story. When people share their stories, often you will hear people share about a problem, a void in their life, sickness, or dealing with the loss of a love one. They cry out to God. God meets them. God showers them with love.

As people, we move from self-centered individuals, who were doing things in their own power, to becoming people who realize we need Jesus. When we accept Jesus into our lives, Jesus changes our heart. We experience joy and peace in our life. Instead of living for ourselves, we start to follow Jesus and live for him. Our desires change. We start caring more about Him than about ourselves.

Each of us has a story. If we are a Christian, we have a story about how we encountered Jesus and made him Lord of our life.

3. God wants to use You!

For Saul, his journey with God had just begun. God brought a guy named Ananias, whom Doug talked about last week, into his life to teach him and encourage him. God then used Saul and his preaching, his story / testimony to change lives. God used Saul's zeal and passion in reaching people for Jesus.

When we accept Jesus into our lives, it is just the beginning of our walk with Jesus. God gives each believer the Holy Spirit. Jesus wants to use you to do his work. God has great plans for each of us.

Ephesians 2:10. *For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*

Once we accept Jesus into our lives, our work is just beginning. I personally believe that God has great work for you to do for him. God has plans for our lives that we don't even realize. I believe that God will use your story to reach people that only you can reach.

I firmly believe that because you may have gone through a difficult period of time, that God will use your experience to help someone else. God is going to use your story to encourage someone else for His kingdom.

I believe "you" are the Jesus to the people that you interact with. Your co-workers or family members may never come to church. I believe that God can use your story to help them find God. *We have to be open to sharing our story with people that are looking for Jesus.* You never know how God may use you.

Summary: I believe "We All Have a Story"

1. God never gives up on people (including you)
2. Each of has a story
3. God wants to use you

Application:

1. For some of you here today, you need to surrender your life to Jesus. You can identify with Saul, Ron, Justin, or Linda. Your first step is to make Jesus Lord over your life. I ask you today, to ask Jesus into your life. Surrender your life. Make Jesus lord over your life. I ask you to put your faith and trust in Jesus this morning.
2. There is a second group of people here. You accepted Jesus a while ago. I want to encourage you to grow in your faith. God wants you to grow in your faith. At BBC, we want to help you take the next step. Here at BBC, we offer bible studies or small groups that help people to grow in their faith. We have a new class starting this week called "Starting Point." You can sign up in the foyer area, or come on Wednesday night to the church at 7 pm. It is an 8-week class. It will be outstanding.
3. As a Christian we need to be open to God using our stories to help other people. I believe that God often brings people in our path that need to hear our story of how Jesus changed our lives. Each of us needs to be confident to share our faith in God when the time comes.

Let us pray.