

“Living Your Okayest Life: Paul/Saul”

Series: *Living Your Okayest Life*

Scripture: Acts 9:1-6

Rev. Chuck Williamson

February 16, 2025



First Presbyterian
Church of Charlotte

For the past couple of weeks we've been talking about how God can use us human beings, with all our frailties and shortcomings, to be witnesses, disciples, proclaimers of the good news. You don't have to have your act together; you don't have to have all the "right stuff." We've talked about Moses who didn't feel like he had the gifts God was looking for. We talked about Elijah who felt inadequate for the task. And today we're talking about Paul the Apostle. When we first meet him, we know him as Saul of Tarsus.

It's true that you don't have to have all the right stuff; however, if ever there was someone who had all the right stuff, it was Saul. We know that he was a Roman citizen which gave him a certain amount of status and power. He was well educated; probably from the upper middle class. Here's what Saul himself says in one of his letters:

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

It's a pretty impressive pedigree.

The Bible doesn't tell us much about the early life of Saul, but one thing we know is that he was a devout Jew. He probably grew up going to Hebrew school, memorizing passages from the Torah. I'll bet his Bar Mitzvah was a real affair. He had it drummed into him that he was part of God's chosen people. So much so that when he learned that there was a new group of believers called The Way who were adding to the traditional and important Jewish practices and beliefs, Saul took it as a challenge and resolved to do whatever he had to do to snuff out those trouble-makers.

That's where our scripture picks up.

Acts 9:1-6

Wow. It can't get any better than that. He already had all the right stuff, and now he's got God on his side telling him what to do. It seems like Saul is well on his way to living not just his "Okayest Life", but his best life—prosperous, successful. So let's see how it goes for him. The scripture we just read is his famous "Road to Damascus" experience. It was here that Saul met Jesus. I think we often have the idea that this was an instantaneous conversion—one

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second he's Saul the persecutor of Christians and the next he's Paul the world-traveling evangelist telling people about Jesus. But it didn't happen quite that way. We learn in one of his letters that following that Road to Damascus experience, Saul went to Arabia and spent three years reflecting on that experience and seeking to understand what it meant. Who is this man Jesus and what was God calling him to do? (See Galatians 1:17-18) Three years guided by the Holy Spirit and coming to believe that Jesus was the promised messiah, that Jesus was God's word of love in human form. In so many words, Saul—soon to take the name Paul—said to himself, “That's what I want to tell people about—God's love made known in Jesus.

So filled with the good news, after those three years in Arabia, he returned to Damascus, and he began to preach about Jesus. But his message was not well-received. In fact it was so poorly received that the leaders of the synagogue began plotting to kill Paul. Fortunately Paul's followers found out about the plot and secretly arranged for Paul to escape by lowering him over the city wall in a basket.

That was his first brush with death, but not his last. From Damascus he heads back to Jerusalem and attempts to meet with Jesus's disciples, except they remembered his reputation as a persecutor of Christians and were still scared of him and didn't want to have anything to do with him. And it turns out that there in Jerusalem was another group of people seeking to kill him. That's 0 for 2. So far things don't seem to be going very well for Paul.

Remember how good Saul had it back in the old days—all the right stuff, a person of privilege. Now that he's met Jesus, people are plotting to kill him.

But that's really just the beginning. Well, I won't go through every detail of his life, but just listen to Paul's own words:

Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches. (2 Corinthians 11:24-28)

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It doesn't sound like Paul is living the good, prosperous, exceptional, successful life. Think back to his "Saul" days, back when he had all the right stuff, and everything was going well, back before he met Jesus. And now here's Paul. Judging by the way the world measures things, if we had to choose one or the other—the life Saul was living or the life Paul was living—it's a no-brainer.

How is it, then, that Paul, not Saul, is the one who is saying things like:

“Rejoice in the Lord, always. Again I say rejoice.” (Philippians 4:4)

And “All things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to God's purpose” (Romans 8:28).

And “I consider that the sufferings of the present time cannot be compared to the glory that will be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18).

And in the same breath that he talks about some “thorn in the flesh” that plagued him, he turns right around and says that God's grace is sufficient and God's strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9)

How can Paul, with all the challenges he experienced, be able to say such things?

How is it that when Paul and Silas were languishing away in a Philippian jail, they passed the time singing hymns of praise? Do you ever wonder what hymns they sang? Maybe it was “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.” Or maybe it was “When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of Glory died, my richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride. Love so amazing, so divine demands my soul, my life, my all.” Maybe it was “Blessed Assurance, Jesus Is Mine.” Who knows what they sang? But it's fun to think about.

Interestingly, when Paul looks back on all the right stuff that he had in his Saul days, he says “I regard as...” The Greek word is *skubala*, and its translation is as ugly as the word sounds—*skubala*. Most translations try to clean it up and translate it “rubbish.” But the word is really uglier than that. When Paul thinks back on all the privileges and credentials that he had in his former life, he calls it all a pile of *skubala*.

So what happened that changed Saul into Paul? Well, he met Jesus. I know there are people out there who will tell you that when you meet Jesus, your life will be perfect; everything will be happiness and joy. That's the message of the Prosperity Gospel preachers. Turn your life over to Jesus and you will receive material blessings, wealth and happiness. But Paul would tell you that when you turn your life over to Jesus you receive something much richer than that. If you'll allow me a personal moment....

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My father was 59 years old when he got the diagnosis that he had a brain tumor. His doctor told him that they could operate and remove the tumor, but that it was the type of cancer that always grew back, and when it grew back, there was nothing they could do. He and my mother talked it over and decided to have the surgery.

Following the surgery, and a period of recovery, on his first Sunday back in the pulpit (He was a Presbyterian minister.) he said this,

Forty years ago when I was 19 years old and didn't know any better, I preached my first sermon at a little country church in West Virginia. During the next 40 years I have stood up Sunday by Sunday and spoken of the infinite love of God, of how Christ died for us and rose again and has won the victory over death, and how our lives are safe in God's keeping come what may, and how the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns.

But I am human enough to have wondered at times, can this stupendous Good News really be true? Or are these just words I am repeating? Well, let me bear personal witness to the fact that in these past two months, I have put those words to the test, and I have found them solid as a rock.

During that last year of his life, he wrote out one of his favorite Bible verses and taped it to his shaving mirror:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

He taped it on his shaving mirror so that every day he would be reminded of this promise. And he underlined the two words “with thanksgiving”. What did he have to be thankful for? There were people who told him that life isn't fair and he'd been given a raw deal and that he had nothing to be thankful for. He disagreed.

I wish I could say that I knew some magic formula that we could follow so that everyone could have the same peace and joy that the apostle Paul knew through all the highs and lows of his life. But I don't have it. All I know is that it has something to do with meeting Jesus.