

## **Beneath the Surface**

### **Acts 9:1-31**

Most of the time I do some kind of Advent series in the weeks leading up to Christmas, but the way things have lined up I've decided to finish up the Acts series in the next couple of weeks and then Kent will do a Christmas sermon on the Sunday before Christmas as we will be gone. So, this morning we are coming back to the book of Acts to seek God's vision for our church.

Our passage for today ties into what Randy preached about last week – Hope in the Midst of Suffering. Like Randy said, we all go through times of suffering. Sometimes it's persecution or sickness; sometimes it's the loss of something or someone valuable to us; sometimes it's feelings of emptiness & purposelessness. When we go through suffering we turn to God for help. We pray for something good to happen, and often it does. Things get better and we have the reassurance that God is near, he hears our prayers, and he is working for our good.

But how many of you have prayed and things just didn't get better? The suffering didn't lift; the pain didn't go away; good things didn't happen, in fact things may have even got worse? Some of you are dealing with suffering that you know will be with you the rest of your life. When suffering persists, you enter a difficult time of waiting. It can feel like God isn't working. Maybe he's not listening; maybe he doesn't care; maybe he's just letting things run their course. It can feel like God is far away and we can struggle with uncertainty and doubt.

Today we are going to look at a story that I believe will help us navigate through those times. The people in the church of Jerusalem were probably wondering what God was up to because of the terrible suffering they were going through. A man named Saul was on a rampage and doing everything in his power to destroy them. They were running for their lives – escaping to the villages in Judea, Samaria and Galilee. Where was God? Why didn't he turn things around? The church was being systematically dismantled and Saul was getting stronger by the day and it didn't seem like God was doing anything. We pick up the story at the beginning of Acts 9.

Read Acts 9:1-2.

<sup>1</sup> But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest <sup>2</sup> and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

So Saul was expanding his efforts beyond Jerusalem, all the way to Damascus – a city far north of the Sea of Galilee. To understand the suffering of the church we need to see more fully what Saul was like at that time. There are several places in the Bible that describe him. Luke, who wrote the book of Acts, pointed out at the end of Acts 7 that he was right there when Stephen was stoned to death and approved of his execution. He also wrote in Acts 8:3: “But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.” Saul was a bad man. A man named Ananias from Damascus, whom we will hear about later, said this in Acts 9:13-14 “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup> And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.” People were terrified of him.

The most outspoken person about how bad he was, was actually Saul himself. Later on in life, in speaking to the people in Jerusalem, he said in Acts 22:4-5: “I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, <sup>5</sup> as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.” In recounting one of his prayers, he said in Acts 22:19-20: “Lord, they themselves know that in one synagogue after another I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. <sup>20</sup> And when the blood of Stephen your witness was being shed, I myself was standing by and approving and watching over the garments of those who killed him.” To King Agrippa, he described himself in Acts 26:9-11: “I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. <sup>10</sup> And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. <sup>11</sup> And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.” In 1 Cor. 15:9 he wrote: “For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.” In Gal. 1:13 he wrote: “For you have heard of my

former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it.” And in 1 Tim. 1:13, 15 he wrote: “I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent... <sup>15</sup>The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.”

Saul was a terrorist. He was a radical religious fanatic who wished death upon all Christians and brought pain, suffering and death upon many. That’s who the church was up against and he was gaining more and more traction. The condition of the church in Jerusalem was very shaky. Nobody was safe, they all had to watch their backs. It was a time of suffering and waiting that kept getting worse. Where was God? Was he still at work in their lives? Why wasn’t he answering their prayers? We see what God was doing in the next few verses.

Read Acts 9:3-9.

<sup>3</sup> Now as he [Saul] went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. <sup>4</sup> And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” <sup>5</sup> And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. <sup>6</sup> But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” <sup>7</sup> The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. <sup>8</sup> Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. <sup>9</sup> And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. (cf. Acts 22:6-11; 26:12-15)

Nobody in the church in Jerusalem knew this was happening. All they knew was that Saul was going to Damascus to terrorize more Christians, and then he would be back. Their suffering would continue. They couldn’t see it, but God was at work even in the midst of their suffering. God was doing something and bringing things about that they would have thought was impossible. And he was using their suffering to do it. He was taking the most hardened terrorist and hater of Christians and totally transforming his life.

Read Acts 9:10-16.

<sup>10</sup> Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” And he said, “Here I am, Lord.” <sup>11</sup> And the Lord said to him, “Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man

of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, <sup>12</sup> and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.” <sup>13</sup> But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup> And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.” <sup>15</sup> But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. <sup>16</sup> For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”

You can see the effect that Saul had on people – fear and terror. Ananias didn’t want to have anything to do with him. But God told him to go. Saul the terrorist was God’s chosen instrument to carry the gospel to the most difficult places and he would do that through tremendous suffering. So Ananias went.

Later on in life Saul suffered deeply for the sake of Christ in the same way he had caused so many Christians to suffer. But through all the suffering and danger he faced, he continued to press on – far beyond what most Christians would endure. Why would he do that? Why wouldn’t he ever reach the point where he would settle down in a safer environment? Based on some of the things he wrote I think it’s because he never forgot about the awful things he did to the church and the immeasurable grace that God showed him. Those things had to happen to turn Saul into the man he became – the apostle Paul. And once God transformed his life, he used him to bring peace back to the church in Jerusalem and spread the gospel to the ends of the earth. God was always at work, even while his people were suffering and couldn’t see what he was doing.

Read Acts 9:17-19a.

<sup>17</sup> So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” <sup>18</sup> And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; <sup>19</sup> and taking food, he was strengthened. (cf. Acts 22:12-16; 26:16-18)

In an instant, the devoted persecutor of Christ turned into a lifelong servant. God was working in a powerful way. All Paul’s energy spent on destroying the church would now be shifted to building the church, and you begin to see that next.

Read Acts 9:19b-31.

For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus. <sup>20</sup> And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." <sup>21</sup> And all who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?" <sup>22</sup> But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.

<sup>23</sup> When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, <sup>24</sup> but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him, <sup>25</sup> but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.

<sup>26</sup> And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. <sup>27</sup> But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus. <sup>28</sup> So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. <sup>29</sup> And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him. <sup>30</sup> And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

<sup>31</sup> So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.

What an amazing turn of events for the people in Jerusalem... They were expecting Saul to come back and continue to punish and persecute them. They were expecting that their suffering would continue. But God was working, even while they were suffering. Now Saul was a changed man and no longer an enemy. He quickly became one of the strongest supporters and spokesman for Christ and the church. Because of his transformation the church entered into a time of peace throughout that region and it proceeded to grow and multiply.

As the people in Jerusalem looked back on what had happened, they could finally see what God was up to – he hadn't left them or forgot about them. He was doing things beyond what they could see – things that in the end benefitted them

greatly. For a while they had to suffer, but their suffering was always for a purpose.

As I look at what happened to this church it gives me hope for when we go through times of suffering today. What we see in this story is that when we go through times of persistent suffering, it's not because God has left us or is no longer working in our lives. It's just that his ways are higher than our ways and we can't see it.

We have done some different landscaping projects around our house and one of the last things we do is to plant grass seed. The last time I planted, I followed the directions to the "T." I tilled fertilizer into the soil with a rototiller. Then I raked it smooth. I made special shoes out of plywood with which I could lightly pack the soil. Then I planted grass seed at just the right amount. I lightly raked it again to work it into the surface, packed it again, spread straw over it and watered it.

Do you know what popped out of the ground the next day? Nothing! I did everything right. Conditions were perfect, the seeds were good, but nothing grew. So I waited another day and guess what? Nothing happened! Two days in a row! Perfect conditions, yet still no grass. The same thing happened the third day, the fourth and the fifth... Should I give up? Should I till the soil again and start over? Was something terribly wrong? No! Everything was as it should be. The reason the grass didn't grow right away is that seeds need time to germinate – sometimes up to 30 days, even in perfect conditions. The seed needs to fill with water. The water has to activate certain enzymes. The seed has to begin to grow. A root has to form and grow downward to access water. Then, finally after several days a shoot appears above ground and eventually grows into a mature plant.

All that time it looks and feels like nothing is happening, but there's actually a lot of things happening beneath the surface. The same is true when we go through times of suffering. We wait and wait and it looks like nothing's happening. We feel like giving up. We sometimes even decide to stop praying. "God isn't going to do anything." Yet all the while God is at work, doing things beneath the surface that we can't see. Sometimes what he's doing becomes clear and we can see what he's been up to – like the people in the church in Jerusalem. But other times the waiting goes on for a long time. Sometimes we suffer for years and never end up

seeing what God is doing in this life. But in the waiting we can be assured that God is always at work.

Saul, or Paul as we know him now, went through a lot of suffering, and for him his suffering never came to an end in this life. He no more got through one dangerous and painful situation and another one was close behind. He described some of his sufferings in 2 Corinthians 11:24-27 "Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. <sup>25</sup> Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; <sup>26</sup> on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; <sup>27</sup> in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure."

Paul endured all kinds of ongoing suffering. But he never gave up, because he knew that behind it all God was always at work – and what God was doing in his suffering would be for his ultimate good. He wrote these encouraging words in 2 Cor. 4:17-18 "For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, <sup>18</sup> as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

You and I will go through suffering and waiting; it will feel like God has left you, but he hasn't. God is always at work, doing things beneath the surface that will be for your ultimate good. Sometimes we see what he's doing and why he's doing it in this life, but sometimes we won't. But we can trust him. He is working beyond what our eyes can see and in all of our suffering in this life he is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory that far outweighs anything we go through. So let us not lose heart, but continue to trust in him.