

**Conversion**  
Kenwood Baptist Church  
Summer Sermon Series: **Join His Mission**  
Pastor David Palmer  
June 9, 2019

**TEXT: Acts 9:1-20**



Seeing me in this t-shirt, some of you are thinking right now that I forgot my coat, but I just want to let you know that I didn't. This summer we start a new series called *Join His Mission*, and as we look at joining God's mission in the world, we are going to be challenged throughout the summer to transition from being passive observers of Christ to active co-laborers with Him. The gospel calls us into activity, an activity that doesn't arise from ourselves, but as Paul says in 1 Corinthians: "The love of Christ compels us." The power to serve Christ is from the Holy Spirit, and how fitting it is that this Sunday is Pentecost Sunday, the Sunday 50 days after Easter. Jesus told His disciples to wait in Jerusalem with the promise in Acts 1:8:

*"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."*

This is the privilege that we have in following Christ, and so this summer, as we look at *Join His Mission*, we want to follow the missionary journeys in the Book of Acts. We want to look together at: What does it mean to follow Christ? What can we expect to experience? Where will the idols of our heart be torn down? Where will He invite us into unexpected places? Where will we be allowed to see the power of God? Where will we see lives transformed?

I remember when Chris came back to church after a season away. God was working. I heard how God was using his time; he was growing. He walked in, and I didn't know he was going to

be here. We hugged in the front of the church. I hadn't seen him between his baptism and his release. I was hugging him and crying. I looked up and some members of the choir knew the story, and they were crying. Other people in the choir were just singing. Praise God, they kept the tune going. But, brothers and sisters, if you see Christ and what He's doing in the world, you want to become part of that, and that's my plea for you all summer. Several have asked me already how they can get the shirt, and you haven't even seen the back of the shirt. It has the full schedule of mission activities. You get a shirt when you sign up for a mission activity.

Let's look at the text this morning that Chris just read for us. It signals for us the beginning of joining God's mission. The beginning of mission is conversion, nothing less. We don't seek friendship with others as an end. We seek conversion. God has called us to make disciples of the nations, and so we seek the radical transformation that comes about when people turn and repent and follow Christ: repent and believe in the gospel. We want to begin our journey of looking at Paul's missionary journeys with the beginning of those journeys, which takes place in an initial 'pre-journey' on the road to Damascus. Let's keep our Bibles open to Acts 9 and let this passage be inscribed upon our hearts.

Acts 9 begins with Saul, his Hebrew name, breathing threats and murder and violence against the disciples of the Lord. So, this chapter begins on a very unpromising note. Here is a man who by all appearances is the least likely to write half of the New Testament. Acts 9:1 would never incline you to think this is a perfect candidate, and yet, we will see God's power at work. We read:

*"But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest."*

The high priest at this time was Caiaphas, known from the gospel narratives as the one who orchestrates the arrest and trial of Jesus. Caiaphas was the son-in-law of Annas, who had been the first named high priest after the Roman occupation. Since Herod the Great took power, until the collapse and fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, there were 28 high priests who served during this roughly hundred-year period. In Scripture, the high priestly office is actually supposed to be



a lifetime, hereditary office, but in the first century, it was a revolving door of people appointed to this position for political motivation. Caiaphas served for one of the longest in this stretch. He was known to us from the gospel narratives, and in 1990, during excavations in a burial in Jerusalem, this extraordinary ossuary was discovered. The ossuary is a bone box, and I took this picture myself in Jerusalem, in the Israel Museum. A

bone box like this is immediately dated from the first century. It was a style of burial that was

used for only about a 100-year period, so when you see one of these, you know that you're looking at a first century object. When we look at the side of this ossuary, which is only 75 cm long and 37 cm high, and you look at the ornate carving, you recognize that this is an upper-class person. This is a beautiful, expensive ossuary, and on the edge, you see that it actually has the name of the person written. The name of the bones inside is Joseph, son of Caiaphas. This is the Caiaphas of the New Testament, the one to whom Saul went seeking letters to arrest the followers of Jesus. We have Caiaphas' ossuary; we do not have an ossuary of Jesus Christ, and that's no small thing! This whole narrative collapses if we did we did. He went to Caiaphas and asked for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, all the way into Syria, and he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, that he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Why was Saul seeking high priestly authorization to arrest the followers of Jesus? Notice that he was keen on traveling in the service of God. Notice that he was intent on arresting men and women, bringing them back to Jerusalem for trial. Why had he reached this conclusion?

As we look this summer at the journeys Paul will undertake, it's important for us to begin to remember where he has come from. Saul of Tarsus was born in a devout, diaspora Jewish family in the province of Cilicia. He was a Roman citizen by birth. His father probably received that citizenship in the aftermath of Pompey's campaigns in the East. Like many Greek speaking diaspora Jews, he had a Hebrew name, *Shaul* ("Saul"), and a phonetically similar Roman name *Paulus* ("Small"), which means small of stature. About 15 years of age, he was sent by his family to Jerusalem to receive a rabbinic education at the feet of Gamaliel, who was the leading sage of his generation, and so he was given an elite religious education. Within that education, he was an extremely zealous student. He devoted himself to the sect of the Pharisees; he learned both the written text of the Scriptures and the oral tradition. He later described himself as extremely zealous for the traditions of his fathers. As the Scripture said: "*Zeal for Your house will consume me.*" Zeal for God is a positive thing in Scripture. It is certainly a positive thing in rabbinic culture, and Saul distinguished himself among his classmates. So, we have to see a man who is zealous for God, a serious student of Scripture, given the privilege of an elite education. His worldview was that he understood Israel as God's chosen people, the descendants of Abraham. He knew from Scripture and tradition that all Israel would have a portion in the world to come. He recognized that God had given His Word to Israel and that they alone knew His will. He saw Israel's relationship to the nations as a guide to the blind, a light to those in darkness, and an instructor of the foolish. He believed in the hope of Israel, that God would come and act again, that the kingdom of God would arrive. He prayed for the advent of the kingdom a thousand times a year in the synagogue liturgy. He anticipated that God would send a Redeemer to fulfill His promise, Israel would be vindicated, and the nations would be judged. He viewed the nations as steeped in idolatry and their only hope being to escape God's coming wrath by conversion. The only way to avoid the wrath of God is to join the people who would be spared that wrath. The only way to convert to Judaism, to become an Israelite, would be to

be marked with ritual circumcision and be taught to walk in the ways of Torah.

Saul became outraged by the early Christian confession that Jesus was this coming Redeemer. He was outraged for several reasons. He was outraged because Israel's own religious leadership had condemned Him. He was outraged because the pagan world had judged Him according to Roman law and convicted Him of a capital crime against the state. The Redeemer who was to come in glory was crucified in absolute humiliation. Can that be God's plan? He was outraged further because he watched the Christian community actually welcoming the nations without requiring them to convert and symbolize their identification with Israel through circumcision. They were letting down the fence; they were welcoming in the corrupt neighbors and giving away the inheritance. That's upsetting, isn't it? We have to enter in to grasp what was so deeply disturbing, and if all those reasons weren't enough, Paul searched the Scriptures and looked at Deuteronomy 21:23, reading that anyone who dies hanging on a tree is cursed. Christians were leading Israel astray, putting the future of the nation and the people at risk, and it had to be stopped. He consented to the stoning of Stephen, agreeing that Stephen was committing blasphemy against God, against the temple, against the Torah, welcoming in the nations, and speaking incessantly about Jesus. So, he set out for Damascus, 150 miles away, in his late 20s, full of confidence, sure of his opinions, eager to return to Jerusalem with honor. What were you doing in your late 20s? Did you believe, think, or act out ideas that now you think are foolish?

It's about a six-day walk from Jerusalem to Damascus. Despite the medieval paintings that depict Saul as traveling on horseback, he probably was walking. There's nothing in the text that

suggests he was riding. It's a six-day walk. You could walk about 20 miles a day in antiquity. As he approached the city of Damascus—Syrian Christians tell us today it was just a couple miles outside of the city—as he approached the city, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him and knocked him to the ground. He heard a voice saying



to him: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" I asked this question dozens of times throughout this week wondering how Jesus asked that. Was it: "**Why** are you persecuting Me?" "Why are **you** persecuting **Me**?" "Why are you **persecuting** Me?" We don't have the MP3; we don't have the WAV File. We don't know how Jesus asked the question, but the repetition of the name is striking, isn't it? Before He even comes to the question of why, the repetition of the

name would have drawn Saul's attention to these moments in the Bible when God appears decisively to reveal His purpose to those whom He has called to serve Him and bring Him glory. It's like the moment in Genesis 22 when God called out, "Abraham, Abraham!" It's like the moment Exodus 3 when God called out from the burning bush, "Moses, Moses!" It's like when God spoke in Shiloh to young Samuel, "Samuel, Samuel!" All those servants knew that it was God who spoke with the intimacy of repeating that name, and Saul responds: "*Who are You, Lord?*" The answer is as arresting today as it must have been for Saul then. We read in Acts 9:5:

*"And He said, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.'"*

There is such a rich and beautiful theology of the body of Christ in this verse, that the way you relate to the body of Christ, the church in the world, is taken by Jesus as the way you relate to Him. Saul's actions were against the church, against the disciples, and yet Jesus says: "You are acting directly against Me." Brothers sisters, we are the body of Christ. We are the body of Christ, hallelujah! in this world. "*I am Jesus,*" present tense, and this is why we don't have an ossuary of Jesus. We don't have an ossuary of Jesus because Jesus is alive! This is the great truth of Christian faith that He who was crucified is alive. Jesus is alive, and as we will see throughout the summer, is running His kingdom daily. Jesus tells him in Acts 9:6:

*"But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."*

Sometimes conversion begins with an arresting vision of Christ, and sometimes, most of the time actually, there is an interval between when Jesus first appears to you and when Jesus gives you a specific commission, like when the Lord said to Abraham: "Leave your ancestral home, go to the land I will show you." You cannot see the land unless you commit to following, just as Jesus told the disciples: "Come, and you will see." Christianity risks everything on the initial steps to follow. That's why you have got to get the shirt at the beginning of the summer, because you step out not knowing, right? "*Rise, enter the city.*" Saul arose from the ground, and although his eyes were open, he saw nothing. He who had been a guide to the blind is now led by the hand into the city of Damascus, and for three days he was without sight. He neither ate nor drank, fasting and preparing to hear the next word from God.

Saul was brought into the city, now in total darkness, as the glory of the real Jesus had blinded him. He waited, fasting and praying, and meanwhile the risen Jesus is at work in another's heart. I love this about our Lord. In Acts 9:10, we read of a parallel vision that is really no less dramatic:

*"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.'"*

Whenever God calls your name, whether it's repeated or singular, just answer: "Here I am." Can we do that? God is going to be calling every single one of us this summer, and I want you to practice the response. The response is: "Here I am." It leads back to Isaiah's great response to

seeing the glory of God: *“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty. The earth is filled with His glory.”* I'll never forget the moment when N.T. Wright asked my wife how in Isaiah 6 the seraphim are saying: *“The earth is filled with the glory,”* and in Isaiah 11, it says: *“The earth **will be** filled with the glory.”* I was glad he asked her, not me. She said: “You know, I have thought about that a lot.” I knew that, but he didn't know that. I just sat back, and they went at it. She answered his question brilliantly, beautifully, and this preeminent New Testament scholar grabbed his tea at the end, and just said: “Thank you for that.” I thought: “Why didn't I record that?”

“Here I am,” was Isaiah's response, “Send me, Lord.” The Lord said to Ananias in Acts 9:11:

*“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.”*

Do you ever wonder if Jesus sees you when you're praying? He does. Every single time that you pray, Jesus Christ sees you. In fact, he not only sees you, He hears you, and He sees you so clearly, that He can tell someone else that you're praying. Brothers and sisters, how little use we make of the direct access that's been given us to the Lord God Almighty. Jesus hears him, sees him, and tells Ananias of a vision that Jesus has graciously given to Saul. Ananias is alarmed by Jesus' call to go and pray for him. He protests in Acts 9:13:

*“Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to Your saints at Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name.”*

But Jesus Christ says: “Go anyway.” So the person in your worldview, in your culture, in your subgroup, that you think is most unlikely to respond is probably the kind of person God would pick. The person that seems the most hostile to the message, even though it was actively working against you, when Jesus says to go and pray for him, you go. Ananias goes, and the Lord says in Acts 9:15:

*“Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine to carry My name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.”*

Literally, he is a *chosen vessel*. If you remember a few weeks ago when Hailey spun out the vessels of clay, this is the same language that Paul used in Corinthians, and it's the language that is given to Ananias in the first description of Saul. He is a vessel. Remember that the clay vessel isn't the main thing. It's what's inside the vessel that counts. We have this treasure in jars of clay. You and I don't really matter that much. I hate to say it, but I'm committed to speaking the truth: We don't matter anywhere close to how much Jesus Christ matters. Isn't that true? Our lives become significant when they are attached to Him. Our lives, our mission, our purpose becomes meaningful when it is filled with His mission, and I want to challenge all of us, myself included, to abandon our plans and let our lives be filled up with His.

Ananias goes to the street called Straight. If he had gone to Damascus this morning, this is Straight Street in Damascus today in Syria. It is still straight. It goes right through the heart of Damascus. That's a country in the world today that needs prayer. I met a Syrian pastor last summer on the road to Damascus going back to his city. He was telling me how in the midst of the Civil War, God had done great things. Their church had grown from 70 to 700, and he said: "You know, sometimes bad times in the world are good times for the gospel because it shakes loose what we place our confidence in." He said: "Sometimes these environments reveal darkness as darkness." Too often for us the darkness around us is masquerading as light. It looks like light, and that's what's so hard for us in our context. We have artificial light that looks like light and it's choking and killing us. Then when you see it as artificial light that is really darkness, you run away from it. And he said: "When the darkness is seen to be darkness, people run to the light."



Ananias went into the house, and he came up he laid his hands on Saul. I love the first word he says in Acts 9:17:

*"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."*

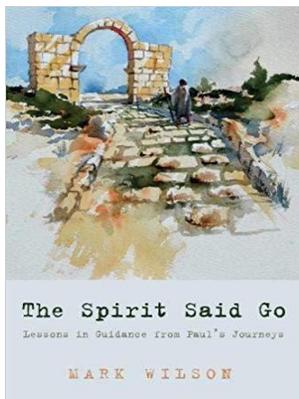
What courage to start the speech off with "brother"! You have to believe Jesus Christ to say that, don't you? Saul hasn't said a word. Ananias doesn't know from Saul, but he knows from Jesus: "The man right here is My man. He's going to carry My name to the nations, to kings, and to the descendants of Israel." So Ananias prays for him, and we read in Acts 9:18:

*"And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized."*

Baptism is an extraordinary thing. Baptism is a public identification with Christ. Baptism signals to everyone that I need forgiveness and the only way to obtain it is through the sacrifice of Christ. Baptism clothes us with the righteousness of Christ. The New Testament uses images of cleansing, that we are purified or washed clean in baptism. Baptism is a term that is first used in the textile industry. As you take undyed wool, you baptize it as you press it down into the water, and it takes on the color of that bath. So the New Testament describes baptism as not only a cleansing, a washing, but it is a change of clothing. We come out of the water with new clothes. Paul will write that he who is baptized has clothed himself with Christ. If you are anxious, if you are worried, if you are unsure of today, tomorrow, or eternity, the best thing I can never tell you is that if you have placed your faith in Christ, you are clothed with His

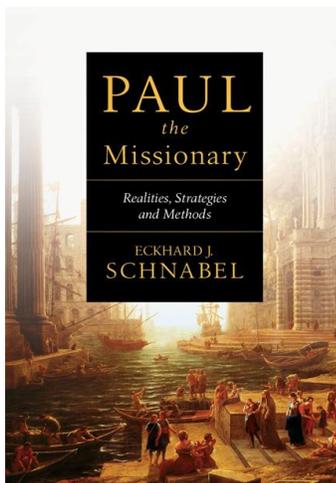
righteousness, and you never need wonder, today, tomorrow, or for all eternity, what God will see when He looks at you. What He will see when He looks at all those who trusted in Christ is the pure, spotless righteousness of Jesus Christ. Saul rises and is baptized, and immediately he spends time with the disciples. He has a new family, new fellowship, and new friendships start to rise, and he has a new message. He begins to proclaim in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.

Mission begins with conversion. If you've never received Christ, and if you're seeing Him clearly this morning, then I would love to pray with you, just as we prayed with Chris. Conversion is the beginning of mission, and after we've been converted, the next thing that happens is we start to fellowship with other Christians and we confess our identification with Christ in baptism. If you've never been baptized, I'd love to meet with you. Baptism is a beautiful, public confession of faith in Christ. If you have trusted Christ, if you've been baptized, what do we do now? Conversion is the beginning of joining His mission, and what happens next? Every new series at Kenwood starts with: "Get the book." This summer, since you have extra time, you get three

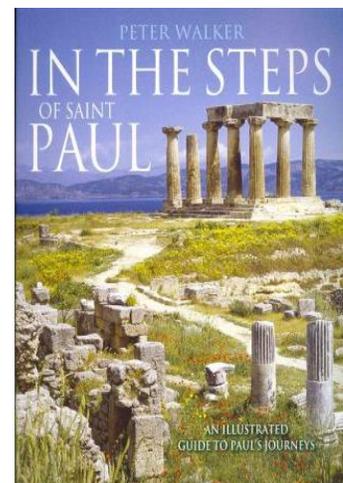


books, and these books are kind of like low, medium, and high. The low is a book by Mark Wilson called *The Spirit Said Go*. It is just a set of devotional reflections on following Jesus. Mark Wilson has a great testimony, and he's a New Testament scholar. He leads a series of Paul trips, and he's the only guy that I know personally that was converted to Christ while smoking or taking peyote inside of a Native American tent. It's a really great story. So, if you have come to Christ through peyote, you identify with this book right away. If you haven't, then you'll find a new brother in Christ soon. He goes from peyote to a New Testament

scholar. It's a great story with wonderful devotional reflections on how God leads our lives. It's a great poolside morning, evening reading. The second is *In the Steps of Saint Paul* by Peter Walker



which guides us through these journeys that we are going to be this summer. I encourage you get that. The advanced book for the really hard-core among us is a book called *Paul the Missionary* by Eckardt Schnabel, and it's by Inter-Varsity Press. Eckardt Schnabel is a German theologian, scholar, pastor, missionary. It's very readable. It looks thick, but it's really a great presentation about how Christ led Paul on mission and what that means for us today. It's really a great read. So, get the books, number one. Number two is



take the class. What we're doing this summer is we are merging together for a shared Sunday

School hour, so I hope that everyone in this service will go to the Multipurpose Room after the service. It is set up for you to connect with others and to learn six practical ways to join the mission. It's modeled on the *Perspectives Course*. We have a team of great teachers, and those six ways are: pray, learn, go, welcome, send, and mobilize. You will learn how to do that. For all of us to do that together, we need to get to know each other, as we are on a mission team. It's a short-term team that lasts just for our lifetime. That's like a breath compared to all eternity. This whole life is a short-term mission trip, so I want you to join in the class. Lastly is to resolve in your heart to join His mission. That's why we are wearing these shirts, not to be fun and trendy, but we want you to see this. This is what we're about, and I hope throughout the summer, as you take a step forward, that you cross some kind of barrier. This afternoon is the first reach-out to our neighboring community with Books and Bites. It's an extension of the Whiz Kids program. We'll be touching about 50 of our neighbors this afternoon. We would love to have your help. There will be chances to interact with children at Vacation Bible School or Soccer Camp. There will be opportunities for those who are ready to go into prisons to share Christ. Preston and his team over the weekend shared Christ in a jail in Kentucky and 195 men responded by receiving Christ. Praise God! I think it would change you and change me if more of us did that. I hope over the summer that you will see more people wear these shirts, not because they are the coolest shirts in Cincinnati, but because they are evidence that I'm taken a step forward to join the mission. Jesus is alive! He appears on the road; He answers our questions; He tells us what we are supposed to do; He coordinates the activities of His servants; He fulfills His promises; He removes scales from our eyes. He is the Son of God!

Amen.