

Hall of Shame – Paul – Acts 9

Have you ever been wrong about something; I mean really, really wrong? You just knew you were right and you could argue about it and you just knew the other side was crazy to think otherwise but then you finally found out that you were wrong all along. Every wife in the place is elbowing her husband right now. It's Republican versus Democrat, Texas versus OU, Dogs versus Cats. But in the end you find out...you were wrong and there is no denying it. That's a bad feeling, right?

My high school football coach used to tell us to give 100 percent even if it's wrong. He would still scream at us if we did it wrong but it was always better if we were giving it all we had. How many of you have heard the name **Jim Marshall**? Mr. Marshall was a great football player back in the 60-70's and had lots of records and awards but just about the only thing he is remembered for today is one play against the 49ers where he picked up a fumble and ran 66 yards the wrong way for what he thought was a touchdown. He was wrong; very, very wrong. But he was passionate about it and I appreciate that. He ran as hard as he could and was so excited when he crossed the goal line that he threw the ball and then waited for his teammates to come join him in celebrating. That had to be a bad feeling when he realized what he had done but have you noticed that everything is better when you are passionate about it?

I want my doctor to be passionate about medicine. I want my lawyer to be passionate about justice. I even want my grocer to be passionate about groceries. I was in the grocery store a while back and I noticed that all the cans on this one aisle were fronted and faced just perfectly. If you have ever worked retail you can appreciate that. Every can was at the front of the shelf and every label was facing the front. Everything was clean and orderly and I noticed it right off. I went down the next aisle and I saw why. The stock boy was intent on his job. He was passionately working, getting everything just right, taking pride in his work. I thought right then that I hope his boss sees and promotes him because he deserved it. If he could be passionate about stocking food, he could be passionate about bigger things and everything is better when you are passionate about it.

Did you know that God feels the same way? God wants a church that is passionate about Him. **Revelation 3:16** says, *“So, because you are lukewarm--neither hot nor cold--I am about to spit you out of my mouth.”* People that like coffee like it when it is hot and lots of people like it over ice but nobody likes lukewarm, room temperature coffee. That's nasty. That's how God feels about a church that is lukewarm. He wants us to be passionate about Him and the only way a church can be passionate is for individuals to be passionate. But what happens when you are passionate about something and you are giving 100% but you find out you are wrong? Let's look at the story of the Apostle Paul because that is exactly where he was for a long time. He just knew he was right about his religion. He was well-educated, a very smart man and a very serious and passionate defender of Judaism as being the only way to God and when this young whippersnapper Jesus came along saying He was the Way, the Truth and the Life, Paul, known as Saul at the time, knew he had to put a stop to it.

No other man this side of Jesus did as much to further the Kingdom of God and would leave such lasting works of encouragement, doctrine and truth as this man. But he started out wrong. He was very wrong but God saw the passion that Saul had and knew He could use him to change the world with that passion. So, let's look at the book of Acts to see where Paul / Saul got his start. Turn to **Acts chapter 9**. The first we actually see of Saul is in **chapter 7** where Stephen is being stoned to death for preaching the gospel of Jesus and it says that the people who were

doing the stoning laid their clothes at the feet of a young man by the name of Saul and it says that Saul approved of his death. We don't know if Saul was personally responsible for any deaths but we do know that he went from community to community beating and imprisoning Christians and we see in **chapter 9** that he was sure talking about killing them. We can see now just how wrong he was and how horrible that was to do but look at it from Saul's point of view. He was a scholar of the scriptures and a passionate follower of the Law of Moses. He sees the followers of Jesus as a cult that needs to be stamped out before it corrupts his "true" religion. He's evidently doing a pretty good job of it too because in the previous chapter we see the whole church being scattered to avoid his persecution. In fact, it worked so well in Jerusalem that Saul is now expanding his booming business to include the neighboring town of Damascus. Damascus was about 4-6 days walk from Jerusalem which would be difficult when you have to carry everything but Saul was like a bloodhound on the scent. He was passionately chasing after anybody that would dare follow this Jesus and there would be no mercy from him; no talking him out of it or explaining the situation; no giving him your testimony and changing his mind. In Saul's mind there was no other option for these new Christians. They had to die and there was nothing and nobody that was gonna stop him!

Let's read **Acts 9:1-19**. *Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest² 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.*³ *As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.*⁴ *He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"*⁵ *"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.*⁶ *"Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."*⁷ *The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone.*⁸ *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.*⁹ *For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.*¹⁰ *In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered.*¹¹ *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.*¹² *In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."*¹³ *"Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem.*¹⁴ *And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."*¹⁵ *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.*¹⁶ *I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."*¹⁷ *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."*¹⁸ *Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized,*¹⁹ *and after taking some food, he regained his strength.*

Years ago I went hunting with a buddy out in Jacksboro and we spent the night in a little shack that had no windows. When it got dark we, of course, had some lanterns and flashlights but when it was time to go to sleep we turned all that off and it was the darkest of dark. Zero light. Pitch black. He was on a cot and I was on a couch pretty close by and we laid there talking for a minute and then he said, "Hey, look at this." My natural reaction was to turn my head and look his way even though I couldn't see my hand in front of my face. Just as I turned his way he thought it would be really funny to make the flash bulb of his camera go off and when he did it was like an atom bomb on my retinas. I thought my eyeballs were going to start bleeding. It was awful.

Now multiply that to the point that it knocked Saul off his feet – during midday – then add to that the voice that even Saul knows can only be God’s. Just the light alone would be enough to mess a guy up for a while but when you add the audible voice of God it must have been horrific, especially because the voice of God was not the God Saul knew. The God that Saul knew was a long list of do’s and don’ts. This God knew his name...and was speaking to him. We have every reason to believe that Saul had heard Jesus preach or teach, that maybe they had even met and maybe Saul even recognized the voice of Jesus and in **verse 5**, he asks who is speaking. *“I am Jesus who you are persecuting.”* Can you imagine Saul hearing those words? Jesus? How could this be Jesus? We killed that guy. Unless...and then the horrible realization sweeps over him. Everything he has been doing is wrong, way wrong. In fact, everything Saul had believed, had done, everything Saul was is completely and horribly wrong.

When Jesus says his name, everything that Stephen had said started to make sense. Everything that these new Christians had said and done was becoming clear to Saul as being truth. How do you think Saul felt at this point? The guilt must have been overwhelming. He had to have thought about all the innocent people that he had done irreparable damage to; the homes broken up; the dreams he had ruined. Now all of his senses are overwhelmed and he is led like a child into the city and into a house. Some historical documents say he stayed in a small closet. We don’t know that but wherever he was, he must have been a mental, physical and spiritual wreck. For three days he did nothing but sit there or lay there and think. His emotions have been hit by a rock truck. He is a mess in every way. He’s no longer breathing out murderous threats. Don’t you know he has to be wondering, not if, but when is God going to kill him. That just makes sense, right? He’s done too much; gone too far. There is no hope for him in this world. There’s no sense eating or drinking anything and besides his stomach hurt and his head hurt. The last thing he is thinking about is eating.

But we see in **verse 11** that he is praying. Cue Ananias. Paul later says that Ananias was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews there. He was a godly man and a follower of Jesus. He had obviously made himself available to God and was able to perceive the word of God when He called. He obviously had a relationship with Jesus because he knew immediately who it was. We looked at the previous verses from Saul’s viewpoint. Let’s look at these from Ananias’ viewpoint. I don’t think he gets enough credit most of the time when we read this. We don’t know much about Ananias. We don’t really see him in scripture anywhere but here. We don’t know what happened to him afterward. Paul is the star of the show from here on out but Ananias played a huge part in getting Paul there. But he didn’t have to. He could have refused but he was obedient.

Ananias was minding his own business when all of this started happening. The Lord called him in **verse 10** and he immediately answered and God gave him specific instructions. The obvious question here is *“What would you do?”* *“Oh, Todd, if God called my name audibly and told me to do something, I would do it.”* Right? We would all like to think we would. But look at the stakes involved. Saul has come to town like a sheriff with arrest warrants. One of which probably has Ananias’ name on it. Some of you haven’t been off parole very long and you’re thinking there’s no way you’re taking that chance! But Ananias was obedient and he was immediately obedient which is the only way to be truly obedient. Now look at **verses 13 and 14**. He wasn’t questioning God’s authority. He never said he wouldn’t or couldn’t. He didn’t make any excuses. He just needed a little clarification and God didn’t scold him for that. In fact, God gave him clarification and confirmed what He wanted him to do.

Then we see in **verse 17** that Ananias was obedient and I submit to you today that his act of obedience changed the world. He doesn’t know what to expect but he goes. You remember where we left Saul, right? He was basically in the fetal position in the closet of a house somewhere wondering what was going to happen to him next.

Was God going to let him live and if so, what happens next? How could he possibly make amends for everything he has done? Then he hears the front door open. He hears the footsteps coming toward him. A hand is on the door. It swings open. His heart is racing, not knowing who was there or what was going to happen. He flinches as a hand touches his shoulder. Then he hears the most beautiful words - "*Brother Saul*" "*Brother Saul*" - With those words he knew he would live. With those words he knew that not only had he been forgiven and accepted but accepted into a family; a family that he could never have paid his way into or talked himself into but only through grace was he forgiven and accepted. He didn't deserve it. It didn't even make sense. But because Ananias was obedient, Saul could go from being way wrong to being considered righteous in God's eyes.

I wonder how our world would change; how our country, our community, our households would change if we had the passion of Saul and the instant obedience of Ananias. What are you passionate about? Listen, I'm not going to bash on you about what you are passionate about and try to make you feel bad about your love of football or racing or, like Billy, your love of fashion. Whatever it is, I want to encourage you to use that passion for God's glory. Saul was passionate about the completely wrong thing and look how God used him. I don't know how God might use you but maybe he wants to take that God-given passion for something and use you to be the person somebody out there needs. Somebody out there needs to know that, while they are a sinner deserving Hell, that God loves them and has a plan for their life and that they can be part of this family of believers, not because they deserve it but because of God's grace. What they need to see is that there are normal, average people that are passionate about the same things they are that are also passionate about leading people to have a life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ, just like Ananias did for Saul. Then Saul went out and changed the world. That could be you. Maybe you change the world or maybe you are obedient to telling somebody else and they change the world. None of us are guaranteed another breath. Don't you want to make a difference in this world? We all do. Use your passion and be obedient to what God tells you.

I want us to take just a few minutes this morning and let's all ask God what He wants us to do. Maybe he wants to use you and your passion to change the world and maybe he just wants to use you to change one other person. Don't be afraid to ask for clarification but don't make excuses. Be instantly obedient. Maybe today you don't have a relationship with Jesus. Maybe all you know about God is a religion of do's and don'ts. God has called us to be free and to live an abundant life. Are you doing that? You can. All you have to do is believe in Jesus as the only way to the Father; the only way to Heaven; the only way to peace and joy in this life and let that belief change you. It changed me. It changed Saul. It changed Ananias. Let it change you. Ask God for forgiveness of your sins and turn from those sins right now. You won't regret it.