



Sermon Growth Guide

April 27, 2025

Totally Transformed



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“Totally Transformed”

Acts 9:1-9, 17-20

Key Verse: Acts 9:18

“Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized”

Big Idea: When we turn to Jesus, we see things in a new way, and death looks different now.

Foundations

Saul’s is a story of total transformation. The person we find at the end of our passage is radically different from who we read about at the beginning. God can transform our lives in the same way he did Saul—but we need to turn to him for this to happen.

When Saul could see again, he saw two new truths. First, Saul saw that he was lost. What he’d been devoting his life to (stamping out Christianity for the good of Judaism) no longer made sense. What had once added meaning to his life was no longer enough, and he made a full turn to the one who’d met him on the road to Damascus.

Second, Saul saw that he was loved. Despite all the damage he’d done to the followers of Jesus, the Lord met him in a personal encounter and lovingly helped Saul put the pieces back together again.

On this Sunday after Easter, when we remember loved ones who’ve gone to be with Jesus, we celebrate that our turning to Jesus enables us to see death differently from the rest of the world. Rather than a bitter end to our lives, it ushers us into a new and eternal enjoyment of our Creator and Lord. Christ’s followers no longer need to fear death, for we know that it no longer has the last word. Instead, it ushers us into a new and even better life.

Understanding God’s Word

Together, read Acts 8:3 and 9:1-9, 17-20.

How would you describe Saul based on 8:3 and 9:1-2? How has he changed by 9:20? What do you think was going through Saul’s mind during his three days without sight

Applying God’s Word

How would you briefly describe your turn to Jesus? Did it occur during a dramatic moment, or was it more of a gentle nudge within or early life commitment?

After seeking to destroy what Jesus had started, Saul received grace that he didn’t deserve. What helps you accept God’s grace even when you know you’re not deserving of it?

Celebrating members of First Pres who’ve gone to be with Jesus the past year reminds us that we’ll all one day experience death. How would you best describe your thoughts, fears, or anticipation around death?

Witnessing God’s Word

We read in 1 Peter 3:15, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” How would you respond to someone who asked why you turned to Jesus?

Can you think of a season in your life when you longed for direction from God? My greatest need for this occurred 40 years ago this summer. After attending seminary part time in Seattle for two years, I decided to go full time at the California campus. My plan was to earn a Master's degree that would position me for doctoral work and eventual employment. I exchanged all that was familiar—home, job, church, family, and friends—for a new environment. Unfortunately, after just a week into my first class, I realized that I was not PhD material! I had to painfully acknowledge that my purpose for coming to seminary was no longer an option.

Suddenly, I didn't have a clue what I was doing in this unfamiliar place. Had I made a mistake? If so, should I admit it? Did I need to humble myself and move back home? Or now that I was on campus, should I stay, even though I had no idea why I was there? I found myself at a crossroad, unsure what to do next with my life. My prayers had a desperation to them in the days that followed, as I sought clarity from God. Repeatedly, I prayed for some sort of direction that would help me understand my next steps.

Finally, one day, while on my knees, I sensed God say as if audibly speaking in the room, "You're where I want you to be." I had no idea where that would lead, but experienced immediate peace knowing I was in the right place. That encounter with God anchored me during the following months, and shaped the course of my life for the next 40 yrs.

Saul's encounter with Jesus in today's passage also changed his life. Unfortunately for Saul, his experience was a lot more painful than mine. The previous chapter tells us that Saul, also known as Paul, was working to stamp out what Jesus had started: Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. (Acts 8:3) Later in Acts, Saul acknowledged that his persecution resulted in death for some. Saul's efforts contributed to many Christians fleeing Jerusalem.

Apparently, a large number relocated in Damascus, 140 miles away. Though it was a multiple day journey from Jerusalem, they were still within Saul's reach: Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest 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. (Acts 9:1-2)

Along the way, though, something happened that Saul hadn't anticipated. The certainty undergirding his approach to life to was suddenly upended:

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. (Acts 9:3-9)

Years ago, when reading this story, I wrote a simple note in the margin of my Bible: "Uh-oh"

I suspect that's exactly what Saul thought in the moment. He suddenly discovered: that he was on the wrong side of what God was doing; that those Saul had had imprisoned or killed for following Jesus had been right and he'd been wrong; and that Saul couldn't undo his misguided actions that had destroyed the lives of many.

I wonder how many of us have done something we've feared was beyond God's forgiveness? Perhaps we've



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crossed a line we never thought we would, and we're unable to forgive ourselves, let alone receive God's forgiveness. Or maybe we've repeatedly failed to say no to the same temptation, and wondered if there was a point when we've worn out God's grace. One of the most important elements of worship each Sunday is the assurance of pardon. We need this weekly reminder that God's grace is greater than our sin. There are times when God's forgiveness becomes the starting point for our own self-forgiveness.

When I remember my uncertainty at seminary, wondering what the future held, I can only wonder how uncertain and disorienting those three days of waiting were for Saul. Surely, he had to feel a bit like a child waiting in the principal's office! After all the damage he'd caused to what God was doing, what punishment awaited him?

Our Lord's response to Saul is a helpful reminder for each of us. Yes, Saul caused tremendous devastation for the followers of Jesus, and he likely dissuaded some from doing so. But rather than making Saul pay, Jesus helped him put the pieces back together again:

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. (Acts 9:17-19)

Don't miss the first word spoken by Ananias. Saul had come to destroy Ananias and his friends, yet he was greeted as "Brother." Saul hadn't done a thing yet to make him worthy of Ananias' gracious response, just as none of us is deserving of God's response of grace. But He gives it to us anyway. Imagine how humbling it must have been for Saul to accept God's grace after all he'd done. And yet, to his credit, he did; Saul's turn to Jesus totally transformed his life.

Think how shocked we'd be if the CEO of Pepsi suddenly professed a craving for Coke? If an avid Broncos fan abruptly swore loyalty to the Raiders during halftime of their game? If the President of the United States held a press conference to announce that he'd switched to the other party?

The turn Saul made was no less shocking to both the Jewish and Christian communities. The one who came to town in opposition to Jesus immediately became one of His greatest advocates. Listen to what happens next: At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. (Acts 9:20)

What in the world could cause such a dramatic turn?! Our Lead Pastor Tim told us a few weeks ago: "One encounter with Jesus can change a life." As a result of Ananias' visit to Saul, we're told: Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized. (Acts 9:18) Saul could once again see, just as he had a few days earlier. But what he saw was dramatically different.

First, Saul saw that he was lost; that what he'd been devoting his life to no longer made sense. Later in Acts, Saul offered an additional detail not in today's text: I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' (Acts 26:14) A goad was a sharp pointed stick for prodding sheep. Jesus was essentially saying, "Saul, it's hurting you to live the way you are."

And that's the essence of Jesus' invitation to turn to Him. He longs for us to experience more of life than we're so often willing to settle for. Saul discovered that he'd placed his ladder against the wrong wall, and that he needed to move it by making a turn. Is your approach to life working for you? If not, would you be open to what Jesus has to offer?

Second, Saul saw that he was loved. This is an important element: if we only understand that we're lost, despair will follow. Jesus's invitation to Saul and



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to us isn't to simply turn from being lost. We turn to His love, understanding that our Creator sees value and worth in you and me often overlooked by the world around us. Jesus' intimate love of Saul was revealed when He called him by name, and spoke to Saul in his native language of Aramaic. Then, when Saul deserved punishment for all the harm he'd done, Jesus lovingly gave him new purpose. Saul spent the rest of his life directing others to the transforming relationship with Jesus he'd experienced.

Most of us won't encounter Jesus as dramatically as Saul did. Yet whether turning to Jesus is prompted by a significant event or a quiet nudge within, a relationship with Him fills our days with greater meaning and purpose, as Saul experienced. But you know what? There's even more that awaits us!

This is a day when we acknowledge the reality of death, which every one of us will experience. Our willingness to confront death in this way is a contrast to much of the world. For many, death is feared. All they can see is the end death brings to the good in our lives, and the unknown that it ushers in. Because of that fear, many avoid talking or even thinking about death, as if to pretend it's not going to happen. Their approach is captured by a remark I once read: "My goal is to live forever. So far, so good."

How different it is, though, for those who turn to Jesus, and what we see as a result. He's the one who's conquered death. Jesus is the one who promised He's gone ahead to prepare a place for us. In the same way Saul saw Jesus with new eyes, turning to Jesus offers a fresh perspective of death: that what one day awaits us is even better than what we've thus far experienced in this world. Bob Benson was a Christian author who died of cancer at the age of 55. Before he died, he wrote "I used to think, loving life so greatly, that to die would be like leaving the party before the end. But now I know that the party is really happening somewhere else."

Today we celebrate members of First Pres who've gone to be with Jesus since last Easter. We miss them, and we're grateful for their contributions to this church and to our lives. But we rejoice in their total transformation, and what they're experiencing now with Jesus, on the other side of death. Friends, if O Sampson, Vesta Fulghum, Jerry Nelson or any of these dear ones were here right now, they would tell you that God's promises of what awaits us beyond death are all true.

We also rejoice in knowing we'll be reunited again one day with these and others who are dear to us. Bill Flanagan, a former Associate Pastor here, became my mentor when I was starting out in ministry in California. He'd often say, "Christians don't say good-bye; they just say, 'See you later'"

As we read these names in a moment, it may be that many are unfamiliar to you. If that's the case, use this time to think of others no longer with you who played a significant role in your life, whom you miss. Make this a moment of giving thanks for them.

As we celebrate these individuals, we acknowledge that our own time in this world will also end one day. What happens to us after we die depends on what happens before we die. So, I close by asking, Is this a list your name will one day be on? Have you experienced Jesus in a way that's prompted you to turn and experience His transformation? If not, could you identify what's holding you back from turning to Jesus today?

I'm going to lead us in a closing prayer that I invite each of you to be a part of. Because the total transformation that a relationship with Jesus brings is too wonderful to not experience.

