Rethink Religion

# (Acts 9:1-18)

Welcome to Christ’s Community Church. I’m so grateful to have you with us today as we worship together, remembering the things that we saw and heard last weekend. You see, the events of Easter weekend are significant because God made a decisive move causing many to Rethink Religion. The resurrection of Jesus Christ was the most significant event in the history of the world, fulfilling ancient prophecy, changing the course of history and the destiny of billions of people who would believe.

I like to think of God kind of like a master chess player. You know, chess is a game that I’ve enjoyed playing since I was a young boy. However, these days it’s like I rarely get to play because my wife and children think that I take too long to make my move. But that’s simply because I recognize that every move in chess is important, each move is strategic, affecting the subsequent moves, and therefore how long before I win the game. And so, when I’m determining how to move, I am rehearsing in my mind different scenarios, considering what if I did this or if I did that. I’m not thinking about what my move is going to be right now, but I’m thinking about what my move is going to be two or three moves from now.

In the same way, we need to recognize that God has several different strategies and is thinking many moves beyond this move, this situation, or circumstance we’re in right now. The reality is that God sees way beyond each move we make, and he’s not just four or five moves ahead, but he’s like 75,000 moves ahead. In fact, the prophet Isaiah recorded these words of God,

“I am God and there is none like me. Only I can tell you the future before it even happens. Everything I plan will come to pass, for I do whatever I wish. I will call a swift bird of prey from the east—a leader from a distant land to come and do my bidding. I have said what I would do and I will do it” (Isaiah 46:9-11, NLT).

And so, God knows what move you’re going to make even before you do; and he’s already devised a countermove and every subsequent move.

Last week, we read about two disciples walking down the road to Emmaus when Jesus came alongside of them, but the Bible said, that they were kept from recognizing him. It wasn’t until later when they were eating together that their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but as soon as they recognized him he disappeared from their sight. And so, they got up at once and returned to Jerusalem where they found the other disciples ecstatically proclaiming,

“It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon” (Luke 24:34).

And then the two disciples told what had happened to them and how they recognized Jesus when he broke the bread.

Today’s message is entitled “Rethink Religion” and we’re going to look at another story of man who had an encounter with the risen Christ. This was a man who had put God in a box, he had defined the parameters, the boundaries, and the ways with which God could move. He had examined God and judged him according to the Scriptures, but his form of religion, his understanding of God, was about to be shattered as he came face-to-face with the Lord Jesus. In this moment, he was forced to recognize the undeniable, unexplainable reality that we don’t have to understand everything to believe in something.

Now, if you’d like to follow along in your Bible, turn to the book of Acts, chapter 9, as we look at the conversion of a man named Saul of Tarsus. If you’ve read much of the New Testament, you’re probably very familiar with a guy named Paul because he wrote a large portion of it. Paul was actually the name given to Saul after he had this encounter with the resurrected Jesus and had the opportunity to rethink his religion. As we look at the background of this man and the story of his conversion, I believe this message will encourage you as you see how God directs our lives one step or one move at a time.

Saul was a very unique man because by birth he was a Jew, by citizenship he was a Roman, and yet he was educated as a Greek. And so, he was very intelligent, he’d become a very prideful man, but his confidence was in his religion. In fact, he gives his own biography in Philippians chapter 3, saying that he was,

“Circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee… as for legalistic righteousness, faultless” (Philippians 3:5-6).

You could say that Saul was a hardline fundamentalist, he was zealous for the law of God, but he’d put God in a box. And so, anything outside of his self-prescribed boundaries, anything that was unexplainable or unorthodox, in his mind just couldn’t be of God. Even though God so loved the world, even though God had made his move, Saul’s religion had blinded him to the realities of what God was doing and he became a great opponent of those who belonged to the Way, the earliest form of Christianity.

The Bible tells us that when Stephen, the first Christian martyr was put to death, Saul was there approving of this heartbreaking act of violence. This tragic event seemed to motivate him, because from this point on he began aggressively pursuing Christians, having them arrested and executed when possible. In fact, Jesus had warned his followers about this persecution saying,

“The time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God” (John 16:2).

And Saul thought he was doing a service to God, he believed he was purifying the land of a false teaching about this resurrected Messiah. But then something happened, everything about Saul changed, and he began preaching the gospel that he’d once despised.

As we look to the Word of God in Acts chapter 9, we’re going to discover the story of his conversion to the Christian faith. Beginning in verse one, we’re going to read about this distinct moment in time when Saul had made his move, but God made a greater move, a countermove, transforming him from the worst of the worst, the chief of sinners, to the greatest missionary, evangelist, pastor, theologian, and church leader of all time. And so, let’s begin reading in Acts chapter 9, at verse one,

“Meanwhile….” Meanwhile what? Meanwhile, as Christians were being captured, flogged, beaten, whipped, imprisoned, and even killed… “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. 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?" (Acts 9:1-4).

Suddenly, everything changed, in a split second, with a flash of light, God made a move and Saul went down. He described it this way to King Agrippa in Acts Chapter 26 saying,

“About noon, O king, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions” (Acts 26:13).

Saul loved the Law, the commands of God, but hadn’t realized that the purpose of the Law was to bring him to Christ, and so now God sovereignly moved according to his grace in Christ Jesus to give him a personal encounter with the One who himself is the fulfillment of the Law. And so, Saul was given this unusual opportunity to rethink his religion and he replied in verse five,

“Who are you, Lord?" Jesus replied, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:5).

Now, Saul, who considered himself to be an enlightened man, saw the glory of God revealed from heaven as his spiritual eyes were opened and he had a face-to-face encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ. I love this, because it illustrates so powerfully how God always makes the first move, and though it may not have been as dramatic in your life, you can still see that God was working all along. In fact, the Bible describes it this way, and it really couldn’t be much clearer that God made the first move,

“While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

And so, we didn’t know Jesus, we weren’t seeking him, and in the same way, Saul was traveling along “still breathing out murderous threats” against Jesus followers when Jesus comes and reveals himself to him.

At this point Saul is forced to rethink his religion, even though he had been raised in the Jewish faith, taught by one of the greatest teachers of the Law in that day, and had memorized large portions of the Old Testament. He had missed seeing Jesus in the Scriptures, he didn’t recognize him just like those two disciples on the road to Emmaus to whom Jesus…

“Explained what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Luke 24:27).

Now, up to this point Saul had been rebelling against God, but now he’s flat on his face, he recognizes that God was talking, when suddenly he said, “I am Jesus”. At that moment, the lightbulb turns on, all the dots connected, and everything clicked in his mind. He knew that this Jesus who was dead is now alive, and in that moment everything that he’d believed was turned upside down, he was broken, penitent, and relying upon the mercy of God.

Jesus had made his move. Saul is challenged to rethink his religion, it’s his move, and Jesus tells him in verse six,

"Get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do" (Acts 9:6).

Notice that Jesus didn’t lay out a detailed plan before him, but he simply told him, “Get up and go into the city. Get up, walk in obedience, and I will show you what you must do.”

This is so helpful, maybe you’ll find it helpful too, because there have been times when I’ve been waiting to hear from God; and maybe you’ve experienced this, but I know that God has moved, he’s given me an assignment, and I haven’t done it yet. And so, maybe you’re wondering why you’re not hearing from God, but he’s not going to tell you what to do next, until you get up and do what he already told you to do. You know, maybe you read it in his Word, maybe he spoke it audibly to you, but God always leads you one step at a time, and so he may be waiting for you to do the last thing he asked you to do.

Continuing in verse seven,

“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 not see anything. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything” (Acts 9:7-9).

They were speechless, they didn’t understand, they couldn’t explain it, because God has moved in a way that they’d never experienced before. And in the same way, Saul gets up, but he couldn’t see, physically he was blind, but for the first time… for the first time in his life he could see spiritually. And I wonder if this is what he had in mind when he wrote,

“We live by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7).

Because here is Paul stumbling, groping around blindly, when suddenly, God moves again. He takes another piece, a pawn, and he makes a move over here. Just like Jesus told the disciples in the garden, “Sit here while I go over there” (Matthew 26:36). And so, God’s moving and just because you don’t understand it doesn’t mean that God’s not doing something. We see this in verse 10, where God takes this unrelated pawn, Ananias, and he makes a move over here, in Damascus.

“The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. 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. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight” (Acts 9:10-12).

"Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name" (Acts 9:13-14).

Now, it’s obvious Ananias had heard the voice of God before, but he pauses, he hesitates, and he questions God. This just didn’t seem like a wise move, it didn’t make sense, and I know in my own life that the distance between here and there, the distance between where I am and where God wants me to be, is often that one move that I’m unwilling to make. That’s exactly where Ananias was, he’s struggling to understand and even though it could be painful he trusted that God was going to show him the way step-by-step even when it seemed just out of reach.

It reminds me of a National Geographic documentary I watched last week called “Free Solo”. It was about a rock climber named Alex, but this was the craziest, most intense, scary kind of rock climbing there is. This was about climbing with no ropes to catch you when you slipped or you lost your grip, and so, it was crazy scary. But in this movie, Alex was scaling these mountains, these rock walls thousands of feet straight up, just scaling them like Spiderman. And so, he’s reaching up here, stepping over there, reaching over here, and it’s like a vertical version of that game Twister, but it was all so purposeful and strategic.

And that’s what the Lord said first to Paul and then to Ananias in verse 15, “Go! Put your foot here, reach your left hand over there, now put your right foot over here, just one step at a time. It may be difficult and you may not understand, but I need you to obey.”

“Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name” (Acts 9:15-16).

Now, you could just imagine what Ananias is thinking, here’s this guy who’s been murdering Christians, and God’s telling him that this man is his chosen instrument. But isn’t that the way that God works, you know, he chooses the most unlikely, those that others overlook? And isn’t that what we see here with the Saul, a man who was going completely the opposite direction, who’s attempting to destroy the work of God and eliminate the witnesses of Jesus? Time and time again we see those things that seem to be a setback, what might even be called a tragedy, are actually setups for God to be glorified.

You can see it all through Scripture. Consider the life of a young boy named Joseph in the Old Testament. God gave him a dream, “One day you’re going to be a great leader.” But then the very next day his brothers sell him into slavery, he’s falsely accused of attempted rape, and winds up in prison. It seems as if the dream was nothing but a dream, but in God’s economy it was a set-up.

To a young shepherd boy, God said, “You’re going to be a great king one day.” But all David saw was the backside of sheep day after day, but nonetheless he remained faithful. Until, one day he got his big break and he stepped up to fight a giant, but it wasn’t all that he thought it would to be, and soon found himself fleeing from King Saul, and for years hiding in the wilderness. However, God was preparing him, he was teaching him to walk with him, step-by-step, and move by move so that God might be glorified.

This morning, you may not think that you’re good enough, that you know enough, and you may actually feel very insignificant, but God is not looking for people that have it all together, he’s looking for those like Ananias who would say, “Yes, Lord.” And some of you today, you’ve got a decision to make, because you’ve never seen yourself as one who God could use, but God would say “You’re my chosen instrument.” In fact, there may be some of you who used to hear from God, you used to be available, but you just don’t see how God could use you anymore. Well, let’s look at verse 17 and 18,

“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…” (Acts 9:17-18).

There was so much that Paul didn’t understand, but there was one thing that was undeniable, he could say, “I was blind but now I see!" There was so much that he had to learn, or relearn with spiritual eyes, but there were some things that he simply could not deny. Like the very fact that a dead man named Jesus was alive, that it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him (Acts 25:19).

This morning, as we close, I want you to know that God has made his move, he wants you to see again, to follow through on your last assignment, walking by faith and not by sight. Like Paul and Ananias followed his directions, keep stepping, keep reaching, until you get to that place where you are a couple moves in and all of a sudden you see. You understand how God is putting this all together and you can trust that he knows the end of the game before it even starts.

And so today, you can say, “Yes, Lord”, because you know that you can trust him, and as the Bible says in first Corinthians chapter 13,

“Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

You see, God is trustworthy, and even though we see dimly, as a poor reflection in a mirror, God knows everything and he’s about to illuminate everything. That day is coming soon, and in that day, we’ll know fully, because we’ll see him face-to-face. Right now, we don’t have to understand everything to believe that God has it under control and that he has sent his Son so that you might have life and have it to the full!

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