

August 29, 1999

God-Touched Lives, The Man who Fought Jesus

Acts 9

There is an old folk saying that goes like this. You can not make a silk purse out of a pig's ear. Granddaddy first told you that when you were swinging on the front porch and the reason he said it was because he had just read about some public figure who had made some stupid mistake. He had know him all his life and he said "well he has always been that way, he will never change". Your mother told you that when you first started dating and you got real serious with a young girl and she thought you were going to marry her. She knew her family and she thought you were marrying beneath yourself and so she said you can never make a silk purse out of a pig's ear. Folk wisdom is meant to be irrefutable. When you hear it, everybody says that makes sense. It is like the one going around today which says if it "ain't broke, don't fix it." That makes sense until you think about it a little and then you realize it is probably one of the most stupid things you ever heard. What I am going to read about today is God taking a pig's ear and making a silk purse. We have a wonderful word in faith that often is used in science. It is the word conversion. Conversion means that you take something and you convert it and make it something else. The wonderful good news that we preach as Christians is that God can convert us. He can take a pig's ear and make a silk purse. One of the most remarkable stories in the Bible about conversion is one of the most famous Christians who ever lived. His name was Saul of Tarsus. We know him as Paul. The story of his conversion is told in Acts 9 and I wanted to read a portion of that for you today. 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 synagogue in Damascus so if he found any who belonged to the way [that is what Christians were first called] 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 on the ground and he heard a voice saying to him "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Not the Christians but 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." One of the most remarkable things about the New Testament is that story is told ten different times in the New Testament. It is the one event that is told more than any others. Over in the book of First Timothy chapter one, Paul tells it again in a different way and if you will turn down to verse twelve you will see what he has to say about it. I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has given me strength that He considered me faithful, appointed me to His service even though I was once a blasphemer, a persecutor and a violent man. I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly with a faith and a love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trust worthy saying that deserves full acceptance. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the worse. Now this passage. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worse of sinners, Christ Jesus might display His unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on Him and receive eternal life. The passage has told us ten

different times and Paul said let me tell you why God did it that way for me. It was that I would become an example of God's patience in working with people. As you understand how God worked with patience in Saul's life, it may be that you will understand a little better how God is working with patience in yours. Let us pull up some truths from the story. First truth is, there is no person so bad that he can not be changed. As Paul began to describe himself he said let me tell you who I was. I was a blasphemer, that is a person who speaks against something even though it is true, a murderer and I was a violent man. The story is first introduced to Saul when the first Christian martyr is about to be sacrificed. His name is Steven. The way people would riot, which was a common thing in Biblical times, they would take stones, and stone a person to death. As these people decided to kill Steven, they couldn't do it with their cloaks around them. They took all their cloaks off and they picked a young man and said, you hold the cloaks. Saul was the young boy who was holding the cloaks. He said I was there saying hit him harder. Pick up a bigger stone, kill him. He gives clear indication that he was a part of murdering other Christians. He would go around and have Christians thrown into prisons, and have some of them killed. He heard there were some of these heretics living up in Damascus and he gets an official document, and says let me arrest them, men and women, I don't care who they are. I will bring them back to Jerusalem and we will kill them. That is the reason after Saul had this remarkable experience on the road to Damascus, God came to a man by the name of Ananias. He said Ananias, Saul has had this tremendous experience with me and I want you to go and talk to him. Ananias said Lord, are we talking about the same man. You want me to go talk to Saul. Saul said paint me black all over. I am the worst of sinners. Yet, it is remarkable as you read through the Bible of how God sometimes takes some of the worst people and does some of His greatest work with them. When He wanted to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt He chose a murderer. His name was Moses. When He wanted to write some of His greatest poetry, He chose a murderer and an adulteress. His name was David. When He wanted to start the church and I want to build it on the faith of the apostles, He chose the chief apostle, Simon Peter, who denied Him publicly three times. When He wanted to spread His message all around the Mediterranean world, He took a man who was a murderer named Saul and He said you are the person that I want to use. Why would He do that, to say it doesn't matter what you have done. It doesn't matter what your background is, if you give your heart and life to God then He can still use you for His glory. If you are hear this morning and you say to me, well you may talk about Saul, but you don't know what I have done. I am so bad, I have done so much. I am trying to hide it. I have news for you. Paul said the reason I was chosen to say if God can change me, he can change anybody. God wants to work in your life to say that He can do that as well. You might recall that in the Bible, there was a man by the name of Lazarus, who died and Jesus came prayed over him and he came back to life. The Bible says that people used to come from everywhere to see Lazarus. You would to. Who do you know who was dead and came back to life. Why does God choose people like Saul? Why does He choose people like Moses? Because He wants to impress on other people that even those kind of people can be saved. What I pray for on a regular basis is "Dear God, send people like Lazarus, Saul, send the ex Moses, send them here, change their life and then people will come to this church and say if he can raise a Lazarus, if He can change a Saul, if He can change a Moses, their is hope

for me. You need to be aware that no person has gone too far, too deep, to where their life can not be changed. Two men whose names have been in the news in America in recent years illustrate the point. If I told you the name of Jeffrey Dahmer some of you would remember back. Here was a young man who committed serial murders, did things that I don't want to share in a group like this. When he was taken to court for his trial, his lawyer said to the judge, this man is mentally ill. The judge looked over the bench and said sir, you are not ill. You are the most evil man I have ever known. Jeffrey Dahmer, was sentenced to the rest of his life in prison where he should be. He turned and to the public said no I am not mentally ill, I knew what I was doing and I delighted to do what I did. Jeffrey Dahmer was killed in a riot in prison but before he was murdered, Jeffrey Dahmer gave his life to Jesus Christ and he set as a testimony that even the Dahmer's of this world can be touched by Christ. If you lived in New York City in the 80's, you heard of the term Son of Sam. Women said they did not like to walk by themselves along a street because twenty-six of them had disappeared. Finally they recognized this unimposing man was responsible for it. He is now in maximum prison and will spend the rest of his life there where he should be. You might have seen on television this past week where the question was asked, what ever happened to the Son of Sam. They sent a national reporter to the prison where he was. He was introduced to him and he was sitting there with a Bible in his hand. He said even I who have done all of these horrible things and one day I went down to the chapel and I heard about Jesus Christ. I have given my life to Christ and now I claim that I am a Christian. I want to say to you if God can change the Dahmer's and the Sons of Sams soul's don't ever come to God and say God you can't change me. There is not any person so low, so deep that God can not touch your life and make a difference. If you are letting what you have done stand between you and God, then you are on shaky ground because God touched Saul's life to give an example to everyone that any person can come to Him. The second thing you need to learn from the story is even the person who looks like they are running the furthest away from God still has pockets of doubt in them. One of those ten times that Paul gave his conversion, he used a phrase we do not understand because it is an agricultural term. God said to him in this experience it is hard for you to kick against the goads. They used to plow with oxen. Oxen did not like to always have to go down rows so they would kick. What they devised was a triangle wood that would put on the neck and when the oxen would try to kick, they put two sharp sticks on it and every time you kicked you would learn a lesson. You don't kick against the goads. Listen to God talking to him. Saul going out to kill others, it is hard for you to kick against the goads. It looks like you are not even thinking about God. But I see in your heart and I know there is some doubt in your mind, there is some work of God in your life that you are fighting against and you are finding it difficult to do what you want to do. There are people who leave the impression they don't care about God, they are not interested in the things about God but listen. I know better. I know because I know the story of Saul that it doesn't make any difference how you look like on the inside, there are times when you are wondering whether you are right or whether you are wrong. Let me tell you what I think the goad of God was. I think it was Steven, the first man who was killed. The Bible says that Steven was a brilliant man when you listen to what he said, he was a very learned man. The Bible said he had power and wisdom that nobody could rebuke. When they decided to kill, stone

him to death, the Bible says that the light of God came on his face and he looked up and he said I see Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father. When they continued, the Bible said they even put a new word. The word for death in the Bible is phanatos. They said when Steven died it doesn't use the word phanatos, it uses the word he went to sleep. What he meant was that while they were stoning him to death, he looked up and he died with a sense of calm peace. Saul never got over Steven. Let me tell you what is going on in your life. There are some things you can't get over. You might never get over a mother, you make never have gotten over a grandmother of faith, somebody at work, they may have been something in somebody elses life you have always wondered about. How did they do that. You would have to confess today that while people on the outside may think that you are not interested, on the inside we know different. The goads of God are there. There is a third thing. There are many different ways that God uses to bring people to Himself. Some people have a revolutionary experience like Saul of Tarsus. Kara said she came and sat in this church one day. The first Sunday she was here, God worked in her life and God said I want you to make your decision for Christ. She hadn't talked to anybody, hadn't talked to her sister, she just came. Many other people come evolutionary. They hear a little bit, make a part of their decision and they finally come over a period of time to make their decision for Christ. God works in all kind of ways. Where I go buy my clothes, I walk in and there are a whole set of suits there. All I am interested in is the right size. Many people however, say I don't want mass produced suits, I want a custom job. Let me tell you, God doesn't do anything mass production. Everything He does in custom built. God is custom working in your life to do what ever is necessary to bring you to Himself. That is the reason if you come and say, well if God would do for me like He did for Saul, maybe I would come too. NO. Let me tell you a story in the Bible. There was a man who died and the Bible says he went to hell. In hell, he looked up and he saw Moses in heaven. He said Moses, I wish you would send somebody back from the dead to talk to my brothers. If somebody you knew had died, next week they show up and talk to you and say you need to give your life to God, would you listen. Sure you would, not necessarily. Listen to what Moses said. Moses said if they don't believe what the prophets are saying, they wouldn't believe if somebody came up from the dead. Let me tell you the difference. The difference is you get so tied in to the man who is dead, and came back, you miss what he is saying. I want to say to you, God has a custom made plan for your life. God will do what ever is necessary to bring you to Himself, don't try to put God in a box when really the problem is your own heart. Next truth that comes out of this story. God has a plan for you even though you don't believe it. Saul, I have a plan for you. I want you to go share the message around the world. I often say to people you never know what God will do with you until you give your life to Him. You never can figure out what God is going to do. He uses the most unlikely people. I had an experience with that one time. I was in a grocery store in my home town and my seventh grade school teacher was coming down the aisle. She looked up and said "hello". She said "I understand you are trying to be a preacher". I said "yes ma'am." She said "how are you doing." I said "not too good." She said "well I am not surprised, I have known you all your life". Then as she threw a can of pork and beans into the basket she said over her shoulder, "I guess if God can use anybody, He ought to be able to use you." Have you ever looked into the mirror lately. God can use you. He

can do things for you, you never thought He would do. Paul was brilliant. He was in the best schools, he was under the best teachers in the nation, God said I want to change you. God just used that brilliance to write much of the New Testament. I don't know how God can use you, but whatever He will do, is that He will take you and your experiences and He will make something out of you, you never imagined. When you give your heart and your life to Him. The last truth. Saul said I was brought to Him to show God's patience. I wanted to ask you. How patience has God been with you? Some of you in this room are thirteen and God has been working in your life for thirteen years. Some of you are thirty three, He has been patient with you for thirty-three years. Some of you are sixty-three and He has been working with you for sixty-three years. I want to ask you a question. What else does He have to do? Why haven't you come yet? Why haven't you done what God wanted you to do? I ask you again. What else does He have to do? I have good news and bad news. The good news is, I don't care if you live to be one hundred and three, God is still going to work in your life. When you are on your death bed in whatever hospital you are in, I want you to know God is going to be there. That is good news. The bad news, if God continues to provide you all of these opportunities and if God keeps on working in your life through all of these years and you keep saying no, no, no to Him, what you are going to find is your heart is going to get hard. You are going to find you may decide you want to give your life to Jesus just so you can go to heaven and not go to hell. I want to ask you a question, if you don't want to live with Jesus here, why do you want to spend eternity with Him? What will happen to you is not that God is not going to keep working with you, but the problem is us. Every time we say no, we end up being a different person. If you were here last Sunday and you were suppose to do what God wanted you to do and you are back this Sunday, you are not the same person you were last week. You rationalize last week why you shouldn't do it, it is easy for you to rationalize this week and you just keep rationalizing and it gets easier and easier. Is God patience, you bet. Are we stubborn, you bet. The key is, if you can tell me why you should not do what God wants you to do today, and you act on it, you have just told me that already your heart is getting harder and harder. I went into a man's house one day and he told me all the reasons why he should give his life to Christ and then he told me all the reasons why he wouldn't. I took a little piece of paper and tore it off and I said let me write you a sentence. Here is the sentence I wrote. Regardless of what happens to me, in the next seven days I will not give my life to Jesus Christ. I put a little blank line and I said, will you read that and sign it please. He said oh no. I don't know what is going to happen to me in the next seven days. Well I don't. Exactly. Can you tell me one reason when God has been so patience and work in your life, why you should not do today what He wants you to. It maybe if you will come do what God wants you to do today, one day they will write a book and say you know old Jim, Jim's life was changed. Jim found a purpose for his life and if God can do with old Jim, He can do it with you. One day maybe you will be the person, the example that people will use of a person who God was patient with and finally was converted that God took a pig's ear and make silk purse. I want to ask you to let Him do it in your life today.