

## ***Reaching the Opt-outs***

### **Acts 9:1-31**

Acts 9:1) Now Saul was still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. He went to the high priest 2) and requested letters from him to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any men or women who belonged to the Way, he might bring them as prisoners to Jerusalem. 3) As he traveled and was nearing Damascus, a light from heaven suddenly flashed around him. 4) Falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, *“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”* 5) *“Who are you, Lord?”* Saul said. *“I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting,”* he replied. 6) *“But get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”* 7) The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the sound but seeing no one. 8) Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing. So they took him by the hand and led him into Damascus. 9) He was unable to see for three days and did not eat or drink. 10) There was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias, and the Lord said to him in a vision, *“Ananias”* *“Here I am, Lord,”* he replied. 11) *“Get up and go to the street called Straight”* the Lord said to him, *“to the house of Judas, and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, since he is praying there.* 12) *In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and placing his hands on him so that he may regain his sight.”* 13) *“Lord,”* Ananias answered, *“I have heard from many people about this man, how much harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. 14) And he has authority here from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.”* 15) But the Lord said to him, *“Go, for this man is my chosen instrument to take my name to Gentiles, kings, and Israelites. 16) I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”* 17) Ananias went and entered the house. He placed his hands on him and said, *“Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road you were traveling, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”* 18) At once something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he got up and was baptized. 19) And after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul was with the disciples in Damascus for some time. 20) Immediately he began proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues: *“He is the Son of God.”* 21) All who heard him were astounded and said, *“Isn’t this the man in Jerusalem who was causing havoc for those who called on this name and came here for the purpose of taking them as prisoners to the chief priests?”* 22) But Saul grew stronger and kept confounding the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah. 23) After many days had passed, the Jews conspired to kill him, 24) but Saul learned of their plot. So they were watching the gates day and night intending to kill him, 25) but his disciples took him by night and

lowered him in a large basket through an opening in the wall. 26) When he arrived in Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, since they did not believe he was a disciple. 27) Barnabas, however, took him and brought him to the apostles and explained to them how Saul had seen the Lord on the road and that the Lord had talked to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus. 28) Saul was coming and going with them in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. 29) He conversed and debated with the Hellenistic Jews, but they tried to kill him. 30) When the brothers found out, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. 31) So the church throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

The martyred death of Stephen in Acts 7 triggered severe persecution. Christian persecution is inevitable, intense, and invasive. Jesus articulated clearly that those who choose to follow Him can expect hatred, insult, harassment, exclusion, rejection, and discrimination. Last week we introduced **The first major turning point in the church's future = witnessing through persecution**. In our journey through the Acts of the Apostles and What Matters in the Church, one clear, settled matter continued to resound: Evangelism Matters. And specifically, evangelizing and reaching the hard-to-reach. Our narrator, Dr. Luke, selected three case studies to demonstrate reaching the hard-to-reach. Acts 8 affirmed the **The Case Study of Philip the Evangelist: Witnessing through persecution requires faithful evangelists and reaching the Left-outs**. Philip's evangelistic outreach to the Samaritans, to Simon the sorcerer, and to the Ethiopian eunuch identified the left outs as the excluded, the unsought, and the overlooked.

Dr. Luke's second illustration of reaching the hard-to-reach involved **The Case Study of Ananias of Damascus and Saul of Tarsus**: "Now Saul was still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. He went to the high priest and requested letters from him to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any men or women who belonged to the Way, he might bring them as prisoners to Jerusalem." (9:1-2)

Continuing to ask the question "What does witnessing through persecution look like?" we consider

**1. Witnessing through persecution requires overcoming fear**. Struck blind by the light from heaven as he neared Damascus, Saul's travelling companions led him into the city. The Lord visited a disciple in Damascus named Ananias in a vision: "*Get up and go to the street called Straight to the house of Judas, and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, since he is praying there. In a vision he has*

*seen a man named Ananias coming in and placing his hands on him so that he may regain his sight.” “Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard from many people about this man, how much harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. And he has authority here from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.”* (11-14)

- **We can all identify with Ananias = the reluctant witness.** If we had been Christians in Damascus, our reaction would be the same as Ananias. Any observant Christian in the first century would have been afraid of Saul of Tarsus. Ananias did not want to go see Saul. The Lord repeated the directive twice before he finally relented.

- Ananias’ encounter with Saul articulated **Three lessons for a reluctant witness.** These lessons encourage me – I hope they encourage you.

- ✓ **Fear is a normal response to be utilized for effective advantage.** How would you respond on a FAITH visit, if the Lord Himself filled out your prospect card? The reason most of us hesitate to share Jesus is because we’re afraid – we’re afraid of being rejected, we’re afraid of being ridiculed, we’re afraid of our inadequacy to say the right thing, or we’re afraid of being a failure. But fear is normal – it can be controlled, it can keep us focused, and it can improve our prayer life. Ken Chafin is right: *“A successful witness is a person who in love and in the power of the Holy Spirit shares Jesus Christ, and then leaves the results to God.”*

- ✓ **God is working in the lives of those He sends us to.** Obviously, Ananias thought God was only working in him and not in Saul. To his amazement, God was already at work in the heart and conscience of Saul, preparing him to receive a Gospel witness. How foolish for us who believe in an all-knowing, all-powerful, everywhere-present God, and at the same time conclude that He would send us into a situation into which He has not already been. We will never encounter a person that God has not already loved and the Holy Spirit has not already convicted.

- ✓ **God has plans for those He sends us to.** The Lord had to remind Ananias: *“Go, for this man is my chosen instrument to take my name to Gentiles, kings, and Israelites.”* (15) To Ananias, Saul represented trouble and persecution. To God, Saul represented a chosen messenger to the nations. How many people have we given up on, rejected and neglected, but God has great plans for their life? (See Ken Chafin, *The Reluctant Witness*, chapter 1)

**2. Witnessing through persecution involves reaching the Opt-outs.** By his own testimony in Philippians 3:5, Saul was a strict Israelite – *“a Hebrew born of Hebrews, regarding the law, a Pharisee, regarding zeal, persecuting the church, regarding the righteousness that is in the law, blameless.”* But he opted out of his

faith, he abandoned his spiritual pedigree, he rejected Jesus Christ as the Messiah, choosing instead to feed his hatred of those who followed the Way of Christ.

- **Saul's encounter with Jesus defines the process of a changed life: persecutor > confronted > converted > persecuted.** Our first introduction to Saul occurs in chapter 7: as the enraged mob stones Stephen to death, *"the witnesses laid their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul."* (7:59) Chapter 8 begins with these words: *"Saul agreed with putting Stephen to death."* On that day, a severe persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and Saul became the dominant persecutor. Notice the intensity of this persecutor: *"**RAVAGING** the church. He would enter house after house, drag off men and women, and put them in prison."* (8:3) *"Now Saul was still **BREATHING THREATS** and **MURDER** against the disciples of the Lord."* (9:1) Saul the persecutor then becomes Saul the confronted: *"As he traveled and was Nearing Damascus, a **LIGHT** from heaven suddenly **FLASHED** around him. Falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' 'Who are you, Lord?' Saul said. 'I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting,'" (9:3-5) Let's just be reminded that God always will get the attention of those who resist Him and threaten His people. Thank God, because of the obedience of the Ananias, the reluctant witness, Saul the confronted persecutor became Saul the converted: Ananias went and entered the house. He placed his hands on him and said, *"Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road you were traveling, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."* At once something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight." (9:17-18) How do we know his life was changed? *"Then he got up and was **BAPTIZED**."* (9:18) *"Immediately he began **PROCLAIMING** Jesus in the synagogues"* (9:20) *"He conversed and debated with the Hellenistic Jews, but they tried to **KILL** him."* (9:29) The persecutor became the persecuted – a sign of authentic life-change.*

- **Saul represents the Opt-outs: Those who have taken an active position against faith, the church, and religious standards.** Opt-outs have decided by personal choice that they can live without the church, without faith, and without religious standards. Who are the opt-outs? Philosophical atheists who don't believe in God. Political groups who make politics their god. Persons who substitute volunteer organizations, civic clubs, or fraternal orders for the church. Hedonists and pleasure seekers. Secularists who live a self-sufficient life without God. People who belong to religious cults. Church drop-outs who view church members as hypocrites. People devoted to hobbies, sports, and leisure in place of a relationship with Christ. They collect into three categories: the philosophical unbelievers, the replacement religionists, the seekers after truth. Opt-outs exist in

every family, in most workplaces, in all forms of government, in every neighborhood and community.

Reaching Opt-outs requires patience and persistence. Philosophical unbelievers exclude themselves by their own overt antagonism toward the church. They need Christian friends willing to disagree agreeably instead of bashing them or judging them. Replacement religionists are unchurched because of their commitment to an alternate lifestyle or special interest. They need Christian friends who demonstrate for them that a devoted follower of Jesus can be serious in their faith and have fun at the same time. Seekers after truth have embraced themselves or another religious perspective. They need a Christian example, so that they can see Jesus in us. (See Robert Dale and Delos Miles, *Reaching the Hard-to-Reach*, chapter 8)

**No One is Beyond the Reach of God's Hand!** Saul of Tarsus became the Apostle Paul – Christianity's greatest preacher, missionary, evangelist, church planter, and world-view apologist. God's Hand is not TOO SHORT to save the hardest opt-out. God is not willing that ANY opt-out should perish, but that all opt-outs should come to repentance. God wants EVERY opt-out to be saved and come to the knowledge of truth. Not even the hardest, roughest, and meanest Opt-outs are beyond the reach of God's hand. We must never give up on them.