

Acts 9:1-19a

Outward Church: The Least Likely Disciple

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Who is the **least likely person** you know who would **ever become a Christian**? Take a moment and think of them. Is it a **family member**, a **friend**, a **coworker**? Is it because they're **apathetic to Christianity**? Or is it because they're totally **against Christianity**? Maybe they identify as an **atheist**, or **Buddhist**, **Muslim**, or even **Jewish**. All you know, is **they'll never follow Jesus...**

Nabeel fit the description of someone who would never follow Jesus. His parents were from Pakistan and they were devout Muslim believers. They moved to the U.S. and Nabeel grew up obedient to Islam. By the **age of five** he was saying the **five daily prayers** and had **memorized the entire Koran in Arabic**. He knew **what he believed** and practiced it **rigorously**.

His family blamed **American Christianity** for the **moral compromises** they saw all around them, for the immorality of culture. These people claim to be Christians but they promote all this stuff. The Christians Nabeel encountered as a child and teen **didn't know their faith** beyond a surface level. He would question them and they didn't have the answers. This only confirmed that Islam was true and that he was on the right path. Nabeel is the kind of person who if we were friends with him, we would assume he would never come to Jesus. Nabeel is a little like Saul. Saul was a devout Jew who practiced his beliefs rigorously.

Saul was the least likely of disciples.

Saul identified himself as "**zealous**" for his faith (Acts 22:3; Gal 1:14). To understand what this means we need to understand **Judaism** at that time. I've been reading *Paul, A Biography by N.T. Wright*. In it Wright talks about Saul's teacher, a man named **Gamaliel**. Gamaliel was a part of a school of thought called "**Hillel**" that **generally allowed** for **disagreement** and **debate within Judaism**. In **Acts 5** when the Sanhedrin put **Peter** and **John** on **trial** for preaching the gospel, Gamaliel argued that they should let these men go and **see what happens**. If their mission has human origins they will fail. If not, Gamaliel doesn't want to fight against God (Acts 5:38-39). Gamaliel is from Hillel and took a "**live and let live**" policy.¹

But there was another school called **Shammai** who were a little more **fiery**, who believed in **prayer**, but with a **sword** strapped to your side. Saul likely identified more with Shammai than Hillel. Those like Saul who were especially zealous would have identified strongly with the **Old Testament hero, Phinehas**. After **Egypt**, when Israel wandered in the wilderness, the men of their camp became interested in **foreign Moabite women**. These women took the Israelites **away** from the **one true God** and they began to worship **Baal**. God sent a **plague** on the people in **judgment** and ordered the Israelites to **kill** any who committed **this act**.

Numbers 25:6-8 (NIV) 6 Then an Israelite man brought into the camp a Midianite woman right before the eyes of Moses and the whole assembly of Israel while they were weeping at the entrance to the tent of meeting. 7 When Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, saw this, he left the assembly, took a spear in his hand 8 and followed the Israelite into the tent. He drove the spear into both of them, right through the Israelite man and into the woman's stomach. Then the plague against the Israelites was stopped;

Phinehas is **so zealous** for God's law and holiness that he took a spear and rammed it through the Israelite man and Moabite woman. The Psalms actually say this was **reckoned** to Phinehas as "**righteousness**."

Psalm 106:30-31 (NIV)

30 But Phinehas stood up and intervened,
and the plague was checked.

31 This was credited to him as righteousness
for endless generations to come.

So Saul must have been thinking, "If I am zealous for God's law, and put to death those who are spreading false teachings, this too will be credited to me as righteousness." **Christianity** was a **threat to Judaism**. You have to eat the **body and blood** of a dead **guy** they claimed **rose again** from the grave? How is this not **pagan**? **To not act** would bring down **God's wrath** on Israel. That's why Saul helped kill **Stephen** and now is **dragging believers from their homes**. He thinks he's **like Phinehas**, protecting Israel from judgment.

Acts 9:1-2 (NIV) 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.

So as Saul is going to Damascus to capture more believers, you can see he would have been completely confident in his position. "I am like **Phinehas** who put the idolaters to death. I am like **Elijah** who put the prophets of Baal to death. I am zealous. I am doing the Lord's will!"

Who do you know who is zealously anti-Christian, who could never come to faith? Zero possibility? Do they remind you of Saul? Do they remind you of Nabeel? Saul and Nabeel are the least likely of disciples. Neither one seems like they could ever come to faith. I can think of a **bunch of people** like this in **my own life**. **Most people** I know seem like they'll never come to Jesus. **Why** have I **given up** on them?

Jesus loves to save the least likely of disciples.

Saul is nearing Damascus when suddenly a light brighter than the sun shines all around him (Acts 22; 26).

Acts 9:3-4 (NIV) 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?"

Instantly, Saul knew this was the Lord. He knew the **throne room vision** in **Isaiah 6**. He knew the vision of **chariots** in **Ezekiel 1**. He knew the vision of the **Ancient of Days** in **Daniel 7**. Here at last God was rewarding him and his righteousness for his zealous crusade for God! But falling to the ground he hears the words he least expects, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" In this moment his whole **worldview shifts**. His understanding of God and Scripture is flipped **upside-down**. In fear and trembling he asks.

Acts 9:5 (NIV)

5 "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.

"This changes everything! This means the martyr **Stephen** was **innocent**! This means the man named Jesus who died on a cross was **more than** a **rebel** or a **heretic**. He was the **Messiah**, God's **special king**. This means I was **right** about some things. The God of the Old Testament, **Yahweh**, is the one true God. But I was **wrong** about Jesus. Jesus is the **Son of Man**. Jesus is God in the flesh!"

Do you ever wonder **why Jesus chose Saul**? Why choose him? Saul later **writes**:

1 Timothy 1:15-16 (NIV) 15 Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. 16 But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.

Jesus loves to save sinners, bad sinners, the worst sinners. If Jesus can save Saul, he can save Nabeel, he can save David, he can save **your friend** or **family member**, whatever their name may be. Let's pray **they too would ask**, "Who are you, Lord?" Maybe we can **challenge** them to **ask Jesus that**. Lord willing, Jesus will **graciously reveal himself**, "I am Jesus..."

When **Nabeel** got to college he finally met a Christian who understood **what** they believe and **why** they believed it. He finally met someone who could **answer** his **questions** and **arguments**, who was **genuinely following Christ** like he was following Allah, and who could explain the **gospel** to him. This man's name was **David**. David became a **friend** to Nabeel. He **spent time** with him. He cared about him. David was willing to **walk** through what it meant to truly follow Jesus—that it isn't just a quick prayer but a **laying down of your entire life for Jesus**.

As Nabeel tried to **disprove** the **death, deity, and resurrection** of Jesus, three things Muslims deny, he found the evidence for those things to be compelling. This **took years**. Finally he began to make Islam take the **same truth-tests** he required of Christianity and he found Islam was **far weaker** than he expected. So that's when he asked **Jesus to reveal himself** to him in a **dream or vision**. **50-70%** of Muslims that come to Jesus come because Jesus appeared to them in a dream or vision.² Jesus answered his prayer.

In Nabeel's **dream** he was standing outside a very **narrow doorway**. It was just tall enough and wide enough for him to **fit through**. On the other side of this doorway there was this really **nice feast** where everyone was seated, waiting for the **owner** or **speaker to arrive**. He knew this was a **vision of heaven**. Nabeel saw his friend **David** in the room but no matter how hard he tried **he couldn't get in**. He asked his friend, "David. I thought we were going to eat together." He said, "You haven't responded." That's when he knew he needed to respond. When he woke up he told his friend David the dream and he pointed him to Luke 13 where Jesus says this:

Luke 13:24-25 (NIV) 24 "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to. 25 Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, 'Sir, open the door for us.'

This vision led to Nabeel counting the cost, the **deep price** he would have to pay **converting** from a Muslim family to Christianity. **He finally took that step of faith to come to Jesus**. *Jesus loves to save the least likely of disciples*. **Whose your Saul? Whose your Nabeel? How do you know** Jesus won't save them? Have you ever talked with them about Jesus? Maybe it's time to prayerfully try again.

Jesus loves to save the least likely of disciples through us.

Jesus tells Saul to get up and go to **Damascus**. Saul get's up but he's blind. He's led to Damascus where he spends the next several days **thinking** and **praying** and **repenting** and **reexamining** his life. Now **God has done** all the **hard work**. God has moved in Saul, but he still wants to use a **fellow believer** in Saul's story.

Acts 9:10-14 (NIV) 10 In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"

“Yes, Lord,” he answered.

God could have just showed up and told Paul everything he needed to know. But God had something in this event for Ananias as well. God wanted to give him the **opportunity** to see him moving. **Maybe** God wants to give you the **opportunity to see him move** in an incredible way.

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.”

God is including Ananias but **Ananias doesn’t see it that way**. Ananias sees **all the reasons why Saul will never come to Christ**. He’s **persecuting** us! He came here to **kill us**! That’s not the kind of guy you expect to come to Christ. Think of the **person in your life** who you think could never come to Christ. How many **excuses** have we used to **not tell them about Jesus**? Sometimes the Holy Spirit calls on us to **wait**, but how many times have we **ignored him** when he said **it’s time**? **Jesus** came to **die** to **forgive them** of this sin.

Acts 9:15-19a (NIV) 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.

Not only is Saul a Christian now. God **intends to use him** to preach the gospel to the **Gentiles**, the non-Jews. It’s amazing how God is going to work through Ananias to **bring Saul into Christianity**, but then God is going to use Saul to bring **others** into Christianity. We can’t lose hope for our friends not only for **their sake**, but for the **sake of those** God might want them to share Christ with. After **Nabeel Qureshi** became a Christian and later joined Ravi Zacharias International Ministries (RZIM), an **apologetics ministry** (aka. good reasons to believe). He wrote the book *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus: A Devout Muslim Encounters Christianity*. He’s told lots of others about the faith he discovered in Christ. God might work through you to save the **one on your heart**, and then **work through them** to **save a bunch more**. But it won’t be easy.

16 I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”

The **quickest** way to get people to sign up for Christianity is to tell them Jesus will make their **life easy**. But it’s also the **wrong way**. In some ways Christianity is **easier** (Matt 11:30). We’re **forgiven**. But in other ways it’s **harder**. Jesus tells us to pick up our **cross daily** and follow him (Luke 9:23). In **2016** Nabeel was **diagnosed** with **stomach cancer**. He died in **2017** at the **age of 34**. **Jesus doesn’t promise** us an **easy rode** once we join him, but he does promise he’ll **walk that road with us**, no matter where he takes us. Till the very end Nabeel prayed for **healing** but believed **God is good no matter what**.

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.

God’s **Holy Spirit anoints Saul** a special way for ministry. **Ananias** gets to **be part of it**. He gets to lay his hands on him and call him “**Brother Saul**.” God used Ananias, another believer, to help make it happen. God used David, a friend in Nabeel’s college years, to bring him to faith in Christ. God can use you and me to bring those around us to Jesus. *Jesus loves to save the least likely of disciples through us.*

Who might God be using you to bring to a relationship with him? Nabeel made the point in an **interview** if becoming a Christian really is picking up your **cross** and following Jesus, we really need to **support** and **encourage people** in **that commitment**. We need to have **real relationships** with them. Who might you need to **encourage**? Whose questions do you need to **answer**? Who do you need to make time for, over **Zoom**, over the **phone**, over a **social distancing** campfire, over a **picnic in the park**. Let's **pray** and **walk in line with our prayers**.³ God is already at work in their lives, preparing them. We get to be like Ananias who **shows up** and **helps them along** their journey. *Jesus loves to save the least likely of disciples through us.*

Romans 10:13-15 (NIV)

13 for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

14 How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?

15 And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

Pastor Jonathan Romig preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above, which includes endnotes and references, or share it through Apple podcasts or Google Play Music. Read the story of our church here.

Discussion Questions

1. Who is the least likely person you know who would ever become a Christian? Why do you think that?
2. How should you begin praying for that person?
3. When might the Lord provide an opportunity for you to share Christ with them?
4. What about Saul/Paul's story is encouraging?
5. What about Ananias's story is convicting?
6. What about Nabeel's story is motivating?
7. What are you going to do next?

¹ Wright, N. T.. *Paul* (p. 35). HarperOne. Kindle Edition.

² Nabeel Qureshi “Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus” Ahmadi Muslim converts to Christianity. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NGJzkm8lZjU> Published Feb 24, 2014. Accessed July 16, 2020.

³ Heard this phrase on the Holy Post podcast.