

Mission Possible

A Jesus Encounter: Saul to Paul

Acts 9:1-19 NIV84

Jeremiah 29:10,11 NIV

“This is what the Lord says: ‘When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’”

God has promised a future and a hope for every one of us. It might be difficult now, but God has *plans* for us - *a future and a hope for us* - and we need to lean toward that and wake up every morning *expecting* it. The apostle Paul knew these verses. He was trained at the highest level as a Pharisee and became a zealot, believing that God’s will was to stop the Christians from being disobedient to the Law and from bringing in their new teachings about the Messiah.

Paul got permission from the Jewish high priest to hunt down Christians and throw them into prison, and the Bible says he also consented to the stoning of Stephen. In spite of that, God had a plan for Paul, and, no matter how bad it’s been for *us* - whatever choices we’ve made, or things we’ve done - God has a plan, a future, a hope, and a destiny for us as well. His desire for us is that we have good success as we endeavor to glorify and honor him.

Many people believe that they’ve done so much bad and made so many mistakes, that there’s no way God would have them back or restore them - but that’s a lie from the pit of hell. Grace is God’s power, strength, ability, authority, and favor for us to do what we cannot in and of ourselves do. In the Old Testament, the original Hebrew word for *grace* literally means “home” or “dwelling place”.

Paul, as a Jewish person, would have understood grace to be an invitation to come back home to the original ideal of the Garden of Eden - a return to what we were always intended to become. If we are stepping into the grace of God for our life, we’re actually accepting an invitation for a return to the way God always designed us to be before the Fall. And now, after the Resurrection, we’re called to live an Eden-kind of life. That’s God heart for us and that’s what Paul got a taste of.

Acts 9:1,2 NIV84 - Saul's Conversion

"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."

When we step into Christ, we're saying, *"I want that!"* and we experience his presence - his Holy Spirit living and dwelling in us and working *through* us - and we experience real *peace* for the first time - *shalom* - "nothing missing or broken even in the midst of pain and trials." Paul was persecuting Christians and many died for their faith as a result. He thought he was doing it for God's glory.

Acts 9:3-6 NIV84

"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 [chase to overtake and bring down] 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.'"

Everything about Paul's life just got changed in a second. Sometimes we think we're so bad - that we've messed up *so much*. We've got memories and traumas - things in our past - where we made the wrong decision - regrets and chains that tether us to our past. The enemy tells us that we're too far gone - that we really can't be used to make a difference - that we're soiled, tainted, and spoiled, and we're of no use to God anymore.

Then we become *religious*, and grow distant from our relationship with a living Lord. Then we don't feel quite good enough to be in the club - to really be in the circle and be close. James 4:8, that says if we'll draw near to God then he will draw to us, is too good for us - that it's for "good" Christians, and we're not one of *them*.

When we align ourselves with thoughts like those, we're literally making a contract with the enemy - shaking hands with the devil and saying, *"Yeah, you're right - I'm not worthy. I'll never be good enough. I'm tainted and I don't have what it takes, and I'll never really amount to anything. My voice really doesn't matter and no one really cares."* Then, we wonder why we feel so *bad* all the time. We wonder why people around us get excited during worship and raise their hands and say, *"Amen."*

How can people be so excited about God? It's because they accepted the truth that Jesus really *does* redeem and restore, and that God's grace isn't greasy or slippery - or easy. No, his grace actually brings us *home* and restores us to our original condition, and we celebrate that - the beauty of restoration and grace wherever it's at work.

We can break those agreements that we've made with what we thought was our *mind*, but in reality was a demonic insertion into our brain - intrusive demonic thoughts that say we'll never make it - we'll never be good enough - we'll never be as excited as *they* are - we'll never be like them. But we continue to go to church and do nice things, and get just enough of God to get *inoculated* - and now we're just numb.

But God wants us to know that we're *redeemable, retrievable, renewable* - that we can be *renovated*, and that we can go *home* and be back in the *original condition*. We might walk with a limp and have some scars, but we'll be honest about our past.

Acts 9:7-11 NIV84

"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. In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. 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.'"

Saul was praying, *"Lord, where did I go wrong? I thought I was doing the right thing."*

Acts 9:12-14 NIV84

" 'In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.' '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.'"

Ananias had to let go of playing it safe - let go of his fear of *breaking* something. We can be so afraid as Christians, of taking a step and making a mistake, that we don't *do anything*. John Maxwell wrote in his book *Failing Forward*, *"If we are failing but gaining ground as we do, then we're really not failing - we're learning."*

We need to *learn* some things - we need to get back in the public square and let our voices be heard and quit worrying if it's going to hurt somebody's feelings. We need to be beyond that right now, move the needle, and *do something* - speak up and speak out for Truth, justice, and righteousness. One of the harshest lists in the Bible is found in Revelation 21, and the first thing on the list of people who go into the lake of fire is "cowards".

We are God's chosen instruments and we don't even know it, because we drifted into *religion* instead of *relationship* with God who is living and alive. We're afraid of breaking things and we don't have what it takes and we've made "agreements". But we can *break* those agreements and get back on track and become the world-changers that we were called to be. We were made for *more*.

Acts 9:15-17 NIV84

"But the Lord said to Ananias, '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.' 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.' "

Ananias *had* to be nervous, but the call to follow God and to make a difference doesn't mean we won't be scared or nervous or that we have it all figured out, but it's not about *us*, anyway.

Acts 9:18,19 NIV84

"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. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus."

There are things that cover our eyes in this world. Sometimes it's pain, or trauma, or suffering - something getting *triggered* in us. These are scales covering our eyes and we can't see. We're trying to go about doing life, but we're fumbling around like a person in the dark, and we're wondering why nothing's working right. It could be we have great scales on our eyes that need to come off.

Proverbs 19:21 NIV

"Many are the plans in a person's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails."

God allowed us to be birthed onto this planet because there's a plan for our life. We're not here by an accident, even if they called us that. We weren't a mistake or unwanted, even if we were told that we were. God has a purpose and a plan. It's *his* purpose that prevails, and the day we accept that as Truth for our life is the day we change. Nothing will be able to stop us after that.

We need to accept by faith that it's the *Lord's* purpose that prevails, and that no matter how many things come along that try to de-rail us from the plan and off the track - that it's his plans that matter, not ours anyway. Maybe we need to re-evaluate our own plans. Maybe the Lord wants to re-route us right now into something that's more in alignment with *him*.

Psalm 37:23 NLT

"The Lord directs the steps of the godly. He delights in every detail of their lives."

The Lord is calling out the steps to our life, but we have to be *listening* to what he's saying.

Jeremiah 29:11 ESV

"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope."

He's talking about us - every person here. *Our* steps are ordered by the Lord. He's delighting in the details of *our* life. He has plans for welfare - not for evil - to give us a future and a hope. *If God is for us who can be against us? Trust in the truth - rest in it ...and then act on it.*

Prayer

Father, we thank You for your Word. Lord, we know that You have plans for our life. Show us whether we've accepted Your plans for our life or if we're only doing our own thing and making our own way. Lord, by faith we submit our plans to Yours and we turn over our will to You.

In Jesus' name. Amen