



CHURCH of
the SAVIOUR

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“Better Call Saul”

June 19, 2022

Acts 9:1-9

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In season two of the AMC television drama series *Breaking Bad*, the protagonists find themselves in need of a lawyer. It's no wonder, because they're making and selling illegal methamphetamines. The attorney they hire is named Saul Goodman, a character originally written into the show for comic relief, but who became so popular that his role led to a spinoff series called *Better Call Saul*. Saul is a brilliant and gifted lawyer. He is creative, insightful, and innovative. He's also dishonest, unscrupulous, and self-serving. His television commercials are flashy and obnoxious. His office is in a strip mall, with an inflatable Statue of Liberty above the door. His desk is backdropped by a giant copy of the U.S. Constitution. Nothing in his appearance or his demeanor indicates someone who can be trusted. Despite this, Saul turns out to be highly reliable and beneficial to his clients. At least most of the time.

In one of the earliest scenes in which he appears, we get a window into the kind of person he is as the main characters argue while sitting in a car in front of Saul's office. Walt wants to hire a “real” attorney. Jesse insists that when the going gets tough, “You don't want a criminal lawyer. You want a CRIMINAL lawyer.

Over the remaining three seasons of the show, we see flashes of conscience and positive instincts in Saul, though not consistently or often enough to redeem his character. It doesn't turn out so well for Saul in the end; his schemes don't pay off. And despite many nudges, he is never able to turn from the path he has chosen to follow the straight and narrow.

In the seventh chapter of the Christian New Testament book of Acts, we encounter a different Saul, but one similarly flawed. He first appears at the conclusion of the story of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, lynched by an angry mob for daring to prophesy about the Holy Spirit and declare that Jesus was the Son of God. Saul is in the thick of it, standing as a witness to the murder and approving of the act, not soiling his own hands but holding the coats of those who commit the violence. *That* Saul was the fixer, the strong man behind the plot to eradicate the followers of Jesus. He led a band of ruffians to invade the houses of early Christians, dragging them out of their homes and locking them in prison...or worse.

Ironically, Saul's actions only made his job more complicated. His aggressive persecution drove many of the disciples out of Jerusalem and into the surrounding region, where they continued to proclaim salvation through Christ and spread the Gospel, growing the movement.

Saul, “still breathing threats and murder against the disciples,” asked for a writ from the religious authorities in Jerusalem to pursue the followers of Jesus into Syria and bring them back to face persecution. Saul was the kind of guy you wanted if you needed a dirty deed done. He was ruthless, resourceful, and relentless in his eagerness to rid the world of those Christian troublemakers. If you were a synagogue leader in the first century and your comfortable, established order was being disrupted by followers of Jesus proclaiming the Risen Christ, you'd Better Call Saul.

But while he was on his way to Damascus, Saul was overcome by a blinding light from the heavens and a thundering voice: “Saul, Saul, why are you harassing me?” He fell to the ground, stunned, and called out, “Who are you?”

“I am Jesus, the one you are harassing. Now get up and go into the city. You will be told what to do.”

The thugs traveling with Saul heard the voice but saw no one. Nor did Saul, since the flash of light had stricken him blind. They led him into the city to await further instructions. At the same time, Jesus appeared in a vision to a follower named Ananias. He told him where to find Saul, to go to him and lay hands on him while he prayed so his sight would be restored.

Ananias wasn't too keen on the plan. Everyone in the whole region knew Saul's reputation, and they were fearful for their lives and their livelihood. But Ananias faithfully obeyed and went to Saul. While he prayed, the Holy Spirit came upon him and something like scales fell from Saul's eyes so that he could see. Ananias baptized him, and Saul became Paul.

The rest of the disciples in Damascus were even less excited than Ananias had been after his vision. But God had big plans for him. The very qualities that made Saul such a formidable enemy of the church became the church's greatest asset. His tenacity and drive led him to plant churches throughout the Mediterranean basin and spread the Gospel to the ends of the known earth.

God has a way of using unlikely characters to accomplish God's work. Abraham was a liar. Rebekah was conniving. Jacob was a trickster. Joseph was an insufferable brat. Moses was a murderer. Rahab was a Canaanite prostitute. David was a runt turned hero, a king turned lazy and corrupt, an adulterer and murderer turned contrite. Mary was a poor teenager pregnant out of wedlock. The disciples were misfits and nobodies. And Saul was the greatest enemy of the church before becoming its chief evangelist. As we follow the story of the followers of Jesus throughout history, we see this theme played out over and over again. God uses those we least expect to accomplish God's biggest plans.

Compared to some of these forerunners in the faith, our reasons for staying on the sidelines seem pretty flimsy. "I'm nobody special." "I'm not all that religious." "Who am I to lead a small group or teach kids about the Bible?" "Maybe I'll get around to doing mission when I'm not so busy." "I have too many shadows in my past (or in my present) to go into ministry."

The same malady often afflicts those of us who have followed a call to be pastors. We too often settle for safe, predictable church life instead of the daring, subversive Gospel Jesus died and rose for. It's easier to stick to programs and administration than to initiate life-changing mission in our communities. It's less disruptive to play chaplain to a status quo culture than to risk breaking up our comfortable status. It's simpler to work up an interesting – or (more likely) boring – sermon about what the Bible *might* mean than it is to proclaim a prophetic word from God to congregants conditioned to low expectations. Bishop Will Willimon says "I got nothing out of that sermon' is easier for preachers to deal with than, "Best sermon you ever preached. Thanks for giving me the guts to quit my job, sell the pickup, learn Spanish, and move to Honduras as a missionary."¹

Who are we to say who God can or cannot call, what God can and cannot use? Maybe your questions about the faith are just the catalyst needed to bring others together for a small group to wrestle with those questions...and others. Maybe the poetry you dabble with in your personal journal is the gift that can unlock prayer for the people around you. Maybe your battle with addiction is exactly what qualifies you to share your faith with people struggling through recovery. Maybe God has been waiting for you to turn over the pain you've carried around for years so you can finally experience resurrection hope and help others find it, too.

Is it possible that you're not *really* too busy, too stressed, too tired, too old, too young, too qualified, not qualified enough to offer yourself to God's purposes for your church, your neighborhood, your community? What if those things are just excuses we make to let ourselves off the hook for not saying yes to the invitation God has been extending to us? The very thing that's holding you back may just be the very thing God wants to use to make a difference.

Part of me wishes that Vince Gilligan and Peter Gould had written a conversion story for Saul Goodman, that he had seen the light and become an advocate for better pay for teachers or better resources for those living with cancer. I recognize that it would have changed completely the tenor of the show, making it more inspirational than entertaining. And they probably thought it would render the plot less believable. Who could blame them? Though stories like the Damascus Road encounter are common in the Bible, they're harder to find in real life. Or maybe that's just because we don't know where to look for them.

After the Damascus Road, the qualities that made Saul the archenemy of the church made Paul its chief evangelist. That doesn't mean that offering yourself to Christian service will lead to missionary journeys across the globe and your letters being canonized as sacred text. We're not all called to that kind of world-altering impact. And not many of us will experience God's revelation through a stunning physical or spiritual encounter. But if God can call the likes of Saul, why not you? There's a danger in lifting up examples of dramatic conversion stories like this one; we might feel that we're lacking something in our faith if we don't see a flash of light or hear the thundering voice of Jesus. The truth is that most of us never experience something that sensational, and that's okay. Elijah found God in the silence. Sometimes it's as simple as taking the first step.

Saying yes to God doesn't mean your whole life will change. It's more likely that God will open one door, then another, then another. Middle management in the kingdom of God is still a pretty important job. But then again, who am I to say? Keep that Spanish dictionary handy. You never know when lightning might strike.

¹ William H. Willimon. "Anybody Listening?" from Will Willimon: Musings from an Accidental Preacher. Email message. June 8, 2022.