**Title: Crooked Ways Made Straight** // NOTE additional liturgical elements are at the end of this manuscript

**Main Text: Acts 9:1-20, Supplemental Texts: Galatians 1:11-16**

**By: Melissa Burmaster, Campus Pastor University of Waterloo & Laurier**

Location: Waterloo CRC (May 25)

You can listen / download - audio at this location <http://blog.waterloocrc.org/2025/05/2025-05-25-crooked-ways-made-straight.html> \*\* This was fun >> my pages were out of order at one point in this sermon 🙂

The text Acts 9:1-20 has been read.

In the story of Saul (who becomes Paul), no one would have thought he would go from **persecutor** to – **follower and promoter of Jesus Christ** in just three days - that was so unexpected. Yet God shows us that no one is beyond his reach of his grace and his forgiveness. **In this world, there are so many around us who do not know Jesus and his amazing love, they have no idea that he is so good -** we can know from Saul’s story that ***there are no crooked ways of thinking or living in relationship to Jesus that can’t be set straight.***

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| LET’S TALK PAUL FOR A MOMENT |

For those of us who have been following Jesus for a long time, we don’t think much of Paul’s life being SAUL because after the conversion to Christianity - there is just so much about him going on in the New Testament scriptures. Paul is the bringer of the gospel to the Gentiles**.** He goes on three missionary journeys to share the message of Jesus most everywhere. **He endures** opposition, hardships and trials among those journeys. **He writes** pastoral letters showing he genuinely cares about those he evangelized. He is a man of character who speaks truth and sets the bar high – yet he ALSO recognizes the thorns in his flesh. He gives us sound theology**,** evident from his writing of Romans. He roots the gospel message in the Jewish tradition**.*****If his conversion wasn’t so dramatic, we wouldn’t give much thought to his life before he was converted****.* Today’s passage reacquaints us with Saul in a **very** not nice period of his life.

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| LET’S TALK - TROUBLE with Saul - persecutor of Jesus & his followers |

Coming up to Acts Chapter 9, Saul is part of a growing movement against the disciples of Jesus, or a group called THE WAY. Persecution AND Saul’s participation in persecution of followers is on the rise over the last four chapters in ACTS which we will trace to develop Saul’s character for you. In Acts 5, a Jewish leader Gamaliel convinces the whole Sanhedrin (council of jewish leaders in Jerusalem) to give the apostles of Jesus a warning and flogging and send them away. Shifting to Acts 7, the persecution standards intensify in the scenario with Stephen versus the Sanhedrin. Stephen is stoned to death for speaking for Jesus and against Judaism. Scriptures there note in that scene, Saul is on the scene and he is looking on at the stoning with approval.

The next thing that happens in Acts 8 which tells us that Saul has taken it upon himself to destroy the church. He hauling men and women by going house to house to bring people before the Sanhedrin and put them into jail (Acts 8:3). Saul is very ambitious in the context of Jerusalem to see that those who are following Jesus are dealt with.

Then we land into ACTS 9, Saul has escalated this mission even further by being ready to persecute followers of the WAY **wherever they may be found**. As he walks away from Jerusalem, he has a letter obtained in hand as he goes to Damacus. It gives Saul the permission to haul Christians into the synagogue in Damascus to question and deal with them as necessary -- prison would be a good place to start. At this point, he won’t let anything delay him from this mission to destroy the church.

We can observe from a distance the condition or who and what Saul has become. He has great pride in his knowledge of Judaism. He has gained a position of influence enough to get documents from the right people. He has the power to persecute wherever he lands. He is extremely intentional - it doesn’t matter if people are publicly acting or privately acting in their homes, Saul will find them and deal with them. His level of determination is high - he is ready, able and willing to persecute at will.

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| LET’S TALK – OUR WORLD - persecution still happens today - example |

Even though we are living in an age of tolerance in the Western world, the persecution of people for many different reasons has not gone by the wayside.

***Persecution -*** to act to harass or punish in a manner designed to injure, grieve, or afflict especially those who differ in origin, religion, or social outlook, *specifically* **:** to cause to suffer because of belief.

It is hard not to make a connection with situations south of our border as an example. In the issue of the deportation of Venezuelans , a few weeks ago Trump had been said to have taken the Alien Enemies act a step too far by a supreme court. There have been gang related activities to which Venezuelans have been a part. For Venezuelans that were made eligible for protection under Biden’s admin, an article that I was perusing said that a, “…the court properly ruled that the president lacks authority simply to declare that there's been an invasion of the U.S. and then invoke an 18th century wartime authority during peacetime.[[1]](#footnote-1)” Just days ago, the Trump administration got the green light on revoking legal protection on these immigrants. One lawyer has been quoted by NBC stating “This is the largest single action stripping any group of non-citizens of immigration status in modern US history.[[2]](#footnote-2) There is so much adrenaline flowing in this issue, and it is so emotionally charged. As leaders and individuals act based on position, pride and power there is bound to be some crooked outcomes and will it get sorted out in a way that is straight ever???

But, it is not just high level leaders that are susceptible behaviours, maybe not to the extreme of persecution but discrimination. In discrimination, there is not a physical harm attached but judgements occur with prejudice or prejudicial outlook. We can all find ourselves on a learning curve with discrimination because we don’t usually see it in ourselves -- until we do! Our own layers of pride, power, privilege and position can set us down a path of treating others less than they deserve. In my opinion and maybe you might share it too, persecution (and discrimination) which occurs as a repeated action, ***not a one time misjudgement scenario***, constitutes an especially crooked way of living and being -- especially crooked because ***we understand the concept of Imago Dei*** – that each one of us is made in God’s image. Persecution and discrimination has no place, and those are some crooked ways that need to be made straight.

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| LET’S TALK – FINDING HOPE |

As Saul is walking down the road to Damascus with his agenda in hand, many of his crooked ways are about to be made straight by the grace of God.

In the light flashing all around and a voice from heaven speaks to set straight the idea that Jesus is deity, he is Lord. The bright light from heaven flashed and Saul sank to the ground, overcome --- a voice said to him **“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”**

This call out to Saul is done as a way to establish that the Lord is speaking. Knowing the scriptures, Saul would know this is how it happened to Abraham when he is just about to cut his son in two on the altar - the Lord says “Abraham, Abraham…, Here I am Lord”(Gen 22:11-12). It was how it happens to Jacob when he goes to Egypt during the famine “Jacob, Jacob,...Here I am Lord (Gen 46:2-3). It happens to Moses at the burning bush, “Moses, Moses,... Here I am (Ex 3:4). It happened to Samuel when he served under Eli, “Samuel, Samuel,... Speak Lord”. **So, this double name call to Saul is meant to let him know right off the bat that the Lord is speaking to him in this vision.**

At the same time, Saul has to be very confused why the Lord would be asking him about persecution. He is not aware of persecuting the Lord after all. Seeking clarification, Saul asks “**Who are you, Lord?**” (verse 9).... Then voice speaking to him says, “**I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting**” (verse 5). This exchange here, is a very concise and a memorable link of thoughts for Saul to hang on to. In a nutshell, just as the Lord that spoke to Abraham, to Jacob, to Moses and to Samuel, the Lord is speaking to SAUL – AND at the very same time that the Lord is identifying himself as Jesus. ***There is no way*** that Paul is to walk away from this without thinking that Jesus is a deity, that he is Lord. His crooked ways of thinking of Jesus are to be set straight – namely that **Jesus is Lord**.

**At the same point, Saul’s fall to the ground,** shows us crooked ways being made straight related to his pride, his power and his position are being shattered. Saul falls to his knees with the bright light flashing around him. It exposes him in every way, as an x-ray exposes bones, but way more intense than that. **In the Greek, the word for fall is Piptos** – it has a spiritual meaning of falling under the weight of one’s sin. In that ***more than*** x-ray light – Saul is humbled and his motives are being examined and he is convicted at every level.

As the light vanishes, Paul finds himself completely blind. He is then led down the road as if he were a child, an invalid…. To a house on Straight Street (how interesting!!!). He sits in a condition of blindness for three days – he is not eating, not drinking. This is a sign that he is percolating about his posture and persecution. This KIND OF FASTING is from the Jewish tradition and is usually a work of repentance used to seek out understanding from the Lord. This part of the story shows us that Paul was ***once confident, proud and up and comer in Judaism*** being thoroughly humbled. Saul’s crooked ways are being cracked under the bright lights and the ensuing blindness.

**As the Lord sends Ananias to help, Saul’s crooked ways of thinking about deity (including God and Jesus) are reconfigured yet again!!!** Ananias arrives to help Saul because the Lord recruits him in a [vision.](http://vision.it/) Just to follow the story, Ananias makes no bones about saying to the Lord that he does want to go because of Saul’s reputation for arresting all who call on Jesus’ name. In obedience, Ananias does go.

When he sees Saul, immediately, he calls him ***Brother Saul***, …it is as if he already belongs in the family – the time of fasting has already done good work in his heart??? From there he says “the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road sent me that you may be healed and be filled with the Holy Spirit” As he lays his hands on him, “immediately” scales fall from Saul’s eyes. The word “immediately” which is in the text makes this all a very concretely bundle -- the healing and the holy spirit are tied together, which being tied to Jesus which is tied to God the Father too. Paul has a Trinitarian experience right here with the whole God-head – that is a complete reworking of his ways of thinking of God in a short amount of time.

**Over and above this all though, there is the manner in which this is all done!** It is remarkable that God chose to make enemy number one **his chosen instrument**. God takes the crookedest man into his fold – to be the ONE to speak to Gentiles, to kings and the other peoples of Israel. Why not someone with a cleaner record, I don’t know – but God does do anything arbitrarily – it is all purpose filled. God’s action to chose Saul (in the GREEK -- chose = **eklogé** phonetic pronunciation - ek-log-ay) which means to take him “out from” and “to” a particular work. **Eklogé** as a Greek word has a spiritual sense that underscores that this choosing action is a work of God’s grace and initiative directed towards his people. That it is a work of grace is further confirmed by the name of the one who does the healing. Ananias’ name means “*the Lord is gracious*”. **You see the overworking of Saul’s crooked ways is being done in a manner of grace!**

Paul gets it! In this encounter there is a genuine transformation which Paul knows as a work of GRACE, it is ALL GRACE! We see him write about that when he writes about his conversion in his words to Galatians chapter 1:15-16 *But when God, who set me apart from my mother’s womb and called me* ***by his grace,*** *was* ***pleased to reveal his Son*** *in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles,…*

He knows he has been called by grace at that moment. Yes, Paul had many crooked ways of thinking and living in the being outside of knowing Jesus, but his life transformation tells us **there isn’t a crooked way that God’s grace doesn’t make straight**.

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| LET’S TALK -- HOPE FOR THE WORLD |

Paul’s ways with his pride, his posture towards others and his powerful methods of working were straightened out, but what about for us? It happens in our lives when we get misaligned with Jesus from time to time. I will share a couple examples arising from Campus Ministry - but then we will consider options to open ourselves and others up to a Damascus Road experience for ourselves.

With permission, I shared about a graduating student friend, JD who was raised culturally Christian. JD was raised in the Catholic church in his youth in India. At some point he moved to Canada in his middle school years. He has not been attending church very often with his family. Over the course of his involvement with Fiction Fantasy and Faith on Tuesdays, Table Talk Thursdays and he joined in on our New Testament in 40 Days in the Winter. He came to realise that while he was living a Christian moral ethical life and was convinced of the teachings of Jesus. Yet, it seems burdensome. In the group, other Christians in the group didn’t talk like their faith was a burden to them. He has realized that just because he didn’t have a dramatic experience (like Paul) - doesn’t mean that his own faith to believe in Jesus day by day isn’t genuine. JD has begun to rework his thoughts of faith in these ways. His next steps are looking for a church in Mississauga. Please pray for JD to continue on the way that the Holy Spirit is leading so that he may know Jesus as Lord and Saviour more deeply.

While on campus, I am coming into *contact with Muslim students and of course - it is a real challenge to talk about Jesus when their position is SO so different to us.* I took the initiative to read **Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus**, by Nabeel Qureshi to expand my understanding of Muslims and what it might mean for them to accept Jesus like we do. What I learned is that as a Muslim, Nabeel was taught three things about Jesus - 1. that Jesus did not die; 2. Jesus was not a deity; 3. Jesus did not rise from the dead. David, a friend in his US college years, demonstrated historical facts that counter those ideas of Jesus. Through Nabeel’s own research and his friend David, he came to believe there was a strong case for Christianity. Nabeel was still struggling with the truth, so he prayed for a dream in which God could speak to him ( …Nabeel explained that Muslims ask for dreams to hear from God).

Eventually he has a dream where Nabeel saw a narrow door leading to a feast which looked to be like heaven. His friend who had been witnessing to him about Jesus was in the room at the table. Seeing Nabeel at the doorway he remarked to him “... you haven’t accepted the invitation!” Nabeel awoke and sought out his friend David who told him to read Luke 13. When he saw the title for the section of Luke 13 “the Narrow Door” and read the story, …he knew God was clearly speaking to him and inviting him to believe in Jesus as Lord and accept he had died and he rose again. You see, God took Nabeel’s misunderstandings of Jesus, and set them straight.

What about for our friends, family or you who might be drifting -- what might bring on a Damascus Road experience.

**If you or someone you know does not believe in Jesus as Lord, I say to you – pray!** For some, they may feel that Jesus hasn’t really revealed himself to them very clearly. Busy lives can make spiritual senses grow dull. So - *Pray for them to seek to know for themselves whether or not Christ is Lord*. The Lord says *You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.*Jeremiah 29:13

**If you or a person you know is stumbling along in the dark, wandering on a Damascus Road with blindness** – there might be blindness because of discouragement, disillusionment with the church, mental illness, physical illnesses or relational conflicts. There may be blindness from having very opposite conditions of prosperity or absolute satiation. They want for nothing and can’t imagine there is something more to find in life. If this is the case, then I say to you – PRAY! that the Lord would be gracious to them, to give them ears to hear a messenger of hope & truth.

**If you or someone you know -- knows about Jesus but something feels amiss in the experience** – this could look like having enthusiasm sometimes and then not, reading the bible sometimes and not, …drifting, dabbling but never going far with anything regarding God, Jesus or the church.

If you/they have already been baptized, there could be something sabotaging the Spirit’s work in their life - a sin that holds one back, a disbelief can hold someone back -- . Talking to a pastor can sort some of that out and allow the Holy Spirit to flow in your innermost being.

If you/they are not baptized, well perhaps the Lord IS asking you? And then, what are you waiting for? Jesus is truly awesome - because there is nothing, absolutely nothing like being in a restored relationship with God the Father through Jesus the Son and experiencing the filling of the Holy Spirit in your life. Talk with an elder, or with me about taking next steps to be in a right relationship with God through Christ. May the Holy Spirit winds renew, revitalize or make new anyone’s faith that has been struggling!

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| CONCLUSION |

All who seek him, even those who don’t, even those who are the worst persecutors of can have a transformative experience with Jesus because the Lord is gracious. The story of Saul’s conversion is one that gives hope for all of us – a major persecutor of people transformed in three days to believe that Jesus is Lord. There is no doubt that God can do that for any situation, any system and any person if he could do it with Paul. Regardless of the crooked ways that might result in our living and being, there is nothing so crooked that God’s grace can’t set straight. Thanks be to God for this good news.

**Closing Prayer**

*\*\*includes slight adaptation to Isaiah 40:30-5*

*Thank you for the hope we have from the life transformation of Saul found in scriptures today.*

*May the way of the LORD be prepared in this world, make straight in the desert to our and others souls, a direct highway to our God. May every valley be exalted and every mountain and hill brought low; May crooked places be made straight and the rough places smooth;*

*That the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, so that WE MAY ALL see it together. Amen*

*Lord, keep us from forming pride, defending positions and using power in harmful ways with others. There are many ways that are rough in our world and still rough within us,… they are not beyond your capacity. May we join with Isaiah in calling out in our world and to our own souls -*

**Additional Liturgical components**

**God’s Greeting Peace of Christ**

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
 the love of God,  
 and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit  
 be with you  
 **and also with you.**

**Prayer of Illumination:**

O Lord, your Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Give us grace to receive your truth in faith and love, and strength to follow on the path you set before us; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

**We are reading from ACTS 9:1-20**

**Saul’s Conversion**

**9** Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest **2** 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. **3** 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?”

**5** “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked.

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. **6** “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

**7** The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. **8** 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. **9** For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

**10** In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, “Ananias!”

“Yes, Lord,” he answered.

**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.”

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

**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.

**Saul in Damascus and Jerusalem**

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. **20** At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.

**THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD**

**Closing Prayer** *Slight adaptation, Isaiah 40:30-5*

*Thank you for the hope we have from the life transformation of Saul found in scriptures today.*

*Lord, keep us from forming pride, defending positions and using power in harmful ways with others. There are many ways that are rough in our world and still rough within us,… they are not beyond your capacity. May we join with Isaiah in calling out in our world and to our own souls --*

*May the way of the LORD be prepared in this world, make straight in the desert to our and others souls, a direct highway to our God. May every valley be exalted and every mountain and hill brought low; May crooked places be made straight and the rough places smooth;*

*That the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, so that WE MAY ALL see it together. Amen*

**Closing Blessing - Numbers 6**

The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.

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1. https://abcnews.go.com/US/judge-blocks-alien-enemies-act-deport-venezuelans-texas/story?id=121364022 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/supreme-court/supreme-court-allows-trump-revoke-protected-status-thousands-venezuela-rcna205657 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)