



Aloha, everyone. Today we continue our four-part study from the Book of Acts as part of our Fresh Wind sermon series and small group study. This series marks the midpoint of our two-year Raise the Sails generosity journey. We are spending four weeks, reflecting on how God’s generosity towards us impacts the way we can be generous toward others and serve God in His mission in the world.

Today we look at a scene where God was wildly generous with His grace, love, and compassion to one of the fiercest enemies of the early church.

Let’s face it we are in a week where the words grace, love, and compassion feel in short supply. I’m filming this just two days after the election, so there may arise all kinds of things between now and Sunday when you watch this that I may not reference in this sermon. However, for all that may happen between today and Sunday, one thing is for certain, whoever wins the election, you can be sure there will be a host of emotions felt and words spoken, and actions taken that will fuel hate instead of hope.

And this is why it is a crucial time for the church to reflect on how we, as Christians, can change that. As pastor and podcaster, Carey Nieuwhof recently wrote: “Hope counters hate better than hate counters hate. And hope is what the church at its best has to offer. Not hope in a candidate. Not hope in a political party. Hope in Christ, someone in the world who also transcends the world.”

As I have read and listened to many reporters, pundits, politicians, and even preachers over these weeks, it seems as if hope is pinned to a candidate, or a political party, or a set of policies rather than to our God.

And when hope is sought in the wrong source, it often sets the stage for things like fear, hate, and hopelessness.

As one writer put it recently: “The 2020 vote is taking place with the country in a historically dark mood, low on hope, running on spiritual empty, convinced that the wrong outcome will bring disaster... and the result is pervasive mistrust, a sense that the world’s most powerful nation can no longer come together in common cause.” Marc Fisher.

This is why I want us to reflect on a tremendous story of hope that occurred in a time when the issues of division, fear, and rage threatened the early church. It’s a story of how a man who was shot through with hate found hope through Jesus Christ, and it is a story of a Christian whose fears were transformed into a gracious act of faith. That act of faith helped changed the trajectory of the church forever.

The Christian in our story today is a man named Ananias. The other man is a Jewish pharisee named Saul. Saul also had a Roman name; it was Paul. Of course, I’m referring to Paul the Apostle. However, as our story will show, many years before he was Paul the Apostle, he was Saul the Slayer.

Let me give some context to our passage and these two remarkable men. In Acts chapters seven and eight, a few years after the resurrection of Jesus, we see that a devoted Christian named Stephen became the first martyr of the new church. He was stoned to death by a zealous mob—no trial, no jury - just murder.

This is where we first see Saul, or Paul, in the scriptures.

Let's pick up the story here at this point in Acts 8:1-3: *"On that day (the day Stephen got killed) a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison."*

So, we see that the death of Stephen kick-started something dreadful in Saul. One dead Christian felt good; killing more would be better. At this time, Saul was a Jewish Pharisee, a deeply religious man whose devotion to God didn't leave a whole lot of room for grace. In fact, his religious devotion was so full of anger and hostility he became very active in 'destroying' the church of Christ.

The word 'destroy' here (in the original Greek language of the New Testament) means to ravage, to annihilate. It's a word that expresses a brutal and even sadistic cruelty. Moreover, Saul is so zealous about this that he literally goes house to house, dragging men and even women out of their homes to put them in prison, or even worse, put them to death.

Think about that for a second. Can you picture the scene of women being pulled from their homes and dragged off to prison? Think of their children or their older parents screaming in fear and panic as this took place all because of Saul. In fact, Saul not only put innocent and godly people in prison, but he beat them and had some put to death.

Later in the book of Acts, when Saul is now Paul, the apostle, he recounts what he did before becoming a Christian. He said this Acts 22:19: *"I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and repeatedly beat those who believe in (Jesus)."*

The word 'beat' implies whipping someone. Folks, you have to be one hate-filled person to want to whip people repeatedly. And if that included women, wow, that is just blind rage.

Moreover, in Acts 22:10-11: Paul admits this: *"Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them (Christians) punished, and I tried to force them to*

blaspheme. I was so furiously enraged at them, I even hunted them down in foreign cities." The word "enraged" here is to be so furiously angry with someone as to be almost out of one's mind.

I lay out all these details because when you look honestly at Saul, you see an enraged, brutal, and abusive person. If you think Antifa or some Right-wing groups are hostile, you haven't met Saul of Tarsus.

That being said, in Acts chapter nine, God steps in and starts to change the whole picture. Acts 9:1-9 says this: *"In Jerusalem Saul was still threatening the followers of the Lord by saying he would kill them. So, he went to the high priest and asked him to write letters to the synagogues in the city of Damascus. Then if Saul found any followers of Christ's Way, men or women, he would arrest them and bring them back to Jerusalem. 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 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.'

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."

When I read this, I wondered that if I was a Christian in Damascus at that time and I heard about how God caused Saul to be blind, would I have been a bit happy that this evil Saul was finally being punished, that justice was finally being served?

Have you ever felt that way about someone who has treated you poorly? Glad to hear they got fired from their job, or glad their marriage is struggling, or maybe even glad they got sick. Sometimes we feel these things because we see people only through our hurt and anger. We stop seeing some people through the eyes and heart of God. We stop seeing that they are still (even as jerks) sacred, loved, and made in God's

Image – even when they don't act that way. As a result, if we are honest, we don't want them loved or saved or redeemed - we just want them punished!

Look, I don't want to sound naïve. Let's be real. To say that Saul deeply hurt a lot of people is a gross understatement. The guy terrorized people's lives, innocent people. After all, think of the families he ripped apart when he dragged parents out of their house. This is why this story gets a little difficult for me because, as it progresses, God has more plans for Saul than just to punish him. I struggle with how God sees Saul as a man who is more than his sin and violence. Let me be honest; when it comes to violent people, I personally find it really hard to see beyond their actions. And at first, Ananias has that same struggle.

Let's read 9:10-14: *"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. 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.'"*

Now just for a moment, let's pause here and reflect on Ananias. In Acts 22, it says that Ananias was a well-respected and godly Jewish Christian. So I want you to know Ananias is genuinely a really great guy. However, even such a godly man had to make some great changes in his heart in order to bring about God's purposes in the world. At this point, Ananias had only known of Saul in terms of one aspect of reality. Saul was the man who brought 'harm' to Christians and who hunted them down to arrest them, and who beat them and even put some of them to death.

In fact, Ananias is so convinced that Saul is not to be trusted, that he argues a bit with God, Himself about healing Saul. In verses 13-14, Ananias seems to be saying, "God, why would I pray to heal Saul? I don't

think You understand how bad this guy is." In a nutshell, he seems to be resisting God's directives.

Ever do that with God? You read something in His word, or He guides you to do something that seems to contradict your understanding of reality, so you find all kinds of reasons not to obey.

For example, when He says, "Forgive those who have cursed you" – nah. "Bless those who hate you" – uh uh. "Anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell" - Are You kidding me, Jesus? Do You not watch cable news?! Have You never been to Jersey?

Kidding aside, these words are all directives from Christ in the bible. But such words do not seem to make sense in our reality, so permeated with division and rage. Thus, we argue with God. "But God, it's not realistic to love our enemies; they are so horrible. But God, look how Marxist these people are." Or, "But God, look how racist and homophobic those people are. You want me to love them? You want me to pray for them? They are ruining this country!"

Anyone know what I'm talking about? Am I ringing any bells here?

Now to be fair. Ananias' hesitation was totally understandable. It's easy for us to look past just how difficult this moment must have been for Ananias because we have the luxury of knowing the whole story and how it turns out. But you must realize Ananias doesn't know yet if Saul has truly repented. At this point, Ananias only knows that Saul was a raging hater of Christians. So for Ananias to go to Saul would be tantamount to giving himself up to the police. In effect, it would be suicidal.

My point is, Ananias cannot yet see that it was a time to stand in hope instead of fear. His well-justified fears created a sense of hopelessness for any change in a guy like Saul. There couldn't be anything worthwhile in this man because he's nothing but a brute beast all the way through.

I get that because I have done the same.

Back in the day in my high school, you basically had three groups of people: Jocks, Geeks, and people whom we jocks would call, Dirtbags. Yes, that is exactly the moniker we gave them - terrible, I know.

"Dirtbags" were the guys whom we thought were the bullies. They were the guys with leather jackets who smoked two packs of cigarettes a day. Guys who seemed to always be in detention after school.

Well, there was this one guy, I'll call him Bob, who was your typical "dirtbag," or so I thought. If you looked at him, you would see a very large, angry-looking, tough guy. It's like he always had a scowl on his face, like he was always ticked off at people. He was a guy who often got in trouble at school. My point is, I saw him as nothing but a punk all the way through.

One day I was cutting class by hiding out in the school auditorium. While hiding in a place where no one would find me, I suddenly heard someone playing classical music on the grand piano in the auditorium. Even for a rock and roller like me, I'm thinking, wow, that's incredibly beautiful. And of course, I just had to go see who it was.

Well, when I looked, I didn't see someone who looked like Yanni or even a John Legend. You guessed it; I saw Bob. I literally was stunned. I couldn't believe what I was looking at. I would not have imagined in a hundred years that *this* guy could play the piano so beautifully. My fear of and anger toward him built a wall so high between us that I was prohibited from ever discovering the beauty and talent that was in him; from ever discovering there was more to him than his anger and hostility.

You see, when we let fear overshadow our faith, we start living blindly. We can't see what God sees in a person. And as such, it becomes very difficult to value a person the way God does, especially those persons who are diametrically opposed to our values and viewpoints.

And when that happens, we Christians, who are called to be Peace Makers, can inadvertently feed the hate and not hope in our culture. Yes, we must speak our differences and challenge and debate one another

about what we think is best socially and politically for our country. That's how great democracies are created. So don't hear me say we Christians should just shut up and say nothing. But what I am saying is, as Carey Nieuwhof put it, "If you echo the culture, you get more of the culture (not more of the kingdom). Let me say that again, it is worth repeating: If you echo the culture, you get more of the culture (not more of the kingdom).

And if we Christians keep echoing the culture, how do we expect to see God's best arise through us, His people, into our culture? Yes, there are a hundred reasons to be upset about people, but to *God*, people are always more than their politics.

And that's why we need to ask ourselves, do I love my politics more than I love people? Or, to put it another way, can I still love people even when I don't love their politics? Which leads us to the last part of our dramatic story.

So, while Ananias is arguing with God about what kind of guy Saul is, God reveals to Ananias something about Saul that others cannot see.

Let's read on 9:15-19: *"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.' 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."*

Notice a couple of quick things expressed verbally and physically by Ananias. One, he laid hands on Saul to bring God's healing, and he calls Saul 'brother' even before he knew for sure Saul had actually changed.

Look, we must realize something very important here. God could have done all the healing and the calling of Saul by Himself. He doesn't need Ananias to do any of

this. Moreover, Ananias doesn't need to lay hands on Saul or call him brother. He could have prayed from across the room and just say, 'Hey Yo, Saul, be healed! Now go out and serve God.' Or something to that effect. So I think something else is going on here.

Maybe the bigger issue in this whole story is not only Saul's dramatic conversion. Perhaps, and I can only speculate here, perhaps God is setting up for the church a tangible embodiment of what it takes to live out the love and mission of Christ toward those we fear and who are diametrically opposed to our beliefs. Maybe God is laying out for us a very earthly example of how we will see His kingdom come, and His will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Maybe He is laying out for us, in living color, how hope takes root in our hate-filled world.

Make no mistake; this is a very sacred and monumental moment in the church. In fact, it helps change the course of church history for the next 2,000 years. Bottom line, Ananias put his faith in God's words more than he trusted his own fears of Saul, and in so doing, he built hope in a man where there was only hate.

And this is one of the reasons why Ananias is such a great person for we Christians to reflect on in our current cultural situation. He causes me to ask myself, does the passion of my politics (not their passion, but *my* passion) stunt the love and respect and value God calls me to have toward those with differing political stances than mine? Am I even seeking God to help transform my deep disdain for people because of where they stand on the political spectrum or on certain social issues?

Look, I want you to know I struggle with this frequently. Trust me; I can get very upset when I listen to people trying to dominate our culture with viewpoints which are fully contrary to God. I confess sometimes at home after reading some book or article or watching some video about some popular political or social figure, who has voiced things diametrically opposed to God's way, or who is touting things that I think are ruinous to our democracy, I start verbally spouting off, out loud, in my home: "I can't believe these people! What tripe!

Their logic is so flawed I don't know even where to begin to shred that viewpoint!" etc. ad nauseam.

In other words, I start to look and sound more like Saul than like Ananias. It's funny, but if my son is home and he hears me like this, he will come and talk to me and lovingly confront me about my self-righteous rants and remind me in so many words about the way of Ananias.

I tell you all that because I want you to know my becoming Ananias-like is not an easy journey for me. In fact, I'm still in the process. Moreover, I want to be clear that I am not at all saying we Christians should not be involved in politics or political discussions. As pastor Tim Keller likes to point out, to not be political is to accept the status quo, which is never God's agenda.

My issue is the kind of spirit with which we engage politics, the spirit with which we confront and critique ideas and people with whom we disagree, that can move us out from God's heart and God's purposes to that of promoting fear instead of faith, hate instead of hope.

Before I finish, let me quickly share three things which we can begin to incorporate so we personally can build hope where there is so much hate.

First: Confess. Confess where your heart is really at in terms of people; not in terms of political parties or general policies, but in terms of people whom God loves. Confess to God and other trusted Christians any disdain or contempt you may have about particular politicians or people of this political stance or that. As you have heard me say before, we can't overcome what we overlook. So confession can be one of the first steps to our overcoming fear and cynicism.

Second: Cut down on or eliminate completely the streams that feed fear and cynicism in your heart. This is where we have to take brain science and the world of technology very seriously.

Our pop culture, social media, and cable news thrive by pushing hate and fear. Tristan Harris, who has worked long in silicon valley and cofounded the Center for Humane Technology, has argued that major social

media and tech companies have figured out that “Outrage spreads faster than something that’s *not* outrage.”

When that reality is coupled with that fact that our brains are naturally hardwired to take more notice of things that seem to threaten us, things like outrage lead to more clicks and views for those who profit from hate instead of hope.

My point is, as a Christian, be aware and be intentional about not being strung along on such an ungodly journey into more fear and cynicism in our world.

Third: Pause, Pray, and Ponder before you forward that angry email, tweet, or video that adds yet another brick in the wall of hate instead of hope. Be intentional about showing restraint. As *Proverbs 17:27* says: “*The one who has knowledge uses words with restraint, and a person of understanding is even-tempered.*”

Yes, there are many anger-provoking things being said and done in our culture, and what it needs is *not* more of your outrage, but more of your wisdom, your godly wisdom borne of restraint and not knee-jerk opinionating.

So, before you fire off that email or pass on that tweet, ask yourself these two questions: Will people be better off, or worse off, for having read or watched what I want to send? And, is this more likely to create more hope or create more hate in the person to whom I am sending this?

So again, Confess, Cut Down or Eliminate fuel for fear, and Pause, Pray, and Ponder before sending.

There is so much more we can say about this story but we will have to leave it there. Bottom line, folks, we are a church called to be an Ananias in a culture that seems so full of Sauls. When we live into that standard, maybe, just maybe, we will see more Pauls arise in our world instead of Sauls, because we have intentionally forged hope and not hate in our world through Jesus Christ.

So now, let me ask, what is God saying to you? Maybe some of you are feeling a little like Saul and are so full

of anger. I want to pray that God would gently deliver you from such a spirit. Or maybe you have walked long in your life without God and now find your life is more hope-less than hope-filled. I want to invite you to pray with me to give your life to Him today.

Lord, first of all, Lord, we pray for our country that You would bring Your peace to our land. Make us, Your people, instruments of hope, wisdom, and peace for the world You *still* love. As the old prayer says, Lord, where there is hatred, let us sow love. Where there is doubt, let us sow faith. And where there is despair, let us sow hope. Deliver us today from a spirit of anger and fear and form in us the way of Ananias in a world full of Sauls.

For those who of you who want to fully give your life to Jesus today, pray this simple prayer: Lord Jesus, I need You. I confess the hopelessness of my life without You. Forgive me, Lord, for all my sins, and as best as I know how, I commit my life to You. Come and fill me with Your Spirit today. In Your gracious and loving name, we pray these things, Amen!

And now receive this blessing:

May God fill you with a sense of His hope in our troubled time. May you become a person who builds hope where there is hate, faith where there is fear, and confidence where there is confusion. May you have the faith and courage to believe like Ananias that even the worst of us can be transformed into God’s greatest instrument for His kingdom. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

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