

If you have a Bible, why don't you take it and turn to Acts 9. My role tonight is to take this one verse of Scripture and from it, hopefully, to lead us into some prayer. Then Mike Turner is going to come up and lead us through some prayer points tonight. Acts, chapter 9. One verse. What I want you to do as we read this verse is sort of take it and hang it in your mind. Keep it in your mind. Fix it in your mind. Hopefully, by the time we get to the end of what I'm going to say, you might have a little bit more clarity of, "Oh, hey, that's why he chose that verse on the five-year anniversary celebration. That's what he was trying to say."

Maybe if I do a good job, it will make sense, and if I do a half good job, it will make half sense to you. It may not be immediately obvious why I chose this verse, but I hope it becomes that way as we walk through this together. If you've never read the book of Acts...maybe you're a new Christian, maybe you're learning about Christianity...the book of Acts is a great narrative to read. I would encourage you if you're looking for a book in the Bible to read, maybe don't start in Genesis. For sure, don't start in Leviticus. Maybe the book of Acts would be a great place for you to start, and maybe even you'll read Luke who wrote it. He also wrote a gospel called the gospel of Luke which should be in your Bible. If it's not in your Bible, go get a new one.

The gospel of Luke. At the end of his account in the gospel of Luke, you'll find the crucifixion account of Jesus and the resurrection. The book of Acts was meant to be read with the gospel of Luke, because the book of Acts is essentially Luke writing down and recording, "Here's what happened after the resurrection. Here's what happened after Jesus Christ got up from the dead, validating and vindicating he was God in the flesh, that he had power even over death, and that he poured his Spirit out in his church, and as he did that the church of Jesus Christ began to grow and flourish." The book of Acts is Luke recording that story and how that happened.

If you have read it, you'll know, or maybe you'll know, that all throughout the book of Acts, Luke has sprinkled his writing with these summary statements of God's work. He'll write a few chapters (even though in his mind he wasn't writing three chapters), and then he'll summarize what he just wrote in these three chapters by saying something like, "...and the church of God was growing increasingly. Many disciples were coming to faith." He summarizes and says two or three times in this narrative, "...and the word of the Lord spread and was flourishing." It's almost like a refrain over and over and over again, these summary statements that are in there.

This verse we're going to read tonight in chapter 9 (verse 31) is another one of these summary statements. The apostle Paul has just become a Christian. He went from being someone who was persecuting and martyring the church (killing Christians and dragging them to jail) to someone who was radically transformed by Jesus Christ. The church was flourishing despite the persecution, which is really fascinating, especially if you're someone who is maybe a skeptic of Christianity. It's pretty amazing these people were getting their throats slit, they were getting fed to lions, and yet they were still putting their faith in Jesus Christ.

In my mind, there is only one way to explain that. They really did believe they saw him after he got up from the dead, so they were willing to go to death because they knew he was real. Luke records this and the church's persecution, and then he summarizes it by saying this in verse 31. He says, "**So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit , it multiplied.**" It grew. The seed went in the ground, and it died, and it began to flourish more and more as it did. Keep this verse in your mind and this summary in your mind, and we'll move forward here.

I want to kind of invite you up to the proverbial mountaintop tonight and invite you to pray with me and hope with me about all that God might do as we continue to be faithful and as we look toward what we hope he might do in not just the years to come, but the generations to come. I want to share with you tonight two convictions. Those two convictions, I hope, will shape and sort of give a platform for this vision I want us to pray through and to consider together this evening. If you're a covenant member, I hope you share these two convictions with me, and I'm just reminding you of those, but if you don't have these convictions hopefully tonight maybe you'll leave with them.

1. *God (the God of the universe that we sing about, talk about, think about, rejoice in, worship) loves our city.* God loves our neighbors who are our city. He loves your neighbors and your roommates and your dorm mates and your classmates and your teammates and your band mates and my neighbors and my co-workers. He loves our neighbors, and God is committed to revealing himself to peoples. I just want to read a couple of Scriptures for you. Second Peter, chapter 3, verse 9 says God is patient. This is the character of God. He's patient. He doesn't want anyone to perish. He doesn't want anyone in this city to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. This is God's heart, that people would know him and come to him, not that they would perish.

In fact, one of the very reasons he is patient in not sending his Son yet is because he's gracious, and by being patient with us and with sinners like us more people get to come into the kingdom. God loves our city. He loves our neighbors. I think of Jonah, which if you've never read the little book of Jonah... After you read Luke, go read Jonah. It's a great, encouraging one to read as well. Jonah is this prophet God calls to

go to this city called Nineveh that is far from God. These people in this city don't know God. They don't love God. They don't worship him.

Jonah is a sinner. He's weak. He's racist, so he doesn't go, and God rebukes him, and God picks him up, and God sends him back. He eventually goes, but as he goes he still is complaining, and he's weak, and he's discouraged, and he doesn't understand what God is doing, and God at the end of the book of Jonah says this to Jonah. He says, "**But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people...**" That's about how many people live in our city. These people in this city, he tells Jonah, don't know their right hand from their left. They're lost. "They don't know me. That's why I'm sending you to them."

Then he asks Jonah this rhetorical question that reveals his heart. He says, "**Should I not be concerned [for] that great city?**" The answer, of course, is yes. "I should be, and I am. That's why I've gone through this process of sending you to preach the gospel to them." As we know, Jonah went and preached the gospel, and people came to faith. What I want you to take out of this (even though it doesn't say anything about Denton) is in the same way God loved these 120,000 people in Nineveh, I think he loves our city. He loves our city. God loves our city and our neighbors and those who don't know him and who are far from him so much more than you do, so much more than I do, so much more than we could ever imagine. I hope you share that conviction with me.

2. *Our local church is a strategic outpost and witness in the kingdom of God.* I really do believe our local church (Dr. Sam mentioned this, and Lan mentioned this, and the video so beautifully portrayed this) is a strategic outpost and witness in the kingdom of God. This is a strategic body of believers. This is a strategic meeting place we have, and you don't have to look too far to see this. In fact, I think as a church we would be blind and maybe a bit foolish to not recognize this. I mean, if you think about our city (some of the things that were said in the video), it is one of the fastest growing cities in the nation. This city is flourishing.

You have universities right down the street both ways with 50,000 students. You have a cultural angst that is building within our city that all of these different subcultures are poised and inspired to influence many different domains of society, not just here but worldwide. You add on top of that the incredible diversity that exists in our city, and you start to get a glimpse of how strategic it might be for a group of God's people to gather with other groups of God's people to be faithful in this city. I was reading an article in the newspaper this week, speaking of the diversity of our city. I still read the actual newspaper and get ridiculed and made fun of a lot for that, but it's actually really helpful. The *Denton Record-Chronicle*.

One of the things going on around town...I don't know if you know this; it's kind of in city council conversations and otherwise...is about food trucks. They're wanting to bring more food trucks in town.

Have you heard about this? I don't know if that's a good thing. I suppose it matters about if the food truck is good or not. They're wanting to bring more food trucks, so if you vote, be involved. Take action or whatever. If you like food trucks, great. One of the trucks they were mentioning in the paper this week, and this was the specific truck the story was about, is one over on UNT. Those of you who attend over there may have seen it. It's the Vietnamese food truck. Has anybody ever gotten something from that?

It was talking about how good it is, and what the article was about was essentially them saying, "We're adding to the culinary diversity of our city." The administrator said they're just trying to give Denton something that really expresses what Denton is all about. "Denton is all about diversity." It's an incredibly diverse city, 122 nations, and then you add on top of that the transients of our city, just the unavoidable transients who exist here. This city is a revolving door, and if you've been here for the last five years, you have probably heard me in one sermon or another lament that.

I spent a good portion of the first few years just lamenting that because I'd get to know so many of you, and then I'd find out, "Oh, you're a senior. It's been great knowing you. I'm glad we just got to know each other." Then you would leave, so I would be really sad. I sort of had self-pity and I'd kind of... What that would kind of lead into was actually begging some of you to stay after you graduated, and some of you have. Praise the Lord for that, as the video talked about. As I've grown in my faith and I've matured a bit, and the Holy Spirit has just been good to rebuke me gently, what I have come to see is that is not something to lament; it's something to rejoice in, and it's something to steward well.

Because whether we want to or not, as a church, we're a sending church. We're going to send maybe even more than we get to keep here in our city. The question is not if we're sending people all over the world; the question is how we're doing it and if we're being faithful to equip you before we send you. This city is unbelievably strategic. Then you think about this: God in his great mercy and wisdom has planted us right in the middle of it. We meet right in the middle of all of this diversity and growth and flourishing and transience, and I think we would have to be blind to not realize this body of believers is a strategic outpost in God's kingdom. Not just for our city, but I really do believe to impact the world.

I know it's obvious to me God doesn't need what man thinks is strategic to accomplish his purposes. I understand that. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, not in Rome. I get it. He grew up in the Galilee, not in Jerusalem. He grew up in Pilot Point. Did anything good come from Pilot Point? He didn't grow up in downtown Dallas. I understand that, and yet at the same time, even though God has a history of using the weak and the foolish to shame the wise, at the same time there are certain cities and places that are strategic in our efforts to reach the world.

There is a reason the apostle Paul was eager to get to Athens and to Rome. There is a reason he planted churches in the city and not in the countryside, because as the city goes the culture goes. I think he knew that, and I think God in his wisdom led him to know that and understand that. Our city that God loves, that he's placed us in the middle, of is strategic. We'd be blind to miss that. In light of these two convictions, I think it should inform the way we pray. I think it should inform the way we live faithfully together.

What I want to begin tonight to pray for, and I hope we'll begin to pray for more and more, not just in these settings, but as you think and as you consider, as you pray with your home groups and your friend groups and just personally by yourself, here's what I want us to begin to think about and pray. For generations to come, long after I'm gone and you're gone and Matt is gone and everybody is gone, as long as it would please the Lord, that he would continue to use our local church as a strategic instrument in his hands and in his wise plan of redemption.

That's what I want to pray, that as long as he would please he would continue to use this local body of believers who meet right here on Oak and Fulton in the middle of this bustling, strategic city as an instrument in his wise hands and in his wise plan of redemption for our city and for the world. What I'm trying to get you to do tonight and what I want us to do as we pray together is to sort of lift our heads beyond the present and look out. This is not something we're good at. It's not something culture helps us with. If you think about social media and other things like that (Twitter, Facebook), it's all about the present.

In fact, Dr. Sam who... If you don't know Dr. Sam (as John said, he's one of our deacons), he's really the smartest man I know. He's a physics professor, which is different than just being a professor. (At least in my mind, okay?) He knows more about everything than I know about any *one* thing. I often ask him when I'm sitting down to coffee with him, "Dr. Sam, what does it feel like to be the smartest person in this room right now?" I never feel like that. Maybe you think you're smart, and so you walk in some rooms and think you're the smartest. I never do, so when I'm with him I'm just so interested and fascinated. "What is it like to be as smart as you?" He usually doesn't answer me. He pushes me away.

He said in deacon meeting this week something I thought was profound. It was just sort of a side comment. He talked about presentism. I don't know if he made that term up or read it somewhere, but this idea that we're always in the present. We're never thinking about legacy, not personally, not for our families, not for our church. We just don't do it very often. Our culture feeds that, and it feeds our proclivity to do that. I was reading an article this week in the *Atlantic* magazine about social media. These researchers at Harvard actually did a study on tweeting and Facebook and about why we are so intoxicated with talking about ourselves and talking about what we're doing right now. We feel like we have to share it with everybody.

Do you know what they found? It was pretty interesting. When we do that (when we tweet or when we talk about ourselves in whatever capacity we choose to do that, by whatever means) there is actually a biological, chemical reaction that happens in our brains. The reward system in our brains is started. It intoxicates us to do that. Not to say that is wrong or right; my point for the illustration is simply that our culture feeds this proclivity for us to just remain in the present, but what I'm wanting us to do is to look out. As Lan and Dr. Sam have already articulated, God in his great mercy brought this church off of her deathbed.

He raised her up and breathed life into her, and perhaps one of the reasons he did that was because he wanted to do something through this little body of believers on this little corner in his divine plan and purposes that will happen long after we're gone. It would have been amazing if the apostles in the early church... If you read Acts, 10,000 people came to the Lord in Jerusalem. What if the apostles had just stayed in the present and thought, "This is it; this is the pinnacle of what God wants to do in his kingdom and among his people. It's us right here, these 10,000 people. This is a big deal"?

Yes, it was a big deal. It's something to worship God about, to thank God about, to extol the Lord about, but that was the tip of the iceberg in God's plan of redemption for the world. What began with 10,000 people spread like fire all over the world. If these guys had kind of stayed there and just focused and beat their chests on what God had done right there and what he was doing right there and had not any vision for the future, none of us would be in this room tonight.

A pastor friend of mine, maybe a couple of months ago now, planted this thought in my mind. He was talking about his church and his city, but I just stole it and began to think about it for us and our city. He said, "What if God wanted to do something so miraculous in our city? What if he wanted to do something you and I could not fathom and that he wanted to break out revival here in our city in profound and beautiful ways like he did in the city of Nineveh? What if he wanted to do that, and our role was to just pray for it, because it wasn't going to happen in our generation; it was going to happen in the next one or the next one? Our role is to be faithful and pray."

That's what we're going to do tonight, and I pray we do it with the angst Paul Lewis had, that we would be like the saints of old who gathered in this place and had a vision far beyond the lives of their own bodies, that we would have a church that outlives us. For some of you, that's going to be a few short years before you're gone, but for the rest of you who are going to be here for a while, then how glorious would it be if God would do that? I'll read this, and then I'm done. Some statistics, and really maybe even most statistics, have shown the average life span of churches today is 70 years. This church was planted in 1948, and so going on those statistics we have six years left in us.

Six years, so what I want to pray tonight is that statistic would not be the reality for this local body of believers, that God in his mercy (not because we're great, but because he is) would choose to have, as long as it would please him, a faithful group of his people who meet on this corner who display his gospel who love this city and love one another for his glory, and that as he chooses to do that, this church meeting on this corner could be summarized as Luke summarized the church in the book of Acts: "**...walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit...**" A church that is making disciples who make disciples who make disciples, and multiplying to such a degree that this church lasts not just for six more years, but for generations to come.

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