This is the 8th week in our Family Tree series… and throughout this series we have been looking at transitional moments in the lives of a number of the well-known members of our spiritual family tree. During the first 6 weeks of our series, we looked at people whose stories are found in the Old Testament, people like Abraham, Hagar and Jacob; Last week, during our celebration of our Care Center’s 10th anniversary, we looked at the first member of the family that we find in the New Testament, the apostle Peter. And I must tell you that the response from last week’s message was, shall I say, unusually robust… in a positive way. I am unsure if the reason there was such an affirming response was that the message was only about 12 minutes long or if it was the content of the sermon, but either way it was an encouraging response. Now, this morning I’m going to have start by saying something we’ve had to say almost each week of this series… something that is especially true today: there is a ton more given to us in the Bible about today’s family member than we could ever discuss in one sermon. You see, today’s member of our spiritual family is the apostle Paul and not only does his story take up a good half of the book of Acts but his 13 letters to the early church make up a huge portion of the New Testament. We simply aren’t going to be able to be the least bit thorough when it comes to talking about such an important member of our spiritual family tree as Paul. But with that said, our focus in this series has been on great moments of transition in the lives of the people we are covering… and Paul’s moment of transition was as profound as anyone we meet in the entire Bible. If we want to see someone change from living his life one way to living his life in a completely different manner, Paul is our man! And to find this transition in Paul’s life we need to turn to Acts 9:1-22 and look at verses 1-22. And while your finding Acts 9 I want to tell you something unusual about today’s passage: this moment of transition in Paul’s life that we’ll be looking at today was so important to him and clearly, also to Luke, the author of the book of Acts, that it’s recorded not once, and not twice, but three times in the book of Acts. Now, each time we read the story of this transition in Paul’s life we are given a few different details, but each version is essentially the same. And anytime you get the same thing mentioned three times in the Bible it means we’d better pay attention! Plus, Paul also references this moment of transition in some of his letters to the Church, such was its impact on Paul or Saul as he will be called in this passage. So, let’s look at Acts 9 verse 1 together… Oh, Saul was first mentioned a bit earlier in chapter 7 of Acts as having been a participant in the stoning of a follower of Jesus named Stephen. And this is the second time we run into him when we read, *Meanwhile, Saul was uttering threats with every breath and was eager to kill the Lord’s followers.* Okay, before we go any further a few things about Paul or Saul First, the reason he is called Saul here and Paul later isn’t because he changed his name. Saul was born into a very observant Jewish family in the city of Tarsus, which is in modern day southern Turkey, and like all good Jews, he was given a Hebrew name… Saul… Saul being the name of the very first Jewish King. But Saul’s family also had Roman citizenship; this was unusual and would have been a high honor at the time. And as a Roman citizen Saul was also given a three-part Roman, or Latin, name… much like the way we name our children. It was very common for Roman citizens to have two ‘official’ names. Saul was his Jewish name and Paul was his Roman, or Gentile name. What you will find in the Bible is that when Paul is interacting with Jewish people he tends to be referred to as Saul and when he is interacting with Gentile people he is referred to as Paul. And since everyone in today’s story is Jewish he is called Saul. And when I said he was born into an observant Jewish family that was a bit of an understatement. His family not only made certain that Paul could speak and read Hebrew, but they sent him to Jerusalem to study Jewish law under the most prominent Jewish scholar of that time, a man named Gamaliel. And while he was studying in Jerusalem he became a Pharisee! Now, we have a terrible opinion of Pharisees; the word Pharisee is almost synonymous with hypocrite. But the truth is that the Pharisees didn’t have that sort of reputation with most people at the time. The Pharisees were a group of about 5,000 or so men who had taken a vow to do everything they could to live holy lives. And for the most part, they had a good reputation as common men who were doing their best to understand and obey God’s law. Saul becoming a Pharisee meant he was as serious about his faith as a man could be. And to a serious, highly educated observant Jewish Pharisee at the time, this new religious cult that was claiming that the Jewish Messiah had come but he'd been crucified by the Romans and that he’d then been raised from the dead was a dangerous heresy that had the potential to create all sorts of divisions and sacrilegious problems in the Jewish world… it went against every imaginable notion Saul had ever heard about what the coming Messiah would do and be. And this is why we read that Saul was uttering threats with every breath and was eager to kill the Lord’s followers. He thought this new message about some dead Galilean charlatan magician named Jesus was from the pit of hell! And we then read,*So, he went to the high priest.****2****He requested letters addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, asking for their cooperation in the arrest of any followers of the Way he found there. He wanted to bring them—both men and women—back to Jerusalem in chains.* Two Quick things: the Romans had given the Jews special permission to arrest, try and convict other Jews of ‘religious’ crimes, but they could only go after people for religious crimes if they had an official letter from the High Priest. This was to keep these sorts of arrests to a minimum. Also, we know from history that a good number of Jewish Christians had fled from Jerusalem to Damascus due to persecution by people like Saul… the reason they fled to Damascus was that it was a highly Jewish city. The estimate is that there were 18,000 Jews living in Damascus at that time and there were a good number of synagogues there. And we also know from history that there was a vacuum of Roman power in Damascus then as well and people like Saul knew they could get away with arresting Jewish followers of Jesus without fear of the Roman intervention. This was a 250- mile trip, that’s at least a 12-day journey at best, but it was a trip Saul was ready to make because he thought he was doing exactly what God would want a seriously religious Jewish Pharisee to do! But then we read. *As he was approaching Damascus on this mission, a light from heaven suddenly shone down around him.* Any time a light like this is mentioned in the bible it implies that the glory of God, God’s overpowering presence has arrived. The Greek implies that it was a sudden and very unexpected light, by the way… so much so that it knocks Saul down! ***4****He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul! Saul!* Hearing his name twice meant someone was very serious… *Why are you persecuting me?”* ***5****“Who are you, lord?” Saul asked. And the voice replied, “I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting!*Two things… this divine light from heaven, which is always been a sign of God’s presence, is associated with the presence of Jesus. That’s significant! And did you notice that Jesus is taking Saul’s persecution of the believers very personally. He says, ‘I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting,’ not ‘I am Jesus, and you are persecuting my disciples.’ And Jesus isn’t messing around here. He gets right to it. ***6****Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”* ***7****The men with Saul stood speechless, for they heard the sound of someone’s voice but saw no one!****8****Saul picked himself up off the ground, but when he opened his eyes he was blind. So his companions led him by the hand to Damascus.*

Just think about this for a moment. Saul was on his way to Damascus to arrest Jewish men and women because they were claiming that Jesus was the Son of God and that he had been raised from the dead and Saul suddenly found out that they were right! Plus, even though he was on a mission… he had work to do in Damascus… he is now told to go there and wait… and he is blind… he has time to think about things… and think he does! ***9****He remained there blind for three days and did not eat or drink.* ***10****Now there was a believer in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord spoke to him in a vision, calling, “Ananias!” “Yes, Lord!” he replied.* ***11****The Lord said, “Go over to Straight Street, to the house of Judas. When you get there, ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. He is praying to me right now.* I bet he was!***12****I have shown him a vision of a man named Ananias coming in and laying hands on him so he can see again.”* I love these next details! ***13****“But Lord,” exclaimed Ananias, “I’ve heard many people talk about the terrible things this man has done to the believers in Jerusalem!****14****And he is authorized by the leading priests to arrest everyone who calls upon your name.”* ***15****But the Lord said, “Go, for Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel.****16****And I will show him how much he must suffer for my name’s sake.”* I’m sure the fact that Saul would have to suffer made Ananias a bit happy… some ‘what goes around comes around!’ ***17****So Ananias went and found Saul. He laid his hands on him and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road, has sent me so that you might regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”****18****Instantly something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he got up and was baptized.****19****Afterward he ate some food and regained his strength. Saul stayed with the believers in Damascus for a few days.****20****And immediately he began preaching about Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is indeed the Son of God!”* ***21****All who heard him were amazed. “Isn’t this the same man who caused such devastation among Jesus’ followers in Jerusalem?” they asked. “And didn’t he come here to arrest them and take them in chains to the leading priests?”* ***22****Saul’s preaching became more and more powerful, and the Jews in Damascus couldn’t refute his proofs that Jesus was indeed the Messiah.*You talk about a transformation! Like I said earlier, I don’t think I know of any other place in the Bible where a person goes so dramatically from being someone we wouldn’t want on our spiritual family tree to being someone who powerfully pictures all that our spiritual family tree should represent… and it all happened because Saul came face to face with Jesus. And my thought is that all of Saul’s years of learning the scriptures and training in the law and practicing the commands of God… his understanding of all things Jewish, came together in this one moment… and suddenly everything made sense! And this is why he could later write with such confidence this to his fellow believers in Corinth, *‘Let me now remind you, dear brothers and sisters, of the Good News… and it is this Good News that saves you if you continue to believe the message… Christ died for our sins, just as the Scriptures said.**He was buried, and he was raised from the dead on the third day, just as the Scriptures said. Again, this is the good news!’* 1 Corinthians 15:1-4 He knew it to be true because, as he further goes on to say in his letter to the Corinthians, *‘I saw him… even after the way I persecuted God’s church, he still poured out his favor on me… I saw him and so I preach this message!’* 1 Corinthians 15:8-11

Now, I want to be honest. This story of Paul’s transition is a very dramatic story… a man bent on killing the followers of Jesus becomes a man about a week or so later who is preaching Jesus as Lord and Savior so powerfully that no one could refute the truth of his message. It’s the sort of conversion story that can make one wonder if theirs is even worth telling… and it also makes me wonder why Jesus doesn’t do this overpowering-light-from-the-sky-and-a-voice-telling-us-exactly-what-to-do thing anymore? But I’ve been thinking about these things a lot over the last couple of weeks and here is where I think Paul’s story of transition intersects with ours. The reason Paul came to faith in Jesus was because he came face to face with Jesus. Everything suddenly made sense when he realized that Jesus was alive, that sins could be forgiven, and that Jesus cared deeply about what was going on in the world. I know that the story of my coming to a meaningful faith in Jesus also involved my coming face to face with Jesus, but it wasn’t that I was struck down by a powerful light and a voice spoke to me out of heaven… it was that one man, a man named Arnie Book, lived his life in a way that shined with the presence of Jesus to such a degree that I couldn’t deny that what he was telling me about Jesus was true. There was something in his demeanor and his character that reflected the reality of him being a brother of Jesus… the similarities were enough to see they were from the same family. And like the Damascus Jews, I couldn’t refute the reality of Jesus being the Messiah. And this has given me a clear understanding of things… when we choose to follow Jesus he fills us with his Spirit and he calls us his brothers and sisters… and when we live our lives following Jesus, others can’t help but see in our actions and our demeanor, the family resemblance. They see Jesus and that visage gives credibility to the opportunities we are given to speak of the hope that lives within us. And Paul’s radical transformation gives me hope for those that I love that seem so far away from ever following Jesus. Paul thought that everything he was doing was exactly what he should be doing and yet he sees Jesus and he suddenly came to the realization that he needed to change his way of thinking about everything! And if he can be transformed by a face to face with Jesus then anyone can be transformed by the seeing the countenance of Jesus in you and in me. I know that Paul holds a huge spot on our family tree. I know that his influence is grand in ways theological, and ecclesiastical and so forth, but his transformation story, which remember is given to us three times, tells us There is hope: hope for those we love and long to come to an understanding of God’s grace for them. Hope for you and me that we can be the face of Jesus to others. Hope for our world that so drastically needs to change in ways that bring joy to the heart of God. And this hope can all come into reality when others meet Jesus.