

# “The 168 Hour Work Week”

Acts 9:1-19

Series: Book of Acts, #10

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Theme: **Christ Constantly Works To Accomplish His Purposes.**

## Introduction.

Time interests all of us. Each one of us has the same amount of time: 24 hours each day, 168 hours each week. But no two people spend their time in exactly the same way. Now, most of us spend a good part of our days focused on basics: work, school, sleeping, eating, leisure.

Expectations about time change. A number of decades ago some people who studied work thought the day would come when technology and innovations would result in there not being enough work for everyone. So, they projected that full time work would be 25 or even 20 hours a week. Of course, we know those projections were wrong.

Let's update that. “*The 20-Hour Work Week of the Future*” is the title of an article written less than a year ago. This researcher thinks that with the growing numbers of people unable or unwilling to work 40 hours a week, the 20-hour-work-week become a reality.

Also, a Statistics Canada survey showed that more than one-third of Canadians aged 25-44 identify themselves as workaholics, and more than half admitted to worrying that they do not have enough time to spend with family and friends. The proportion of people reporting time-stress has been increasing for several decades.

People are working longer and enjoying it less.

God is concerned about time. God's relationship to time is much different than ours—He is not fenced in with the beginnings and endings, or the balance of work, sleep, and leisure that we are. Looking at this section of Acts again, I was reminded of how God, in our terms, from our perspective, *uses His time*. God doesn't have a 20, 30, 40, 50 or 60 hour work week. God has a “168 Hour Work Week.” God is constantly at work throughout His creation. That constant work has a focus, *to accomplish His purposes*. The book of Acts is about Christ building His church. And *Christ constantly works to accomplish His purposes*.

We see that here in Acts in ...

- Christ's work of quickly bringing thousands to faith in the first days of the church;
- in meeting the challenges within the church;
- in the church facing opposition from outside;
- and now, in stopping that day's greatest opponent of the church in his tracks and transforming him into the early church's first and greatest missionary.

I'm thankful God's doesn't ask you and me to have a 168 hour work week. But I'm even more thankful that God chooses to have a 168 hour week, that Christ our Savior, *constantly works to accomplish His purposes*. Let's walk through some evidence of that in this section. His continual work is seen as ...

### **Christ Transforms A Troublemaker.**

Meet Saul the troublemaker. We begin with a brief survey of his background. He was born in the city of Tarsus, now on the east edge of Turkey, about 16 km. from the Mediterranean. [Let's check the map on the screen or one in the back of your Bible]. While not right on the coast, it had a river ships could navigate, and was an active port. It was a very diverse city, fitting in both the western and eastern worlds of Saul's day. It had a rich diversity in culture and religion and was a business, political, cultural and educational center.

Saul's family apparently was traditional and successful, based on the fact that he was born a Roman citizen and was sent to Jerusalem as a teenager to study under the great traditional scholar Gamaliel. He became a Pharisee and was very devoted to his faith. It appears that at a relatively young age he became a member of the elite and powerful Sanhedrin. He was a rising star, if not *the* rising star in the younger generation of Jewish leaders.

Note also what Luke tells us about Saul's background with respect to the church. Turn back to chapter 8, verse 1,

“Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him [Stephen] to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.”

Then to verse 3, “But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.”

Now move to the opening of today's section, chapter 9,

“Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way [i.e., believers in Christ], both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.” (9:1-2)

While most other religious leaders were satisfied with running Christians out of town, Paul was not. He wanted what he saw as a blasphemous heresy exterminated— including the people who clung to it.

Take note of the severity of his crusade:

- He was “ravaging the church,” “dragging off men and women,” throwing them into

prison (8:3).

- He was persistent (9:1, “*still* breathing threats and murder”).

When we turn ahead to chapter 22 in Acts, we read Paul’s testimony in Jerusalem. He stated that...

- he approved of Stephen’s death (22:20);
- that he “persecuted this Way to death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons” (4);
- that in “one synagogue after another” he “imprisoned and beat those who believed.” (19)

Then in chapter 26 when he appeared before Agrippa he tells us that...

- he locked up many, and cast his vote for their deaths (10).
- He tried to make them blaspheme, was “furiously enraged at them,” and pursued them from one place to another, “even to foreign cities” (11).
- Now, if God were like us—at least some of us—He would not have blinded Saul with that light, He would have fried him, burned him to a crisp on the spot.

Thankfully, God isn’t like us in that way. *Christ continually works to accomplish His purposes* in many different ways and people, including ourselves, to whom we or others might not give a thought, let alone a chance.

Saul, the troublemaker. But then Christ stops Saul in his tracks. This was a very dramatic encounter. Look again at Luke’s account, verses 3-4,

“As [Saul] was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’”

Turn ahead to his own account years later to a crowd, or mob in Jerusalem. 22:6-7,

“But it happened that as I was on my way, approaching Damascus about noontime, a very bright light suddenly flashed from heaven all around me, and I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’”

Then a second personal account, again the one to King Agrippa. 26:12-14,

“While so engaged as I was journeying to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests, at midday, O King, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining all around me and those who were journeying with me. And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew dialect,

‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’”

Saul was a very sincere and devoted, a very bright and well-educated young man, eager to serve God and unwilling to tolerate any false teaching. But when it came to the church, Saul was 180° out. He was persecuting Christ, God the Son, not serving God.

He required a direct, dramatic, forceful 2x4 approach to see the light, the truth of Christ. Some people have wished for a dramatic experience like Saul’s. *“If only I had a Damascus road experience!”* God uses what it takes to convict and change people. Saul’s experience was evidence of a deeply darkened and hardened heart. He needed the 2x4 approach. You may not have had a dramatic conversion experience, but God used exactly what was required to bring you to faith.

God spoke directly to him. Go back to verse 4,

“he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’ And he said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ And He said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do.’” (4-6)

According to verse 7, the whole group heard the voice speaking to Saul, but only he saw a vision. Jesus made it clear that to persecute the church is to persecute Him. Saul was left unable to see and was led to Damascus where he had three days for prayerful (verse 11) reflection in darkness.

Saul headed out to Damascus with letters of authority from the High Priest to persecute and prosecute the church. Now he waited for a new assignment from the head of the church Himself, Jesus Christ. He recounted it to Agrippa in chapter 26,

“And I said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But get up and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you; rescuing you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.’”

Christ stops Saul in his tracks and then He transforms him. After the three days God sent Ananias to Saul. Ananias was one of Saul’s intended victims in Damascus. Look at Luke’s record of their initial meeting, 17-19a,

“So Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you

on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’ And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized; and he took food and was strengthened.”

Turn again to his account in chapter 22,

“A certain Ananias, a man who was devout by the standard of the Law, and well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, came to me, and standing near said to me, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight!’ And at that very time I looked up at him. And he said, ‘The God of our fathers has appointed you to know His will and to see the Righteous One and to hear an utterance from His mouth. For you will be a witness for Him to all men of what you have seen and heard. Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.’” (12-16)

God dramatically, radically transformed Saul. *Christ continually works to accomplish His purposes.* We see this traced out in another way here.

### **Christ Uses Ordinary People.**

Enter Ananias—an ordinary man. What do we know about him? Luke tells us in verse 10 that he was “a disciple.” He was not an apostle. He is not pointed out as being a leader in the church. Just “a disciple.” This is a way of saying that he was just one of the believers in the Damascus, *an ordinary man.*

He may have been ordinary, but he was a man with excellent character and a good reputation. In 22:12 Paul tells us he “...was devout by the standard of the Law, and well spoken of by all the Jews...”

Ordinary, but available to God. Look at verse 10,

“Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, ‘Ananias.’ And he said, ‘Here I am, Lord.’ And the Lord said to him, ‘Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias [*that is, you, Ananias*] come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight.’” (10-12)

He was also open and honest with God. Let’s continue at verse 13,

“But Ananias answered, ‘Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name.’”

(13-14)

Saul's reputation and mission preceded him. They didn't have television, cell phones and e-mail, but the word spread quickly.

Ananias was also obedient. Drop down to verse 17, "So Ananias departed and entered the house..."

"Christ uses ordinary people." Then and today. There in Damascus, and here in Edmonton. As we are available and faithful, the Holy Spirit uses us to accomplish God's work. Christ continually worked to accomplish His purposes through Ananias, and He is continually working to accomplish His purposes through *us*.

Ananias had an extraordinary task. God used him to confirm His work in Saul and move Saul on to the next step, to take public stand for Christ. He used him to reveal His plans for Saul. Verses 15-16,

" But the Lord said to [Ananias], 'Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake.'"

Paul's account in chapter 22, again, records these words of Ananias to him,

"The God of our fathers has appointed you to know His will and to see the Righteous One and to hear an utterance from His mouth. For you will be a witness for Him to all men of what you have seen and heard."  
(14-15)

Ananias, an ordinary man, was the only man to have such a task.

- Saul became Paul;
- Paul became the first missionary, sent out with Barnabas;
- Paul became a great teacher and theologian;
- Paul was appointed an apostle by Christ.

When you look at these two men, Saul was the exception, Ananias was the norm. Think back to the Old Testament era. Most of the prophets were ordinary men.

In 1 Corinthians 1 & 2 Paul wrote about the gospel message being misunderstood and distorted by many who are *wise* in terms of this world. As he made that point, he wrote, "For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God."

So then, why do we put ourselves down as *just ordinary*? Or, why at times do we excuse ourselves as *just ordinary*? For some believers it is a deeply ingrained way of thinking about themselves.

There is an old story about a man who traveled from village to village claiming he could make pure gold. People would gather around excitedly to watch. He poured water into a tub, put a coloring agent in it and began to stir it, repeating his special incantations. When he distracted the crowd, he let a few gold nuggets slip down the stick. He would then pour the water off and, *amazing! Pure gold at the bottom!*

There would always be at least person in the village who would offer to buy the formula, sometimes offering all they had. The traveling man would object, but then finally, *reluctantly* he would accept the offer. He would go over the secret instructions in great detail, placing special emphasis on one key instruction: “You must not think of a red-faced monkey as you stir, or the gold will never come.”

And, you’ve got it, every time the buyer would try to make gold, the red-faced monkey came to mind ... and there never was any gold at the bottom of their tub.

My point is that it can be very difficult to remove some things from our way of thinking, even though we don’t want them there. One of those things for us may be “I’m just an ordinary person. I can’t do, God won’t do important things through me.” Difficult for us to change our thinking, yes. Impossible for us on our own, perhaps. But not impossible for God. Ask and allow God to use His word, His truth to renew, to transform your thinking.

## **Conclusion.**

*Christ continually works to accomplish His purposes.* Remember the words from Psalm 121, “He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep” (4). God keeps a *168 hour work week*. Be thankful that He does.

As you spend time with God now,

- thank Him that He continually is at work to accomplish His perfect purposes.
- Thank Him that He uses ordinary people like us, like you to do His work.
- Ask God to show you what He has been doing over the last days and weeks in your life, and around you.
- Determine to be faithful and available to God.

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