



Acts 22:1-16
The New Normal
Re-done By God

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Today we wrap up our series on the “New Normal”. Next week we will begin another 4-week series on character and reputation.

This topic - particularly the interplay between character and reputation - is something that God has put on my heart for quite some time now, in part because of some things that have happened in my own personal life, but also because of other things in our world. So we’re going to look at this starting next week with an introductory message on the whole topic and then in the following three weeks we will look at: Jesus’ character and reputation, then our own character and reputation, then the last week we will look at the Church’s character and reputation. Anyway, that all starts next Sunday.

Today, however, (**Today’s Sermon Graphic**) we wrap up our series on the “New Normal.” The first Sunday we looked at the first few verses of Genesis 3 when Adam and Eve eat the fruit of “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” and we talked about how should we respond when we do or say something that brings a “new normal” into our own lives...when there’s no one else to blame but ourselves. The next week we looked at the life of Joseph and how he responded to his brothers’ shipping him off to Egypt and we talked about our own response to when a new normal sets in because of something that other people have said or done. And then last week we looked at another Joseph and Mary, his bride-to-be, and their response to a new normal that God brought into their lives. How do we respond when God brings us into a new normal? So we’ve had messages titled, “Our Own Undoing” “Undone by Someone else” and “Undone by God.”

And so far, all of these have focused on new normals that are pretty challenging and painful. They’ve had good that has come out of them, but we’ve focused on the response in the midst of the difficult new normal. But today’s message really is focusing on that end result, where we see that we are “Re-done by God.” We may be “undone” by ourselves, or others or even God himself, but usually that “new normal” doesn’t last forever - whether that’s emotional difficulty, or physical, or financial, or spiritual. That stretch

that we call our “new normal” almost always gives way to something else. There’s a final step that is *truly* the new normal, that God brings about, where we are “re-done” by God.

The apostle Paul is a great Biblical illustration this for us. Paul - who I know was called “Saul” until he came to faith in Jesus but I’ll refer to him as Paul today - Paul thought he was doing everything right for God. Paul thought he was living a faithful Jewish life, pleasing God in every way. But God got a hold of him, took him into a season of “normalcy” that was challenging for Paul, and then brought him into a final new normal where God had totally reshaped him and remade him. So in today’s passage we hear Paul recounting these events...**Acts 22:1-16**

So in the first 5 verses Paul recounts what his life had been like. **Paul was a zealous Jew who believed the Christians were completely wrong and he persecuted them for their faith.** He thought he was doing what God wanted him to do. This was his “normal” at the time and he thought he was doing the right thing - that he was on the right road.

Then God got a hold of him and brought him into to a “new normal” that wasn’t what Paul would have wanted at that moment. He was blinded by light, he heard a voice from heaven asking why Paul was persecuting Him, and Paul finds out that this voice - whom he takes to be the Lord, meaning God - is actually the voice of Jesus. This was not easy for Paul.

But this is where Paul connects the dots that Jesus is who the Christians he was persecuting claimed he is: God come to them in the flesh, crucified, but now resurrected and alive in eternity. And this changes everything for Paul. He immediately knows he can’t keep doing what he’s been doing because he is actually working against God the Father whom he thought he was helping and serving. He now realizes that Jesus and the God of the Old Testament are on the same team. This revelation completely transforms his life.

He spends time with other Christians, specifically Ananias, getting re-oriented to life as a follower of Jesus rather than a hater of Jesus, and to make

a long story short: He goes on to be one of the most influential Christians of all-time. He started several churches, wrote several letters that are in the New Testament, about half of the book of Acts is devoted to Paul's ministry, and countless people came to faith in Jesus because of Paul's testimony that Jesus is Lord.

There are several things we can learn from Paul's life that help us in our own journey of life and faith. **First, oftentimes we think we're doing just fine, that life is all good and that we're on the right track - but it may very well be that we are actually off-course and things could be much better.** About 10 years ago, when we were living in Chehalis, I was on a road-trip by myself across the country from Florida back to Western Washington. And at one point I missed a turn-off from one interstate highway onto another, but I didn't realize it. I thought I was going exactly as I was supposed to be going. In fact, this was just outside Salt Lake City, not far from where we had lived for four years before moving to Chehalis, and I knew this stretch of highway and knew which way I should be going. But I completely messed up. I realized about 15 or 20 miles into it that although I thought I was on the right road and that everything was good: I wasn't and things were not good. I turned around at the next exit, went back, and got on the right track. It was like 45 minutes of my life literally going in the wrong direction, and I can never get those 45 minutes back. I wish I could tell you that's the only part of my life where I've made a mistake like that, but it's not (and not just in regards to driving □).

And similarly: **We might think we're on the right road because things are cruising along smoothly in our life, but we may actually be headed in the wrong direction.** For Paul, this was explicitly and obviously about his relationship with God. Sometimes for us, it may be as well. Perhaps you believe God exists but you don't really know which religion actually points you to the God of all time and eternity. Or maybe God is not somebody you've spent much time thinking about and your life is primarily focused on other things. Quite frankly, this can be as easily true for the Christian as it is for the non-Christian, so just because we cling to the name of Jesus let's not assume our life is truly centered on Jesus. You may have a stable job, a lovely house, a sweet car, healthy relationships, a 401k, you might be

winning your NFL fantasy league...**But if Paul were here he'd probably say to you, "The more important thing to consider is: How's your relationship with Jesus?"** Before Paul met Jesus, he thought he had everything going in the right direction; but he discovered that he didn't, and he needed to change course. Better to get re-done by God and on the right path of life sooner, rather than later, before you've gone very far in the wrong direction.

There is good news, however, and that's the next point: **Second, how far down the wrong road you are is completely irrelevant to God: He can still get you on the right track.** By "irrelevant" I don't mean that God doesn't *care*, but that in terms of getting back on the right track, God can overcome a lot. Paul was vehemently opposed to Jesus and his followers. He wasn't just a little ways down the wrong path, Paul was *way* down the road of anti-Christianity, and *deeply* invested in it. In fact, when he first became a follower of Jesus, Christians didn't trust him. His reputation was so established by his prior behavior that people couldn't believe that he had become a follower of Jesus and was no longer someone to fear, but someone to embrace.

Six months ago in late March, just as Covid was really ramping up, I reached out through Facebook Messenger to a guy I know who I had not seen or talked to in 25 years. For the four years we had together at the University of Washington, he was not exactly "in tune with Jesus," (to put it appropriately in church) and was into the party scene (yes, Jesus loves social gatherings/parties as we see in the Gospels, but they can cross a line at some point), and other facets of college life that aren't aligned with Scripture. I'm not passing judgment, because my life then certainly could have been more biblically grounded than it was then, too; but he took things another level or two beyond where I was then and he would say so himself if he were here.

Anyway, I asked him about his family and what he was up to and so forth and he wrote back (in part): **[I have] 3 kids...2 girls and a boy and a wonderful spiritual life. Wish I would have done things differently in the past but no regrets and beautiful path forward.** We had a really encouraging, pretty lengthy, back and forth dialog about our lives, and coping with Coronavirus

he shared more about the church he's a part of, and a little more about his spiritual journey and some steps of faith he's taken...and it was clear that he is NOT the same guy I knew in college. I mean, biologically, he is...but he's on a whole new path and God has re-done him into a whole new person after he'd gone quite a ways down the road in the wrong direction. Even he wishes he'd done things differently, but clearly he's also not letting that keep him from moving forward. It's a pretty healthy place he's in.

His life, like the Apostle Paul's, is a reminder to me, and I hope now a reminder and an encouragement for you, that: **God can put you on a new path, no matter what road you're on or how far down it you've gone.**

The last thing we learn from Paul - and we see it more in his writings elsewhere in the New Testament - is that when you're on the right road with Jesus, it's a "new normal" that is better than whatever other road you could have been on, and you don't want to turn off of it. In other words: **The "new normal" God brings you into when you've been re-done by Him, is a new normal that you want to last.** If we think we're on the right road now and everything seems to be going great - even in spite of the virus - and if we're *not* following Jesus on this road, it might be hard to imagine that a new normal is needed or that a new normal with Jesus is actually better. This is easy to do - especially in a region like ours on the Eastside. There's a lot of wealth, a lot of great jobs, great homes that people live in...there are a lot of signs of "success" and it's easy to think that things can't really be a whole lot better. But that's exactly what God's promise is.

For instance, in Philippians 3 we get a taste of this from Paul himself. He begins by speaking of his life before he met Jesus - and he says that things were really good. He writes: **"If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless"** (Philippians 3:4-6). What Paul is saying is that in this stretch of his life before he met Jesus he thought his normal was both right and really good, and he was incredibly successful - in his own eyes and in the eyes of others. Then he writes in the very next verses:

“But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things” (Philippians 4:7-8). In other words, the new normal of being a disciple to Jesus far “surpasses” the previous normal of his life. God got a hold of him and re-did him...brought him into a new normal for which he is grateful...Paul has given up all that he was for the sake of this new normal and he’d gladly give up more to keep it going because it’s better than the life he had before he met Jesus.

And the promise of God through the resurrection of Jesus is that this new normal does in fact keep going. Jesus overcame the grave and so the forgiveness, the healing, the grace, the love...all that God offers in this life as a new normal continues into eternity when we trust in Jesus Christ.

When you sit down and look in the mirror at yourself and reflect upon your life - not physically, but look in the mirror at your soul: your values, what gives you peace and security, your relationships, and so forth - maybe, in spite of the pandemic, a lot of your life is in a pretty good place. **Perhaps you feel like you’re on a pretty good road and going in the right direction; that “normal” couldn’t really be a whole lot better.** While not everyone is in that place - and God’s healing and transforming power can bring you to a new normal if you aren’t in a good place - ...while not everyone is in that good kind of place, a lot of people are. There’s a lot of “success” in our region...a lot of high-functioning, highly capable people. Like Paul, before God got a hold of him: a lot of people wouldn’t probably trade too much about their lives. Even if there are parts we’d like to see improved, an awful lot of people would say that by-and-large, their “normal” is pretty good. And it’s easy to believe, therefore, that we are on the right road.

But: Paul’s life shows us that there’s a “new normal” that God can bring to fruition in our lives, and it’s far better than the normal we have created ourselves. And it’s not only his life: mine, probably many of yours, and countless others bear witness to the blessing of a life that is re-done by

God. We live into that new normal when we humble ourselves before the Lord and authentically desire to know Jesus in our lives...to trust him to bring a new normal into our lives that is built on the rock solid foundation of Jesus. The blessings and benefits we get from that are hope, joy, peace, love, and more....the list goes on. We experience these things here in this life and in the life to come. They far exceed whatever shadow of those things we experience on the road of life without Jesus.

So whether you have already been re-done by God and you know this new normal to some degree in your life, or you've never experienced God in this way: there's still a road ahead that Jesus is leading us down. I pray that just like happened to Paul nearly 2,000 years ago, that God would get through to you to get you on the right path or help you stay on it (no missed turns/detours) if you're already walking with Jesus, as we each live into the new normal that God continues to bring into our lives now and evermore. Let's pray...Amen.