

Good morning everyone, my name is Mark and I'm one of the pastors here at North Shore Alliance Church; I'm glad you're with us.

Now you may be sitting here this morning and wondering to yourself, "*what am I doing here?*" And the truth is that you may be here out of habit, obligation, or deliberate choice. But why you came is probably not as important as recognizing that you are not here by accident. The bottom line is that Jesus wants to meet you in a personal way.

We have been created for relationship with God, and our lives are restless until we find our rest in Him...this is true for all of us. If you are already a follower of Jesus, to you I would say, "*Find your rest in Jesus, look to Him and don't hold anything back.*" And to those of you that are beginning to investigate Jesus, to you I would say, "*Jesus is Someone worth living for. His love brings life to all who receive it; He has new life in store for you.*"

As I was writing my sermon this week, I was struck by how many of my thoughts have been shaped by the things I have been reading and pondering in recent weeks. And so, if you hear something this morning that grips you, or sounds particularly intelligent, it likely came from someone else.

I want to begin with a question, and invite you to respond. Do any of you know which Bible verse is memorized more often than any other? John 3:16. Now I want to put you on the spot and see if you can recite John 3:16 with me and I'll even make it easy on you by

providing some fill-in-the-blanks:

God so \_\_\_\_\_ the \_\_\_\_\_ that He gave His only \_\_\_\_\_, that whosoever \_\_\_\_\_ in Him will not perish but have \_\_\_\_\_ life.

If you haven't memorized this verse then chances are that you've seen John 3:16 written on a billboard, on the side of a building, or you've seen it on a poster, held up by a fan in the back of an end zone. This verse conveys a number of important truths: God loves the world, He sent Jesus for our sake, and that belief in Jesus central to receiving eternal life.

In his book entitled, "*Not A Fan*," Kyle Idleman points out that while many people can rattle off John 3:16, not many can recite Luke 9:23. In Luke 9:23 Jesus said, "*If anyone would come after me, they must take up their cross daily and follow me.*"

John 3:16 emphasizes *believing*, while Luke 9:23 emphasizes *following*; these two are like two sides of the same coin, they belong together. Idleman writes, "There is no believing without following. There is no John 3:16 without Luke 9:23."<sup>1</sup>

But at the heart of Jesus' invitation to believe, and to follow, there are two words that He does not want anyone to miss: the first is

---

<sup>1</sup> Kyle Idleman, *Not A Fan*, 116.

*whosoever*, the second is *anyone*. Jesus carefully chose these words to make it clear who has been invited into relationship: *anyone* who wants to follow, *whosoever* chooses to believe.

Two different words with one meaning. Idleman writes, “*Anyone* means *everyone*.”<sup>2</sup> What it means friends, is that you’ve been invited...to believe in Jesus and to follow where He leads. Maybe you didn’t realize that you’ve been invited, maybe you have a hard time believing that Jesus would want you. But listen again to His invitation: *whosoever* chooses to believe, *anyone* who wants to follow.

**Illus:** Idleman goes on to tell a story that most of us can relate to if we’ve ever bought a new piece of furniture. He and his wife bought a white love seat to go with the white carpet in one of their rooms. Being that he and his wife had young kids, they walked them through the rules: no eating in the white room, no playing in the white room, no breathing in the white room...you get the picture.

Everything seemed to be working fine, that is until the day his wife was arranging the cushions on the couch and noticed that someone had been hiding a secret. We all know that in life there are good secrets and bad secrets...this was a pink-fingernail-polish-on-a-white-couch kind of secret. And so the two parents called their girls into the room, ready to launch a full scale investigation. But before they could turn over the stained cushion, one of the girls “cracked” and ran upstairs to hide.

As we grow older, we do not hide any less; we simply become more sophisticated about our hiding. We hide behind our smiles, our achievements, or our excuses. All the while, most of us are terrified that someone will discover our stains and write us off. And it’s not an unfounded fear is it? It does happen... being “written off” I mean; I know I’ve been written off by others, perhaps it’s happened to you.

Perhaps you fear that Jesus will write you off, that your “stains” will disqualify you from being included on His invitation list.

When Morgan ran upstairs, Idleman followed after her. He began to call her name, but she wouldn’t answer; she remained in hiding. He began to check each room and eventually he found her in one of the closets, knees up to her chest, crying; she wouldn’t even look up.

After a time, Morgan went downstairs and confessed to her mom and dad what had happened. Once the spill happened, she had tried to clean it up but she only made matters worse. She flipped over the cushion because she was afraid they would find out. After her confession she turned to her parents and asked a question that melted their hearts, “Do you still love me?”

Idleman’s wife knelt down beside her and whispered to her, “*Morgan, you could never make a big enough stain to keep me from loving you.*” And that was that.

Idleman writes, “I wish I could tell you that somehow we were able to get the stain out...but the stain is still there. It will always be there. But a funny thing happened. Morgan started telling the story of the

---

<sup>2</sup> Idleman, 116-117.

stained white couch. She likes to show people the stain and tell them what happened...Because a stain that once represented shame...now represents love, grace, and acceptance.

All of us have stains...some that people can see, and others that we've managed to keep hidden. But not from Jesus...He sees our stains and still He invites us using words like *whosoever* and *anyone*. And Jesus never throws around words: He says what He means and means what He says. When He says *anyone* what He means is *everyone*. It's not your stains that will keep you on the outside looking in; you've been invited to believe, you've been invited to follow. Will you take Jesus up on His invitation?

Everyone's got a story to tell: you, me, Morgan. What's more, God has a story to tell, a story that He is sovereignly writing over the Cosmos. In fact, the story-line of the entire Bible can be summarized by four words: creation, fall, redemption (rescue), and restoration.

*Creation:* In the beginning, God created. He made everything with purpose and care; He made us for perfect, conflict-free relationship with Himself and one another. In the beginning, there was heaven on earth.

*Fall:* But, it didn't last. Humanity rebelled...deliberately rejecting God's purposes and attempting to live independently from Him. Our quest for "independence" from God and His ways has created the mess that we're now in: conflict, cruelty, squalor, brokenness, and stains. We are reaping what we have sown.

*Redemption:* But God so loved the world that He sent His only Son. Jesus came on a rescue mission, to save humanity from sin, death,

and separation from God. Jesus gave Himself over to death, on a cross, in order to deal with the separation between us and God. His perfect, stain-free life more than makes up for our stains before God. Because of Jesus, we can be forgiven. Because of Jesus, we can be reconciled to God.

*Restoration:* It's one thing to be forgiven, it's another thing to be washed clean. It's one thing for a stained cushion to be flipped over, it's another for the cushion to be reupholstered. Jesus does more than promise to forgive; His promise is to transform and restore us to God's original purpose. This is why your name is on His invite list: it's about more than being forgiven, it's about more than punching your ticket for eternal life...it's about being made new.

The title of my sermon this week is "*God's Grand Redemption Story*," and what better way to understand the way God works than to see His work in another person. If you have your Bibles with you, I want to invite you to turn with me to Acts 9, and see Jesus' action play out in the life of Paul. If you are using one of the Bibles in the seat rack in front of you, you can find our text on page 1706.

I said last week that everywhere Paul preached the message of Jesus, uproar in city and riots on the streets followed after him. What I didn't mention is that in the very beginning "Paul" went by the name of "Saul," and he was a part of the crowd that rioted at the mention of Jesus' name. What's more, he was leading the movement to round up followers of Jesus and throw them in prison, or put them to death. But when Jesus met Paul on the road to Damascus, and a lot more changed than simply his name. Let's read Acts 9 and find out what happened:

*1 Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest **2** and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. **3** As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. **4** He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"*

***5** "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. **6** "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." **7** The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. **8** 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. **9** For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.*

***10** In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. **11** 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. **12** In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."*

***13** "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. **14** And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name." **15** 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. **16** I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."*

***17** 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." **18** Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, **19** and after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. **20** At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.*

***21** All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" **22** Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ. **23** After many days had gone by, the Jews conspired to kill him, **24** but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. **25** But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall.*

***26** When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. **27** But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. **28** So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. **29** He talked and debated with the Grecian Jews, but they tried to kill him. **30** When the brothers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.*

**Illus:** You wouldn't think it, but my beautiful little girl is into bugs. When we were on vacation this Summer, Anna found a little wood-bug, named him Woody, and carried him around all afternoon. She said to me, "*Daddy, Woody is the best wood-bug in the whole world!*" But it's not just wood-bugs, it's snails, worms, and daddy longlegs too. And in the last month, Anna has gotten really excited about caterpillars.

I can't say that I share Anna's passion for bugs, or more specifically, her excitement *for* caterpillars. But, I can get excited about what *happens* to caterpillars. Only God could come up with something as brilliant as metamorphosis: a caterpillar transforms into a butterfly. It's the same creature, but it's hardly recognizable...a conversion has taken place that has changed its form completely.

"Conversion" comes from the Latin word *convertere*, meaning "to turn around". To say that Paul got turned around when he met Jesus is a massive understatement. Paul was hunting down Christians, tossing them into jail, giving his approval to their death sentence.

Within a week of meeting Jesus, Paul was now trying to convince everyone that Jesus was the Son of God. Paul went from being the hunter to being the hunted; in both Damascus and Jerusalem people tried to take his life because He wouldn't shut up about Jesus. Conversion. Metamorphosis. Transformation. But more than just a transformation of vocation, God began a transformation of Paul's character.

For the rest of his life, Paul never stopped marveling at the love and grace that God poured out in his life. In his early years, following his encounter with Jesus, Paul wrote a letter to a church in Corinth and in it he confessed, "*I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect.*"<sup>3</sup>

It wasn't his stains that that dominated Paul's memories, it was the love and mercy of Jesus. Paul knew that God had given him better than he deserved, and this undeserved mercy had a profound effect on him; it changed him.

Later on in his life, reflecting back on what he had once been, Paul wrote to a church in Ephesus saying the following, "*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast... 7 I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. 8 Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ.*"<sup>4</sup>

Paul never forgot the state he was in when Jesus found him on the Damascus road. As Paul neared the end of his life, he wrote the following in a letter to his young protege:

---

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:9-10.

<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 2:8-9; 3:7-8.

*“12 I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. 13 Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. 14 The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.*

*15 Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. 16 But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life. 17 Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

Until his last day, Paul was thankful for the moment when Jesus stopped him on the road and stepped into his life. Paul's stains didn't keep him from being on Jesus' invitation list, and neither will yours.

Paul found new life in Jesus, a changed life. Meeting Jesus was easily the best thing ever happened to Paul, but it wasn't the easiest thing that ever happened. It's like Idleman says, “Anyone can follow [Jesus] but not without giving up everything.”<sup>5</sup> There were times when Paul had to sneak out of cities in a basket to escape death. There were other times when Paul experienced the power of Jesus and people were delivered, healed and set free.

But in each circumstance, Paul experienced the presence and power of Jesus at work in his life. He wrote to the church in Philippi saying, “I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.”<sup>6</sup>

Jesus did more than offer Paul forgiveness; He offered Paul transformation, a new way to live, and a new life to come.

And the same offer is open to you. Whoever you are, wherever you are, no matter what you've done, you can be sure of one thing: you are on Jesus' invitation list. Jesus sees your stains and still He invites you using words like *whosoever* and *anyone*. And friends, “*anyone*” means “*everyone*.” Paul would say, “Just look at me...I got in.”

Jesus gave Himself over to death on a cross, in order to deal with the separation between us and God. His perfect, stain-free life is more than enough to make up for our stains before God. Because of Jesus, we can be forgiven, reconciled, and made new. You've been invited to put your trust in Jesus; you've been invited to believe and to follow Him. Will you? Will you take Jesus up on His invitation?

### Pray

---

<sup>5</sup> Idleman, 124.

<sup>6</sup> Philippians 4:12-13.

**The Lord's Supper**

I always look forward to participating in the Lord's Supper, because I know how much I need it. 1 Corinthians 11:24-26 tells us that *"The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." 25 In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." 26 For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."*

The bread is a symbol of Jesus body, which was broken for us on the cross. Every time we eat this bread, we remember and celebrate the fact that we have been invited to sit and feast with God at His table. Because of what Jesus has done for us, because of His invitation, when we say "yes" to Jesus, we become a part of God's family.

The contents of this cup are a symbol of the blood that Jesus shed for our sins. If you like, when we say "yes" to Jesus, His shed blood acts as our divine stain remover; Jesus makes us right before God the Father. Every time we drink this cup, we remember that we've been forgiven, washed clean, and been made new...to this very day He is making us new.

At this point I would like to invite our worship team to come and join me on the stage, and I'd like to ask our servers to come as well. If you are new, or visiting, when you come forward to receive the bread and the cup, just tear off a piece of bread, dip it in the cup and then partake.

**Worship**

**Benediction**

**Announcements:**

- Highlight Alpha as a great place to investigate, or learn more.
- come forward for prayer.