

Blinded By the Light

January 20, 2019

Acts 9:1-9

This morning, in our ongoing study of the book of Acts, we come to Acts 9:1-9. This text is a plot development story. It records an event so monumental that the name at the center was to become perhaps the greatest Christian theological figure of all time. His name in the text is Saul, but later it will be changed to Paul, the Apostle Paul. This text tells of his encounter with the risen Christ that both strikes him down, turns him around, and sends him fumbling in the dark (temporarily) in a totally new direction.

This text gives us the account of what happened that day on the road to Damascus. But it also teaches us important theological truths about God, about us, about how we treat God, and perhaps most importantly who it is that actually directs the Church. In this passage, it is most clear that Saul (or later Paul) did not “choose” to become a believer. God chose Him! God turned him around and sent him off in a new direction. Paul came to be perhaps “THE” leader of the early church because God appointed him to that position. He did not choose God, God chose him!

I know we are only taking the first section of this text, and rest assured that the sermon this morning will be shorter (relatively speaking, of course) due to the presentation earlier, but I still believe there is a great deal we can glean from Saul’s Damascus Road experience. Follow along as I read this great text. READ Acts 9:1-9.

Main point: The gospel is on display when God takes an enemy and turns his life around.

As should be obvious, I believe there is purpose behind the fact that God specifically chose Saul. In other words, He determined to strike down this one out of the whole party. He chose the one who was perhaps most fiercely against Him. He didn't choose the good man, the morally upright but spiritually blind, one who just needed a final nudge or confirmation. He chose the rebel, the zealot, the one who hated Christians. God chose the least likely. Why? I believe it was to prove a point, that this Church of Jesus Christ is led by Christ Himself, not by us, not by people of our choosing. He didn't choose you because you were so good. In fact it was this same Saul who would later say about himself (paraphrasing I Timothy I) God chose me as an example that if He can save Paul, He can save anyone! This is the account of God intervening in Saul's rebellious life and turning him around. (3 parts)

I. God stops rebellious people in their tracks by shining His light on their darkness. vv.I-3

Not only did He do this with Saul, but He has a habit of doing this. Perhaps He did this with you in such a dramatic way. But it also reminds us that we can't always predict whom God might want to save and use. We tend to pick out the good and seemingly godly. But God often shows His power by going after the worst, the ones mired in darkness and sin, who are headed in the exact wrong direction. And when He does, it causes quite a stir, by plan!

v.I- Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples.

The "meanwhile" takes us back to Acts 8:3 where Saul was seeking out Christians to put them in prison. In that context, the encounters between Philip and the sorcerer and the Ethiopian eunuch took place. While those good things were happening, Saul was still carrying out his campaign to wipe out this band

of renegade Jews who were followers of Jesus. So both the good and bad were happening at the same time.

The things we notice here is that Saul seems to be leading the charge, and his intents were severe, murderous, threatening limb and life. His intent was to KILL followers of Jesus. He was zealous against them. Now, why was he doing this? What had these followers of Jesus done against him? We are not told specifically, but it seems clear to me based on context and how he frames it later as he reflects back on his life. Saul was a Pharisee, one whose identity was wrapped up in zealously understanding and living out the Jewish faith. If the standards of the Law were this, he did this plus that. If it called for one day of fasting, he fasted for a week. The Pharisees were known for going above and beyond.

Then, along comes this sect of “Jesus freaks,” who turned all the seeming central truths on their heads. They believe that the Messiah had come, but He was put to death. They believed that being true to the God of Scripture meant becoming a follower of this Jesus, the officially recognized failure of a Messiah. Saul saw them as misguided phonies, who were an affront to the true Jewish faith. He saw them not as a foreign faith, but as a false understanding of the Jewish faith. He saw them in a similar way that I would see the Jehovah’s Witnesses or the Mormons. They are not other faiths, but dangerous distortions of our faith. This is Saul’s attitude toward Christians. And so, it makes sense that he would set out to stop them...whatever the means. Stop them, put them in prison, kill them if necessary! Saul was the great defender of the Jewish faith.

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.

Being a man of the law, he sought official permission to carry out his mission. But notice here that he went to the high priest, who was surely in

Jerusalem, to receive permission to go to Damascus and bring back these renegades. It is not that he was content to eliminate them in Jerusalem. He sought to go “there” and stop them and bring them back to Jerusalem where they might receive the just rewards of their rebellion. You have to stop this movement from spreading. This is zeal. Saul was a zealot! We see here and will see elsewhere that one of the earliest names of this group of Christ followers was the Way. The term “Christians” will not show up until chapter II. Here they are simply known as “the Way.” We are not told why, but I suspect it has to do with the path to God, with the thought recorded by John in his gospel (14:6) that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, and that no one comes to the Father but by Him. I see here the same thought. If you want to please this Yahweh, this God of Scripture, be a part of the Way, those on the path Jesus established. You might say this title thumbs their noses against their zealous counterparts in the Jewish faith. Do you want to please God? Follow Jesus, join us on the Way.

So, Saul wanted official permission to go out and find these rebels, all of them, including men AND women. He wanted to eradicate them completely. I’d say that is at the bottom of the barrel.

3 As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.

We are not told that it was lightning. I always think of it as lightning, but it need not have been so. In Acts 26, it seems like sustained light. All I know is that it came suddenly, from above and instantly lit up the whole scene, if only for a second. God showed up in the midst of the rebellion and said, “Go no further!” Interesting, God let him get almost there. I would have stopped him in Jerusalem, before he got far. But God’s sense of timing sometimes waits until late, at precisely the right moment. But then WHAM! I suspect such a tactic highlights the switch, the drama, it reveals His hand in a big way rather than a small way. Many times, perhaps most times God is subtle, but sometimes He

has (shall we say) a flair for the dramatic! “You shall not pass!”

II. The risen and ascended Jesus is zealous to protect and lead what is His. vv. 4-6

So far, I have referred to this divine being simply as God. But here, when He speaks and identifies Himself, we see that He is Jesus. You know, this Jesus whom people like Saul thought they had eradicated when they crucified Him. Here Saul finds out He is very much alive, able to speak, powerful, and zealous for His own. Attacking His followers is attacking Him.

4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

As we see so often in Scripture, when you are in the presence of Holy God, you immediately fall to the ground. Indeed, John records such a thing about the soldiers who came to arrest Jesus. When He identified who He was “I am (he)” they fell to the ground involuntarily. I see the same thing here. The light from heaven flashes and Saul falls to the ground. The interesting thing here is that Saul’s experience was different from his travel companions. More on that in a bit. But with Saul now laying on the ground, a pleading voice cries out, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” This is an interesting question to me. We already know why. We’ve articulated it. But from the perspective of the Savior, it makes no sense. Why do you hate and hope to hurt your Savior, your Messiah? We will see this voice identify his identity in a moment, but before we get there, I want you to notice that persecuting Christians is persecuting Christ. Saul never met Jesus. Saul was not hurting Jesus, except that he was. To hurt His people is to hurt Him. I think this is an important principle. I think we ought to remember this. He hurts for us. He defends us. He takes issue with those who take issue with us. It is not that Jesus does not know why here, but that it makes no sense. It is a dumb thing to do.

5 “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied.

By his question, I take it that Saul recognized the voice as coming from heaven and having authority, but he doesn't recognize it. This encounter doesn't fit his understanding of God. Why? Because he has been on a mission on behalf of God. So, if arresting Jesus followers defends Yahweh, his God, then who is this divine figure taking issue with him for doing so? He knows this voice has authority (Lord), but he just can't identify who it would be. It doesn't fit his mold.

Jesus responds with His personal name. Can you imagine Saul's shock when he heard that? Can you imagine the craziness going on inside his brain? Jesus was put to death as a false Messiah. He died!...I guess He's still alive and kickin'! Notice He is both powerful and gentle. He is protective and merciful. This conversation is both directive and inviting.

6 “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

Again, I can only imagine how Saul processed this information. He is now ordered to get up and go on with his journey, but now under this voice's authority. And this Jesus' authority will be carried out by someone else. For now, Saul didn't need to know what it will be. “Get up soldier. You under my authority. I will tell you what to do!” I don't see any choice here. I see the word “must”. This “fake messiah” is now Saul's commander. Oh yes, Saul's world has changed!

Pause for a second. Some of you will recognize what I am about to say because we hashed it out in Wednesday night's Bible study, and we hashed it out from a different perspective with the college students on Thursday night. There are several truths about a relationship with Christ that seem to be contradictory but are both true at the same time. Jesus came to set us free. And if He sets us free, we are free indeed. Right? But it is also true that we are now His slaves, His servants, His prisoners. All of those terms will one day be written by this same Saul/Paul when he pens so much of the New Testament. But the point is that our freedom was never intended by God to mean under no authority. It means being freed up to be able to do things that please God. And we DO have an authority over us. We have a Lord!

This submission to His authority is not automatic, instantaneous, nor easy. In fact, we have to regularly pray that His will would be done and not our own. We pray that it would get to the point like it is in heaven, where His will is perfectly and completely done. We must commit ourselves on a daily basis to be a good soldier, a good servant. We must get to the point where we see ourselves as a prisoner of Christ. So, how are you doing???

III. When Jesus directs your life, He leads you one step at a time. vv.7-9

7 The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone.

As I said, Saul was the target, not them. Why? We are not told. All we know is that they saw part of what was going on, it was quite a shock to them, but it made no sense. They were dumbfounded.

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.

Saul is blinded by the experience. Why? To turn him around and give him a taste of what this new life was like. He could only see what Jesus wanted him to see. He had to give up his autonomy. Instead of being the man that everyone followed and obeyed, he was going to have to learn to follow, to be obedient himself. This zealous rebel was now the blind man.

Think of his fellow travelers. They went from men on a mission with letters of permission following their brave warrior to guides for a blind man, leading him to an unknown location, where they will meet some unknown people, for some unknown reason. Their world too was turned upside down, but not in the same way as Saul. And Saul would stay in this state for three days, blind and helpless. Huh! This sounds like an intentional period of time, three days. His commander made him wait.

Can you see the point here that God picked Saul out of a crowd? His plan is not general and vague and meant the same for everyone. His plan is specific, targeted, with a plan known to Him and laid out for His people with just enough information to get them to the next step. "Go to this spot and then someone will meet you there and tell you what to do next." Does this sound to you like living out the will of God?

If we believe this passage is the Word of God, then what should be different about our lives?

I) We will not be surprised when God chooses the least likely to do something for Him.

2) We will be humbled and encouraged by Jesus' perspective about us and what happens to us.

3) We will see ourselves as people under His authority.

4) We will follow Him by faith, not needing to see the big picture to move forward.