

## *Blinded by the Light: The Conversion of Paul*

Acts 9:1-19

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Alleluia; all I have is Christ. That very confession, that very proclamation of trust and of foundation for life and for identity would become the very kind of thing that the apostle Paul would say. It's hard to believe, however, honestly, when you consider where he came from. And that is precisely what we are going to do this morning. We're going to look at the conversion of Paul, as he was blinded by the light. We turn now to God's Word, Acts chapter 9, verses 1 through 19, as we continue to unpack the book of Acts, at the various conversions. We were together looking at the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch, and now we turn to Paul, and again very soon we will be looking at the conversion of Cornelius. Let's hear now God's Word: Acts chapter 9.

But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground he 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 rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." And the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name." But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; and taking food, he was strengthened.

For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus.

This is the word of God. Thanks be to God.

Aside from the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, chronicled for us in the gospels, there is perhaps no other more important figure in all of the New Testament than the apostle Paul. He is responsible for writing thirteen of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. He would be the one who would be the chosen instrument of God to take the gospel to the Gentiles. We, as a body of Christ in 2014, give testimony to the fact that we are the recipients of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, because that gospel

came to the Gentiles which would eventually reach our forbears which now brings us into existence. But Paul did not begin as Paul. He began as Saul of Tarsus. And so we look this morning at what is one of the most poignant and most beautiful passages in all of the New Testament, of his conversion, of Saul of Tarsus being blinded by the light, so that he might be an instrument of the light, Jesus Christ. So let's look together at this passage. You'll see there are three points: he was an extremist; you'll see there was a revolution; as well as a pattern. An extremist, a revolution, a pattern. So together, let's look again at these verses.

You'll see in verses 1 and 2, we learn that Paul was, in fact, an extremist—and yes, I'm using that phrase as we know it now. Paul would not have been considered an extremist in his day, but looking back on his life as one who persecuted the church, it's very clear that Paul was an extremist by all of our modern terminology. It was a religious extremism. And that was seen by first, in fact, in that he was blinded—again, from our perspective, not from Paul's—he was blinded by rage. He saw his rage as being perfectly righteous. In verses 1 and 2 we learn of what it tells us in very quick order, but in very painful detail. Notice what it says: "Still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, he went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus."

Damascus, at this stage in history, was at times seen as a place of refuge. We know, as we've been walking through the Book of Acts, that Christians were already under persecution in Jerusalem. They fled Jerusalem, and one of the places that they fled to was Damascus. Damascus was not under the same kind of rule that Jerusalem was, and so there were pockets and places of refuge. But here what we see is that Paul had what we would call in modern terms letters of extradition. So he would go to the chief priest, get permission, and he was simply given letters, if you will, that were blank checks. And he was given those letters, and he would travel to Damascus, and he would go to the various synagogues in Damascus, and if he found anyone who was a convert to "the way", as it was known, to the Christian way, he would simply be able to take them—men *and* women, as we heard earlier in the Book of Acts—families, they would go door to door. And as we would hear from Paul later in the biographical sections of his testimony before rulers, later in the Book of Acts and in other places—we know that he would take men and women, and he would take them, and he would bind them, and he would take them back to Jerusalem where they would be punished. What was their punishment? In their refusal to convert or to deny Christ, they would receive a death sentence—at best, life imprisonment and definite torture. No doubt about it.

Now, from Paul's perspective, this was neither religious extremism nor was it a blind rage; it was *all* the rage. It made complete sense. Paul was, in God's name, seeking to honor the name of the Lord and to protect the people of God, Israel, and to protect the Word of God, the Old Testament, from heresy. And so Paul believe that he was doing God's will by seeking out those who were blaspheming God's name by claiming that Jesus was the Son of God who became man, was wrongfully tried as the Son of God, was nailed to a tree, was given a death sentence as the Son of God, and was raised on the third day. And their teaching the gospel that Jesus taught was itself blasphemy against the honor and character of God, because it would lead others to break the law of God. For example, the Sabbath. Saul believed that he was carrying out the righteous calling that was placed on his life.

We know—as Pastor Tim will unpack for us later, and so I don't want to steal his thunder as he'll be looking at this evening Philippians chapter 3—but consider for just a moment the way in which Paul—this is not an interpreter talking about Paul; this is Paul talking of himself in regard to his religious commitment—he said, as we heard earlier, he was circumcised on the eighth day; of the people of Israel; of the tribe of Benjamin; he was a Hebrew of Hebrews. In regard to the law, he was a Pharisee. As for zeal, persecuting the church. As for legalistic righteousness, he was faultless. But from our perspective, Paul was blinded to the truth of Christ, and he was blinded by his rage.

But do you know what is interesting? If we were to have Saul of Tarsus here—if we were all gathering together for a meal in the culture in which we live—which, by all reports, we're told, is going to hell in a hand basket—if we had Saul of Tarsus at a table around us, and if we were talking about the problems of culture, and we were to ask Saul of Tarsus what kind of life he led, do you know what he would tell us? He would tell us of the story of his commitment to the moral character of God, and he would bring out and teach backwards and forwards the glory of God's holiness in the moral Ten Commandments. And I tell you, we as professing Christians—if you are—we would look on that and say, "He is an ally!" You see? Morally upright, respectful—the Pharisees were not just a bunch of dunderheads. These were men who cared about purity, protecting themselves from the defilement of the world. They would want to worship and honor God in all of his glory and all of his power, and they would want to recall God's covenant promises. They would do all of those things—and I tell you, if you are a Christian, you would be tempted to put your arm around Saul and say, "My friend, look at the world! It's going to hell, isn't it?" Except when we realize that Paul would have looked at us and said, "*You are the problem.*"

And so, I want to say to you, in this day where we have extremist videos put up on Youtube and on our news programs on a regular basis—now of late, it's ISIS. And what are they doing? They're taking the lives of men and women who seek to oppose what they're doing, and who refuse to recant what they believe or what they have followed, and who refuse to bow the knee to Allah. And then they, for all to see, they take the life of that person—and are threatening to do more. We look at that, and we say, "Religious extremism!" We look at that and say, "See how horrible that is!" But my friends, if you are a Christian this morning, I want you for just a moment to remove your glasses through which we normally see Paul as an apostle, the author of thirteen books of the New Testament, and put on a different set of glasses to see Saul of Tarsus. He was the ISIS of his day. Do you see, in light of that, how incredible, how beautiful, and how unworldly and beyond imagination that God would choose to reach down and grab Paul by the neck, as it were, on his way to enact more violence against Christians, and he would claim him for himself? And he would be blinded by the light of heaven, the text tells us, to the point where he could not see though his eyes were open.

Now, I want you to think on that for just a moment. When you see pictures of ISIS zealots seeking to take out their violence against the west, against Christians, against anyone who is against them—have you ever looked at that screen and stopped for a moment, maybe put the DVR on pause, and prayed for the man who's getting ready to wield the knife? And I know perhaps what you're thinking—"Of course the *pastor* would ask that." Well here I'm gonna tell you something: as a pastor, *I* haven't done that. And the next thing you're gonna say is, "Well, we *should* do that." But the truth is, have we thought so little of just how powerful God's grace is? Why don't we pray like that? Is it that we have forgotten that God does this all the time? This is precisely what he does—he reaches down, and he takes this man for himself. Are we praying like that? Do we think it took Jesus to hang on the cross any longer to save us than it did to save Saul? Do we forget the miracle, the beauty, the steel trap of our own hearts, that it took God to pursue us, to change us? Are we any more righteous in our flesh than the worst of ISIS terrorists? The Bible says no. For all have gone astray, following after his own way, and have refused to acknowledge Christ. We are *all* in need of this amazing light of the grace of God. Are we praying like this? Have we forgotten this is what God does? And God means to do that right here in good old Howard County.

Recently, talking with a friend who was at a large box store in our community. And he went up to the counter, and the woman behind the counter was in a burka head dress. And then he noticed around him—he was one of ten people standing around—he noticed that he was the only English speaking person around him. And he said 80% of those ten people were all Muslim, and wearing their religious outward uniforms. And he got really quiet, because he didn't want anybody else to hear, and he says, "I know I'm a Christian, but it's those people who are moving here." And he's right. Just on 144, a 65-acre piece of property has been purchased and is now being designed into a mosque that can seat close to

6,000 people. My friends, Howard County is the world at our door. Let me say, do we believe it's possible that if God can take Saul of Tarsus and turn him into the apostle Paul, author of thirteen books, is it not possible that God could take his hands to change the life of a Muslim imam or a faithful Muslim attending one of those mosques and make him the mightiest preacher in Howard County for the sake of Christ? Do we believe that God still works that way? Sometimes I do. I'm going to challenge you, if you are a professing Christian, to begin praying for those around you who do not know him—because you and I have no clue as to what God may do in the life of another. But we have an opportunity.

And let me just use this as a, if you will, an advertisement—on Sunday evening, November 2<sup>nd</sup>, we're going to be gathering here in this room, and we're going to watch a televised talk from a young man who has been working with the Ravi Zacharius ministry around the world and speaking on this subject: "Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus." His testimony and his preaching are powerful because he's testifying as to what God can do, and that is precisely why I'm so thankful this is here; because God wants us to see that this is precisely what he wants to do. He wants to bring not just an extremist to himself; he also, through the conversion of Paul, wants to show us a revolution that is necessary—not just for Saul, but for all of us. Let's see it, in verses three through sixteen. What we hear is we hear Saul being blinded, being escorted to a house in Damascus where we see, because God tells Ananias so, that God is clearly continuing to speak and give visions to Saul. Saul has been completely undone. That blindness that he has been given, I do believe, is meant for Saul to finally understand that he was so blind to the fact that he was persecuting God and not serving God—he was blind to that fact. So now he has a physical blindness so he can truly begin to see again, and begin to see who Christ is.

What took place in those three days where he was blind and didn't eat or didn't drink? What happened was nothing short of a revolution. That revolution is two things. First, it was the fact that he received a new center. You see, Paul in his life, like all of us, has a center—we call it the heart. Paul's problem wasn't first and foremost his brain; it was his heart. At the middle of all of our hearts is like a living, organic magnet, and that magnet helps us gain an organizing principle: we call it what we love, what we desire, what we want. What was the organizing principle of Saul of Tarsus? Yes, as a Pharisee he remembered God's covenant promises. Yes, he remembered that God brought Israel out of Egypt. Yes, he believed that God is gracious and good and glorious.

All those things are true, but the one thing that organized his life, that organized the Pharisees lives—and by the way, we're able to discover this because of a great archaeological find in 1947: the Kumran Discoveries. Here we see the rules and regulations that surrounded Palestinian Judaism, of which Paul was a part, and the way they lived their lives. You know what the organizing principle was? Law. The organizing principle for Paul, the magnet in the center of his life that gave breath to everything he did, was about the law—being obedient to the law, making sure he didn't do what the law told him not to do—and so he sought to live his life in the flesh, trying to maintain a righteousness before God. That is precisely what he was doing.

But what happens in this encounter with the Lord is that that center is transformed. The law is displaced as the organizing principle, and Christ is now at the center. Christ is now the righteousness. Christ is now the one who has done all things, which is why Paul would say in 2 Corinthians 5 that God calls you to be reconciled to him because God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God. Amazing, because for Saul it was about how *I* obey, how *I* live, but now the new center is something else. And let me be absolutely clear: it wasn't that Jesus came in and looked at Paul—as one of my good German seminary professors said, Dr. Byer, he said "He didn't come along to Saul and say, 'Saul, well done. From the tribe of Benjamin? Great. A Hebrew of Hebrews? To be sure. You are circumcised? Wonderful? Born in Tarsus? Just what I was looking for. Trained under Gamaliel? Wonderful. Zealous against the church? Well, we'll have to talk about that one. What you need is a little

more faith, Saul. You are nearly there. Just come a little bit more and then you will have it made.' " Jesus was not coming along as an add-on to his already righteous life. What happened was, he saw that everything he had been doing—the trajectory of his life, the basis of his life—had no *life* in it. Jesus had to be his identity. Jesus had to be the foundation.

Now, some of you may say, "Well that was good for Saul, but we're not caught up in legalism really." *Really?* If you're a single person and have ever put an add on a dating website, have you ever felt the pressure, the legalism, to match up to what people might be looking for? Either the look, or the questions you answer and the way that you do? If you are an employee, you know what it's like to feel the pressure of your job coming in on you if you don't perform well. The fear of failure. If you have experienced anxiety and uncertainty and fear, you know something about stress, and stress is oftentimes—at least, many times—at least one indication that if we don't get something, our lives will fall apart. Now, that's not Pharisaical legalism, but that's a new kind of legalism. Many of you know precisely what I'm talking about.

If our lives are built on anything other than Christ, God in his love will allow those things to be shaken until we finally find our home in him—and Saul, now being made Paul, finds his home in this new center. Then Christ becomes what he says in Philippians—Christ has now become of such surpassing worth, surpassing greatness and glory, that he now considers everything, he says, "But whatever was to my profit I now consider a loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things." That surpassing greatness that was a product of this complete revolution in Saul's life now becomes the message to which he goes into synagogues almost immediately and begins preaching. And everybody looks at him and says, "You have gone nuts." And he's called to testify, and he says, "I am not nuts. You remember who I was! I am ceremonially clean. I have obeyed the law. But I persecuted Jesus, that I now proclaim to you, Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected." And he says, "Have I broken any law?" That's because a revolution had happened.

And that's precisely the revolution that must happen in each of our lives. We might be righteous, we might be obedient—on the outside, we might be putting up the good front, checking off all the boxes, whatever those boxes might be on a given day or given week—but on the inside, where no one else can see, that foundation is crumbling. And I come to you this morning with all candor and yet all humility and all grace, and say to you, aren't you tired of running? God's grace and message to you this morning is: all you are to have is Christ. Alleluia, alleluia; all I have is Christ.

But there is also a pattern. A pattern here to Paul's conversion. In verses 17 through 19 we see the pattern. I'm so glad that Ananias is retained here in this text. I'm so glad we get to hear of what God said to Ananias, because Ananias is going, "What? Are you cra—okay, you're not crazy, Lord—but *really?* That guy hates us, you know!" And he says—I love this—he says, "Lord, I've heard many things about this man," as if he's trying to let God know, "Don't you remember who this guy is? How much evil he's done to the saints in Jerusalem?" And he says, "And here he has authority by the chief priests to bind all who call on your name, Lord." Ananias is trying to remind God of what God already knows. Okay, just pause, because I can't. How many of you, how many of us who claim the name of Christ, are no different than Ananias? Who is God calling us to take the word of the gospel to, who we think and say back to the Lord, "Are you nuts? They hate Christians! They hate the church. They don't believe in God." Or, "They're Jewish." Or, "They're Muslim." Or, "They're Buddhist. They've been that way all their lives." The Lord is calling Ananias here to do what the pattern shows us. And here's the pattern.

The pattern first is: it is God who is sovereign in salvation. Not us—we don't choose the terms. It is God who sends us out. The rest is up to him. Even the sending of us out is up to him. He's calling you today—

go out! And what he does is, God is so sovereign in demonstrating to us that it's his work to draw Saul's heart to himself, and he says to you as a Christian: your job is not trying to convince someone into the kingdom; your job is simply to bear witness to my name. And it is God who is sovereign.

But here is what God is sovereign about: God is sovereign about making Christ known to the world, not as a message to be "you're going to be happier if you become a Christian"—because you probably won't—you might become more joyful, but happiness we have no clue and no promise. Jesus is not an add-on to your already well-lived life. Jesus is not coming in to give us good advice. God is sovereign to make one thing known: he gave his Son the name Jesus because he was to save his people from their sins. God is sovereign about bringing conversion and redemption into individual hearts and individual lives. Not just giving a blanket blessing, but about coming in and giving one person, one woman, one child, one man at a time. This is what God is about. This is an example of what God is about, because that's the pattern, if there is one. And he uses the likes of Christians like you to send you out to bear witness to the name.

Here's another thing. Here's the pattern to conversion: there is no pattern. What I mean is this: this is how Saul was brought to the Lord and called, now, Paul. We saw with the Ethiopian eunuch how he came to the Lord—very different than Saul. We'll see how Cornelius becomes a professing Christian—very different, yet again. We see the earlier Christians, earlier on in the Book of Acts as we've seen, they come about in a different way. All that is to say this—and I heard it explained years ago through this illustration—if you're a mother here today and you have more than one child, you know that each pregnancy was different. Was it not? Each delivery was different. Were you to sit down this afternoon and write down what the pregnancy was like, what the delivery was like between each of your children, there might be some similar things, but they were very different. The same is the case for how people come to Christ. Some of you can't remember a day that you did not profess faith in Jesus Christ, but that is no less glorious or more glorious than someone who became a Christian as a teenager or as an adult. Some come to Christ because one person shared the gospel with them. Others come to Christ because they couldn't find another radio station to work on a cross-country road trip and they could only find that preacher, and they were changed. It happens in a multitude of ways, but the one fact is true: God is about salvation, and about redeeming human beings and making them a part of the body of Christ, based on the work and the beauty and the righteousness of Jesus.

Is the Lord done doing this? Thanks be to God, he is not. Are there many people and people-groups to whom the gospel must go because the Lord is sending the likes of us? Yes. Does the Lord want to bring about people who are converted to the name of Christ here in Howard County? Yes. And around the world? Yes. Because the Lord wants us all to be able to sing, "Alleluia; all I have is Christ." May the Lord do that in our midst this morning. If you are not a believer, I invite you this morning to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior. Do not put it off another hour, another day, another week. Receive him as your Savior. If you are a Christian, may God give you eyes to see that the fields are ripe for the harvest. The laborers are few, but if you're a Christian, he's sending you today. Let's pray.

Every single one of us who calls on the name of Christ is here this morning, Lord Jesus, because someone bore witness to your name. All of us who call on the name of Christ are here because you, Lord, caused a revolution in our heart to trust in Jesus Christ. All of us, outside of Christ, are blind, but the light has come. Jesus Christ was made flesh and made his dwelling known among us, and he was full of grace and truth. Now, Lord, by your spirit, work that grace and truth in us. Father, for that man or woman, boy or girl who does not know you here this morning, I pray, call them to yourself and show them the beauty, the glory of the love of God in Christ, and give courage to everyone who calls on your name, to make you known. And now, in the name that is above every name, and the only name in heaven and on earth that we have been called to pray, we say, in the name of Christ, amen.