

Scripture Reading:

Acts 9: "1 Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2 and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. 3 As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. 4 Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" 5 And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads." 6 So he, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" Then the Lord said to him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." 7 And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one. 8 Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. 9 And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank. 10 Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." 11 So the Lord said to him, "Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying. 12 And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him, so that he might receive his sight." 13 Then Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. 14 And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name." 15 But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. 16 For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake." 17 And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." 18 Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized. 19 So when he had received food, he was strengthened. Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus.

"The Conversion of Saul of Tarsus"

This morning we begin our study of Saul of Tarsus, who the world today knows as the Apostle Paul. The Apostle Paul is well-known and much studied:

- **Beloved in the eyes of the Saints and hated even today by many others who reject the Good News.**

We talked last week about the importance of knowing our Bibles... If we do there are many major figures that we will come to know:

Adam and Eve as our first parents are introduced in the first chapter of Genesis and are discussed all the way up to the New Testament Epistles. We know of Noah who was saved from the flood, Abraham who God made many promises too as well as his extended family ending with Joseph ruling in Egypt. Then we come to Moses and Joshua who deliver God's people and conquer the land of Canaan. We know the judges and King Saul and then King David and those who sit on his throne like his son Solomon and the other Kings.

- **The prophets both warn God's people about the gravity of their sin and also tell of the hope they have in the Messiah to come.**

The New Testament opens with the last prophet John the Baptist who comes as the voice crying in the wilderness to make straight the way for God's Son Jesus. We meet His mother Mary, Simeon and Anna at the Temple, He picks twelve disciples and there are various women who care for them all. Then we have two gentlemen who come late in the telling of God's great story of salvation:

Dr. Luke, whose orderly account we are studying comprises almost a third of the New Testament... And now he introduces us to Saul of Tarsus, who we come to know as Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles!

- **A man who would turn the world upside down and write the greatest number of books in the New Testament!**

Now we pointed out last week that the serious study of our Bibles would lead to questions and in a certain way the answer was always Jesus! In this brief Bible survey we see many of the major characters in the story of God's salvation and we should know them all very well...

- **But the story is not about them, it is about Jesus and it is to Jesus they all will take us, if we listen to them with obedient ears of faith!**

If you get into a serious discussion about life today, you will often hear it said that what you are saying is just your opinion...

- **Or if you appeal to the Bible they will smugly say, "that is just YOUR interpretation of what the Bible says!"**

When we come to the conversion of Saul of Tarsus there will be important lessons for us to learn so we know better how to answer such attacks...

- **Attacks that will come if we are faithful to our calling to take the Good News to the entire world.**

We would rightly argue that Jesus is the center of God's story of Salvation, but there will be many who argue this point. Obviously the Jewish people think that Jesus and His followers messed everything up with all of their stories and accounts and that we should stick JUST with what God has given in the Old Testament, seeing all the promises about a Messiah as fulfilled now in the Jewish people as a whole or just being fables and stories that help us understand life.

There are those who say they believe in Jesus but think that much of the New Testament is now cluttered with the same type of stories and fables... They would argue that Jesus did not really walk on water or do other miraculous things: They were added later to make Him look good.

They would tell us that if we want to see the real Jesus and what lessons He would teach us you must ignore them, the way the Thomas Jefferson did when he wrote his own New Testament without these miracles! And finally there are those who REALLY get upset with the Apostle Paul and all of his writings... They think that he came along as a proud man who had his own ideas about what "Christianity" should be and really changed all of the great things that Jesus taught about loving everyone and being nice!

Then of course you have the modern skeptics who like some of the clever teachings we find in the Bible but insist that it is just all made up... A wise person in today's great Universities will tell us that we must leave behind such myths so we can believe in all the great advances of science and the human mind... Which of course are nothing more than some advanced mud and rocks that have cleverly managed to evolve all by themselves into what we see and experience today!

- **As we get to know the Apostle Paul we will see a man who preaches Jesus and Jesus ONLY!**

We will see a man who confronts both the religious & secular skeptics and we will see a man we turn to very often if we are serious about living the Christian life we are called to in our season of ordinary time: Hearing and obeying what the Scriptures would teach us as Paul gives practical advice on marriage, children, church life, giving and of course, how to turn the world upside down in our day!

- We will begin to put all the skeptics in their places this morning with the account of his conversion.

It is given in detail at three different points here in Acts and mentioned often by Paul in his other writings. The Bible is God's book so it should not surprise us that it comes to us from history with the most reliable evidence and accurate copies. With the Bible we are studying thousands of copies and fragments that have survived down to our day. With other major writings like the works Julius Caesar we have ONE! There are other major players in history we know of only because others have talked about them. And yet, with all of this evidence and three different accounts there are those who argue that we know little about Paul or his conversion!

- They argue that we just can't be sure about what happened that day on the road to Damascus and the accounts that we have are full of contradictions, so how can we trust them?

We will consider all three accounts as we come to them in our study of Acts, but I have included them in today's order of worship as a little homework assignment for you to take on individually or even during your family meals or devotions.

- As those who have confidence in the Bible, we don't have to fear such study or give long explanations about what is really being said.
- It is really pretty simple, IF we simply let the text speak as the author of the text intended that text to speak!

This does not mean ignoring obvious errors because the Bible is a spiritual book and it does not have to get the details or facts of this world right!

- Sadly, many take this position.

In these accounts people bring up questions about whether the men with Paul stood or fell down, whether they heard the voice of Jesus or not. They do so because the various accounts could appear to be giving a different take on what happened. Yes, this is another place where those who want to find contradictions in the Bible have a field day...

- But it is also one of the silliest and actually makes our case for how God has preserved His revelation down to our age!

If we consider what is given honestly, we see how God does in fact give us true history, with great insights, while teaching us many wise things.

First we should consider why we even have these accounts to study... They were all written by Luke in the Book of Acts at chapters nine, twenty-two and twenty six. [Please remember that all three were written by the same man in the same book, a point that I will come back to it in a moment.]

- We must also remember that Luke's source for all three was very likely Paul himself.

They were traveling companions for years, but Luke was dependent on others for the proper history of what happened up until he begins his first-hand accounts in chapter 16 of Acts.

- **AND of course we must also remember that all of Scripture is God-breathed and not provided by the will of men...**
- **The Holy Spirit is the ultimate author of the entire Bible!**

SO, with all of that, a single author, a single source and the Holy Spirit guiding each word, do you think we are going to find contradictions in these accounts?

What do you think kids, does God know how to tell a true story? Seems like a silly question: But you would not believe how many ‘educated’ people get really confused at this point!

And of course the really ‘smart’ ones think that we are just being very naive in believing that we have a reliable Bible in the first place. They would smugly declare that this book is just a bunch of myths written by the early church fathers and forced upon us as something we must believe so they can control us!

These accounts, with the so-called contradictions in them, are one of the biggest problems they have in trying to discredit the Bible in this way! Remember, three accounts from one source, three accounts written by the same man in the same book and three accounts in the Bible that we say the Spirit has inspired.

- **Now the skeptics say none of this is true, but rather it was made up later by other men...**

Then why did these same men not fix these ‘obvious’ contradictions? If Paul’s friends are clearly falling down in one account why have them ‘standing speechless’ in the other? You see, IF this was a man-made book, changed at well by those in the church over the years as they claim...

- **Then these simple things would certainly have been changed.**

IF on the other hand it is God’s revelation that has been faithfully preserved down through the ages for us to have today ...

- **Then we have it as it was written & we have to study & understand why it was written this way!**

That was an important rabbit trail to remind us again of last week’s lesson:

- **This is God’s book and it is telling God’s story!**

As you can see in the order of worship we do have three rather lengthy accounts of Paul’s conversion: Luke gives us the account of what happens here in Acts 9. In Acts chapter 22, Paul give his testimony, if you will, to the Jewish crowd in Jerusalem and then again to King Agrippa at Caesarea in Chapter 26.

We will look briefly this week at what happened from Paul’s perspective... We will consider his conversion again next week from God’s perspective, and then Lord willing in two weeks Mike will teach us about the immediate result of this dramatic conversion.

Luke presents quite a contrast with two men who we see leaving Jerusalem: Phillip the evangelist brings the Good News to Samaria and impacts far off lands by converting men like the Ethiopian eunuch.

- **Someone who the Saints would be happy to see!**

Then comes Saul of Tarsus... He leaves Jerusalem as one who is breathing threats and murder against the disciple of the Lord!

- **Luke tells us that Phillip brought much joy to Samaria...**
- **We see from the reaction of Ananias that people greatly feared the coming of Saul.**

One of the important lessons that I trust we will learn in the coming weeks is how God uses BOTH of these men to further His Kingdom! It serves as a gentle warning about how little we often see of the big picture...

- **And how careful we must be in judging how God will deal with others, especially in the Church!**

Saul was a very proud man who had very specific plans for what he was going to do for God...

- **This was all going to change on this road to Damascus!**

This is one of four places in the New Testament where we see the appearance of Jesus in all His glory. The three disciples saw Him on the mount of transfiguration; Stephen saw Him standing at God's right hand; and the Apostle John will see Him on the Isle of Patmos.

Here Jesus comes as a great light... It is described as a light from heaven and before King Agrippa Paul says it was brighter than the sun! *[remember the light experiment?]*

Those with Saul hear a mighty sound of a voice that speaks only to Saul *[there, I just solved one of the great contradictions!]* Now Saul was breathing threats and murders against the disciples of the Lord, but notice what Jesus says...

- **"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting ME?"**
- **Saul asks who is speaking, and the answer is "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting!"**

Saul was picking on the bride and now the husband takes offense! We know this is true in our earthly marriages...

- **So it should not surprise us to see it here and it should bring great comfort.**

It is here in our passage from Acts 9 that Christians are first referred to as Saints and here as well we see Jesus taking great offense when His Saints are persecuted.

- **Jesus makes it clear that to persecute the Church is to persecute Him!**

This should cause those skeptics we discussed earlier to fear and it should also cause us to be careful how we treat others in the Lord's Church! We will discuss the reference to the goads next week, but for now we see a converted Saul of Tarsus who quickly says, "Lord, what do You want me to do?"

- **In considering Saul conversion from the human perspective the most important lesson is once again obedience!**

With both Saul and Ananias, we see simple obedience resulting in the advancement of God's Kingdom. Saul is blinded but he obeys Jesus and journeys to Damascus where he spends the next three days in fasting and prayer.

- **Then God chooses to use a common believer named Ananias to come and baptize the once proud Saul and announce his great calling as the Apostle to the Gentiles!**

But as God does so we see the lesson of obedience again: God tells Ananias to go and visit Saul of Tarsus telling him exactly where he is staying.

- **Ananias, as we so often want to do, needs to remind God that He may not fully understand all that has been happening!**

Word had reached Damascus that Saul was on his way with orders to arrest the followers of Jesus... So Ananias lets God know about this and that Saul has come to Damascus to 'bind all who call on your name.'

- **God is very patient with Ananias which is something we should rejoice in!**

The Lord says, “Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel!” Just as the angel did for Mary, faithful Ananias is given an explanation and then he quickly obeys... As a result the scales fall from Saul’s eyes, he is baptized and becomes the great leader of the early Church who by His own admission was “the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.”

Paul there in that 15th chapter of the first epistle to the Church at Corinth quickly adds “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, thought it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.”

- The once proud Saul of Tarsus is now the Apostle Paul who only boasts in the Lord!

What I want us to see this morning as we consider this conversion from the human perspective, is that we have two men who obeyed Jesus in two very different ways... We see Ananias as a quiet Saint who rightly fears to go where God calls him to go, but listens carefully to what is said and follows the instructions given. [I will give you a hint about the proper application for this morning: This is the better path to follow!]

Saul on the other hand is an example of a proud and stubborn man... We are not told just when Saul first encountered the teachings of Jesus and he may have even perhaps met Him during His earthly ministry. We do know that he rejected what Jesus taught and even the council of his mentor Gamaliel who wanted no violence when he consented to the murder of Stephen. This led to an angry man who was breathing threats and murders... Not a pretty picture.

But in the end Saul is also one who obeys... After a few of those proverbial two-by-fours

An appearance by the exalted Jesus, being confronted by his great sin, and three days of blindness certainly put Saul on the right course

- Saul enters Damascus in a much different way than he had planned!

It had to end this way because Saul was God’s chosen vessel!

- So the question for those of us who are God’s chosen vessels today, is how should we learn to obey our Lord’s directions?
- Willingly and quickly?
- Or brought kicking and screaming by those divine goads that cannot be resisted?

The answer should be obvious, but we see this pictured beautifully in Psalm 32 and it is something we should ponder each week as the Lord gathers us for right worship... King David begins where we do each week with the confession of sin and assurance of forgiveness:

“Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, Whose sin is covered. 2 Blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity, And in whose spirit there is no deceit.”

- Ananias had questions but brought no deceit and trusted the God of His salvation.
- We see more of Saul in verse 3:

“When I kept silent, my bones grew old Through my groaning all the day long. 4 For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; My vitality was turned into the drought of summer.”

- King David goes on to show how both have forgiveness and how God will protect them and preserve them:
- Then Jehovah speaks about obedience:

8 “I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will guide you with My eye. 9 Do not be like the horse or like the mule, Which have no understanding, Which must be harnessed with bit and bridle, Else they will not come near you.” God promises to be a loving Savior who instructs us gently and guides us with His eye, the way a trusted friend would do in times of trouble. Or you could think of a godly marriage where the couple seems to be able to communicate without a word!

The alternative is not as pretty or comforting:

- **The bit in the horse’s mouth which must be pulled this way or that from someone who is out of their line of sight!**

I am sure there is some of Ananias and some of Saul in all of us...

- **I am sure we can recall times where we saw God’s eye as He guided us**
- **And others where we had to be struck down like Saul**

King David certainly knew this was true in his life and so he could close Psalm 32 with these comforting words:

10 “Many sorrows shall be to the wicked; But he who trusts in the Lord, mercy shall surround him. 11 Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, you righteous; And shout for joy, all you upright in heart!”

Communion Meditation: I Corinthians 15:

Not what is in it for me, but rather for us... “26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes. 27 Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. 28 But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. 29 For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body. 30 For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep. 31 For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. 32 But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world.”