

The Acts of the Apostles

Sermon Number: 15

Acts 9:1-31

July 3, 2011

“Saul of Tarsus”

Acts 9:1-9

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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.

NKJV

Tomorrow is Independence Day, July 4th and we ought to thank the Lord Jesus Christ for His longsuffering towards this God-rejecting nation.

O Lord, all we can do is to beg for your mercy and ask that You give courage, integrity, and wisdom to our leaders.

In the bulletin today you will find a brief article about the Declaration of Independence and the opening paragraph.

We can segue into the “Independence Day” for some people in the Book of Acts.

There were about three thousand souls on the Day of Pentecost; a lame man at the Gate called Beautiful; and even many of the priests, to name a few, who received their freedom from the bondage of sin.

Do you know what it is to be free from the guilt and condemnation of sin?
Have you had your “independence day?”

We can look at independence in two ways.

Adam, the representative of the human race, wanted to be independent of God and his one sin ruined the entire human race. But the sinner who has been regenerated has gained independence over sin.

The saved sinner is still a sinner and he still sins but he is not a condemned sinner! In that sense he is independent of the absolute power of sin. He now has the power to not sin! Before a sinner is regenerated every thought and action is sinful. Even the plowing of the wicked is sin.

Proverbs 21:4
A haughty look, a proud heart,
And the plowing of the wicked *are* sin.

Now let's advance in our study of Acts and consider how God saved “the chief of sinners.”

1 Timothy 1:12-17

¹² And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting *me* into the ministry, ¹³ although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did *it* ignorantly in unbelief. ¹⁴ And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ *This is* a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. ¹⁶ However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life. ¹⁷ Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, *be* honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

In our last study in the Book of Acts we considered the account of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch. The title of that message was “The Right Place at the Right time.” It occurs to me that every genuine conversion of a lost sinner is the same, viz. being at the “right place at the right time.”

If you are saved there must be a time in your life that you became aware that you were lost and needed the righteousness of Jesus Christ to be justified by God.

Now I am not insisting that you must know the instant, day and hour that you were born again, but you must acknowledge that at some time you were lost and condemned and now you repent and trust Jesus Christ as your sufficient Savior.

And another thing that seems to be the case is that the salvation of a sinner is usually a surprise to the one who is being saved.

The Ethiopian Eunuch was a man of integrity and he didn't have the sense of being a lost sinner. He had come to Jerusalem to worship with the Hebrews and so he was a religious man. He observed the sacrifices in the temple and did not understand what they meant. That was the case of the vast majority of those offering the sacrifices. They just came to the temple did some religious things and then went home in the same lost condition that they were in when they came to the temple.

Do you suppose there are any people meeting with churches this morning that do not understand what the Gospel message is, if the preacher was to preach the Gospel?

That was the case with the Ethiopian Eunuch. He was going about the business of being the treasurer of the queen of Ethiopia and the Holy Spirit sent Philip to join him in his chariot and preach Jesus to him from Isaiah 53.

The Ethiopian Eunuch did not wake up that morning and decide that today he would come to know who Jesus is and repent and be saved.

If you are saved did you plan for it to happen exactly when it did?

Were you as surprised as he was?

Every genuine conversion is ordered by God the Holy Spirit who is sent forth by the God the Father and by God the Son to bring some lost sinner into the Kingdom of God.

That was what happened with the Ethiopian Eunuch and that is surely the case with Saul of Tarsus.

For the sake of some person who may be just beginning to study their Bible, Saul of Tarsus, the Pharisee becomes Paul the Apostle who wrote thirteen of the twenty-seven books in the New Testament.

It was along time ago, but there was a time that I didn't know a Bible from a Sears catalog.

Saul, the Pharisee, was absolutely sure that he was justified before God by his obedience to the Law. Saul was yet to learn what he wrote as Paul the Apostle to the church in Rome:

Romans 3:19-20

¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. ²⁰ Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law *is* the knowledge of sin.

As Paul the Apostle he will take his training in the Scriptures as a Pharisee and will prove from the Old Testament Scriptures that justification is by grace through faith alone. E.g., Abraham in Romans 4.

We were first introduced to Saul of Tarsus when he was consenting to the death of Stephen as the mob stoned Stephen to death. [Acts 7:58-8:1]

In their religious zeal without knowledge, the mob, made up of members of the Sanhedrin, gnashed at Stephen with their teeth, yelled at him with murderous hatred, dragged him outside the walls of Jerusalem and stoned him to death.

Ever the legalists, the first stones were cast by witnesses against Stephen.

Standing guard over the clothes of the witnesses was a young Pharisee named Saul. Saul approves of the murder.

A study of the life of Saul of Tarsus who becomes Paul the Apostle reveals a man who is always in the midst of intense and emotional activity.

In his lost condition Saul is legalistic, full of pride, and ignorant in his religious zeal. It is in this lost condition that he hears a dying man pray for the forgiveness of the men who are murdering him.

Saul sees the face of a man who has seen Jesus.

Could Saul imagine that he was about to become one of those of “the Way”?

Saul is about to be at “the right place at the right time” and he isn’t planning on it.

Saul is about to be surprised by grace!

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.

An in-depth study of Saul/Paul would be extremely helpful. I have no less than ten volumes on the life of Paul on my bookshelves.

However, for the purpose of this message I will give a brief introduction to Saul and call on what Luke records about him here in the Book of Acts. A more complete understanding of this man would require that his NT writings be studied for other personal data.

Saul was a young man. [Greek: *neaniou*: 24-40 years of age – 7:58]

Saul was a Jew and like every Jewish boy he began to learn the Scriptures at age five. [21:39; 22:3]

Saul was born in Tarsus, an important city in the province of Cilicia.

As a Roman citizen he had certain privileges and rights.

Acts 21:39

But Paul said, "I am a Jew from Tarsus, in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city; and I implore you, permit me to speak to the people."

Acts 22:25-29

²⁵ And as they bound him with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who stood by, "Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman, and uncondemned?"

²⁶ When the centurion heard *that*, he went and told the commander, saying, "Take care what you do, for this man is a Roman."

²⁷ Then the commander came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman?"

He said, "Yes."

²⁸ The commander answered, "With a large sum I obtained this citizenship."

And Paul said, "But I was born *a citizen*."

²⁹ Then immediately those who were about to examine him withdrew from him; and the commander was also afraid after he found out that he was a Roman, and because he had bound him.

Acts 16:37-38

³⁷ But Paul said to them, "They have beaten us openly, uncondemned Romans, *and* have thrown *us* into prison. And now do they put us out secretly? No indeed! Let them come themselves and get us out."

³⁸ And the officers told these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Romans.

Naturally, Saul spoke the Greek language and his writings show that he had a classical Greek education.

He also spoke Latin, Aramaic, and Hebrew.

Acts 21:40

So when he had given him permission, Paul stood on the stairs and motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great silence, he spoke to *them* in the Hebrew language,....

Acts 22:1-3

"Brethren and fathers, hear my defense before you now." ² And when they heard that he spoke to them in the Hebrew language, they kept all the more silent.

Then he said: ³ "I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers' law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today.

There are four more things about Saul:

He was raised in Jerusalem. He is in Jerusalem, "this city."

He was a disciple of the highly respected Pharisee, Gamaliel, and excelled in his rabbinical education. The studies for a Pharisee began at age thirteen.

He was an expert in Jewish law.

The reason he persecuted "the Way" was his zeal for God

It is difficult to picture the intensity of Saul's rage in your mind.

Saul is "breathing threats and murder." Saul had publically announced that he intended to kill every disciple of Jesus that he could arrest. Under the Roman law he did not have the authority to carry out an execution but he "made havoc for the church." [8:3]

If you think about the contemporaries of Saul, the mob who stoned Stephen, they would not consider him an evil man. And certainly Saul did not think himself to be evil. Saul was a "moral" man according to how he interpreted the law and the traditions of Israel.

Is there not a parallel with this twisted view of religion assumed by Saul and his fellow Pharisees and what passes for the "peaceful" religion of Islam?

Part of the genius of the Roman Empire was that when they conquered a state they allowed the state to be governed by its own laws as long as the laws did not threaten the control by Rome. Rome would take its taxes and pretty much leave them alone.

That explains why the Romans would allow the Sanhedrin to have power over the Jews in the various provinces in which they lived.

Under this arrangement all Saul needed was authorization from the high priest and he was “good to go” to persecute those of “the Way.” This permit from the high priest would be recognized by the government and the synagogue officials in every city.

And so Saul has his authority and heads out to Damascus. Damascus is 150 miles north of Jerusalem with a population of over 10,000 which means it would have had many synagogues.

And now the surprise!

Acts 9:3-9

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.

In a blinding light, brighter than the noon day sun, Saul and his party, temple guardsmen, are confronted by the Lord Jesus Christ.

Wait a minute, isn't Jesus dead?

Saul thought He was but is about to be surprised by the grace of God and the truth of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

This is the first of three accounts of Saul's conversion in Acts.

Cf. 21:37-22:21 & 26:1-32

“Saul, Saul....”

“Who are you, Lord?”

When the Lord saved me I did not hear an audible voice but it was just as clear to me that God was about to kill me and send me to hell.

My response was in some way like Saul's, "Who are you, Lord?"

Lord, you are not the Jesus whose name I used as a curse word.

Jesus, You are Lord!

In great mercy, Jesus identified Himself as the very one that Saul had been persecuting. By persecuting "the Way" Saul was persecuting Messiah.

In an instant everything that Saul was fighting against was turned into blinding Truth! **Jesus is not dead! Jesus is God!**

And Saul spends the rest of his life proving from the OT Scriptures that Jesus of Nazareth is the long expected Messiah.

Saul's Conversion is not a dream; it was a visible, personal appearance of the risen Christ. Peter and James and John, and others saw the risen Lord as infallible proof of His resurrection. [Acts 1:3]

Saul is going to spend three years with Jesus getting his interpretation of all of the OT Scriptures correct; but this is the beginning. His theology has just had a major adjustment. Paul writes about this in Galatians.

Galatians 1:11-24

¹¹ But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. ¹² For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught *it*, but *it came* through the revelation of Jesus Christ.

¹³ For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and *tried to* destroy it. ¹⁴ And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers.

¹⁵ But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called *me* through His grace, ¹⁶ to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood, ¹⁷ nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those *who were* apostles before me; but I went to Arabia, and returned again to Damascus.

¹⁸ Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days. ¹⁹ But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother. ²⁰ (Now *concerning* the things which I write to you, indeed, before God, I do not lie.)

²¹ Afterward I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. ²² And I was unknown by face to the churches of Judea which *were* in Christ. ²³ But they were hearing only, "He who formerly persecuted us now preaches the faith which he once *tried to* destroy." ²⁴ And they glorified God in me.

Jesus told Saul to get up, go into town, and wait for instructions. [9:6]

Saul was physically blinded but in his mind he saw clearly Jesus and the Church for the first time. The proud Pharisee had to be led into the city.

Saul is subdued. He fasted for three days, he waited, and he prayed.

Saul has a new "brother."

And Saul's new brother is reluctant to be in the presence of a man who has the authority to kill him.

Acts 9:10-14

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."

God the Holy Spirit had everything already worked out. Jesus confronts Saul and commands him to go into the city. At the same time the Lord spoke to a man named Ananias about Saul.

Ananias is not a refugee from Jerusalem; he is a highly respected member of the Jewish community in Damascus and he is a believer. [22:12]

It is probable that the Gospel had reached Damascus through people who had been in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. It is pure speculation but Ananias may have been in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. In any case Ananias was a believer and he knew all about Saul and what he was doing to “the Way.”

Acts 9:15-19

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.

There is an example here for us about how to consider other believers.

Ananias is rightfully afraid of Saul but after the Lord spoke to him he fully accepts Saul as a brother in Christ. **“Brother Saul...”**

Saul has learned some things that will shape his ministry for the rest of his life.

Jesus is Lord.

The Gospel is for the Gentiles as well as for the Jews; there is only one Gospel.

Saul is a “chosen vessel” of the Lord and he must suffer for the sake of Christ.

He immediately obeyed the command of the Lord Jesus Christ to be baptized.

[Matthew 28:19]

Saul preaches the Gospel

After his conversion Saul stayed in Damascus for a while. The raging Pharisee goes to the synagogues to preach to the Jews. The Jews are as dumfounded with the change in Saul as were the Christians.

Acts 9:20-31

²⁰ Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God.

²¹ Then all who heard were amazed, and said, "Is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name in Jerusalem, and has come here for that purpose, so that he might bring them bound to the chief priests?"

²² But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this *Jesus* is the Christ.

²³ Now after many days were past, the Jews plotted to kill him. ²⁴ But their plot became known to Saul. And they watched the gates day and night, to kill him. ²⁵ Then the disciples took him by night and let *him* down through the wall in a large basket.

²⁶ And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple. ²⁷ But Barnabas took him and brought *him* to the apostles. And he declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus. ²⁸ So he was with them at Jerusalem, coming in and going out. ²⁹ And he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus and disputed against the Hellenists, but they attempted to kill him. ³⁰ When the brethren found out, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him out to Tarsus.

³¹ Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied.

We have already read in Galatians 1:15-24 where Saul describes his transformation from a persecutor of the Way to a believer in Jesus Christ.

In summary:

Saul met Jesus on the road to Damascus and was converted

Ananias was sent to minister to Saul.

Saul preached the Gospel in Damascus.

Saul went to Arabia.

Saul returned to Damascus and preached for three years.

There was a conspiracy to kill Saul and he escaped over the wall in a basket.

He goes to Jerusalem.

Saul leaves Jerusalem and goes to Syria and Cilicia.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of Saul's ministry to the Gospel.

Of course, it is entirely of the Lord's doing, but Saul still had to do it!

As the Lord's "instrument" Saul devoted his life and resources to the ministry of the Gospel. This record of Saul will help us understand what he wrote in...

Romans 11:13

For I speak to you Gentiles; inasmuch as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry,...

Not every one has a "Damascus Road" experience but every believer knows what Saul learned. **Jesus is Lord!**

Have you had your "independence day?"

Repent and believe in the Gospel.