

Acts 9:1-30

The Conversion of Saul

Last week, we saw how a “young man named Saul [Paul]” was the driving force behind the “great persecution” that arose against the early church in Jerusalem. Luke tells us that after the stoning of Stephen, “Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he was delivering them into prison” (Acts 8:3). Saul himself will say later: “[N]ot only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons... but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them. And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme; and being furiously enraged at them [exceedingly out of my mind with rage], I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities” (26:10-11). At the beginning of Acts chapter nine, Saul was travelling on the road to Damascus (a 135 mile, five day journey by foot from Jerusalem), still breathing threat and murder against the disciples of the Lord.

On the one hand, Saul was full of zeal for the Law (for the Old Testament Scriptures) and for the traditions of his fathers. He really did believe with all his heart that the man, Jesus, had been an imposter and that therefore His Jewish followers were both deceived and dangerous deceivers. And yet Saul’s so-called “sincerity” was precisely what blinded him to the fact that he was a living lie—that in the very act of claiming to serve God with noble zeal, he was actually “exceedingly out of his mind with rage.” To make matters even worse, Saul’s wickedness was injected with an arrogant self-righteousness. He boasted in being a Hebrew of Hebrews; in being—as to the Law—a Pharisee, and as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found (by all his colleagues) blameless. Even as Saul went about breaking the law (breathing threat and murder), he boasted in that very law-breaking as the sign of his righteousness and of his zeal for God. He was, by his own later admission, an insolent man (*hybristes*), full of hybris.

Humanly speaking, Saul’s blindness was of the very worst and most “incurable” kind. He was utterly incorrigible. He was hardened in his sin. He was the great persecutor of the church, intent on destroying it—full of rage, murderous, insolent in his self-righteousness. And yet God saved him. We remember what Paul later wrote to Timothy: “Yet for this reason I was shown mercy, so that in me as the foremost [of sinners], Christ Jesus might demonstrate all His longsuffering patience [*makrothymia*] as an example for those who are going to believe upon Him for eternal life” (1 Tim. 1:16). Isn’t this why we all have hope—because not one of us, sinners though we all are, was outside the reach of God’s mercy and grace? All the emphasis in Acts 9 is on the irresistible saving and redeeming purposes of an all-powerful God—specifically, in the life of someone who, until the very moment that “God... was pleased to reveal His Son to [him]” (Gal. 1:15-16), was hell-bent on resisting those purposes and who was even raging exceedingly against them.

We remember how Saul was blinded by the glory of Jesus that shone around him. But if his physical eyes were blinded, now God has opened his previously blinded spiritual eyes—now God has given him spiritual eyes to see the true glory of Jesus in the Gospel. The point of Jesus’ appearance to Saul on the road to Damascus isn’t simply physical proof of a physical, historical fact. Simply to believe the physical, historical fact isn’t saving faith. We need to understand that apart from God’s sovereign, irresistible grace at work in Saul’s heart to change it and transform

it—to give him spiritual eyes to see, he would either have been struck dead at the revelation of Jesus’ glory, or he would have responded only with a further hardening of his heart—with a sullen and bitter silence or with an even greater rage and violence than before. I think of Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians chapter 4:

- 2 Corinthians 4:6 — For God, who said, “Light shall shine out of darkness,” is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

We’ve all heard the saying, “to see is to believe.” Ultimately, though, when it comes to the authority of God’s saving word, it’s the reverse that’s true: “To believe is to see.” It was this miracle of Saul’s spiritual eyes having been opened that was pictured by the “lesser miracle” of the scales falling from Saul’s eyes. The scales must be removed, too, from our eyes. God must give to us eyes to see. And this is just the miracle that God has promised to continue working in this world until Jesus comes again. We remember what Jesus said to Saul:

- Acts 26:16–18 — “[F]or this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a servant and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you; rescuing you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, **to open their eyes** so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the authority of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.”

And so we sing these words with Saul: “I once was blind, but now I see.” And because we see—because of who it is and what it is that we see—we’re changed. We’ve been radically converted, so that we’re no longer the person we used to be, but a whole new creation in Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17).

The Calling of Saul

We’ve talked before about the difference between the *Ordo Salutis* and the *Historia Salutis*. The *Ordo Salutis* refers to the “order of salvation” specifically as that salvation is applied to us “subjectively” (cf. regeneration, adoption, justification, sanctification, glorification). It’s the *Ordo Salutis* (salvation applied to us subjectively) that we’ve been focusing on so far in the account of Saul’s conversion on the road to Damascus. Saul’s experience of being given spiritual eyes to see is ultimately the same experience that all of us have had, who have truly believed in Jesus.

But now it’s important for us to remember that Luke doesn’t include this account of Saul’s conversion just to illustrate an aspect of the *Ordo Salutis* which is applicable to us all (we were all blind, but now we see). That would leave us without any explanation for the things that happened to Saul that are never reproduced in our own experience. How many of us have ever been knocked to the ground because of a light brighter than the sun that suddenly shines around us? How many of us have ever seen the risen and exalted Jesus and heard a voice from His mouth? How, then, are we to “explain” this uniquely supernatural intervention in the life of Saul? This is where we come back to the *Historia Salutis*.

The *Historia Salutis* is the unfolding in history of God’s redemptive plan. If the *Ordo Salutis* refers to the application of God’s salvation subjectively in our own experience (something common to all of us as believers), then the *Historia Salutis* refers to the once-for-all accomplishment of God’s salvation objectively in history. Luke’s focus in this account, then, is not only on what all believers have experienced in common with Saul in conversion, but also on the divine calling that Saul received at this particular moment in redemptive history and that was therefore unique only to himself. Do you see how important this distinction is for reading our Bibles? The Scriptures are not simply a collection of timeless spiritual truths; the Scriptures are the God-breathed record of the unfolding in history (in space and time) of God’s eternal redemptive plan. This redemptive plan, we know, has come to its fulfillment, in the fullness of time, in Christ—both in His person as God’s only Son and in His work as our Prophet, our Priest, and our King (in Christ, person and work are inseparable). So the author of Hebrews writes:

- Hebrews 1:1–3 — God, having spoken long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days spoke to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds, who is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power; who, having accomplished cleansing for sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high...

In these “last days,” God has spoken His saving, self-revelatory word to us finally and supremely in His Son, Jesus Christ. And yet it was necessary that this saving word that God had spoken in Jesus should be not only preserved for us, but also explained and unpacked for us by Christ’s own authorized representatives. We remember how the book of Acts began:

- Acts 1:1–3 — The first account, O Theophilus, I composed, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when He was taken up to heaven, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen, to whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over forty days and speaking about the things concerning the kingdom of God.

Not only was it necessary that this saving word that God had spoken in Jesus be explained and unpacked for us by Christ’s own authorized representatives, but it was also necessary that this word be proclaimed to the redemptive-historical “end of the earth” by these same authorized representatives. So we remember what Jesus said to His apostles immediately before he ascended into heaven:

- Acts 1:8 — “[Y]ou will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea [Jews] and Samaria [Samaritans], and even to the end of the earth [Gentiles].”

It’s in the light of all this, then, that we understand Jesus’ uniquely supernatural intervention in the life of Saul. Acts 9 is the account not only of the opening of Saul’s eyes to see the glory of Christ in the Gospel (*ordo salutis*), but also—simultaneously—of his divine calling and authorization to unpack and expound to the church the things of Christ, proclaiming Christ, ultimately, even to the Gentile “end of the earth” (*historia salutis*). It was in order that this divine

calling and authorization might be confirmed to all (in connection with this specific moment in the fulfillment of redemptive history) that Christ effected Saul's conversion so suddenly in this outwardly most extraordinary way. So we remember what Ananias said to the Lord after he had been instructed to go and lay his hands on Saul so that he might regain his sight:

- Acts 9:13–14 — “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name.”

And we remember how Jesus answered:

- Acts 9:15–16 — “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name.”

In Acts 22, Paul recounts what Ananias said to him:

- Acts 22:14–15 — “The God of our fathers has **appointed** you to know His will [His saving will in Christ] and to **see** the Righteous One and to **hear** a voice from His mouth. For you will be a **witness** for Him to all men of what you have **seen** and **heard**.”

And, again, in Acts 26, Paul recounts what Jesus said to Him either directly or through Ananias:

- Acts 26:16 — “[F]or this purpose I have **appeared** to you, to **appoint** you a **servant and a witness** not only to the things which you have **seen**, but also to the things in which I will **appear** to you...”

Here in Acts 9, we go on to read in verses 19-22:

I. Acts 9:19–22 — Now for several days [Saul] was with the disciples who were at Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.” And all those hearing him continued to be astounded, and were saying, “Is this not the one who in Jerusalem destroyed those that called on this name, and who had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?” But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this One is the Christ.

Again, the point of emphasizing this sudden and extraordinary transformation in Saul is to confirm not just his conversion, but especially his direct calling and authorization by the risen and ascended Jesus. This is especially important in Saul's case because he had no prior connection whatsoever with the apostles in Jerusalem or with any of the leaders in the Jerusalem church. The one who previously was in Jerusalem destroying those who called on Jesus' name and who had come to Damascus with the express purpose of binding those who called on this name is the very one who—after an interval of only three days—is now proclaiming Jesus' name in the Damascus synagogues.

Given Saul's upbringing and past history and recent career as the great persecutor of the church, there's no natural psychological explanation for the sudden transformation that's taken place in him. The transformation of Saul is, in itself, testimony to the truthfulness of Christianity, and more specifically to his having seen Jesus and having heard a word from His mouth. And yet, at the end of the day, our faith isn't founded on the evidence of Saul's transformation, but rather on the authority of that message about Jesus that the transformed Saul proclaimed. Even though Saul had never had any contact with the apostles or with the church in Jerusalem, he didn't proclaim a different Jesus in Damascus than the apostles were proclaiming in Jerusalem and Judea. He was "immediately" proclaiming the same Jesus. And what was he saying about this Jesus? "He is the Son of God." In the Old Testament Scriptures, God identified his covenant people, Israel, as His son (Exod. 4:22; Hos. 11:1). Later, God identified the king who sat on David's throne in Jerusalem, and in whom the whole covenant people were represented, as His son (2 Sam. 7:12-15). But in the end, this theme of "sonship" was to be fulfilled in the promised Messiah who would be uniquely the Son of God (Ps. 2:1-12) because He would embody in Himself the true and "ideal" Israel (Isa. 49:1-7) and because as David's greater Son, He would even be David's Lord (Ps. 110:1; Mat. 22:41-45). When Saul was saying about Jesus, then, "He is the Son of God," He was proclaiming Jesus not as someone who had come from out of nowhere, and certainly not as a new "invention" of his own, but as the one who fulfilled the Law and the Prophets. Luke says that "Saul kept increasing in strength [the strength and wisdom supplied by the Spirit] and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this One is the Christ." Again, we know that "the Christ" is simply the Messiah foretold in the Scriptures. So how was Saul "proving" that "this One"—this Jesus—is that promised Messiah? He was confounding them with the Scriptures. He was "proving" the identity of Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God from the Law and the Prophets (cf. 28:23).

Even though Saul had never had any contact with the apostles or with the church in Jerusalem, yet here he was proclaiming the same Jesus from the same Scriptures. On the one hand, then, there would be a certain independence in Saul and the gospel he proclaimed and even a unique and special insight that he had been given by revelation into the "unfathomable riches of Christ" (Eph. 3:1-12). In Paul's letter to the Galatians, he writes:

- Galatians 1:11–12 — For I make known to you, brothers, that the gospel which I am proclaiming as good news is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

On the one hand, we see a certain independence. On the other hand, we see an essential identity between the gospel that Saul immediately began proclaiming in Damascus as the fulfillment of Scripture and the same gospel that the Jerusalem apostles were proclaiming as the fulfillment of Scripture. Listen to how Paul concludes his letter to the Romans:

- Romans 16:25–27 — Now to Him who is able to strengthen you *according to my gospel* and the preaching of Jesus Christ [not the gospel that Paul invented, but the gospel that was revealed to Paul by Christ Himself], according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested [in Christ], and *by the Scriptures of the prophets*, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all

the Gentiles, leading to obedience of faith; to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen.

How are we to explain the independence of Paul's gospel, on the one hand, and on the other hand its essential identity with the Gospel that the Jerusalem apostles proclaimed? One, it was rooted in the same "Scriptures of the prophets"; and two, the same Jesus who had walked and talked with the apostles in Jerusalem had also appeared to Saul and spoken with him.

The sudden transformation of Saul from someone who one day was travelling to Damascus to bind all those who called on Jesus' name to someone who the next day was proclaiming Jesus' name in the Damascus synagogues bears eloquent testimony to the fact that he had seen the Righteous One and heard a voice from His mouth. But there's another part to this sudden transformation of Saul that bears equally eloquent testimony.

II. Acts 9:23–25 — And when many days had elapsed [after three years, during which time Saul was also in Arabia; Gal. 1:15-18], the Jews plotted together to put him to death [the Jews in league with the Arabian king's representative in Damascus; 2 Cor. 11:32], but their plot became known to Saul. They were also watching the gates day and night so that they might put him to death; but his disciples took him by night and let him down through the wall, lowering him in a large basket.

Here again, we have to ask ourselves: Could there be any greater contrast between the Saul who journeyed to Damascus breathing threat and murder and accompanied by a posse of men to bind those who called on the name of Jesus, and now this lone Saul who, because of the men watching at the gates to put him to death, is being let down by a basket through a window in the city wall? In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, he speaks of this whole ordeal as in some sense the ultimate sign of his "weakness." He writes:

- **2 Corinthians 11:30–33** — If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. In Damascus the ethnarch under Aretas the [Arabian/Nabataean] king [in league with the Jews] was guarding the city of the Damascenes in order to seize me, and I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and so escaped his hands.

For Saul, the Pharisee and rising star in the religious establishment, what could be more humiliating and ignominious than this? And yet now it's precisely in this sign of his own "weakness" that Saul "boasts." Even though in this instance he's escaping death at the hands of the Jews, the whole episode reflects his willingness, now, to suffer for the name of Jesus. Later in Acts, Paul will say to the Ephesian elders:

- **Acts 20:24** — "I do not make my life of any account nor dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God."

And then to the brothers in Caesarea:

- Acts 21:13 — “I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.”

Given Saul’s upbringing and past history and recent career as the great persecutor of the church, there’s no natural psychological explanation that can account for this sudden transformation. And so we remember what Jesus said to Ananias in response to his concern about Saul having come to Damascus to **bind all who call on His name**: “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to **bear My name** before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must **suffer for My name**.” Having been confronted with the glory of the risen and exalted Jesus and having heard a voice from His mouth, what does Saul care anymore for his own “honor”? Having had his eyes opened to the truth of a suffering and dying and now resurrected and exalted Messiah, what does Saul care anymore for his own temporal ease and comfort?

And so, once again, this sudden and extraordinary transformation of Saul is, in itself, testimony not only to the truthfulness of Christianity, but even more specifically to his having seen Jesus and having heard a word from His mouth, and therefore to his having been appointed by Jesus to be a witness for Him to all men of what he had seen and heard. For the rest of his life, Paul will appeal not to any worldly marks of strength or greatness, but rather to his sufferings and the persecutions he endured for Jesus’ name as the true mark of his appointment and commissioning by Jesus (2 Cor. 11:23–28; Gal. 6:17; cf. 2 Cor. 4:7-12; Phil. 3:7-11; 2 Tim. 1:8–12).

And yet, once again, at the end of the day our faith is not founded on the evidence of Saul’s transformation, but on the authority of the message that the transformed Saul proclaimed—the message of Christ crucified which was to the Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:23-24). So we go on, now, to read in verses 26-30:

III. Acts 9:26–28 — And when [Saul] came to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles [to Peter and James, the Lord’s brother; Gal. 1:18-19] and recounted to them how he had **seen** the Lord on the road, and that He had **talked** to him, and how at Damascus he had **spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus**. So he was going in and out among them in Jerusalem, **speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord**. And he was talking and arguing with the Hellenistic Jews, but **they were attempting to put him to death**. But when the brothers learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus.

Do you see how Luke continues to emphasize the sudden and extraordinary transformation that’s taken place in Saul? And do you see how Luke ties this transformation to the fact that Saul had “seen the Lord on the road and that He had talked to him”?

If previously Luke emphasized this transformation by the response of the disciples in Damascus to Saul’s preaching of Jesus and also by his ignominious escape from Damascus in a basket, now Luke emphasizes the same transformation by the response of the disciples in Jerusalem and how even in Jerusalem, Saul was speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord—ultimately being compelled, again, to flee for his life (cf. Acts 22:17-21). If previously we saw the essential

identity between the gospel that Saul preached and the gospel that the Jerusalem apostles preached in the “Scriptures of the prophets,” now we see this same essential identity in the fact that before Saul was sent away to Tarsus, “he was going in and out among [the apostles and the disciples] in Jerusalem.” And so all the believers could be assured that Saul had, indeed, “seen the Lord on the road and that He had [indeed] talked to him” (v. 27)—specifically, that He had called and commissioned him, this most unlikely of all candidates, to explain and unpack for His church all “the unfathomable riches of Christ” in the Gospel (Eph. 3:1-13).

- Acts 26:16–18 — “[F]or this purpose [Jesus said to Saul] I have appeared to you, to appoint you a servant and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you; rescuing you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you [*historia salutis*], to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the authority of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me [*ordo salutis*].”

Conclusion

How thankful, then, we ought to be for the apostolic deposit that God has preserved for us in the Scriptures. How we ought to love and treasure the apostolic writings (themselves built upon the Law and the Prophets) as God’s own word to us. We understand, now, how Paul can write to the Thessalonians:

- 1 Thessalonians 2:13 — [F]or this reason we also thank God without ceasing that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also is at work in you who believe.

Later, Paul would write again to the Thessalonians:

- 2 Thessalonians 2:13–15 — But we should always give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. It was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions [*paradosis*; the things handed down] which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us.

Have you received and accepted “Paul’s” gospel (his proclamation of Jesus as the Christ and Son of God) not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God? Is it this Gospel of Jesus Christ that today is “at work” in you? We remember that our faith is not founded on the evidence of Saul’s transformation and certainly not on Saul himself, but on the authority of the message that the transformed Saul proclaimed. Paul will later write to the Romans:

- Romans 1:16 — For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

So then, let us, too, stand firm and hold fast in joyful faith and obedience to those things that have been handed down to us.