

Acts 9:1-19a

Introduction

Over our last several weeks in Acts, we've been following Luke's account of the ministry of Philip, first to the Samaritans and then to the Ethiopian eunuch. We remember that Philip was one of those who had been scattered—or dispersed—from Jerusalem because of the persecution that had arisen in connection with Stephen's martyrdom. We read at the end of chapter seven:

- Acts 7:58 — And when they had driven him [Stephen] out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.

Later, we'll learn from Saul's (Paul's) own words that he was a Jew born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but that he was "brought up in [Jerusalem], having been instructed at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strictness of the law of our fathers" (Acts 22:3; cf. 26:4-5). We learned in Acts chapter five that Saul's teacher, Gamaliel, was a Pharisee, "a teacher of the Law, respected by all the people" (5:34). In Galatians chapter one, Paul can say: "I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being far more zealous for the traditions of my fathers" (Gal. 1:14). As one who studied under Gamaliel, Saul would have immersed himself for long hours every day in the law and the prophets as well as in the "traditions" (the interpretations and applications) of the Jewish teachers and fathers. Though Saul was still a "young man [*neanias*]," therefore (maybe early 20's), and not a member of the Sanhedrin, one could say that he was a "rising star" in the religious establishment. That it was at the feet of this same Saul that the witnesses in the stoning of Stephen were laying aside their garments tells us that he was already acknowledged in some sense as a leader among them. Luke tells us at the beginning of Acts chapter 8:

- Acts 8:1 — Now Saul was in hearty agreement with putting [Stephen] to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

Notice how Luke introduces the persecution. "And on that day" alerts us to something of great significance. In this case, following immediately after the account of Stephen's stoning, it alerts us to something ominous. "And on that day a *great* persecution began..." Luke isn't given to exaggeration (no more than any of the other biblical writers). When he says that it was a "great [*megas*] persecution," he means that it was systematic and thoroughgoing and that it was severe—that *no one* was safe (except perhaps the apostles) and that the punishments were harsh. The believers, he says "were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria [they were all leaving their homes and their livelihoods to find refuge elsewhere], except the apostles." Apparently, the strategy now was to stamp out this upstart movement not by going after its leaders (the apostles), but by attacking those who were believing as a result of their testimony.

In verse 58 of chapter seven, the witnesses at the stoning of Stephen were laying aside their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. In verse 1 of chapter eight, Saul was in hearty agreement with putting Stephen to death. Then, in verse 3, we learn that Saul was the driving force behind the "great persecution" that began "on that day."

- Acts 8:3 — But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he was delivering them into prison.

The word for “ravaging” is used only here in the New Testament, and only 3 times in the Greek Septuagint. In the apocryphal book of Sirach, it’s used to describe the mauling inflicted by a leopard or a lion (Sir. 28:23). In Isaiah 65, it’s used to describe the injury inflicted by wolves or lions or serpents (Isa. 65:25). Here, then, is Saul attacking the church like a wolf or a lion would attack its prey and tear it to pieces. That he was entering “house after house” indicates that he was systematic and thoroughgoing; that he was “dragging [*syro*]” people off indicates violent force; and that he was dragging off both men and women indicates that he was without any pity (cf. Acts 22:4). Later, when Paul makes his defense before King Agrippa, he’ll say:

- Acts 26:10–11 — “[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, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities.”

We could translate the Greek behind “being furiously enraged” more literally: “being exceedingly out of my mind with rage.” So here in chapter nine, after pursuing the story of Philip, Luke returns to Saul.

I. Acts 9:1–2 — Now Saul, still breathing threat and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

It’s important for us to understand something here about Saul. On the one hand, by his own later testimony, he was “zealous for God” and “zealous for the traditions of [his] fathers” (Acts 22:3; Gal. 1:14). In Paul’s letter to the Philippians, he will say that “as to zeal, [he was] a persecutor of the church” (Phil. 3:6). In his testimony before King Agrippa, Paul will say: “So then, I thought to myself that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus the Nazarene” (Acts 26:9). There was a certain “sincerity” about Saul. He wasn’t a hypocrite, nor was he a conniving false teacher. He really did believe—he even believed with all his heart, and soul, and strength, and mind—that he was right and that the followers of Jesus were wrong. He really did believe that in persecuting the followers of Jesus, he was offering service to God (cf. Jn. 16:2).

That’s “on the one hand.” But now, on the other hand, we have to remember that it’s precisely this “sincerity” which gave rise to Saul “breathing threat and murder”—even though he knew very well that the sixth commandment explicitly states, “You shall not murder” (Exod. 20:13). Saul was blinded 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.” In Paul’s first letter to Timothy, he will say that he was formerly “an insolent person” (1 Tim. 1:13). One commentator says that “wickedness [*adikia*] becomes insolence [*hybristes*] when it is done ‘out of overweening pride or arrogance...’” (Bertram, quoted in Mounce). Saul’s wickedness, therefore, was injected with an arrogant self-confidence. We remember that he was the rising star in the religious establishment. He boasted smugly in his circumcision on the eighth day, in his

membership in the nation of Israel, in his descent from the tribe of Benjamin, 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 (Phil. 3:4-6). And so even as Saul went about breaking the law (breathing threat and murder and furiously enraged), he boasted in that very law-breaking as the sign of his righteousness and of his zeal for God.

Was there ever anyone more blinded than Saul was? What we should see, here, is that this is someone whose eyes, humanly speaking, can never be opened by “evidence”—whether by reasoning from the Scriptures or by miraculous signs (and no doubt Saul had been confronted with both). This is someone who by all human standards will never, ever deviate from the path he’s on. To speak only in human terms, there wasn’t any chink in Saul’s armor. His blindness was of the most incurable kind. He was utterly incorrigible, hardened in sin.

It’s this Saul who—“still breathing threat and murder against the disciples of the Lord”—“went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.” Even if, humanly speaking, there had been any hope that Saul might change (and there wasn’t), such an “impossible” change could only have been envisioned in a far distant future. At this moment, Saul is literally “hell bent” on destroying the church (cf. Gal. 1:13, 23). Right now, the enraged Saul is on a mission all the way to Damascus, a city 135 miles north of Jerusalem, to find and take into custody any belonging to the Way. And then we read in verses 3-9:

II. Acts 9:3-9 — And as he was traveling, it happened that when he was approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed 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 up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do.” And the men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. And Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing. Leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

In Acts 22, Paul says that it was “about *noontime* [that] a very bright light suddenly flashed from heaven all around me” (22:6), which explains why in chapter 26 he says that he “saw on the way [to Damascus] a light from heaven, *brighter than the sun*, shining all around [him] and those who were journeying with [him]” (26:13). This light, then, was the radiance of the glory of the ascended and exalted Jesus. I’m reminded of when the apostle John saw the “one like a son of man,” and how he says that “His face was like the sun shining in its power” and how when he saw Him, he “fell at His feet like a dead man” (Rev. 1:13, 16-17; cf. Mat. 17:2).

Luke tells us that when Saul did get up from the ground, “though his eyes were open, he could see nothing.” Later in Acts, Paul will say that he could not see “because of the glory of that light” (22:11). So why could the men who were traveling with Saul still see—as evidenced by the fact that they’re the ones who led him by the hand into Damascus? The answer is that they didn’t see all that Saul saw, just as they didn’t hear all that Saul heard. We know that they heard the sound of the voice (9:7), and yet Paul will say later that they couldn’t understand what the voice was saying (22:9)—even though it was speaking in the Hebrew language (26:14). Likewise, Paul will

say later that his companions “beheld the light, to be sure” (22:9), and yet Luke points out here that they saw “no one” (9:7). Even as Saul alone understood the voice that was speaking to him, so also it was Saul alone who saw Jesus (cf. 9:17, 27; 26:16). And so having seen the radiance of the glory of the ascended and exalted Jesus, Saul was now blinded and unable to see. But why only blinded? Why not dead?

If Saul was blinded, he could still hear, and what he heard was the voice of this one who had appeared to him asking: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” What we have to understand is that this is a completely rhetorical question to which there is no real answer. Jesus certainly isn’t having a “pity party” or asking Saul to feel sorry for Him, or even trying to “guilt” Saul in any way. The point of asking this question is to emphasize the utter futility of all Saul’s fighting and raging against Jesus and specifically the utter futility of all Saul’s fighting and raging against God’s plan and purpose for him. “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” Why are you raging against My plans and purposes for you? It’s a hopeless endeavor, Saul. Here in these words is the good news of the irresistible power of God’s grace.

In chapter 26, Paul will say to King Agrippa: “I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads’” (26:14). The Legacy Standard Bible translation note explains that this is “an idiom referring to an animal’s futile resistance to being prodded with goads.” Saul was fighting with all his might against the very thing to which God had destined him. He didn’t know this, but that didn’t make it any less true. And now Jesus tells him that all his resistance is ultimately to no avail. He can fight and kick and rage all he wants, but in the end God, who set him apart even from his mother’s womb (Gal. 1:15), will have His way in Saul.

Jesus goes on to give Saul these instructions: “[B]ut rise up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must [*dei*] do.” This “must” is the “must” of divine necessity. In chapter 22, Paul remembers what Jesus said to him like this: “Rise up and go on into Damascus, and there you will be told of all that has been determined [appointed; *tasso*] for you to do” (22:10). If before we had the “must” of divine necessity, here we have the passive of divine agency: Saul will be told of all that has been determined *by God* for him to do. All the emphasis 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.

So what, exactly, is it that Saul must do? Remember what Jesus said to Saul: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” And how in response to Saul’s question, He said again, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.” Jesus draws all the attention to Saul’s persecuting, and how it’s in this way that he’s resisting and fighting against God’s predetermined plan for him—the plan that He’s had for him since the day he was born. What does this tell us, then, about what God has determined Saul must do? And what about Saul? How will he respond to this news that he’s about to be told what he must do? Luke continues in verses 10-12:

III. Acts 9:10–12 — Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias, and the Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” And he said, “Here I am, Lord.” And the Lord said to him, “Rise up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from 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.”

In just these few words, “For behold, he is praying,” we have Jesus’ own testimony to Saul’s conversion—to the reality that Saul is no longer the man he was when he set out from Jerusalem. The fact that for three days Saul neither ate nor drank indicates not only that he’s been physically undone by the revelation of Jesus’ glory (cf. Dan. 8:18, 27; 10:15-17), but also that he’s been spiritually undone and transformed. While he’s been fasting, what is it that he’s been praying? Certainly not just that he might regain his sight. We can only assume that he’s been crying out for mercy and calling upon Jesus’ name (cf. Lk. 18:13).

If Saul’s physical eyes are now blind, then his previously blinded spiritual eyes have now been opened. If his physical eyes have been blinded by the glory of Jesus that shone around him on the road to Damascus, now God has given him spiritual eyes to see the true glory of Jesus in the Gospel. Notice the purposeful irony of the fact that Saul has “*seen (eidon) in a vision* a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, *so that he might regain his sight (anablepo)*. If Saul can’t see with his physical eyes as he used to see, nevertheless we can say that he sees now as he’s never seen before.

But how are we to “explain” this? How are we to explain Saul’s conversion? It can’t be a matter of simple “physical proof,” as if anyone else would also have been converted if he had been confronted with the “naked” glory of Jesus. Otherwise, how do we escape the conclusion that Christianity is just a matter of reason and logic and “the natural man” (cf. 1 Cor. 2:14)? Neither are we to think that Saul’s “sincere” zeal made him more receptive and a more “worthy” candidate to be given this vision of Jesus. Everything about this account and all of Paul’s later testimony proclaims the opposite.

When Paul says in 1 Timothy: “Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief” (1 Tim. 1:13), his point isn’t that he was a worthy candidate for God’s mercy (cf. Jn. 16:2-3). Not only is that a contradiction in terms, but he really means the opposite. Contrary to the false teachers who had once confessed the faith, but who now denied the faith by their lives and words even though they knew it to be true (cf. 1 Tim. 1:5-6, 19; 6:20-21; 2 Tim. 2:17-18), Paul had never confessed the faith and was convinced with all his heart that it was a lie. If Paul had once confessed the Christ that He was now raging against with such murderous zeal, this would have been a sure sign that God had handed him over to reprobation (cf. Heb. 6:4-6). Paul’s point, then, is not that his ignorant unbelief made him a more worthy candidate for God’s mercy, but rather that this is the only possible explanation for how someone as sinful and as wicked and as undeserving as he was (a blasphemer and a persecutor and an insolent man) was still left within the sphere of the sovereign operations of God’s mercy. Just a few verses later in 1 Timothy, Paul will say: “Yet for this reason I was shown mercy, so that in me [not as someone relatively more worthy, but] 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).

Humanly speaking, Saul's blindness was of the very worst and most "incurable" kind. He was utterly incorrigible, hardened in sin. He was the great persecutor of the church—full of rage, murderous, insolent in his self-righteousness. And yet God saved him. We understand, then, that apart from God's sovereign, all-powerful, irresistible grace at work in Saul's heart to change it and transform it, 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—either in sullen bitterness and silence or with an even greater rage and violence, as will happen for so many at the final day. And so we "behold" in amazement the Saul who hated Jesus now praying and calling on His name—the Saul who raged against Jesus now subdued to His will. The Saul who boasted in his own righteousness now counting that righteousness as dung because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus His Lord (Phil. 3:7-11). This is the awesome, radical miracle of conversion, and even if it manifests itself outwardly in very different and usually more "subtle" ways, yet it's still the same miracle that's been worked in me and in all of us who have believed in Jesus.

Why is God sending Ananias to Saul? On the one hand, we know the answer is to accomplish His own sovereign and predetermined purposes in Saul. On the other hand, we know that the answer is because Saul is praying. We haven't been told, yet, exactly what it is that Saul must do, but we know that Saul *will* do what has been determined for him not because God forces him against his will, but because God has made him willing by His own all-powerful, all-conquering, irresistible grace. But all this is more than Ananias has yet grasped. So we read in verses 13-14:

IV. Acts 9:13–14 — But Ananias answered, "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."

Ananias doesn't say this as an expression of unbelief or of fear for his own safety, but rather as an expression of his love and concern for all his brothers and sisters in the faith—for all who "call on [Jesus'] name" (cf. 22:12). But the main thing Luke wants us to hear in Ananias' words is one last reminder of who Saul was, so that we'll be all the more amazed and give God all the more glory for who Saul is about to become. "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."

V. Acts 9:15–16 — But the Lord said to him, "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."

The one who came to Damascus with the purpose of binding all who call on Jesus' "*name*" is now the one who will bear Jesus' "*name*" before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel, and who will be shown how much he himself must [*dei*] suffer for the sake of Jesus' "*name*" (cf. Gal. 1:23).

VI. Acts 9:17–19a — So Ananias departed and entered the house. And he laid his hands on him and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord sent me—that is Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming—*so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.*” And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales [or flakes], *and he regained his sight, and he rose up and was baptized;* and he took food and was strengthened.

Three times in our text this morning we’ve had a reference to Saul “regaining his sight”—once by Jesus (v. 12), once by Ananias (v. 17), and once by Luke (v. 18). In verse 12, the reason Ananias is to go and lay his hands on Saul is “so that he might regain his sight [*anablepo*].” But in verse 17, when Ananias lays his hands on Saul, we find that in connection with regaining his sight (*anablepo*), Saul is also “filled with the Holy Spirit.” And in verse 18, we learn that in connection with Saul regaining his sight (*anablepo*), he “rose up and was baptized.” The miracle of Saul regaining his physical sight, then, represents the greater miracle of his previously blinded spiritual eyes now being opened. The miracle of Saul’s physical eyes being opened represents the greater miracle of God having now given him spiritual eyes to see the true glory of Jesus in the Gospel. This explains why Saul didn’t just suddenly see again, and why he only saw after something like scales fell out of his eyes. This is a graphic picture of what’s happened in Saul’s heart, and of what’s also necessary for us to be able to see, like Saul does, the glory of Jesus in the Gospel. The scales must be removed from our eyes. God must *give us* eyes to see (cf. 2 Cor. 4:6). And this is just the miracle that God has promised to continue working in this world until Jesus comes again. Listen to what Jesus said to Saul (either directly or through his servant Ananias):

- 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.”

Truly, then, we can 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).

Conclusion

Now, then, we understand Paul’s words in Ephesians:

- Ephesians 2:4–10 (cf. 1:4–6; 2 Tim. 1:9; Titus 3:4–7) — But *God*, being rich in **mercy** because of *His* great love with which *He* loved us, **even when we were dead in our transgressions** [and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest”; vv. 1–3], made us alive together with Christ—by **grace** you have been saved— and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come *He* might show the surpassing riches of **His grace** in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For **by grace** you have been saved through faith, and this **not of yourselves**, it is the **gift of God**; not

of works, so that no one may boast. For we are *His* workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which *God* prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.

- Romans 9:16 — So then it does not depend on the one who wills or the one who runs, but on *God* who has *mercy*.

I think again of Paul's words to Timothy:

- 1 Timothy 1:16 — 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 as an example for those who are going to believe upon Him for eternal life.

Have you seen, this morning, in Christ's longsuffering patience even with Saul a reason to believe upon Him today for eternal life? There's no one here today outside the reach of His mercy and grace. So may all our hearts be moved to conclude with Paul:

- 1 Timothy 1:17 — Now to the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.