

Self Righteous Blindness

Acts 9:1-20

We have been traveling through the story of the birth of the Christian church.

Acts 1:8 ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

- In **Jerusalem** thousands of Jews were saved.
- The religious leaders threatened the early church. Stephen. One of seven leaders chosen to lead in the Jerusalem church was killed as Saul stood in hearty agreement. A great persecution arose against the church and Saul began ravaging the church entering homes and dragging off men and women to put them in prison.
- The Christians fled to north to **Samaria** where Brett told us about Phillip’s preaching and performing signs and wonders. Many came to Christ and were being baptized. The apostles Peter and John came from Jerusalem to confirm the authenticity of the gospel being presented and these new believers received the Holy Spirit.
- We see an example of one, Simon, who was a sorcerer and claimed to believe and was baptized. He wanted to purchase the power to give the Holy Spirit. Peter discerns that his faith was not true.
- Bryan did an excellent job contrasting Simon’s false confession with the authentic experience and faith of the Ethiopian eunuch who had come, from at that time, what was known as the “**end of the earth.**” An angel called Phillip to go south to the desert road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza where he encountered this royal official who had come to worship. He was reading Isaiah, and Phillip guides him to understand Jesus as the fulfillment of the writings of the prophet Isaiah. We see an authentic conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch. The Eunuch believed and couldn’t wait to be baptized. He sees some water, asks to be baptized and Phillip baptized him and then Phillip was snatched away by the Spirit.

Today, we will pick up on the story of Saul

Acts 8:3 ³But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

Saul was a zealous man. He **truly believed** he was doing God a service by persecuting the church. If you had asked Saul, he would have probably said Jesus of Nazareth is dead. He was a criminal who was crucified. The Law of Moses says, “anybody who is hung on a tree is cursed.” Would God take a cursed false prophet and make him the Messiah? His followers are preaching a false message and performing miracles through the power of Satan, not God. They are truly harmful to our great Jewish faith and must be stopped.

Acts 26:9-11 says, ⁹“I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. ¹¹And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blasphemy, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.

Paul is chasing the Christians into Samaria. He may have heard of Phillip and others who fled Jerusalem preaching Christ, casting out demons, healing the sick, and many believing in Christ and being baptized.

Saul was “spiritually blind.” The Jews and religious leaders of that day were blind and so much of humanity today. In today’s self-righteous world many are even offended by the suggestion that they are sinners in need of a Savior. They are **blinded** by their own self-righteousness. In his letter to the Corinthian church Paul reflects on the blindness of the Jews and the transformation that comes by the Spirit.

2 Corinthians 3:14-18 ¹⁴But their **minds were hardened**. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. ¹⁵Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. ¹⁶But when one^[a] turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. ¹⁷Now the Lord^[b] is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord,^[c] are being **transformed** into the

same image from one degree of glory to another.^[d] For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

Like many of the Jews and Jewish religious leaders, Saul had a “veil over his heart.” A veil of self righteousness and was blind to the working of the Holy Spirit. Not only was he blind, but he was actively working against the Holy Spirit and the kingdom of God as he “locked up the saints in prison with the support of the Chief Priests.

Today we are going to hear the story of Saul’s conversion. The greatest personal story of conversion and transformation in history.

Acts 9:1-2 But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

- Paul “still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” - Describes his fury.
- So he goes and asks the high priest for letter giving him permission to raid the synagogues looking for men and women who belonged to the Way so he might bring them to Jerusalem.
- “The Way” was a name taken by those who believed that Christ was the promised Messiah. The “Way” referred to the path to forgiveness of sins. Jesus claims:
John 14:6 “I am the WAY, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.
- **Damascus**- A beautiful white city in green forest. 150,000 people. Many synagogues. Large Jewish community. 60 miles in from coast where Syria meets Turkey. 160 miles North of Jerusalem.
- Paul would have traveled through Judea, Samaria, into Syria to Damascus. It would have taken about 6 days to get there.

Picking up in verse 3 we will read of Paul’s encounter with Jesus.

Acts 9:3-9³ Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him.⁴ And falling to the

ground, he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” ⁵And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” ⁷The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. ⁸Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

- Saul had an Encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ.
- This was a supernatural divine encounter – We are all saved by a sovereign act, but not like Paul. Paul had a supernatural encounter with Jesus.
- Verse 3, As he approached Damascus “**suddenly a light from heaven shone around him.**” In Paul’s description of his conversion in Ch 22 and Ch 26 he also describes the encounter at **noon** or **midday** and the light “**from heaven**” was “**brighter than the sun.**” It was an extremely intense light, like a flash of lightning or like the light of a welder fusing metal that requires shielding to protect our eyes.
- V. 4 And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” He is literally blinded by a light brighter than the sun. He loses his sight and he hears the voice of Jesus calling him out. We know from many other Scriptures where people encounter the living God, they buckle at the knees and fall on their faces.
- Luke’s account of Saul’s encounter with Jesus is repeated 3 times. Ch 9, 22, 26) This is really important. The **greatest challenge to Paul’s ministry** in the first century was his credibility as an authentic Apostle. All of the other Apostles were disciples of Jesus and specifically called by Jesus. It is an important point that Paul substantiated a divine encounter with Jesus. Our Scripture tells us in verse 7 that there were eyewitnesses to the encounter. It is repeated in Acts 22:9 saying, “those who were with me **saw the light** but did **not understand** the voice of the one who was speaking to me.”
- Later in **Verse 9:17** he says, “the lord appeared to him,” **In 22:14** Ananias said, “The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to **see the Righteous One** and to hear a voice from his mouth.”

- Paul in giving testimony of all the eyewitnesses to the resurrected Christ appearing to the apostles, to more than 500 at one time, to James and then in **1 Cor. 15:8** says, “⁸Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.” The story gives Paul the credentials to authenticate him as one of the apostles.
- Paul saw the resurrected Lord.
- **“Saul Saul”** – emphatic repetition. Why are you persecuting me?
 - Christ is the “head of the body” and he identifies with us. To persecute us is to persecute Him. He bears our sin and carries our sorrows.
 - **“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”** Paul knows exactly what those who are of “the WAY” believe and those whom he has imprisoned. Paul is broken.
- Have you ever held a strong conviction and then suddenly realized that you were dead wrong? I can’t tell you how many times I have said with conviction, “I will never....” Drive across Houston freeways to work. Buy a car the first visit to a dealer. Let my kids do this or that. Never say “NEVER.”

“So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.”

- He was stopped in his tracks, he was caused to pause his life, contemplate his actions, contemplate his beliefs, and commune with Jesus in his thoughts for 3 days. **How could he be so wrong?** Think about all those men and women he pulled from their homes. How sorrowful he was for all the people he harmed.

This was Paul's moment of conversion and moment of transformation:

- Paul had heard the gospel
 - He heard Stephen lay out the Scriptures and still oversaw the stoning.
 - He knew the claims of the believers who called themselves the WAY, but in his SELF-RIGHTEOUS indignation he was blind to the truth and rejected it.
- We are all brought to believe by someone. For Paul, it was **Jesus Himself**.
 - Paul now realizes that Jesus truly is alive and He is who He claimed to be.
 - Paul experiences the process of becoming a new creation as he later describes to the church in Corinth in **2 Cor 5:17** that at the moment of salvation, we are a new creation, the old self has died and a new life is born.
 - Transformation occurs –
 - The one who was dead is now alive.
 - The one who worked against the Gods kingdom is now part of God's kingdom.
 - The one who resisted the Spirit is now empowered by the Spirit.

Acts 9:10 ¹⁰ Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a **vision**, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord."

Ananias – What do we know about Ananias?

- Chapter 22 tells us Ananias was a devout Jew and follower of Jesus. He was highly respected and a disciple of Jesus.
- Ananias – In a vision heard the Lord call him. "Here I am Lord" – Like Samuel
- Notice the difference between Ananias response to the call of the Lord and Saul's call of the Lord. "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" ⁵ And he said, "**Who are you, Lord?**" And Ananias' response, "**Here I am Lord.**" Saul did not know the voice of the Lord. He asked, Who are you lord? "Lord as a respectful term, but not Lord as Master. **Ananias knew the voice of his Lord as master** and responded, "**here I am Lord.**"

Acts 9:11-12 ¹¹ And the Lord said to him, “Rise and go to the street called Straight***, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, **he is praying**, ¹² 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.”

- ***Straight is a street that runs through the center of Damascus and is about 3 miles long.
- **Verse 11** says **He was praying**. What is the first thing we do when a crisis strikes? We learn of a cancer diagnosis, our job is in jeopardy, we are struggling with a relationship or any problem that is bigger than us? We cry out to God. It is a natural response. No one needs to teach you how to pray. Have you ever been with a new Christian and heard them pray? I love to hear the honest prayers of a new believer. They are simple, pure, and true heartfelt communication.
- **Verse 12** Saul had also seen a vision of a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so he might regain his sight.
- The Lord orchestrates the vision for Saul **and** for Ananias. Does Scripture not tell us that God works through dreams and visions. He still calls us and communicates to us through dreams and visions. Angie Pizcazotowski was called by the Lord in a dream. Mike Bryant often encourages us to pray to hear the Lord in our dreams.

Acts 9:13-14 ¹³ But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.”

- “But Lord” – I have heard about this man. He is a bad dude! Are you sure?

Acts 9:15-16 ¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a **chosen instrument** of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. ¹⁶ For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”

- Jesus says to Ananias. Go. He is a “chosen instrument” by me. He will **bear my name**.

Galatians 1:1 Paul introduces himself as

“an apostle, not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead.

- He will carry my name to Gentiles, Kings and the children of Israel.
- He is going to suffer for Christ’s name sake. And did Paul suffer? Listen to how Paul describes his ministry carrying the name of Jesus to the Gentiles, Kings and children of Israel.

2 Corinthians 11:23-28³ Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death.²⁴ Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one.²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea;²⁶ on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers;²⁷ in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food,^[a] in cold and exposure.²⁸ And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

For Christ followers there is often a cost to bear His name.

Acts 9:17-19¹⁷ So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, “**Brother Saul**, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may **regain your sight** and be **filled with the Holy Spirit**.”¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized;¹⁹ and taking food, he was strengthened.

- Ananias wasted no time and goes to the house of Judas to minister to Paul. laying his hands on him he said, “**Brother Saul**” – He recognized

him as a “brother.” The Lord had told Ananias that he was a “chosen instrument” to carry his name to the Gentiles. He is now a brother in Christ and greets him affectionately as a brother.

- He regains his sight and is filled with the Holy Spirit. At the moment Paul believes in the risen Lord, the scales fall from his eyes and he receives the Holy Spirit. Verse 18 says, “Immediately something like scales fell from his eyes”. It could be read, Immediately, “As if” scales fell from his eyes he regained his sight.
- This was the first time the Spirit was given to someone that was not **with** an original apostle.

To be filled by the HS is to be under the control or influence of the Spirit. What happens as we come under the influence of the Spirit. Maybe gradually or perhaps instantly we begin to reflect the fruits of the Spirit that now reside in us.

Gal. 5:22-24 ²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. ²⁴ And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

We also receive gifts from the Spirit and are empowered by God for the common good.

1 Corinthians 12:8-11 ⁸ For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of **wisdom**, and to another the utterance of **knowledge** according to the same Spirit, ⁹ to another **faith** by the same Spirit, to another gifts of **healing** by the one Spirit, ¹⁰ to another the working of **miracles**, to another **prophecy**, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of **tongues**, to another the **interpretation of tongues**. ¹¹ All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.

- “Then he rose and was baptized.” He raised his flag to declare his faith in Jesus. I wonder how many witnesses came to see this baptism. Baptized into one body, one fellowship with other Christians, the same ones he pursued and sought to imprison.

- Verse 19 “He took food and was strengthened. For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus.”

Paul had a reputation of ravaging the church and abusing Christians. In his self-righteousness, Paul was blind to the working of the Holy Spirit, rejected the Messiah and worked diligently to oppose the work of Jesus. Paul had an encounter with Jesus and the Holy Spirit opened his eyes. He is now a new person transformed to be even what secular historians call **the most significant figures in world history**. He is now fellowshipping with the believers in Damascus whom Saul had come to arrest. I can imagine the relief of the Christians, the stories that were shared and the blossoming of Saul’s faith among his new friends.

Let me close today with a few questions that this lesson caused me to ask myself.

In relation to Saul:

Are there areas of self-righteousness in my life or your life that blind us from the truth?

Are there areas of self-righteous blindness in my life or your life that cause us to resist the work of the Holy Spirit or to EVEN work against the Holy Spirit?

Do I need the Spirit's bright light to come and blind me for 3 days? To stop me in my tracks? To cause me to recognize How could I be so wrong? How could I have hurt others in the way that I did and not turn from my blindness, repent and let the Spirit work through me.

Is there a "veil of self-righteousness" that needs to be lifted? Lifted to open my eyes or your eyes so we can be in instrument of the Spirit to **change the world? To Build His kingdom?**

In relation to Ananais:

Do I or do you have a Saul in your life? Someone who intimidates, threatens or has hurt us in some way that needs to know Jesus and we would rather avoid?

Do I feel the nudge of the Holy Spirit to go and see that CHOSEN INSTRUMENT OF GOD that I would rather avoid? Is fear holding me back from being obedient to the prompting of the Spirit?

Am I able, like Ananias, to love my neighbor, bless those who curse me or pray for those who persecute me?

Never underestimate the value of one person brought to Christ, who may just be the one who changes the world.