

*Words and Deeds: On The Road To Damascus*  
*By Jason Huff*  
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*Psalm 25:6-18; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Acts 9:1-9*

Today's final Scripture reading comes from Acts 9:1-9. May God add His richest blessing to His holy and perfect Word. "Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything."

St. Augustine had one. Martin Luther had one. John Calvin had one. John Wesley had one. James Newton, the former slave trader and author of the hymn "Amazing Grace," had one. The question is, what did all these great men of faith have - one what? All of them had sudden, dramatic conversions to faith, points at which God got ahold of them and immediately changed their way of thinking. Some of them turned to faith during what we would normally call an "act of God" - a thunderstorm, a terrible storm at sea. Others had believed in God's existence and even a sickly, weak Christianity but were struck suddenly with what it meant to be a true believer who trusts in Christ alone for salvation. These are often known as "Damascus Road experiences." They're named after the famous conversion of Saul, who changed completely after his encounter with Jesus.

Now not everyone has a sudden or dramatic conversion story. Most of the men I just mentioned grew up with some sort of "Christian background." And lots of us are brought up in the faith, and we've never really doubted it. Often we've come to a better understanding of our faith, which is why we may have switched churches - to better reflect how we want to make our relationship with Jesus stronger, front and center in our lives. But there's no doubt that no one will come into God's Kingdom who won't say, "I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see." Every faithful person will know that God has saved them from what they were and what they could have become.

So last week, we talked about a road trip - Philip's road trip down to Gaza on a divine appointment. He encountered an Ethiopian official who became a believer on the spot, and history tells us that his testimony to his home country laid the groundwork for perhaps 100 million Ethiopians becoming Christians over the ages.

This week, we have a very different kind of road trip going on, not one that God ordered but one God knew about, allowed, even foreordained would occur, because if last week's road trip affected 60 million Ethiopians over time, this week's road trip would affect billions around the globe. Saul, also known by his Roman name Paul, would become the greatest apostle in terms of spreading the gospel throughout the known world. But before that could happen, he had to be humbled before Jesus of Nazareth – the person he once most despised.

We first became aware of Saul at the death of Stephen – we found out that Saul was holding the clothes of those stoning Stephen. He was encouraging it – “You want to take down this blasphemer? Let me hold your cloak for you!” From there, we have a fierce persecution of the church led by Saul, who's determined to stomp out Christianity. He's been going door to door taking followers of Jesus from their homes and locking them up and charging them with blasphemy in front of the Sanhedrin. We don't know how many lives were lost, but it was so bad that countless Christians fled Jerusalem to escape Saul's wrath.

But Saul's not done! He's determined to flush out the Christians wherever they've gone to hide. Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing threats and murder against the Lord's disciples. This is a point where the Greek is helpful, as I learned from R.C. Sproul whose study of Acts 9 was really useful to me. Our translation we read together says that Saul was breathing out murderous threats because that's the phrase we used in English. We don't speak unless we breathe out, right? You can't do it. Try talking and breathing in at the same time...you'll see what I mean.

But Greek has a completely different word for breathing out as breathing in. The text in Greek literally says Saul is breathing in threats and murder. The first idea is that Saul is feeding off of the accusations and violence against his opponents. It's become his life purpose, his life's breath. He's become a murderer at heart. But this breathing in also puts him in the same category as a wild bull or a wild boar. It's like he's snorting with rage as he attacks the church. Just like a wild animal, he is out of control and deadly dangerous. He's truly become a menace, and up to this point there's no sign of stopping.

So he goes to the high priest to get letters of recommendation. He's getting written permission to destroy the church wherever he goes – to have Christians put out of the synagogues and taken to Jerusalem for punishment. He's not making exceptions for women, either – sometimes women were excused for ignorance of religious matters in ancient times because they weren't trained in the Torah the same way the men were. Not here. Anybody who is a follower of The Way – which was the earliest name that Christians gave themselves – was to wind up in shackles.

Saul rounds up his posse to head into action. He's got guys with him on the road ready to help take down anyone who tries to escape or resist. And this is not just any ordinary trip, OK? Damascus is 135 miles north of Jerusalem – a full week's journey on foot, assuming the road was direct. You remember how last week we said that Philip had been in Samaria? Well, you go from Jerusalem, go through Samaria, go through Galilee (where Jesus and the majority of the disciples were from), keeping going past that, then go east and it's up there – well out of Jewish territory, and really along one of the edges of the Roman empire itself.

Why is Saul going to Damascus? We knew the Christians took flight during the first wave of persecution, except for the apostles and a small number of the disciples. They scattered all over the place. The best guess is that Saul had heard reports from Damascus about these people spreading news that the Messiah had come, and he was furious. Maybe he was planning a dragnet, starting north in Damascus and arresting people that he met all the way back to Jerusalem. Maybe he'd already gotten word of the conversions in Samaria and had been there to root out the believers there. It's possible there's a significant time lapse and Saul is working to keep the Christian "threat" under control. No matter what, we know Paul is dead serious about tracking down and eliminating any Christians he can find.

And they make good headway. They are nearly to Damascus when a light shines down from heaven, and a voice calls out, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Now the easy part of this is the question – why are you persecuting me? Paul thought that he was doing a service to God – Jesus predicted this would happen in John 16:2. Paul thought he was fighting for the honor of the one true God, completely oblivious to the fact that Jesus was actually the promised messiah. In Paul's later testimony and letters, we learn this to be the case.

The hard part is "Saul, Saul." You see, using someone's name twice is a sign of intimacy and care to the Jewish people, and also a hint to pay close attention, for something monumental is about to be said or to occur. The angel of the LORD calls out, "Abraham, Abraham," to stop him from killing his son Isaac. God calls "Moses, Moses" out of the burning bush; He reveals Himself to the great prophet Samuel the same way. King David mourns this way after his dead son Absalom. Jesus calls out, "My God, my God," from the cross. When God calls out, "Saul, Saul," of course God is getting his attention. But He's also speaking from a perspective of love.

And that's our first main point for today: *God's love extends to the worst sinners.* God does not forgive Saul after a huge confession session and years of work fixing the damage he did. God doesn't require Saul to go to each family he's hurt and apologize before His love is on the table. No, before Saul does anything, while Saul is still an enemy of the church, God loves Him. God shows great love to Him just by steering Saul off the path he was on and bringing him into the fold, into His Kingdom under Jesus.

When we think about God's forgiveness, we need to know that God's love is far greater than our own. God's love extends to three men guilty of murder, either by their own hand or by their command – Moses, David, and Saul. Those aren't just any names, are they? No, they are three of the most revered figures in the Christian faith. God's love extends to cowards – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Gideon, Elijah, Peter. In the Gospels, Jesus shows kindness to the Samaritan woman who's had five husbands and the woman caught in adultery. And in Saul, God loves someone who has actually had His disciples put to death. Not just any violence, but deadly violence against His chosen people.

When we look at ourselves, we come up against two truths that seem contradictory but aren't. We are sinners deep within our humanness – even sins we don't carry out, we dream about, we lust over, we scheme. And despite that rottenness at our core, we are created in the image of God and deeply loved by God. The good news of the gospel is not that God saves good people. It's that, through faith, awful people are transformed and made righteous in His sight.

You know, despite what our culture encourages us to do, the Bible never says that we should love ourselves or forgive ourselves. When Jesus said “you should love your neighbor as you love yourself,” He was implying that we naturally love ourselves. Of course we do! Even if we don't like all sorts of things about ourselves, most of our days are consumed with things that we believe are in our own self-interest.

And forgiving ourselves isn't our priority. We need God's forgiveness. We need His grace to cover the sins we've committed. Because all the sins we commit, whether against others or even against ourselves, ultimately we're responsible to God for them because He created us. He is the One to whom we owe our debt. The good news is that when we turn to Him in faith, He does forgive us, and He forgives the worst of our offenses. Saul is proof that no one is beyond the grace of God, if God moves in their heart and draws them to Himself.

So this incredible light surrounds Saul, and the voice speaks to Him from out of it. And Paul knows this is not an ordinary encounter. “Who are you, Lord,” he cries out. Now “lord” was a popular honorific for a noble person in that era, but Paul is going beyond that. He knows that something incredible, supernatural is happening. But it's also ironic that he doesn't get it. It shows just how ignorant he was. All this time, he was going after Christians, yet it never occurred to him that they might actually be telling the truth. He is amazed to find that this vision is of Jesus, that the Savior and Lord the Christians serve really is God the Messiah in the flesh.

And that leads me to our second key thought today: *we do not save ourselves*. Saul does not choose to believe in Jesus. Saul does not make a decision for Christ. Jesus appears to Saul and says, “Go into the city, and you will be told what to do.” When he gets up, Saul can't see a thing, so it's not as if he has a choice in the matter. Saul has a devastating encounter with the risen Lord and is given his marching orders. Nowhere do we see Saul listening to the evidence and making up his mind that the stories of Jesus are true. Saul has to get knocked on his keister by Jesus Himself before he believes.

Do we have to have faith in Jesus Christ to be saved? Absolutely. The cornerstone of Christianity is that we are saved by grace through faith. Saul says so in Ephesians 2:8. He goes on to say, and “this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one may boast.” The very faith that saves us is implanted into us through God's wonderful grace. We are not saved because of our work of believing; we are saved because of God's mysterious work that then gives us understanding, belief, and works that follow from our joy in Him.

Let's never think, “I'm good with God because I did X,” whether X is going to church or saying your prayers or doing good deeds or being a nice person. The only reason we are good with God is because of God's sovereign mercy on us, which gives us faith and trust in Him. And that's reason enough.

Compare this to, say, the Mormons, who are really really nice but not a true Christian church, no matter what they try to tell you. And why? Listen to this from their former president, Gordon Hinkley: “Brothers and sisters, all the Lord expects of us is to try, but you have to *really* try!” (His emphasis, not mine.) Why are Mormons so nice? Because they're afraid that if they aren't nice, they aren't really trying!

Or Islam...the key beyond everything else in Islam is sincere belief in the one true God, whom they call Allah. You show your sincerity through following the five pillars of Islam. The only people who are absolutely determined to go to hell in Islam are hypocrites who combine the worship of God with something else – devotion to one's wife, business, children, work. But who in this world isn't drawn to other things? Who in this world isn't a hypocrite? We sing, “God saved a wretch like me!” No person lives out their beliefs in complete obedience all their lives.

Which is why we can celebrate that we do not save ourselves. Salvation belongs to God, and He is our rescuer. He is our redeemer, our restorer. When He redeems us, that's when true and lasting faith takes root in our hearts. That true faith shows itself in how live, in our attitudes, the things we do. But Saul's conversion shows us that it is God's work, not our own. If we have faith and trust in Jesus, we should not ever have to worry about God's saving grace in our lives.

So the end result of Saul's encounter with Jesus is that he is left blinded, led by the hand into Damascus. We'll learn more about what happens to him next week. But what's fascinating is that Saul's sight is never quite the same. We know from his letters that he had a “thorn in his flesh.” In another letter he speaks how the church he was serving was so kind, they would have given him their own eyes if they could. On multiple occasions Paul talks about how his signature is so big and how he dictates his letters to other people.

And that leads me to a final thought: *our obedience or obstinance towards God has consequences*. God is the one who gives us faith, who saves us, who moves us. But we have choices as to how we're going to respond. And those choices will have lasting effects on our lives. Maybe not as obvious or as drastic at the lasting effect on Saul, but they will be there nonetheless.

The question for us is, does God have to blind us in order for us to see? Do we have to have the wind knocked out of us in order to leave room for the Spirit's breath to fill us? We will never know what things we might miss out on by delaying our obedience, what rewards we might have had if we had just moved closer to God now instead of later.

Look, all of us are kinda obstinate. I get it, I am too. I want my way – the other night, I ordered pizza with sausage on it because I thought nobody else was going to be eating my half. I heard about it the next day – “why is there sausage on this pizza?” Because I like it, that's why! We stomp and carry on about getting our way in everyday life. But we do it in our spiritual lives too, and it is dangerous. Dangerous because we don't want to know what we might have to go through for God to get our attention.

I want to encourage you to make plans to be a part of our Bible study. It's starting up a week from Wednesday. We're going to be doing *Discipleship Essentials*. There are copies of the book in back. It's not a video series. It's about becoming true disciples of Jesus – doing the work necessary to understand what God desires us to become and putting into action with the Spirit's help. It's going to take a little work. But we need this. As a congregation, we need to know how best to be God's ambassadors to our world. Don't keep putting it off. Now is your chance to stand up and be counted for God. Now is your opportunity to witness the goodness of obedience, rather than the consequences of procrastination and stubbornness.

Next week, we'll see just how God got Saul out of this predicament...and how he pulled one man out of his fears to do it. Let's pray.