

ACTS 9:1-31

BLINDED BY THE LIGHT

As Acts Chapter 9 opens, the church is being persecuted and Saul is one of the main persecutors. We were introduced to him back in Chapter 7 when Stephen was stoned to death. It says that "the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul." (Acts 7:58). It goes on to tell us that "Saul approved of [Stephen's] execution" (Acts 8:1).

OK, so who is Saul of Tarsus? We know he's a young man. He's smart. He has some level of authority. He has a passionate spirit. He is zealous for Judaism. He is diligent in following the Law. Saul is angered over this new sect simply referred to as "the Way." These people are claiming that someone named Jesus, obviously cursed by God for having been hung on a tree – that this person was the promised Messiah, God's Son. Saul views this group as a bunch of dangerous heretics and blasphemers who must be silenced. "But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison" (Acts 8:3). We mentioned that churches were starting to meet in houses. So, while they are in their worship services they were dragging these groups of believers off.

So then, as we pick up the narrative in Chapter 9 Saul is actively persecuting the followers of Jesus.

READ Acts 9:1-2

Saul would later admit in Acts Chapter 22, "I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished" (Acts 22:4-5).

The question that people ask is, "Did Saul ever actually kill any of these early saints or did he just harass and imprison them?" The answer

comes in his own words in Acts Chapter 26... "And 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" (Acts 26:10). So then, Saul was an active participant in the deaths of many Christians even if he didn't actually kill them himself.

And so it is that this former student-of-the-law-turned-Jewish-zealot and persecutor of the church makes his way to Damascus.

I'll be honest. If I had been in charge back then and were advising God, I would have probably told Him to go ahead and strike Saul dead. By doing that you would spare the church a lot of heartache, wouldn't you? And you would preserve a lot of the scattered saints who were being killed. But thankfully God knew what He was doing. The one true omniscient God is able to see beyond the here and now and look inside a person's heart. The Bible tells us... "For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). Aren't you glad that He does?

What God sees in Saul is a man passionate for Yahweh, the LORD God of Israel. Saul truly longs to know God and he's trying his very best to please Him. He really is. Saul's problem is that he has a misguided zeal. He's off course – way off course – but he doesn't know it yet. So, God intervenes and sends His Son to have a little talk with Saul.

READ Acts 9:3a

Remember, Saul is on this important mission. He's traveling on orders of the Sanhedrin to Damascus in Syria to deal with those dangerous believers in Jesus who have relocated up there. What is Saul's state of mind as he approaches Damascus? In his testimony later in Acts this is what he says: "And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities" (Acts 26:11). He's angry.

Well, as Saul is approaches Damascus...

READ Acts 9:3b

Without warning, a bright light, probably similar to the brilliant glow from an atomic explosion, shines around Saul and those traveling with him. Our quarterly says that "Light has its source in the Person and work of God." Saul recognizes that this light is from God.

READ Acts 9:4-5

Blind and disoriented, Saul falls off his horse to the ground. He addresses the glorious Presence in the middle of this bright light as "Lord." It's a term of highest respect. "Who are You, Lord?" Saul thinks that perhaps the voice is that of an angel or some other heavenly being. Whatever or Whoever it is, he knows that He's dealing with Someone greater than himself.

The voice identifies Himself as Jesus. Notice the question that Jesus asks Saul. "Why are you persecuting ME?" You see, Jesus identifies closely with His followers. To persecute or hurt a member of His body is to hurt Jesus Himself. "So why are you persecuting Me, Saul?" He then gives Saul some instructions...

READ Acts 9:6

"One step at a time, Saul" (the same with us when God gives us directions). "Just go into Damascus and wait there for further instructions."

READ Acts 9:7-8

Saul's blindness is quite unusual. I want you to notice something. The other men traveling with Saul had seen the same light. But they apparently retained their sight because now they are leading Saul. So then, Saul's blindness is something supernatural, a working of God.

Now, Saul later in the book of Acts gives his personal testimony about this Damascus Road experience. This is from Acts Chapter 22 – he's giving his testimony about this experience we just read about... "Now those who were with me saw the light but did not understand the voice of the one

who was speaking to me. And I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord said to me, 'Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do.' And since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me, and came into Damascus" (Acts 22:9-11). Here we are told that the men who were with Saul heard the voice but didn't understand it. So, not only were they not blinded by the light as Saul was, but they didn't hear what Saul heard. This encounter with Jesus is intended solely for Saul.

Later in Acts Chapter 26, again recounting his conversion experience, this is what he says: "At midday...I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me. And when we had all fallen to the ground, 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.' And I said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen Me and to those in which I will appear to you...'" (Acts 26:13-16).

Here we find out that Jesus's revelation of Himself to Saul is followed by a gentle word of rebuke. Jesus says, "It is hard for you to kick against the goads." The KJV says, "kick against the pricks." A "prick" or a "goad" is a pointed rod. It is used to jab a large animal like an ox in order to get it to move. To "kick against the prick" or the goad means to push back, to resist, to rebel against the urging, the command of God. Our strong wills and our dulled consciences often resist the Spirit's promptings. It's a very painful experience for us when we do that! Just like it would be painful for the ox that resists its master, so it will be painful us when we resist God. He has to "poke" us! A word of advice – submit to Him! Don't fight against God. Gamaliel had given this same advice to the Sanhedrin when he was advising them – "Let's not fight against God. We're not going to win." This is apparently what Saul has been doing without knowing it.

Another thing we learn from this passage in Acts Chapter 26 is that Jesus has a purpose, a special mission for Saul. He doesn't know what it is yet, but it is going to be revealed soon. Jesus is telling Saul, "I have a purpose for you."

Saul's blinded condition stops him in his tracks. It interrupts his life. It immobilizes him for several days. This is God's way of re-focusing Saul, of getting his attention. He will be secluded from all outside distractions so that he might become more in tune to this new direction that God has for him. This is a life-changing event.

READ Acts 9:9

You can just imagine Saul's mental condition as he waits. He is a humbled, stricken man who is convicted of his sin against God. He realizes now that everything he's been doing, which he thought was God's will, has been wrong.

In 1 Corinthians he confesses the shame and regret for what he had been doing: "For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God" (1 Corinthians 15:9). His own self-righteousness as a good Jew has been brought into the light of God's presence. He now sees all the things he had been doing as Isaiah 64:6 describes it, as nothing but "filthy rags." Saul contemplates all of this and is deeply convicted. No wonder he doesn't eat or drink anything.

We know from looking ahead to verse 11 that Saul is spending his time praying. Using my sanctified imagination, I can just picture the LORD speaking to Saul during these three days. Perhaps Saul recalls the Old Testament scriptures that he knows so well. Now he can see that all those references to the various sacrifices and all those prophecies were pointing to the Person and work of Jesus. I don't know. I'm just guessing. Whatever the case, by the time God's messenger arrives on the scene, Saul's heart will be ready to receive God's truth.

Well, who is the messenger that God is preparing to go to Saul? It's a man named Ananias.

READ Acts 9:10-14

Ananias is a willing servant, but he's also well aware of Saul's reputation. Ananias is not rebelling against or arguing with God (like Moses did at the burning bush). But you can sense that Ananias is a bit leery of this Saul guy. He's heard all about him. It's like Ananias is saying, "Are you sure about this, Lord?"

READ Acts 9:15-17a. Ananias is obedient and he goes immediately.

READ Acts 9:17b-19. Saul's blindness is lifted by God. "Something like scales fell from his eyes." He is baptized and then physically rejuvenated by food. A brand-new chapter in Saul's life begins.

I want to spend just a little time talking about what happens in the years that follow Saul's conversion. Roughly 17 years will pass from the time of his conversion here in Chapter 9 to when he and Barnabas head out on their first missionary journey later in Acts Chapter 13. We know this based on information given in the book of Galatians (1:17 to 2:2). He is giving his testimony to them in that letter. For the longest time I had it in my mind that Saul's name was changed from Saul to Paul soon after his conversion. A lot of people might think that. But his name change doesn't actually take place until after he embarks on his first missionary journey – that will be nearly two decades after his Damascus Road encounter.

[Note: Saul is his Jewish name. His name is changed to Paul in the book of Acts, which is his Greek name as he begins to minister more and more to Gentiles.]

So, what's going on in Saul's life during this period? A lot! It's a time of spiritual preparation for the missionary effort that will later define who he is. Even though Saul is now a believer in Jesus; and even though he has great knowledge of the Scriptures having studied under Gamaliel, one of the top rabbis of that day; and even though Saul is on fire for the Lord Jesus, he is NOT ready yet. God must prepare him further for his unique calling. Sometimes our spiritual training for the task to which God has called us takes time. And that's the case here with Saul.

As we resume the action in Acts Chapter 9, notice what Saul is doing right after his conversion and baptism...

READ Acts 9:20

You can imagine how Saul's sudden change must have absolutely floored people. They must have been shocked by what they heard coming out of Saul's mouth! "What? Jesus is the Son of God?"

READ Acts 9:21

Those who hear Saul's preaching are astonished. It says here that they "were amazed." No doubt the people are wondering just what's come over Saul. He's a totally different person! How ironic it is that Saul is now preaching the very truth that he came to Damascus to squash out.

READ Acts 9:22

Remember, Saul has a great knowledge of the Old Testament scriptures. He now sees them in a different light. We see the spiritual growth that has taken place in Saul in the short time he has been in Damascus. Saul knows enough of the Old Testament prophecies to see how they tie directly to Jesus and how they show Him to be the Messiah. How does Saul know all this? By the Holy Spirit's revelation to him (the same way we learn). Saul might have been blind physically but he has been given spiritual eyesight. Eager to share this new-found knowledge, Saul passes it along to anyone who will listen. He is on fire!

Between Acts 9:22 and Acts 9:23 is the period when many Bible scholars believe that Saul travels to Arabia for an indefinite period of time. Saul's time in Arabia is not mentioned by Luke in the book of Acts. But we know that it happens based on his letter later to the Galatians. In his own words this is what he says in that letter: "But when He who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son to me, in order that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and

returned again to Damascus” (Galatians 1:15-17). So, we know he goes to Arabia. We have no idea where exactly in Arabia Saul went. The Bible doesn’t tell us. It could have been anywhere in a vast desert region. All we know is that he went to Arabia for “many days.”

So, what happens out there in the desert, in the middle of nowhere? Well, Saul gets alone with God. He has no distractions. He’s thinking about what has happened to him. He is overwhelmed by all this. He feels the overpowering need for solitude with God. He is experiencing a complete upheaval inside; a change in his whole way of thinking – his beliefs, his work, his friends, and his life’s purpose. It has all been interrupted. Undoubtedly this is a time where Saul meditates on the Scriptures and experiences God’s holy presence.

It is my personal opinion (not original, other Bible teachers have said this as well) that Jesus Himself met with Saul personally and taught him. I base this on what he says in Galatians 1:11-12. This is what Saul says to the Galatians: “For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man’s gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.” Jesus comes to Saul several times in his life. Perhaps it is during this time in Arabia that he had that revelation from Jesus. We don’t know. I am just throwing it out there as a possibility.

I find it interesting that. just prior to beginning His earthly ministry, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert for 40 days where He was tempted by Satan. This gave Jesus much-needed time alone with His Father in preparation for His ministry. Likewise, here we see Saul, before he starts his ministry, spending time alone with God, again, in a desert.

Eventually Saul makes his way back to Damascus. As it turns out, he’s not exactly welcomed back with open arms by his fellow Jews.

READ Acts 9:23-24

This is a rough period for Saul, isn’t it?. He goes from being the champion of the Jews to being their “Public Enemy Number One.” And it

isn't like the believers in Damascus are falling all over themselves to welcome Saul back either. A lot of them are still fearful of him and understandably skeptical of the change that has taken place. When someone changes 180 degrees, you can't help but question the reasons why. You wonder if they might have an ulterior motive. "What are they up to?"

READ Acts 9:25

Many in the Christian community in Damascus, to their credit, upon hearing about the Jewish plot to kill Saul, rally to Saul's aid and help him to escape the city in a unique way. From Damascus Saul heads to Jerusalem.

READ Acts 9:26

It's been quite a while since Saul's conversion. The believers in Jerusalem aren't exactly thrilled to see him. Just as we noted the apprehension on the part of the Damascus believers, it is easy to understand why the disciples in Jerusalem would be fearful of him. As spiritual as the apostles were, not one of them reaches out to Saul. Instead, who is it that does?

READ Acts 9:27

It's a relatively unknown disciple named Barnabas who takes Saul under his wing. He introduces him and shows him around. He informs the apostles of how Saul had been saved; of how he had boldly preached in the synagogue at Damascus; how they had tried to kill him and how he had suffered for his faith. No wonder Barnabas is known as "the son of encouragement."

John Phillips in his commentary on the Book of Acts offers this insight: "[Saul's] arrival in Jerusalem was not greeted with enthusiasm by the church. His new sympathy for the saints was extremely suspect. One and all the believers shunned him, naturally thinking he had come to spy on them. What happened to Peter's spirit of discernment? Why did not John befriend him, take him home and introduce him to Mary, the Lord's

mother? Where was Andrew? Of all the apostles Andrew was the one always reaching out to bring outsiders to Jesus. What happened to Nathaniel, that Israelite indeed, in whom was no guile?"

Again, listen to Saul's own words from Galatians: "Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas [the apostle Peter] and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother" (Galatians 1:18-19). We know from this passage that when Saul goes to Jerusalem he meets only with two of the church's leaders, the Apostle Peter and James the brother of Jesus. Saul has the privilege of staying at Peter's house for 15 days.

Can't you just imagine the conversation between these two men? Peter probably shares with Saul many of the stories about his three and a half years with Jesus. Remember, none of the Gospels has been written yet. So, Peter shares a lot of the stories we read now in the Gospels. Saul probably shares some of his deep insights into Old Testament that he has from studying under Gamaliel and the prophecies he now sees in Jesus. Perhaps he shares about his experiences with the LORD in Arabia. You can just imagine the conversations between these two men who will become stalwarts in the church.

READ Acts 9:28-29

They wanted to kill him in Damascus and now they want to kill him in Jerusalem. Do you notice a common theme here with Saul? The Jews can't beat Saul in an argument. So, if you can't beat him, kill him!

READ Acts 9:30.

Why Tarsus? Because that is where Saul is from. Over time while Saul is in Jerusalem, he becomes accepted by the Jewish Christians there. He is able to preach the Gospel and move freely. Everything is going great. He feels compelled to share the good news about Jesus with his fellow Jews. This would become the pattern later in his ministry – to share the Gospel with the Jews first because he loves them dearly. They are his brothers! Unfortunately, many of the Jews reject Saul's message. God uses this. It

seems like a negative thing, but God actually uses this opposition for good – as a way to get Saul out of Jerusalem and prepare him to be a missionary to the Gentiles.

When the believers in Jerusalem hear of the plan by the Jews to kill Saul, they come to his rescue and send him away. From dates in secular history Saul's period back home in Tarsus will last somewhere between six and ten years. So, there is going to be a time here when we don't hear from Saul.

Saul already knows when he leaves Jerusalem that his calling is to the Gentiles. We know this from his personal testimony later in the book of Acts (Acts 22:17-21). Saul is ready and eager to take the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles. But God has to get the rest of the church on board with His plan. So, God works in the life of the church to change their traditional mindset against the Gentiles. The struggle to get Jewish Christians away from their old prejudice of the Gentiles, circumcision and keeping the works of the Law will be a long and painstaking process. It is going to take time. We see that as we go through Acts.

Peter becomes the focus of Acts for the next few chapters. Saul will not re-appear on the scene again until Acts 11:25.

READ Acts 9:31

God is doing a work in the church. We'll stop and pick it up here next time.

A few applications from Acts Chapter 9:

- God is in the business of transforming lives. If He can change a religious radical zealot like Saul of Tarsus, He can certainly change anyone.
- Trust that God knows what He's doing even if from a human standpoint He doesn't always seem to make sense. Case in point: Ananias -- "You want me to do what?"

- For every Saul (the Apostle Paul) that is out there, you have a host of spiritual mentors and encouragers along the way (like Ananias, Barnabas and Peter). We may not all be like Paul or Peter, but we can be like Ananias and Barnabas. The church needs all these people.
- Sometimes we need to just get alone with God for a while and re-focus our lives.
- When called, Saul submitted to Jesus. He didn't argue with or resist Him. Fighting against God will always be a losing proposition.
- It may take time for God to prepare us for a specific task that He has for us down the road. It may take time!