"Saul's Conversion"
Acts 9:1-43
Dan Leppo

When the Romans conquered the world from the Greek empire, they left pockets of Grecian culture throughout its footprint. Regarding the Jews, they were segmented into two groups. One group was aligned with the Grecian culture, which focused on the Arts and more liberal interpretations of the Law. These were the Hellenists or the Sadducees. They didn't believe in the resurrection, so that made them sad, you see? The other group of Jews was more legalistic – focused on strict adherence to the Law. These were the Pharisees. These two groups were more often than not at odds with each other.

Prior to his conversion, the Apostle Paul was known as Saul. Until he reached the age of 14, he grew up in Tarsus, which was an area in the center of the Grecian culture. Therefore, until he turned 14, he lived with the Hellenistic cultural influence. At 14, his parents, who were Pharisees, enrolled him in a school focused on teaching the Law under the tutelage of Gamaliel. He was the renowned scholar on the Jewish scriptures at that time. So, without Saul or Paul knowing it, God was preparing him to be a voice that could relate to both the Hellenistic and legalistic sides of the Jewish culture.

In today's lesson, we're blessed to read about God's apprehension and conversion of Saul of Tarsus. We first learned about Saul in Maggie's lecture last week on chapter 8 where we he was an approver of having Stephen stoned to death - making him the first Christian martyr. Additionally, we're told in verse 3 of chapter 8 that Saul was beginning to destroy the church. He was going from house to house dragging off both men and women who were believed to be following Jesus.

Now that we head into chapter 9, Saul's anti-Christian agenda is getting more pronounced and violent. He's breathing murderous threats against the disciples and asking for letters from the chief priests to the synagogues in Damascus. These letters would give him the permission to apprehend any man or woman who belonged to the Way and take them to Jerusalem as prisoners. The Way was the early name of followers of Jesus. They were not yet called Christians.

As Saul was approaching Damascus, there is suddenly a light from heaven that flashed down and around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice from heaven saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?" The fact that Saul dropped to his knees is an important aspect of this story. There are a lot of people I've talked to or heard over the years that have boldly proclaimed that when they get to heaven, they're going to have a "*Come to Jesus*" meeting with the Lord Himself. They want explanations of the injustices they've experienced. My response to them? Good luck with that.

If you have been blessed to have the Lord draw near to you and your experience, or experiences, have been anything like mine when this happened, you crumbled and dissolved into joyous tears in a millisecond. You just get so overwhelmed by the goodness and love of God. I have news for those of you who think you're going to get tough with Jesus when you see Him; brother or sister….you're going down to your knees in total adoration of your Savior. Whatever bone you have to pick with the Lord, will evaporate. Paul's response of falling to the ground is the natural response to being confronted by one's Creator.

The real revelation is how closely Jesus identifies Himself with the church. "Why are you persecuting ***Me***? This is our Good Shepherd talking, loved ones. Whatever adversity you have gone through, you are going through, and/or will go through for the sake of the Kingdom of God, your King is feeling it every bit as much, if not more, than you are. I hope you take great comfort in this beautiful truth of being a child of God – you're never alone.

Notice how Saul addresses Jesus in his response, "Who are you, *Lord*?" In my opinion, this is an instant conversion for Saul. He literally went from being in opposition to Jesus to calling him Lord with one flash of light from heaven. The Lord repeats the fact that Saul's attacks on the church are attacks on Him. But then what did He do? Did He spank Saul or give him a stern lecture? Isn't that how we feel when we get the conviction of sinning against the Lord? We feel like we deserve punishment.

Remember, the punishment for yours and my sins was taken by Jesus at the cross. What did He say in John 3:17, "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved." Our God is about forgiving, restoring, and moving forward together with us. For the believer, God is not a grudge-holding God. Both Jeremiah and Isaiah reminded us that He remembers our sins no more.

Jesus foregoes the anticipated tongue-lashing and simply instructs Saul to go into Damascus where he'll receive further instructions. This is very typical of following the Lord. We don't get His entire plan laid out before us. It's one step at a time. Why does He do that? I would guess for a lot of us, if we knew the whole plan God has for us and saw what kind of sacrifice it would take to accomplish that plan, we might politely say, "No thank you, God." I think the real reason for this approach is it builds up both obedience and trust in the LORD. With each act of obedience, God shows up with additional instructions. As He keeps responding to our obedience, then trusting and obeying Him will get easier.

Saul, understandably speechless, was helped up by his friends. They heard the sound of the voice from heaven but could not understand what was said. When Saul opened his eyes, he was temporarily blind. So, instead of entering Damascus as a zealous persecutor, he's being led in as a humbled servant. He remained in the city for three days still blind and did not eat or drink anything. Can you imagine what was going through Saul's mind at this point? With him being a highly trained Old Testament scholar, my guess was he was connecting the dots of the Messianic prophecies to Jesus.

The Lord then spoke to a disciple, not an apostle, Ananias in a vision. He told Ananias to look for Saul on Straight Street in the city. Jesus then told Ananias that Saul has seen Him in a vision and that he was to go and place his hands on him to restore his sight. Ananias knew exactly who Saul was, so He questioned the Lord in a way like, "Seriously? Have you been seeing what this dude has been doing to your holy people in Jerusalem?" Ananias also knew that Saul was coming with the authority of the chief priests to arrest all who call on Jesus' name.

Jesus ignored Ananias' whining and orders him to, "**Go**!" When hearing this word from the Lord with an exclamation point, I have this vision of the scene in the Wizard of Oz when the Wizard yells at the cowardly lion who runs out of the Wizard's throne room and jumps out of a window. I'm not feeling the warm and fuzzy here from Jesus. In verses 15 and 16, the Lord then laid out to Ananias, and to the rest of us, Saul's purpose and the cost that comes with his obedience.

- Saul's purpose: He is God's chosen instrument to the Gentiles, their kings and to the people of Israel.
- Saul's cost: God will show Saul how much he must suffer for Jesus' name.

Do you know that each of you is God's chosen instrument? Jesus did not go through all He went through to just save you. As glorious as this grace is, salvation is just the beginning of our walks with Christ. God did not offer salvation just so we could chill out, eat bon bons, and play video games. Each and every believer in Jesus is a new creation with a defined purpose, or purposes to benefit God's kingdom and glorify Him.

Now yours and my purposes may not be as far reaching as Saul's. However, whatever God's purpose, or purposes, for you is/are, they are *your* highest calling. Your purpose might be to be an exceptional parent or grandparent. It might be to be a plumber. If you think you want a greater, or more meaningful purpose - like Saul's - than what God has for you, pay attention to the second bullet point, which speaks to the cost of Saul's purpose.

For Saul/Paul to accomplish his purpose for Jesus, he would have to suffer, *"From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one; three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of: robbers, my own countrymen, the Gentiles, in the city, in the wilderness, in the sea, and among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness."* (2 Corinthians 11:23-29) *Now*, how much do you want to elevate your purpose for Jesus?

What's impressive about Paul is I believe Jesus told him that all of this was going to happen to him. Paul didn't flinch – he went after it and never gave up. When reading from this list, I seriously doubt I would have been able to handle 5% of what Paul did. I'm sure in heaven there is a long line to meet Paul, but I will wait as long as it takes just so I can hug him and tell him thank you for all he did.

Ananias obeyed Jesus and went to place his hands on Saul to heal him from his blindness. How Ananias addresses Saul tells us a lot about his believing Jesus' intentions regarding him. He calls him "Brother Saul." There is something very special about the family of God. People of all genders, races, and backgrounds have this beautiful and instinctive brotherhood/sisterhood in Christ. Ananias healed Saul, baptized him, and Saul was filled with the Holy Spirit.

Saul got some food and spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. He didn't waste any time in his newfound faith and began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. In most cases, new believers should not be doing things like this. They need to build a foundation via the Scriptures in developing a firm understanding of Who and what they believe.

I believe the spiritual warfare is significantly elevated for the preachers and teachers of God's Word. I say this because we are professing the truth, and the truth is what will always dispel the lie. The lie is Satan's primary weapon, so anyone who is proclaiming the truth is attacking the devil. That doesn't put him in his happy place. Ergo, the escalation of persecution for the preachers and teachers.

The people hearing Saul teach are blown away as they have heard of all the attacks he had instigated against the church. This was part of what Saul/Paul would have to suffer – getting people to believe he was a changed man. For most of us, our past anti-God or sinful behaviors can be a hindrance to our fruitfulness in the present. Once people make up their minds about you, it's pretty hard for them to change their opinions. That's why I spend so little time talking about myself and focus as much as possible on talking about God and His love for all of His creation.

Saul being Saul, ignored the pushback and, via the Holy Spirit no doubt bringing to his mind more and more that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah, became a powerful minister of the Gospel. The Jews in Damascus were resisting his teaching, but Saul, via the truth of God's Word, was baffling them with his undeniable revelation that Jesus is the Messiah. *His convincing arguments likely migrated to convicting arguments*, so for those Jews who refused to acknowledge the truth, they wanted to kill Saul. God's grace made Saul aware of their murderous plans. Those who were supporting and following Saul's teaching took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall to allow him to escape without harm.

While our text doesn't point this out, there's a gap of time between verses 25 and 26. We learn from the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Galatians that upon his escape, he went to Arabia for as long as three years. He went there by himself no doubt to pray and sort out his transformation. I've heard multiple Bible scholars speculate that while in Arabia, Jesus Himself was teaching and building up Saul. I think church leaders make serious mistakes in putting new believers immediately into service. As I mentioned earlier, for a person to become a mature Christian, they need to take the time to get to really understand Who and what they believe. This kind of foundation laying will allow them to stand strong and walk boldly forward when, not if, the trials come.

At the end of three years, he returned to Damascus and then traveled the 135-mile journey to Jerusalem. When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the apostles, but they were all afraid of him. They didn't believe he really was a disciple. This is a sad moment in the early church, but I can sympathize with the apostles. There's real and recent history that would cause even the most seasoned believer to question the legitimacy of Saul's conversion. Thankfully, God is prepared for moments of doubt like these and brings in reinforcements.

Enter Barnabas, which means son of encouragement or consolation. Living up to his name, Barnabas brought Saul to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord, that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. What a beautiful gesture of this man. We all at times need that interceder to be the bridge to take us from doubt to trust. The fruit of Barnabas' efforts? They accepted Saul, and he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord.

Saul approached the Hellenistic Jews with his newfound boldness and faith, but they tried to kill him. I'm certain this was part of what Jesus warned him about. The closer you publicly identify yourself with Jesus, the more resistance you're going to face from the enemy. This is the essence of spiritual warfare – the goodness of God against the evil of Satan. The more demonstrative we get in our faith, the greater the threat we become to the enemy. The bigger the threat, the stronger the response to discredit the truth.

The believers heard of the Hellenistic threats against Saul, so they took him down to Caesarea and sent him back to Tarsus. Again, our text doesn't provide this, but church history tells us Saul could have been in Tarsus for as long as 10 years. Some call this his silent years. How can this make any sense? We have this powerful and gifted new convert – why isn't God putting him to work for the betterment of the kingdom? I believe the Lord was doing just that. We need to remember that God's thoughts and ways are not our thoughts and ways. He sees the world from an eternal perspective. I would imagine for those up to ten years, the Lord was deepening his training of Saul to prepare him for the opportunities and trials he was going to face.

With Saul now gone, the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers. Our story now shifts from Saul to Peter. With this time of peace in the church, Peter felt compelled to get out of Jerusalem and go check on the believers in other areas. He starts with a visit to a town called Lydda located just south of what is today Tel Aviv and not far where the main airport into Israel is.

When getting to Lydda, Peter found a man named Aeneas, who was paralyzed and had been bedridden for eight years. Peter said to him, "Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and roll up your mat." Immediately Aeneas got up. Peter was exercising two of the gifts of the Spirit – that of a word of faith and healing. As I mentioned with speaking in tongues back in Chapter 2, the exercising of at least some of the gifts of the Spirit is a controversial topic across the various denominations.

Our friends in the Pentecostal and charismatic churches heavily emphasize the use of all of the gifts of the Spirit, while more conservative denominations take the position that many of these gifts were only available for the Apostles. These gifts were to be solely used by them for the purpose of demonstrating their apostolic authority. The argument against some of the gifts of the Spirit being available today is if you follow chronologically the New Testament, there is progressively less instances of documented use of these gifts. Therefore, as the apostles were martyred, the gifts went away with them.

With all due respect to those who take this conservative position, I disagree. *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever*. Malachi said in chapter 3, verse 6 of his book, "*For I the LORD do not change.*" Furthermore, while I understand the interpretation of the conservative position on the gifts of the Spirit, I do not want to be in the business of putting handcuffs on what God can/will do when the Scriptures do not clearly support such a stance. Therefore, to take a blanket position to deny the exercising of the gifts of the Spirit is, potentially, putting a limit on what God will do with someone who is willing to step out in faith.

That being said, the use of the gifts of the Spirit are to have one singular motivation – to glorify God and His kingdom. They are not meant to be a resource to generate a revenue stream or glorify the one exercising the gifts. The gift of healing is a specific gift that I believe is misused in this manner. The misuse of this gift is especially cruel when the person claiming to have this gift does not heal the desperate person seeking help. To avoid being embarrassed and called out as a fraud, the person with the alleged gift points the finger at the suffering one and says they weren't healed because they did not have enough faith. I can't think of a much more devilish mindset than that.

I'm not aware of any one individual who has the gift to heal every person he or she tries to heal. However, that does not mean that we should cease praying for healing. Can God heal a person through another person who calls upon His name? Absolutely. Will He do it every time? That's His call – that's part of Him being sovereign. Getting back to our story, I believe *before* Peter pronounced his word of faith and healing on Aeneas, he received a prodding from the Holy Spirit to speak out what he did. This supports my position that we should keep our hearts and minds open and available to the prompting of the Spirit to exercise one of His gifts. If Peter did not believe in God's power to heal via the gifts of the Spirit, Aeneas would still be paralyzed and bedridden. Well, he would be dead by now, but I hope you see my point.

As I just mentioned, the endgame of a successful use of the gift of the Holy Spirit is God gets the glory. Verse 35 confirmed the purity of this beautiful healing. All those who lived in Lydda and nearby Sharon saw the healed man and turned to the Lord. Next we learn of a wonderful servant in Joppa named Tabitha (or Dorcas) who was always doing good and helping the poor. She became sick and died. Joppa is a short walk from Lydda/Sharon, so they likely had heard about how the Lord healed Aeneas through Peter. They sought Him out to come and see if he could do something for Dorcas.

There is a story of Jesus raising back to life a ruler of a synagogue's 12-year-old daughter. When Jesus told the people who were grieving that she was only sleeping, the people ridiculed Him. What did He do? He cleared the room – He did not want any lack of faith around Him. Knowing Jesus did this, I'm certain Peter took the Lord's lead and cleared the room where Dorcas was laying lifeless. If I were Peter, I would have done the same thing. Not so much because of the lack of faith of others but if my prayer to raise someone failed, I would avoid the embarrassment.

Peter got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he said, "Tabitha, get up." She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up. He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called for the believers, especially the widows, and presented her alive to them. Not surprisingly, the word spread like wildfire through Joppa, and as a result, many people came to faith. Peter hung out in

Joppa for some time and stayed with a tanner named Simon, who we'll learn more about next week when Carol provides her lecture on chapter 10.

I want to conclude this teaching with a word of encouragement for all of you. As I mentioned towards the beginning of this lecture, the Lord took Paul's experiences living in both the Hellenistic and Pharasitical cultures to make him the perfect instrument to tell the Jewish people that Jesus was the Messiah. The thing is, Paul had no idea God was orchestrating his life to prepare him for his eventual purpose in the kingdom. My encouragement to each of you is I believe God does that with every single believer – including each of you.

God takes all of our past – the good and the bad – and puts it to use for the betterment of His kingdom and His glory. Now you may be questioning me why I would include the bad things we've done. You don't have to believe me, but perhaps you'll believe Paul in his proclamation in Romans 8:28, "And we know that **all** things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose." I added the emphasis on all. God not only has the ability but also the desire to redeem not just our souls but our past as well. He can take our worst sins or the painful sins committed against us and turn them into something good and beautiful.

I realize many of us are on the back nine of our lives, but I don't believe for one moment God cannot take the combination of your redeemed past experiences, the indwelling of His Spirit, and a willingness to step forward in faith to produce something amazing to glorify Him and further His kingdom. It's never too late to love someone who seems unlovable. It's never too late to be kind to someone who is desperate to see genuine kindness. It's never too late to be faithful to someone who has been repeatedly abandoned and rejected. If you're willing to believe and let Him, God can take our seemingly wasted and painful experiences and turn them into what is the most valuable for another. My question as we get ready to stand and sing is, will we?