

Previously, we read of Saul witnessing the death of Stephen and beginning a campaign of persecution against the church. Then we learned of Philip's outreach to the Samaritans and that amazing conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch on that desert road from Jerusalem to Gaza. He was so elated to hear that God could forgive him and welcome him into the kingdom of God that upon seeing water he asked to be baptized. Coming up out of the water he saw Philip disappear. The Eunuch must have been overwhelmed by one supernatural event following another. The passage says he went on his way rejoicing. He surely went on to read a couple of chapters later in Isaiah, *³ Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely separate me from his people"; and let not the eunuch say, "Behold, I am a dry tree." ⁴ For thus says the LORD: "To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, ⁵ I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.* Isaiah 56:3-5 What was impossible for him under the first covenant is his in the second. What a confirmation of God's love he must have had as he read those verses!

The passage today returns to Saul's efforts to stop the rapidly growing church of Jesus. *¹ But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² 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.* Acts 9:1-2 Saul wanted to exterminate Christianity for he believed it was leading people to follow a false Messiah. He was more zealous for Judaism than most of his contemporaries (Galatians 1:14). From grammar school on he was sent from the Greco-Roman city of Tarsus to live in Jerusalem and study under the leading rabbi of the day. He made his plans to stop this new movement, not knowing he was trying to stop the living Lord Jesus who would stop him. Sometimes the conscience of people will be so bothered that they become even more extreme in their persecution in an effort to resist the conviction of the Spirit (Acts 26:14). I wonder if that was the case after he witnessed the behavior of Stephen as he died.

The high priest permission was needed to solicit the help of local synagogues in rounding up the people of the Way. This is what Christianity was referred to in that first decade of the church. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." John 14:6 It is an interesting name. We don't know all the history behind the choice of that title.¹ I would guess that it was referring to the way of salvation (Acts 18:26). The veil into the Holy of Holies was torn when Jesus died.² His death made a way into the presence of God for those who believe. Believing in Jesus is the way to forgiveness which gives us access God. It is the way to eternal life in heaven. It is the way to peace, and joy, and an abundant life (John 10:10).

Saul wanted to go to the frontiers of Christian outreach and stop it before it went any further. He received letters of permission from the high priest who had legal authority under Roman law to deal with Jews. He could expect cooperation from the numerous

Commented [PW1]: Galatians 1:14 (ESV)

¹⁴ And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.

Commented [PW2]: Acts 26:14 (ESV)

¹⁴ 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.'

Commented [PW3]: John 14:6 (ESV)

⁶ Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Commented [PW4]: The term occurs six times in Acts (9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22) and was also used by the Qumran community.

Commented [PW5]: Acts 18:26 (ESV)

²⁶ He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately.

Commented [PW6]: I have read that the inner curtain of the Temple was called The Way, though I don't remember the source.

Commented [PW7]: John 10:10 (ESV)

¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

synagogues in Damascus and the Roman authorities to round up Christians and take them bound to Jerusalem to be tried. We don't know exactly what they would do, but I would expect the ruling council would ask for them to recant and return to Judaism or be severely punished.

³ 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?" Acts 9:3-4 This was the beginning of his dramatic conversion experience. I have heard the testimonies of others who have seen a light from heaven or a vision of Jesus. We all have our own unique conversion experiences, most which are far less dramatic but just as life transforming. Saul was so immersed in the teachings of his rabbi that it took something that drastic to make him see what he was doing (Acts 22:3). This reveals the extent God will go to correct someone who is sincere but wrong (1 Timothy 1:13). Some Christians unnecessarily worry that someone will be judged to eternal damnation because they grew up under false teaching and never heard the truth of Jesus. God has a way to reach out to every human heart (Romans 10:18). He is just and loving. He is not willing that any should perish (2 Peter 3:9). **The light of God will shine into every human heart to give them a clear choice** (Isaiah 9:2; John 1:9).

We should be moved by the double use of Saul's name. God knows your name. We see that again and again in Scripture. We see God call Ananias by name to go pray for Saul. God called Abraham by name in Genesis 22:1. He repeated Moses' and Samuel's names (Exodus 3:4; 1 Samuel 3:10). Jesus knows *your* name. He is very personal with each of us. Listen for His still small voice to call your name (John 10:3).

Saul wasn't the only one who fell to the ground. This was such an important event in his life that later in his ministry he repeats it to authorities when explaining why he is an evangelist. In Acts 26:14 Paul tells us everyone with him fell to the ground as well. That was what happened to those who came to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus answered by saying, "I Am!" (John 18:6) These persons that fell to the ground with Paul were probably official representatives of the Sanhedrin who were sent to help Saul capture people of the Way. This shows us God can easily override the plans of man if He chooses. He can stop ISIS in an instant. However, He allows us to rebel against Him and do evil, and yet He uses it all for our eternal good.

⁵ And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Acts 9:5 Jesus asked Saul why he was persecuting Him. Saul is persecuting followers of Jesus. We can see that Jesus so identifies with us that to persecute us is to persecute Him. After the resurrection, Jesus no longer referred to the disciples as friends, but as brothers (John 20:17). In Matthew 25:40 Jesus told the disciples that what was done to the least of his brothers was done to Him. **He so identifies with you, brother and sister in Christ, that what is done to you is done to Him.** As I wrote this I had to stop and weep, partly for joy and partly with conviction. The joy comes from knowing how intimately Jesus feels what we endure. We are never alone. He knows what you endure like no one else ever could. The conviction comes as I recognize that

Commented [PW8]: Acts 22:3 (ESV)

³ "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day.

Commented [PW9]: 1 Timothy 1:13 (ESV)

¹³ though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief,

Commented [PW10]: Romans 10:18 (ESV)

¹⁸ But I ask, have they not heard? Indeed they have, for "Their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world."

Commented [PW11]: 2 Peter 3:9 (ESV)

⁹ The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

Commented [PW12]: Isaiah 9:2 (ESV)

² The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.

Commented [PW13]: John 1:9 (ESV)

⁹ The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.

Commented [PW14]: Genesis 22:1 (ESV)

¹ After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."

Commented [PW15]: Exodus 3:4 (ESV)

⁴ When the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am."

Commented [PW16]: 1 Samuel 3:10 (ESV)

¹⁰ And the LORD came and stood, calling as at other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant hears."

Commented [PW17]: John 10:3 (ESV)

³ To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

Commented [PW18]: Acts 26:14 (ESV)

¹⁴ 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.'

Commented [PW19]: John 18:6 (ESV)

⁶ When Jesus said to them, "I am he," they drew back and fell to the ground.

Commented [PW20]: John 20:17 (ESV)

¹⁷ Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers... [1]

Commented [PW21]: Matthew 25:40 (ESV)

⁴⁰ And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'

as a recipient of such great love, I should love Him more and show that love in my life more than I do.

What a shock it must have been to Saul to suddenly realize the One he was persecuting was the God he zealously desired to serve! I had a shock like that when I realized I was in a cult. God broke it to me gently but I was so distraught that I considered taking my life. If one can sincerely be so wrong, how can he ever know if what he believes is right? But the answer was that God broke through the indoctrination. His light shined in the darkness. For Saul, the pride of being God's servant suddenly turning into the humiliation of knowing how desperately he needed the revelation of God to even know what was true (Philippians 3:8). He suddenly saw the fact that without Jesus He could do nothing at all (John 15:5), even worse, in trying to do what he thought was right he was fighting God. When we see this is true of us we feel broken and useless, but it is then that we are yielded clay in God's hands.

Despite all Saul had done to Jesus, Jesus didn't leave him in despair. ⁶ *But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.*" Acts 9:6 "Get up! I've got a job for you." This brings another kind of brokenness. It is the realization that God is not only willing to forgive you, but will even give you the honor of truly serving Him.

I felt this way when God called me to preach. How could God use me when I had absolutely lost all faith in my ability to even know right from wrong? I'm sure this is what Saul was feeling. "He will tell *me* what to do? Jesus is willing to give me an assignment after I have killed and persecuted His brothers and sisters? How is such great a grace even possible? How can forgiveness be so complete?"

⁷ *The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one.* Acts 9:7 Back on their feet again, the men with Saul could hear God speaking with him but couldn't understand the words or see from where the voice was coming (Acts 22:9). I wonder if any of them were converted by Saul's testimony?

⁸ *Saul 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.* ⁹ *And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.* Acts 9:8-9 This is where we get the expression, "Blinded by the light." Saul's physical condition demonstrated his spiritual state. He had been completely blind to the glory of Christ. God gave him three days to pray about the revelation Jesus had given him. I don't believe he said, "I think I'll go on a fast." He was so overwhelmed he didn't think of eating or drinking anything. Three days is about all you can survive without water unless you are on a supernatural fast like Moses on Sinai (Exodus 34:28). I would guess that Saul would have gone on fasting until he died had God not sent Ananias.

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."* Acts 9:10 Ananias is the name of the man who lied to the Holy Spirit in Acts 5. This Ananias had a different spirit. God looks for the man or woman who is willing to hear His voice and obey. He calls him or her by name. Ananias had a vision along with hearing a voice. He answered like Abraham,

Commented [PW22]: Philippians 3:8 (ESV)

⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ

Commented [PW23]: John 15:5 (ESV)

⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

Commented [PW24]: Acts 22:9 (ESV)

⁹ Now those who were with me saw the light but did not understand the voice of the one who was speaking to me.

Commented [PW25]: Exodus 34:28 (ESV)

²⁸ So he was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights. He neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments.

Samuel, Isaiah (Isaiah 6:8) and others had answered in Scripture, "Here I am, Lord." In other words, here is your servant ready to hear and obey. Will that be your answer when He calls your name? Is that the kind of relationship you have with Jesus?

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." Acts 9:11-12 The street was discovered by archeologists. Today it is called *Darb el-Moskatim*. As in many Roman cities there was a fifty-foot-wide colonnaded street running east and west through the center of town with shops on each side, some of which went into residences behind or above. Archeologists discovered a Jewish quarter on that very street. Judas' house was probably prearranged as a place for Saul to stay while he persecuted Christians. Judas and his household must have witnessed the miraculous events that followed and had to decide what they would believe.

While Saul was praying, Ananias was being told to bring the answer to Saul's prayers. Saul had another vision, this time it was of Ananias laying hands on him so that his sight would be restored. At the same time Ananias is having a vision to go to Saul. A similar thing happens in the next chapter. As Peter prayed men came knocking on the door who had been sent because of a vision. It led to clarity regarding the vision Peter had seen (Acts 10:19-20). God is in the details, and there are no coincidences. God gave Ananias the address and specific words to proclaim.

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." Acts 9:13-14 "You want me to do what?" The testimony of Saul preceded him. He was famous for his evil against believers in Jerusalem. I can't blame Ananias for arguing with God. If God told you to go witness to an ISIS captain, you'd probably question God too. That has actually happened! One fascinating point is that somehow the Christians knew about the plan. Either they had spies in the Sanhedrin or perhaps it was already announced in the local synagogues and they were informed. God often forewarns his people (Proverbs 22:3).

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." Acts 9:15 Go! God doesn't have to explain His instructions, but this time He did to help Ananias have the faith to obey. Jesus chose Saul. Saul didn't choose Jesus (John 15:16). And what God chose Saul to do is not what we would expect. As the devout Jew, we would think he'd be perfect for convincing fellow Jews, but God called him to be the apostle to the Gentiles first and foremost (Romans 11:13). Next he was called to witness to kings, and last of all to Jews (Acts 18:6). Did you notice how Jesus described the mission, "to carry my name!"? The name of Jesus once so despised by Saul would be the very name he would proclaim. The name of Jesus means the salvation of God.

Commented [PW26]: Isaiah 6:8 (ESV)

⁸ And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here I am! Send me."

Commented [PW27]: Acts 10:19-20 (ESV)

¹⁹ And while Peter was pondering the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are looking for you.

²⁰ Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them."

Commented [PW28]: Proverbs 22:3 (ESV)

³ The prudent sees danger and hides himself, but the simple go on and suffer for it.

Commented [PW29]: John 15:16 (ESV)

¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.

Commented [PW30]: Romans 11:13 (ESV)

¹³ Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry

Commented [PW31]: Acts 18:6 (ESV)

⁶ And when they opposed and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles."

¹⁶ *For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.*” Acts 9:16 Saul was going to reap as much suffering as he had sown, but for the sake of the name of Jesus. That is not Jesus getting even with Saul; it is Jesus blessing Saul with eternal rewards and honoring him to be like the prophets who were before him (Matthew 5:10-12) Paul gave us a list of the suffering he endured in 2 Corinthians 11:23-29. He tells us in the letter to the Philippians, ²⁹ *For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake,* Philippians 1:29

¹⁷ *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."* Acts 9:17 Ananias called him his brother. He believed the vision and knew Saul was a believer with a great calling on his life. The laying on of hands was the Old Testament way of commissioning someone for ministry (Numbers 27:23). Ananias had either heard the story of the light from heaven from one of the companions of Saul or perhaps it was part of the revelation he received. Ananias identified the One who sent him as the same One who had appeared to Saul. Thank God Ananias overcame his fear and had faith to obey. May we have faith to do the same! We don't know the rest of Ananias' story, but this one act of great faith will be remembered.

¹⁸ *And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized;* Acts 9:18 In the messages of the last few Sundays we saw that sometimes God fills a person with the Holy Spirit when they believe, and other times when they are baptized, and even after they are baptized. It sounds like Saul was filled with the Spirit when he was baptized when we notice the parallel of 17b "regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit" and verse 18 "regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized." Some would argue that he was filled when Ananias laid hands on him. Let me say again, the important things are that we are being filled continually (Ephesians 5:18), yielding our lives to God's direction, saturating our minds with His Word, and being faithful in prayer.

^{19a} *and taking food, he was strengthened. For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus.* Acts 9:19a Those three days of fasting must have been a time of intense contemplation and prayer on the passages regarding the Messiah, what he had heard of Jesus, the way the disciples died, and the things the disciples declared. After his baptism, he moved in with the disciples in Damascus and probably had a thousand questions. We don't know how long the phrase "some days" refers, but surely the disciples spent many days explaining to him the Apostles' Doctrine. Imagine how relieved the church of Damascus was to find the man who came to persecute them had been miraculously converted!

Did the Holy Spirit speak to you this morning? Was it about our desperate need to rely upon Jesus and the Word? Was it that he calls you by name and identifies so intimately with you, or perhaps that Jesus calls those who know they are nothing without Him? In whatever way God has spoken to you through this passage, will you make a note, take it home, and meditate on it? Take to heart what the Spirit has spoken to you!

Commented [PW32]: Matthew 5:10-12 (ESV)

¹⁰ "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Commented [PW33]: 2 Corinthians 11:23-29 (ESV)

²³ 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, in cold and exposure.

²⁸ And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

²⁹ Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?

Commented [PW34]: Numbers 27:23 (ESV)

²³ and he laid his hands on him and commissioned him as the LORD directed through Moses.

Commented [PW35]: Ephesians 5:18 (ESV)

¹⁸ And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit,

Questions:

- 1 Why do we need to be consistently in the Word?
- 2 Where was Saul going and for what purpose?
- 3 Describe the encounter with Jesus.
- 4 What does it mean that Jesus calls us by name?
- 5 What evidence do we see that God can easily intervene?
- 6 What does Jesus' use of the expression "brother" mean to you?
- 7 Why was "He will tell you what to do," another breaking experience?
- 8 Why did Saul fast three days?
- 9 Why did Ananias question God?
- 10 What was God's commission for Saul?
- 11 What did God speak to you in this passage?

John 20:17 (ESV)

¹⁷ Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"