

ALIVE IN THE SPIRIT
A SERIES ON THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES
(5) FROM PERSECUTOR TO APOSTLE

Acts 9:1-19

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SCRIPTURE

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ²and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” ⁵He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” ⁷The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. ⁸Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

¹⁰Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” He answered, “Here I am, Lord.” ¹¹The Lord said to him, “Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, ¹²and 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.” ¹³But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; ¹⁴and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.” ¹⁵But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; ¹⁶I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” ¹⁷So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” ¹⁸And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, ¹⁹and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus (Acts 9:1-19 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

In terms of its impact on the world, one of the greatest events in history was the conversion of Saul to Christianity. Saul was a rabbi from Tarsus who later became the Apostle Paul – the greatest Christian teacher and missionary of the first century. Nearly a third of the population in the world today is Christian. From a certain point of view this is inconceivable if Paul had never become a Christ-follower.

His conversion is first mentioned in Acts 9, which is our text for this morning. There are many things we can learn from this event that can affect how we relate to God.

1. YOU MAY BE RELIGIOUS AND YET BE AGAINST GOD

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ²and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” ⁵He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” ⁷The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. ⁸Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank (Acts 9:1-9 NRSV).

The first thing we learn from Saul’s conversion is this: You may be religious and yet be against God. Saul was deeply religious. As a young man he went to Jerusalem to study in the schools of the rabbis. His chief teacher was Gamaliel, by whom he was educated according to the strict manner of the law. Later he became even more zealous than his teachers. He was particularly upset about this new movement referred to as “the Way”¹ that claimed that Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of God. He believed it was blasphemous and had to be stopped. He was even a consenting witness to the execution of Stephen (one of “the seven,” see Acts 6:1-7; 7:54-8:1) and he spearheaded the subsequent persecution:

But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison (Acts 8:3 NRSV).

¹ “The Way” as a term for the followers of Jesus predates the term “Christian” and is used more times in the New Testament than “Christian.”

The Sanhedrin was the council with the highest authority in Judaism at this time. Theoretically they had jurisdiction over every synagogue in the world. And since the days of the Maccabees they had the right of extradition. It was for this very reason Saul was headed for Damascus. He was going to seize and bring back to Jerusalem any “troublemakers” in the synagogues.

In order to execute the warrant he needed to have some of the temple police go with him. But he was a strict Pharisee and would not associate with “common Jews” as the temple police would have been regarded. So for the week long journey from Jerusalem to Damascus you would have had this strange scene of Saul walking alone on the road with the rest of the party some distance behind. Walking alone meant a lot of time to think about things.

They went through Galilee, the ancestral home of Saul before his family moved to Tarsus (coastal SE Turkey). But Galilee was also the home of Jesus of Nazareth. Saul may have wondered to himself, “Who was this Jesus? Why do his followers love him so? And that Stephen – how could he die that way, so full of grace, and with forgiveness on his lips?”

Then there was a blinding light and a loud sound.² Everyone saw a light (26:13). Everyone heard something (9:7). But Saul alone understood the words directed at him. It was the Lord and the Lord said, “Why do you persecute me?”

This must have been quite a shock to Saul. He thought he was defending God, not persecuting God. But as it turned out he was not defending God. He was defending his own expectations of God.

We can have the same shock today. We may be active in church, hold to strong religious beliefs, and actually be against God and causing harm to God’s church. This usually happens when our expectations of God become more important than the things God says are important. When our expectations keep us from showing love, when our expectations keep us from telling others about Jesus, when our expectations keep us from relying on grace, then we need to get rid of our expectations and surrender to Christ.

This is what Saul did. He entered Damascus a changed man. He had a new relationship with God, a new purpose, new vision (literally and figuratively) even a new name – Paul.

2. YOU MAY BE AGAINST GOD BUT YOU CANNOT THWART GOD

Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him

² The account is found three times in Acts (22:11-13; 26:12-14).

in a vision, “Ananias.” He answered, “Here I am, Lord.” ¹¹The Lord said to him, “Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, ¹²and 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.” ¹³But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; ¹⁴and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.” ¹⁵But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; ¹⁶I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name” (Acts 9:10-16 NRSV).

The second thing we learn from Saul’s conversion is: You may be against God but you still cannot thwart God. You cannot stop the purpose of God. Individuals may or may not choose to be part of this purpose but the purpose itself cannot be stymied by human effort. Now Saul did say, “Yes,” to God but I believe he could have said, “No.” But even if he had said, “No,” it would not have stopped God’s purpose. Exactly how that would have worked out is left to speculation. Fortunately, Saul said, “Yes.”

The words in verse 15 that are used to describe what God wanted the new “Paul” to do are a re-statement of the original purpose of Israel which is now the purpose of the church – to spread the message of God’s redeeming love to the world. Recall the words of Jesus who said to his followers, “You will be my witnesses to Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

But the Christians in Jerusalem basically sat on their hands. They were sent but did not go. However, God will not be thwarted. If they would not be sent into the world then God would make sure they were scattered into the world. Persecution broke out and many Christians left Jerusalem. And wherever Christians went the message of Christ went also. Think about this. Who was the chief persecutor? Saul. But even when Saul was the arch-enemy of the church God used him to fulfill his purpose. The church was scattered. The mission was back on track. “You *will* be my witnesses to Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

The mission of the church has not changed. But the question remains: “Do we want to be sent or will we have to be scattered?” I hope we choose to be an active part of God’s purposes in the world.

The fact that God cannot be thwarted should bring us great comfort. What God promises to do God will do. The promises of forgiveness, friendship with God, and eternal life will

come true. God can be trusted to make it so. Paul would later write:

I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:6 NRSV).

Whatever good God has started in us will not be lost. God’s purpose will be fulfilled.

3. YOU MAY BE THE CHIEF OF SINNERS BUT YOU CAN BE FORGIVEN

So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

¹⁸And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, ¹⁹and after taking some food, he regained his strength (Acts 9:17-19a NRSV).

The third thing we learn from Saul’s conversion is: You may be the chief of sinners but you can be forgiven. Christians struggle with the idea of receiving forgiveness. No doubt Paul struggled with this for a time.

A Christ follower by the name of Ananias (not to be confused with the Ananias of Acts 5:1ff) went to the house in Damascus where Saul was and laid his hands on him – a powerful symbol of acceptance. Then later Saul was baptized which, among other things, is a powerful symbol of forgiveness and a fresh start. Reflecting on this experience Paul would tell his friend Timothy:

This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners”—and I am the worst of them all. But God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in him and receive eternal life (1Timothy 1:15-16 NLT).

In other words, what Paul is telling us is that if God can forgive him then God can forgive anyone. God can forgive you. God can forgive me.

4. YOU MAY THINK YOUR LIFE MATTERS LITTLE BUT GOD THINKS IT MATTERS A GREAT DEAL

And after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus (Acts 9:19 NRSV).

The fourth thing we learn from Saul's conversion is: You may think your life matters little but God thinks it matters a great deal. Paul, of course, would become exceedingly well known for his accomplishments. Few of us will ever experience such notoriety. But Paul would never have done what he did without the help of an unsung hero named Ananias and several unnamed Christians in Damascus who nurtured Paul in the faith. Their acts of kindness and giving were every bit as important to the cause of Christ as any of Paul's missionary journeys.

It is said that America's fastest growing religion is celebrity worship. From gossip magazines to entertainment TV, from blogs to ads featuring famous faces, the stars are our new gods. We have bought into this idea that what makes someone truly worthy is fame. That's why we know a great deal more about Harry and Meghan than we do our next door neighbors.

The Lord has a different idea. You are important because God made you and loves you and wants you to be in an ongoing relationship with him. Your life is not defined by the number of awards you have received or the size of your bank account or even the number of Twitter followers you have. These have no value in the kingdom of heaven. But faith, hope, and love remain forever.

It is highly unlikely you will ever have dinner with the Duke and Duchess of Sussex. But you can meet the King of Kings today just by showing kindness to a person in need.

'Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink? Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing? When did we ever see you sick or in prison and visit you?' "And the King will say, 'I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!'" (Matthew 25:37-40 NLT).

CONCLUSION

The conversion of Saul teaches us:

- You may be religious and yet be against God.
- You may be against God but you still cannot thwart God.
- You may be the chief of sinners but you can be forgiven.
- You may think your life matters little but God thinks it matters a great deal.

This is a testimony to the grace of God. The same grace that came to Saul of Tarsus can come to us and change the way we relate to God and one another.