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Acts 9:9-19

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Turn if you would to the book of Acts. We will be in chapter 9 and we will be looking at the conversion of Saul. Let me read, as an introduction, before we dig into the text, the intro to this text from the *Reformed Expository Commentary* by Derek Thomas. This is one of the commentaries that we are really using and leaning on for this study. Reformed basically means non-Catholic, so Protestant. Reformed also has with it the heavy burden and responsibility of saving someone on Christ, not on the works of man. In other words, as a church that leans into the Reformed tradition, we believe that salvation is of God, by God, through Christ; so that you didn’t get yourself saved, right? Amen? The second word is expository. Expository is the method of teaching and preaching that we practice here, which means that we take a passage of Scripture, we examine that passage of Scripture, and we ask, “What does this mean? What did God intend for this to mean?” and then we respond to that. So, we don’t inflect or inject our meaning, or our purpose, or our angle into it. We just look at Scripture and say, “God wrote this.” Do you ever say something to someone and you say what you mean and that person doesn’t get it? You’re like, “That’s not what I’m saying.” I’m not stuttering, or stammering, or being ambiguous. God speaks clearly, so expositorily means we teach, and preach, and study the Bible based on how God intends for us to receive it. The third word is commentary. That means that this guy is making comments on the Scripture. Commentaries are very helpful. So, this is one of the ones that we are using in this study on Acts. I want to read you the introductory paragraph concerning the conversion of Saul of Tarsus.

The conversion of Saul of Tarsus is among the greatest events in the history of the Church. John Calvin comments,

*“Luke records the story of Paul’s conversion. He tells how the Lord not only brought him under His control, when he was like a wild animal, but also made him a new person. Luke relays the conversion of Saul of Tarsus three times in Acts. In addition to here, he repeats the account in chapters 22 and 26.”*

So, as we study through the book of Acts, when we get to chapter 22 and when we get to chapter 26, we will actually see this story laid out again. So, we will get to see it three times. That’s significant to note. If God puts something in Scripture three times, it’s a pretty big deal and we need to pay attention. Right? We need to pay attention to anything that’s in there, but when something gets put in there three times in a short period of time, that’s definitely significant.

This spiritual transformation ranks among the most significant events in world history. Without Paul there would be no New Testament as we know it. Neither would we have many of the doctrinal emphases now considered central to the theology of the New Testament, such as union with Christ…

Who first taught that specifically and clearly? Paul.

…justification by faith…

Who first taught that specifically and clearly? Paul.

…and the significance of Christ’s death and resurrection as an explanation of the Christian life.

Paul will always go back to the resurrection. It’s kind of like the good apologist, Gary Habermas, who has made a life and ministry and career of defending the resurrection and proving the resurrection of Jesus. If the resurrection happened and we can prove it, then checkmate. A man was living and it was predicted that He would die and come back to life. If that, indeed, happened then we don’t have to defend anything else. You understand that, right? You understand the significance of the resurrection. So, Paul constantly brings up the resurrection and drives it.

Without Paul, there would not have been an Augustine, or a Luther, or a Wesley. Some of the world’s most hostile thinkers, Nietzsche, Freud, and George Bernard Shaw, to name but three, saved their most caustic remarks for the Apostle Paul. In short, it is no exaggeration to suggest with William J. Larkin that, “The most important event in human history, apart from the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, is the conversion to Christianity of Saul of Tarsus.”

That’s a big statement, isn’t it? Apart from the resurrection of Jesus, the most significant thing that possibly happened in all of history was the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, and we are going to study that tonight as we continue in our study of the book of Acts.

So, we are in Acts 9 and we are going to be looking at verses 9-18. But let’s go back to Acts 8 and look at the first couple of verses because that’s where we are introduced to Saul and I think it’s helpful to go back and look at what that says about Saul. This is immediately following the execution and martyrdom of Stephen. Listen to what it says. Acts 8:1,

And Saul approved of his execution.

And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. 2 Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. 3 But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

So, we see that early in Saul’s existence that he is vehemently assaulting and attacking Christianity. He is trying to put a stop to Christianity. You will also, maybe, remember that when Stephen, who was the first person who was ever executed for being a Christian, got killed, those who did the actual, physical killing of Stephen laid their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul, which John MacArthur believes points to the fact that he was the man in the position of authority at the execution of Stephen, not just a bystander who agreed with the killing of Stephen. Actually, he was in a position of authority. So, this guy was responsible for driving the first execution of a Christian in history. There is no doubt about what side of Christianity he is on.

So, a question before we jump into chapter 9: Would it be safe to say that at this point that Saul is not seeking salvation through Christ? It’s safe to say that, right? He’s not seeking it. Okay, so let’s go to chapter 9:1.

But Saul, still breathing threats…

“Still breathing threats.” Still, since what? Since what we saw in the last two weeks, which was Philip in the ministry in Samaria and then Philip in the ministry and baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch. A lot has gone on and we don’t know how much time has elapsed, but Saul is still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.

Now, an important word in that first verse is the word “breathing,” and here’s why that’s important. Because Saul, when it says he is breathing, this is interesting—the word “breathing” doesn’t mean taking breaths and inhaling and exhaling. It means breathing in and inhaling, so the idea that Saul is breathing threats carries this really strong picture that it is literally his life’s breath to stop Christianity. He is inhaling life from this mission that he is on. That’s serious, isn’t it?

I don’t know if you’ve ever studied much about Nazi Germany. I’ve just listened to a book called *Killing the SS*. I’m telling you, I’ve studied a little bit and I’ve seen a few movies through the years but what is so mind-blowing to me is the type of hatred that a person would possess in their heart to do the kinds of things that were done to Jews during the Holocaust. We could say the same thing about the types of things that were done to Africans during European and American slavery. It’s hard for me, and maybe for you, hopefully—it’s hard for us to wrap our brains around where does that type of wickedness and evil come from, particularly in Nazi Germany, or in Colonial America, or Europe—where the most educated people were the people who were committing the most heinous crimes. We can call them crimes because they are sins against God and humanity. When you study that, what you realize is that the human heart is capable of incredible hatred. This is why Jesus would speak against it, and He would say it’s not just bad enough that you would commit murder, but He would take it to the next level (and if our Institute students are in here they would know this), He intensified the Old Testament command. He intensified it and said that not only is murder bad but thinking thoughts of hatred, murderous thoughts, are just as bad. It’s terrible to even think that way.

So, Saul is breathing threats. He’s literally taking his life’s purpose, and passion, and meaning from this mission to stop Christianity. How is he going to stop Christianity? By killing Christians. So, he’s breathing murder against the disciples of the Lord.

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.

So, let’s stop here and I want to give you a little background. Here’s what we know about Saul based on this passage, based on his introduction in Galatians, based on chapters 22 and 26, and where he’s giving a defense of himself before some Roman dignitaries. Here’s what we know. Saul was from a city called Tarsus. Here’s what we know to be true about Tarsus. Tarsus was a city that set on the Mediterranean Sea on what is the border between modern day Turkey and Syria. It was a trade city that produced and generated a lot of Greek culture. At that time period, most of the world was shaped by Greek culture. Not only was it shaping culture but it was also an academic city. So, Tarsus was the home to one of the three largest universities in the world. In that city, you had intellectuals, academics, and you had an entertainment industry, and then you had all of the world’s philosophies being driven by that. That was Saul’s background. Additionally, Saul was a Roman citizen, so he was at home in Tarsus. It wasn’t like he was exiled to Tarsus. He was comfortable there. What he would have learned in Tarsus was worldview and history and he would have been educated in his younger years in one of the best school systems in the world. He was really, really cultured in the sense that he came from this city called Tarsus. In fact, the only other two cities that had universities that were as large were Alexandria and Athens. Those are pretty big cities—have you ever heard of those? We’ve heard of those. Those are big, ancient cities. So, Tarsus had one of the three largest universities in the world.

Now, today, you don’t have to go far to run into a university, do you? You can drive east and hit Western Carolina University, just over in Cullowhee. Go south and you hit Kennesaw State University. Maybe there’s something between here and there. Within our own county, we have a community and technical college. You don’t have to go far to reach higher education. But in those days, you had to travel and go to a large metropolitan complex to study and there weren’t many institutions of higher learning in the world, and one of the three largest was in Tarsus. So, people from all over the world would come to Tarsus.

When you walk the streets of Andrews, Robbinsville, or Murphy, you are going to see mostly white people. You are going to see mostly southerners or people who have retired here. You are going to see mostly people who drive the same types of vehicles. But if you go somewhere like Clarkston, Georgia, you are going to see Ethiopians, Sudanese, South Asians, from places like Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, and you’re going to see people from China and the Far East. You are going to see people from Eastern Europe, some of the “stan” countries, like Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and you’re going to see people from all over Western Europe. There is going to be a melting pot of humanity and with that comes an incredible cultural experience and when you live in a place like that you really become broad in your understanding of culture and, typically, you become more open-minded to the way that people think.

That’s what Paul came out of. Paul came from a place called Tarsus and Tarsus was kind of a who’s-who place on the map. It was also a city where a lot of industry took place. One of the industries that Tarsus was known for was an industry where they would take fibers from goat hair and weave it into cord, and they would then weave that into the fabric that they would make tents out of. There was a huge tent-making industry in Tarsus. And we know from Saul’s later life that he would do bi-vocational work where he was preaching but he was paying his own bills by doing this thing called tent-making. It was a trade he had learned, so he was a well-rounded man. Saul comes from a place where he was a tentmaker by trade and he had learned that trade at a young age, because even in an academic world, in the ancient world, you weren’t just expected to go get an education at a university or institution of higher learning; you were expected to know a trade and a skill. So, Saul had that wrapped up.

Then, somewhere along the way, Saul left Tarsus and went to Jerusalem, which is a drastic cultural difference and a drastic religious difference. Why is that? Because Jerusalem is the hub of the Jewish faith. So, in ancient Israel, people followed the Law, or the Torah, by God, and that became what all of ancient Judaism was built off of and founded on. So, there was a whole system of learning that was built off of the Torah. So, you have a man who comes from an academic city -- . Hang with me and we will be through the history stuff in a minute. Okay? I see some of you on the edge of your seats. You’re like me—you love history and you think this is great. But other people are going down and I can see you tail-spinning. Hang with me. Go get another cup of coffee and crank the Maxwell House, alright? We will be through this in a minute but this is significant. You’ll see why in a minute. So, Saul has this academic background in Tarsus, studying at a secular university, with one parent who is Roman and one parent who is Jewish. He had a Roman citizenship and a Roman education. He left and went to Jerusalem because his parents wanted him to have the greatest Jewish education he could have. So, he went to Jerusalem and studied under a man named Gamaliel.

Here’s what we know about Gamaliel. He was the quintessential expert on the Torah. That means that in all of history he was recognized, up until this point, as the greatest authority on the Jewish system of Law. When he died, it was written of him that the Law died with him, to some degree, because he was such an expert in the Law. We’ve already been introduced to this guy a couple of chapters back, where he stepped in when they were about to kill some of the disciples. He said, “Wait, wait, wait,” and he spoke up and said, “If these men are preaching truth then it’s going to stand. If they are not, then it will perish. So, let’s wait and see what happens.” So, he was a man who had great influence and great clout, but to study under him would be the equivalent of going to Harvard to study business or law, or of going to Princeton in the 1800s to study theology. It was the pinnacle of study in the Jewish system. To go and study under this man, when you rolled out of that you had immediate clout.

Let me give you an illustration. You guys know Van and Lauren Jones, right? We are live on the worldwide internet so I’m going to code what I’m saying a little bit. Van and Lauren Jones are preparing to go to a place whereby they are going to be working hard (wink)—do you know what I’m saying? There are some places you can go and you can have certain jobs but you can’t have other jobs—do you know what I’m saying? So, they are going to a place and they are going there to work as CrossFit coaches. Now, if you don’t know what CrossFit it, it’s this thing that Satan invented (laughter) whereby you run around, jump up and down, puke, run around some more, jump up and down, strain a shoulder, or a knee, or a hip…. I’m hating on CrossFit for no good reason; my brother runs a CrossFit gym. It’s a brutal exercise regimen that’s really good for skinny people. Skinny people are good at CrossFit. So, Van and Lauren are going to go do this thing and that’s their platform. You guys do understand what I’m saying, right? Because you can’t go there and be a pastor-preacher-teacher. There are no seminaries there. There is no Christian witness there. So, we started praying what that platform would look like and they started working with my brother who was doing some training. He’s a really solid dude who loves the Lord and he’s teaching and training.

They have to be legitimate in that industry. As you can imagine, that’s not an industry where you can show up eating jelly doughnuts with a big belly and go, “I’m your new CrossFit coach,” right? You’ve got to look the part and you’ve got to be able to perform at a high level. So, he started training them. Then, enter a man named Rich Froning who happens to be the most well-known CrossFitter of all time. He’s won more world championships, which basically means you win a contest at exercising. It’s kind of like the Super Bowl of exercising. But in that world, his name is gold. He is the Michael Jordan of that world. Well, they inadvertently, coincidentally connected with this guy, who happens to be a believer, and Van and Lauren have lived and trained with him for the last two and a half months. They are now going to go to this place as CrossFit instructors, having trained under the greatest CrossFitter of all time. What does that do? That gives them legitimacy, doesn’t it? It makes perfect sense.

When Saul trained under Gamaliel, what that did is it legitimized him as a Jewish authority. So, even at a young age, when he came out of his educational training, he was top dog in the world. At one point, he says, “I was advancing among my own brethren at a far greater rate than anybody else.” He said, “I was climbing the ladder. I was going to be the boss of Judaism.” What he was doing was operating in a system with a group of people called Pharisees. You might have heard of the Pharisees and they were religious leaders. The Pharisees thrived on being really good at religion. Saul was a Pharisee. In fact, at one point he would say, “I was a Pharisee of Pharisees. I was the tip of the Pharisaical spear.” This man had credentials. So, here’s what that means. If he rolls into a Roman city, he’s a boss man, because he has worked in the tent-making industry and been educated in Tarsus. He came from a strong Roman family of Roman citizenship. To be birthed into Roman citizenship gave you a certain credibility throughout the Roman Empire that non-citizens didn’t have. He was credible. At the same time, if he walked into a Jewish city, he could go into their synagogue and stand up front on a Sabbath and preach and teach, and they would be in awe of him because he was a Pharisaical rabbi who had trained under the greatest instructor of their day. No matter where he went, he was the boss man, and he was power hungry, and he was driven, and he was zealous.

What we learn from Saul is that you can be very passionate about the wrong thing and do a lot of damage. You can believe it in your heart. That’s why it’s never a good enough answer to say, “Yeah, but those people really believe in Islam.” You can believe something strong enough to be willing to die for it, and die and spend eternity in Hell separated from God. Belief in the wrong thing is damning and damnable and it will bring condemnation because the Scripture teaches that there is one Judge and His name is Jesus and it is “appointed unto man once to die and after that the judgment.” And let me tell you something; every human that’s ever breathed breath has something that they would die for, it’s just a matter of tapping into it. Saul would die for Pharisaical Judaism. He would die for it.

So, he’s so passionate about it that he’s gotten extradition orders from the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem. What does that mean? Well, there’s this city called Damascus, which is a really cool place. Damascus is a very scenic, beautiful place about a hundred forty miles north of Jerusalem. Apparently, a lot of Jews up there had converted to Christianity. There was a strong Jewish population, and the Christian faith was really taking root in Damascus. A lot of Jews had fled Jerusalem under persecution and gone up to Damascus. So, you have all these Christians living in Damascus, and what they are doing is that they are sweeping through. The church of the Jews in Damascus is converting at a rapid rate and Saul is like, “We’ve got to stop this.” So, he gets extradition orders, which means he goes to the authorities, which means he had the stamp of approval from the Roman Empire that was in governance. The Romans would let the Jews sort of govern their own affairs as long as they kept to themselves. So, he was going up there and we see in other passages where he’s recounting this story that he was taking both men and women and persecuting them. He was hauling them off to prison and jail and it was a bad situation. So, he was headed to Damascus that was a hundred forty miles away, a six day journey. You have to be pretty committed to the cause, don’t you? He’s zealous; he’s passionate.

so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem

He was going to tie them up. Can you imagine having your hands tied behind your back and walking a hundred forty miles in the hot sun? That’s what he was going to do.

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?” 5 And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

Now, when it says that this light from Heaven shone, Paul will later tell us in Acts 22 that this happened at noon and in Acts 26 he says that it happened at midday. If you can imagine, in the middle of summer, on the hottest day, at noon, when the Sun is straight overhead, and it is blinding, and the heat is overwhelming. I’ve seen pictures depicting this where it is at nighttime and then there is this brilliant light. I think maybe the artist was trying to create a contrast. But I want you to imagine the brightest day where you are shading your eyes. You need sunglasses on those days, don’t you? You are shading your eyes and it’s so bright that it’s blinding. That’s why many of us who spend a lot of our time working outside end up with wrinkly eyes at a much younger age, don’t you? You are doing this all the time. Get yourself some good sunglasses that are Polarized. Get you some Oakleys that are made in American or some WileyX that’s what the Army wears. Get you some sunglasses because the Sun is bright and overwhelming.

So, in the overwhelming heat and the radiant brilliance of the Sun… Have you ever tried looking at the Sun? It doesn’t work out well. You can’t do it. It’s not possible. Then, something so much brighter than the Sun is the way this is being described. Spurgeon compares this to the Shekinah glory of God that radiates from the throne of Jesus. He said that Saul has literally entered the brightest physical light and has passed into the radiating glory of the presence of Jesus that dims the brightness of the Sun. That’s cool. Because you think about how it says in Scripture that there won’t even be a Sun because the radiance of Jesus is so overwhelming.

So, that’s the scene. It literally blinds Saul. He falls down and Jesus speaks to him and identifies himself. Jesus says, “Why are you persecuting me?” This is a really beautiful moment because Jesus is saying, “When you persecute my people you are persecuting me.” That’s a lesson for us to learn. How we talk to each other, how we care for each other—things like gossip, slander, backbiting, and the things we might say about a brother or sister in Christ, we are saying that about Christ, because we bear the name of Jesus, and we’ve been given His Spirit, and He’s sealed us. We just sang about it. He’s washed us with His blood and sealed us with His Spirit. So, what we say matters, particularly when we are speaking of or to other believers. He says, “You are persecuting me.” Jesus’ bride is being persecuted. He takes the persecution of believers very seriously.

In verse 5, Saul calls Him Lord. Look at this. It’s Saul’s first act in responding to Jesus. As far as we know, Saul never met Jesus during His earthly ministry. He never mentions that and most scholars, and theologians, and commentators think that if Saul had met Jesus while Jesus was on the Earth, he would have at some point talked about it. But every time he recounts meeting Christ, he recounts his conversation experience, and in his first words that he ever says to Him, he calls Him Lord. That’s the first response that’s appropriate to Jesus. The first act of submission, and the first act of a salvation experience, is the submission to Christ. Many years ago there was a great controversy and debate about what is called lordship salvation. Can you confess to believe but not submit to the lordship of Jesus? I think it’s important to understand that our confession of Jesus as Lord does not validate His lordship. In other words, He’s Lord whether I confess it or not. I don’t make Him Lord. I don’t validate His lordship. People can curse God, reject His existence, swear that Jesus is a myth, and wholeheartedly abolish the Gospel in a society or culture, and it doesn’t change who Jesus is. Amen? He’s on His throne, He governs, He rules, and Colossians 1 says that He literally holds all things in place. Whether a fifteen-year-old kid rejects Jesus by rejecting the authority of their parents or an eighty-year-old man shakes and clenches his fist in the latter years of his life and rejects the Gospel, neither of those changes who Jesus is. Jesus is the same Jesus that Saul persecuted and now Saul is submitting to Him and calling Him Lord, and that word, Lord, is beautiful. I love it when my little boy calls me daddy. That’s good. That’s a good word. There are certain words and names that reflect intimacy and a healthy fear and worship. So, Saul is calling Jesus Lord.

Now, after introducing himself, Jesus gives Saul instruction. “Hey, Saul, I’m Jesus. You might notice that you can’t see. Let me tell you what I want from you.”

But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” 7 The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one.

Can you imagine those guys’ experience? They hear it but they can’t see what’s going on.

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.

This man who was a man of power, who commanded authority, who had people at his beck and call, who spoke and people responded out of fear, is having to be led by the hand. He’s a humbled man and he’s a broken man.

Many of you might remember the day that you met Jesus and the humility and the brokenness that came with that. I can surely remember that. There was a humility, a brokenness, and an overwhelming sense of, “Oh, wait a minute. You’re God and I’m not. You hold and possess the authority to literally end my life and drive my eternity. I’m going to submit to you.” But in that submission, here’s what we are promised—immediate grace and forgiveness from Jesus.

And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Let’s think about those three days. Three days of solitude with Jesus. He was by himself. Can you imagine the Christians in that city? They probably weren’t saying, “Hey, I heard Saul got saved. Let’s go hang out with him.” They know what he’s coming for. They’ve been hiding from this guy. Three days of solitude. His former allies want him dead. His former victims are scared to go near him. It’s just him and Jesus all alone.

I don’t know if you’ve ever practiced solitude. I try to practice some degree of solitude daily, and I try to practice a lengthier degree of solitude weekly, and then at least once a month I try to be somewhere by myself for an entire day, where there is no phone, and I don’t hear from anybody, and I don’t talk to anybody, and just have solitude with the Lord. It’s good, isn’t it? Bonhoeffer would write that you can never appreciate biblical community until you appreciate and experience solitude before the Lord. You can never appreciate the need for solitude until you’ve lived in the busyness of biblical community. Do you ever feel like you just need to withdraw, get away, go be alone? It’s good. Solitude is good but there will be times in our lives where Jesus will force us into solitude. That will happen. It could be the severing of a relationship.

I’ll never forget when we were trying to adopt our two youngest children. Many of you were with us and Red Oak was a fledgling, young, new church plant. Many of you were praying for us, and holding the rope for us, and we were over there and stuck in another country. Because when a judge issues you guardianship of children you can’t return them, and we wouldn’t have returned them anyway, would we? Of course not. So, there was this dilemma. We couldn’t go home. The US Embassy said we couldn’t bring them here. This wasn’t Trump, by the way. That’s a touchy subject right now. I’m not being political, in other words. It was just the fact of the matter that we couldn’t get them home. They didn’t have the proper documentation. I remember being stuck there. Little and I were talking the night after we were told by the embassy that we couldn’t leave the country with our kids. We were having this conversation and we said, “Well, the Lord has put us in a place where we are cut off from our community. I think He wants to teach us something. Let’s try to learn as best we can.” We had each other so it wasn’t total solitude. We were having incredible family times. Maybe you’ve been in a position of solitude but can you imagine being in prison, or being in a country where you’re the only Christian, or being in a family where you are the only believer. Many of you come from that situation, where when you go home at Christmas dinner you’re the outcast, you’re the oddball, you’re the only believer. Solitude is not a bad thing but at the same time we are not expected or called to live in that lifestyle long-term, because Christ calls us into Christian community and He tells us how the Church is supposed to function and what that’s supposed to look like. But Saul is experiencing solitude. I think that had to be an incredible three days, don’t you think? He reflects on it later.

Have you ever had an experience in your life where a very short period of time God grew you enormously? Spiritually, a single experience where you grew a ton, and there have been other three, six, eight, ten year spans where you don’t feel like you grew that much? God will do that sometimes. So, God put Saul in this situation where he is totally dependent on others. He doesn’t even eat or drink. Think about that for a minute. What’s he doing? Well, he’s been abandoned by his entourage and he’s just sitting somewhere. He’s just somewhere by himself, blind, with no food or water. Imagine right now a city you’ve never been to. I’m thinking of Fargo. I’ve never been to Fargo and I don’t have any plans of going. Think of a place and you are blindly brought into that city. Now, imagine that it’s a hostile environment and you are sat down somewhere and left for three days in solitude in a place you don’t know. That’s Saul. And Jesus spoke to him and ministered to him. This is where Christ, by His Spirit, began to work in Saul and prepare him for the work he was going to do.

Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias.

You can read about this man outside of Scripture. There are things written about him from this time period.

The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” And he said, “Here I am, Lord.”

See, Saul responded, “Yes, Lord.” That’s the first response he ever has. But the thing about following Jesus is that will continue to be the way you respond the rest of your life. “Yes, Lord. Here I am, Lord. Yes, Sir.” It’s like saying, “Yes, Sir. Yes, Lord.” So, Ananias says, “Here I am, Lord.”

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.”

So, here we have this picture where Saul is there and the Lord has not left him alone in his solitude. The Lord has spoken to him through a vision and has shown him identifying characteristics of Ananias and told him that he would come to him. So, Saul is just patiently waiting. He can’t see, he can’t communicate with people, and he is there by himself. So, God goes to Ananias and tells him that He told Saul he was going to come, “I gave him a vision. He’s expecting you.”

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.”

You can appreciate Ananias’ response, can’t you? “Lord,…ummm….You’re the boss….But, Saul kills folks like me. You understand that, right?” You don’t ever do that, do you? Help God out a little? Do you ever do that? “Uh, God, I know you know but you don’t know that I know….what am I saying right now? I’m trying to tell God what to do.” Do you ever do that? “Okay, Lord, I’m just having a hard time with this one.” Let me tell you something, guys. The decisions that God is going to call you to make in your life that are probably going to have the biggest, deepest, widest impact, are going to be the hardest ones to say yes to, because they are going to push you to where it is not comfortable to live as a Christian. They are going to get you out on a limb as a believer. God is going to put you in a place where it’s uncomfortable and typically that’s where He’s going to start to do things because it forces you to live by faith and trust that God is going to take care of the rest. If you’re not uncomfortable ever in your Christian life then something is not happening that needs to be happening. We need to be acting in ways…. I remember talking to a guy who is a young church planter and he’s getting ready to plant a church in a large, major US city. He came here and spent a couple of days here and he asked me, “What would you say to a guy like me who is getting ready to do this?” I said, “You should constantly be a little bit freaked out and in a mild state of panic. Because you are living in a place where if God doesn’t come through this whole thing is going to fail and people are going to question why you would even go there and do it in the first place.” That’s a good way to live. So, God is calling Ananias to do something really difficult and he’s like, “Okay, Lord. I’ve heard about this man and the authority he has.”

Verse 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. 16 For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” 17 So Ananias departed and entered the house.

God answered and Ananias went. God’s not scared of our questions but He does expect obedience. He expects obedience. He says, “I’m going to use this guy. He’s going to suffer and it’s going to be hard. Go minister to him now.” So he goes.

So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, “Brother Saul”

He calls him “brother.” Isn’t that beautiful? He calls him, “Brother Saul.” He’s not afraid of him. He is validating his faith.

“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.”

Why would he be filled with the Holy Spirit? Because, as we have seen, the Spirit of God comes into the life of the believer. We are given the Holy Spirit and that is the seal that God has given to Saul at this point.

And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; 19 and taking food, he was strengthened.

This is chock full of little things that are important for us to understand. He confesses Jesus as Lord, he receives the Holy Spirit, and he is baptized. Some of you were there today when I baptized a young man. At our marriage retreat this weekend I baptized a young man in the creek down here. It was about 41 degrees this morning when we went into that water. They’re from Florida. Bless their hearts. They are probably freaking out right now and still shivering. His wife said, “I’d like to be baptized, too.” So, I baptized him and he baptized her and it was awesome. It was awesome. But we had a conversation where she said, “I’ve been a Christian for a while and I got sprinkled at my church,” and I was like, “Yeah, we need to fix that.” Because the word “baptize” in the original language didn’t get translated. The word is *baptizo* and it means to immerse. It’s not confusing. It means to immerse. So, what a cool thing; Saul is like, “I want to obey. I want to obey Jesus.” He confesses Him as Lord, he receives the Holy Spirit, and he is baptized.

Here’s the hope for us tonight. It’s not too late for anybody who has breath in their lungs to receive the Gospel— The worst drug dealer, the vilest gangster, terrorist, agnostic, or atheist, or whatever—or the religious do-gooder who has followed all the rules their whole life and just lives in a legalistic jargon, thinking that everything is alright based on their performance. Christ can save anybody. Educated, religious elite; that’s the world Saul lived in. He met Jesus, confessed Him as Lord, and everything changed, and his life got harder in some ways. But he had the horsepower to drive through those hard times; that’s what the Gospel does. That’s hope for all of us and hope for the people that we love and want to see come to faith in Jesus. That’s Saul, and we are going to hear a lot more from him from here on out. He’s going to become a central figure, not just in the book of Acts but in history, and it’s going to be awesome.

Let me pray and we will sing together in reflection on God’s Word.

Lord, we want to worship you now through song, believing that you are worthy of worship and you are worthy of praise, so we want to give you that which you are worthy of. Please help us to honor you with our lips but also to honor you with our hearts and act in obedience with our lives. Thank you for Saul and his conversion and for the light of the Gospel that overwhelmed him and penetrated his life and for the way you used him to literally change the course of history. Thank you for that and thank you that we have hope that the Gospel can save and change anybody. Paul would even say that it is the Gospel that is the power of God unto salvation to anybody that believes, and we thank you for that. We worship you now, in Jesus’ name. Amen.