

April 14, 2024

The Acts of the Apostles
XI. On the Road to Damascus
Acts 9:1-19a

Dr. William P. Seel
Easley Presbyterian Church
Easley, South Carolina

This story is often read as being about Paul – specifically, as being about Paul’s conversion. But while Paul is certainly important to this story, he is not the main character. And while Paul’s conversion is the event which is described in this story, it is actually not the main event. This is a story, first and foremost, about the risen Christ, our Lord and Savior Jesus. And what this story is really all about is Jesus’ plan to bring His salvation first to Jerusalem and all Judea, then to Samaria, and ultimately to the very ends of the earth. This is not so much a story about Paul’s conversion as it is a story about the unstoppable salvation plan and power of our risen Lord.

Let’s go back to the start of Acts. After His resurrection, Jesus had gathered His disciples and told them this: *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”*¹ And, having said this, He ascended into heaven. Shortly thereafter, just as He had said, the disciples received the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.² And the immediate result of the Holy Spirit’s indwelling was that the disciples indeed began witnessing to Jesus as the Messiah, raised from the dead. On Pentecost afternoon, in fact, Peter – whose bravery track record had not exactly been exemplary up to that point – suddenly stood up and boldly proclaimed Christ risen and triumphant to the very crowd in Jerusalem that had put Jesus to death on the cross.³

And from there, the witnessing of the disciples to Jesus had just kept on spreading. Again, just as Jesus had said, the disciples began witnessing outside of Jerusalem in the towns and villages of the surrounding region of Judea. And then, when persecutions began to rise up against them in Jerusalem, and several of them had fled to Samaria, we saw the disciples – just as Jesus had predicted – witnessing to the Samaritans, bringing Christ to them and them to Christ.⁴ And then, after that, Philip, who had been one of those witnessing in Samaria, was taken up by the Holy Spirit to meet an Ethiopian eunuch out in the desert, to witness to him about Jesus – an event signifying that the Gospel of Christ was now just about to go out to the ends of the earth.⁵ Jerusalem → Judea → Samaria → the ends of the earth.

And that’s the context in which we are to read this story of Paul’s conversion – Jesus Christ fulfilling through His disciples this plan of salvation, this going forth of the Gospel from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. Again, that’s what this story is all about – Jesus and the expanding reach of His salvation. It is not, first and foremost a story about Paul, but about Jesus. In fact, Paul enters into this unfolding story of Jesus’ unstoppable spread only for two reasons: one, he is the number one obstacle standing in the way of Jesus’ plan to take the Gospel to the Gentile world, to

the very ends of the earth; and two, because – in the lovely irony of God – Jesus intends that His greatest opponent to the Gentile mission will become His greatest missionary to the Gentiles, to the ends of the earth.

So, let's look at our story now, in light of this much greater story unfolding in the book of Acts. Paul – or Saul as we was still known at this point – had been looking on as Stephen had been martyred back in chapter seven of Acts. Indeed, he was holding the outer garments of those who were doing the hard, and horrible, work of carrying out that stoning.⁶ But Paul was no mere bystander. Chapter eight of Acts begins with the statement that he not only approved of Stephen's execution, but that Paul was actually the leading terrorizer of the fledging church of Christ. Paul was the persecutor-in-chief. Verse three of chapter eight: *“But Saul was ravaging the church; and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.”*⁷ Paul was no mere bystander – he was the single greatest threat to the church of Jesus Christ!

And, as our story in chapter nine begins this morning, we see that Paul was not only persecuting the church in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, but that he was also the single greatest obstacle to the Gospel spreading beyond there – the single greatest obstacle and threat to the Gospel going out to the Gentile lands, to the ends of the earth: *“But Saul, still breathing threats”* – just picture that image for a moment – *“But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.”* Letters to the synagogues at Damascus – Damascus was Gentile country. Damascus was, as we might imagine it, the jumping off point for the Gospel going out, as Jesus had declared, to the ends of the earth. Paul, in other words, is travelling to Damascus, official papers in hand, to be sure that this Jesus business, the Gospel, the Way, is stamped out before it can spread any further into the Gentile world, any further along that path to the ends of the earth.

And that is when it happens. Paul thinks he both can and must stop Jesus. But, instead, Jesus stops Paul. On the road to Damascus – and just picture Paul all heated up with his high purpose, his singular focus, his murderous intent, his one-man wrecking machine the likes of which those new Christians in Damascus have not imagined even in their worst nightmares. But on the road to Damascus, suddenly, suddenly, Jesus says *“Stop!”* A light flashes so brightly Paul is knocked to the ground and struck blind. And then the voice – and everybody there that day heard this voice, but not one of them could see where it was coming from. Because it was coming from heaven. It was the very voice of Jesus Christ – the risen Lord, the promised Messiah, God's only Son: *“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”* And Paul, in terror and utter confusion, cries out, *“Who are you, Lord?”* – but I'm guessing he may already have had a pretty good idea. *“Who are you, Lord?”* *“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”*

Paul rises up but cannot see, must be led by the hand by the others on the rest of that road to Damascus. And look at how Paul is described in verse nine: *“And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.”* Think about that for a moment. Who else have we recently heard about who, for three days, could not see, could not eat or drink? Paul, symbolically speaking, has been struck dead and buried. And he will later sum it all up in this way, in his letter to the

Galatians: *“I have been crucified with Christ. So it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”*⁸

But let’s not get ahead of ourselves – we will come back to Paul’s upcoming resurrection, his new life in Christ. For now, let’s simply see this striking down of Paul on the road to Damascus for what it is really all about, what it really means: and that is that nothing, and no one, shall ever be able to stand in the way of Christ and of His plan of salvation: Jerusalem → Judea → Samaria → the ends of the earth → the coming of the Kingdom of God. That nothing, and no one, shall ever be able to hinder, much less halt, the coming of Christ’s rule on earth. That nothing, and no one, will ever succeed in standing against the Lord and against His saving and redeeming purpose on this earth. That’s what Paul’s conversion is really all about. Not Paul getting saved, so much as Jesus removing an obstacle. Not so much Paul getting saved, so much as Jesus Christ working His purpose out on earth despite any and all obstacles – Jesus Christ working His purpose out on earth, as it is already in heaven.

And, as such, what powerful reassurance this story is for us. I mean, for the Christians in that day, Paul must have seemed a nightmare – a terrible threat not only to their own safety but also to the very cause of Christ. And yet that terrible threat proves to be as nothing before the power and plan of God. Jesus lifts His little finger, and Paul is a threat no more. We look around the world, we look around at our own lives – and everywhere we can find threats to the cause of Christ. Events and threats which make it look as if Jesus is losing, as if our own faith is in vain. But what this story reassures us is that, first of all, that though the wrong *seems* oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.⁹ And second, that the victory of Jesus Christ, the coming of His Kingdom, is not a fragile hope, but a powerful certainty. Nothing, said Jesus, absolutely nothing – not even the gates of hell itself – shall prevail against His Church, against His coming Kingdom, against His Gospel of salvation reaching out to the very ends of the earth, until every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.¹⁰ That work, that plan, is being carried out every day, beneath of the noise of the headlines – and shall continue to be so, until that day when at last the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea!¹¹

That’s what the story of Paul’s conversion is really all about. It is first and foremost a reassurance that Jesus Christ, and His mercy, are unstoppable – no matter how fragile or hanging-in-the-balance it may seem to us at any given moment. And the evidence of this truth is still around us, if we have eyes to see it. Remember back in the days before the Berlin Wall toppled, when Communism – going all the way back to Lenin and Stalin – had sought to root out Christian belief and destroy it. The most determined effort to stamp out Christianity since the time of the Romans. And seemingly had done so by the latter middle part of the last century. Will Willimon tells of a friend who went on a tour with the National Council of Churches behind the Iron Curtain during that time. She returned in absolute despair over the church in Eastern Europe. She said there was no one at all in the churches of Eastern Europe except a handful of little old ladies lighting candles and saying their prayers. But only a few years later, remember what happened? Like the walls of Jericho long before, the Berlin Wall came tumbling down – and the Iron Curtain with it. And it was discovered to be the church of Jesus Christ which had pushed it over. One former East German official was quoted as saying that they were prepared for anything – except for prayers and candles.¹²

In the end, Jesus wins. In the end, His Kingdom comes. And in the end, every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.¹³ And nothing, nothing can stand in His way. Not Paul, not Lenin and Marx, not nothing! And so we stand firm. And so we lift up our heads and our hearts in boundless hope. And so we, like the disciples, keep on bearing witness to Jesus, come what may. As one theologian puts it: *“We do not gaze at the world and then try to understand Christ in terms of the world. We gaze at Jesus Christ and then try to understand the world in terms of him.”*¹⁴

Ah, but what of Paul himself? We left him a minute ago three days blind and unable to eat – as if in the tomb with Jesus. But as Paul’s opposition to the mission to the Gentiles was not at all the end of that mission, so Jesus’ striking down of Paul on the road to Damascus is not the end for him either. Jesus calls to Ananias and tells him to go to Damascus and lay hands on Paul – that He has big plans ahead for Paul. And let’s just say it right here that Ananias has to be one of the bravest, as well as most faithful characters in all the Bible, because he goes as Jesus commands despite his well-founded fears of Paul. Ananias goes, lays his hands upon Paul, and suddenly Paul (Saul no more!) can again see – something like scales fall from his eyes and he can see the light. The light of day, but far more importantly the One who is the Light of the World.¹⁵ He rises and is baptized. Don’t miss that. *“Then he rose”* – what does that sound like? After three days, *“Then he rose and was baptized.”* And then he eats and drinks. Jesus has raised Paul from the dead and into new life. As Paul himself will write to the Romans: *“Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.”*¹⁶

But there is more than a mere physical recovery/resurrection. Imagine for a moment the state of Paul’s head and heart during those three days. He has learned that not only was he wrong about Jesus, but that his whole work has been an endeavor of sin against Jesus. Can you just imagine the guilt, the shame, the humiliation of that realization? But then the deeper realization – that though he has been stopped by Jesus, he has not been destroyed by Jesus. In fact, on the third day, he has been given a new life by Jesus. And that’s the second meaning of this story. If the greater meaning is the spread of the Gospel into all the earth, then the second, slightly lesser meaning is simply the amazing grace of our Lord Jesus Christ towards Paul, towards us all, which is the content of that Gospel. Paul could here, in that moment, having been leading us in song: *“I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.”*¹⁷

What Paul’s story is telling us is not just that the salvation plan of God is unstoppable and shall be fulfilled despite any and all opposition – but also that no one, and I do mean no one, is beyond the reach of His saving grace. There is no sin He will not forgive. And there is no sinner whom Jesus Christ is not longing, with all His divine heart longing, to save. Mercy, love, amazing grace – that’s what the Gospel is all about. And if Paul can be forgiven, restored, renewed, and redirected – then anyone can. Paul who was once upon a time Jesus’ greatest enemy on earth, personally testifies again and again to the truth of God’s amazing grace. Just listen, for example, to what he wrote to the Romans – this was not Paul’s theology, this was Paul’s lived reality:

*God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners,
Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by
his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of*

*God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.*¹⁸

“For if while we were still enemies” – just think what those words meant to Paul – “For if while we were still enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son . . .” Amazing grace.

But maybe Paul’s greatest testimony to what he experienced on that road to Damascus comes a little bit later in that same letter. In a section in which he is writing about how the salvation of Jesus Christ has gone out from the Jews to the Gentiles – gone out, in other words, as Jesus said from Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth – Paul breaks off his theological argument and just breaks out in song. Or at least that is sure what it sounds like, even on the written page:

*Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! . . . For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.*¹⁹

To Him, to our Lord Jesus Christ – unstoppable grace, reconciler even of His enemies – to our Lord Jesus Christ, be glory forever. Amen.

¹ Acts 1:8.

² Acts 2:1-13.

³ Acts 2:14-41.

⁴ Acts 8:1-25.

⁵ Acts 8:26-40.

⁶ Acts 7:58.

⁷ Acts 8:3.

⁸ Galatians 2:20

⁹ Line from Maltbie Babcock’s beautiful hymn, “This Is My Father’s World”, hymn no. 370 in our Glory to God hymnal.

¹⁰ Philippians 2:10-11.

¹¹ Habakkuk 2:14.

¹² Will Willimon, “Divine Wisdom Among Little Old Ladies,” from the weekly e-newsletter of the North Alabama Conference of the United Methodist Church, dated January 22, 2007.

¹³ Philippians 2:10-11.

¹⁴ Robert McAfee Brown, The Spirit of Protestantism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 82.

¹⁵ John 8:12.

¹⁶ Romans 6:8.

¹⁷ Opening lines of John Newton’s great hymn, “Amazing Grace,” hymn no. 649 in our Glory to God hymnal.

¹⁸ Romans 5:8-11.

¹⁹ Romans 11:33-36.