

CONVERTED

Acts 9:1-22

Third Sunday of Easter (Series C)

May 5, 2019

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The Scripture reading comes from *The Acts of the Apostles*, chapter 9, verses 1 through 22. It is on page 777 of the pew Bible. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From Acts 9, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

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.

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?" ⁵ And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ 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. 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.

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." 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." 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." 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. 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." ¹⁸ 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.

For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus. ²⁰ And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." ²¹ And all who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?" ²² But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

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On the road to Damascus, Jesus appeared to Saul in a great light. This Saul is the same man we more commonly refer to as Paul. It's a common misconception that Jesus changed his name from Saul to Paul. But that's not actually true. He really had two names all along. Even after his conversion, the book of Acts continues to call him Saul until he begins his missionary work to Gentile lands (13:9, 13). Saul was his Hebrew name, and Paul was his Greek name. And since most of his ministry was to the Gentiles, who spoke Greek, and all of his letters were written to churches in Gentile cities, we are more familiar with his Greek name: Paul.

So Jesus didn't change his name, but Saul did go through a radical conversion. His entire life was changed. Prior to this encounter, he was, perhaps, the greatest persecutor of the Christian Church. In the case of Stephen, which is recorded a few chapters earlier in Acts, this persecution even included murder. And he was at least threatening to kill many more (9:1). But after his conversion Saul became the foremost Christian missionary to the Gentiles.

It was a radical conversion. It was so radical that the Christians in Damascus were in disbelief. They had heard about everything Saul he had done in Jerusalem, so they were amazed, and maybe a little cautious, when he shows up in Damascus proclaiming that Jesus is the Son of God. It was a radical conversion.

Saul certainly has an interesting testimony. It might make us a little jealous. Not many people get a personal appearance from Jesus. So we might get a little bit of testimony envy and wish something like that would happen to us. Saul's testimony is certainly different than ours in some ways, but it is also very similar in other ways.

Like Saul, we are all enemies of God before being converted. And, like Saul, conversion always has something to do with Law and Gospel, it always includes contrition and faith, and, unless it is a very special exception, it always includes Baptism. We'll explore this a little bit, because we don't always experience these things in the same order, and we don't always recognize the significance of them, but these basic truths of conversion are universal. When we read Paul's letters as he talks about these things, we can see how his conversion illustrates the doctrine he teaches. His conversion seems quite different from ours, but it is actually quite similar.

First, we recognize that we were all enemies of God. It probably wasn't as overt as Saul was. He persecuted the Church, and by persecuting the Church, he was really persecuting Jesus. The first thing Jesus says to him is, "**Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?**" (9:4). Saul was, quite obviously, an enemy of God. But we, also, "were by nature children of wrath." That's Ephesians 2:3. And Paul teaches in Romans 5:10 that "while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son." In Romans 8:7 he says, "The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God." And in Colossians 1:21 he says that we "once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds." None of us were trying to become children of God. Such a person does not exist. Nobody tries to be converted. It is always something that happens to us. Our nature is to live our own way, save ourselves, or find our own way to be saved. Our nature is to trust in ourselves. But God will not have that, because trusting in ourselves will never save us. So instead of us finding God, God finds us, and he converts our hearts and minds. Saul's former hostility to Jesus is an illustration of the hostility that dwells in all of us from conception. "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 2:14), so the heart and mind must be taught.

God teaches our hearts and minds by speaking to us the two primary doctrines of Scripture: the Law and the Gospel. “The Law is the divine Word that tells us what we must do.” It shows us where we have sinned against God and calls us to account. And “the Gospel is the good news of the grace of God in Jesus Christ our Savior.” It shows us what Jesus has done for us and assures us that we are forgiven for his sake. These two doctrines proclaim very different truths, but they work together to convert our hearts and minds. And we can see this at work in Saul’s conversion.

Look at the words Saul heard. Look at the words Jesus spoke to Saul, and look at the words Ananias spoke to him. Where was the Law preached to Saul? And where was the Gospel preached to him? It’s kind of interesting to examine this, because it didn’t go the way I would have expected it to go.

Jesus appeared to Saul in a great light, preached the Law to him, and that was it. **“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”** And, **“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting”** (9:5). Jesus pointed out Saul’s sin to him, and he left him there. Jesus did not actually preach the Gospel to Saul. He left that to his servant, Ananias. We tend to assume that Saul was converted on the road to Damascus, but that’s not really true. He learned that Jesus is Lord, but he had no hope of forgiveness, and he was left blind. The blindness is an indication to us that Saul was still in spiritual darkness. He had heard the Law, and he experienced contrition over his sin, but he did not hear the Gospel yet, so he did not have faith. He wasn’t given anything to trust in yet. Faith does not merely know that Jesus is Lord. Even the demons know that (e.g., Mark 1:24), but that’s not faith; faith also receives forgiveness.

So Saul was not actually converted by this vision of Jesus Christ. We could say he has experienced the first part of conversion, but not its completion. The start was quite extraordinary, but the completion will be very similar to yours and mine.

And we really shouldn’t envy Saul’s vision of Jesus, because it was not a pleasant experience. Jesus appeared to him only to chastise him. It would be like working for a giant corporation, and one day you meet the CEO, but all he does is chew you out, except, in Saul’s case, it’s God chastising him. This would not be pleasant.

Then, for three days Saul remained blind and didn’t eat or drink anything (9:9). He had seen Ananias in a vision (9:12), but he had not yet heard a single word of Gospel. He had three days to ponder Jesus’ rebuke, and for three days there was no word of forgiveness. Jesus had simply instructed him to go into the city and wait.

So consider yourself in Saul’s place. What would Jesus require of him? What would Jesus tell him to do? What must Saul do to atone for his sins against the Lord of heaven and earth? For three days he fasted, blind and under the condemnation of the Law.

So imagine Saul’s joy when Ananias comes and speaks these words to him, “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” (9:17). This is the Word from the Lord he has been waiting three days to hear. The first word, “Brother,” is enough to absolve him. *No longer are you alienated and hostile. You are a brother in the family of God. God has adopted you as his own dear child.* This is all wrapped up in the greeting, “Brother.” But the good news continues.

The most gracious part is the promise of the Holy Spirit. The gift of the Holy Spirit is often associated with restoration and salvation. Throughout the book of Acts it is a sign of God’s acceptance of a person. And the connection between the gift of the Holy Spirit and the restoration of a sinner is made most clear in Psalm 51. Psalm 51 is the most well-known of the penitential psalms. Now remember, Saul was a Jew with an elite education in the Old Testament

(22:3). He would have known Psalm 51 very well, and I would bet he prayed this psalm more than any other during those three days. Part of that psalm goes like this:

- 10 Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.
- 11 Cast me not away from your presence,
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.
- 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and uphold me with a willing spirit.

The gift of the Holy Spirit is an answer to this prayer. It is a clear sign that God has created in Saul a clean heart. It is a clear sign that Jesus has restored to him the joy of salvation. Here is the Gospel.

Then Saul is baptized. He has heard the Gospel, and he is now joined through Baptism to Jesus' death and resurrection. He is converted. We shouldn't try to pinpoint when exactly in this encounter with Ananias Saul was converted. Was it at the Word "brother"? Was it at the promise of the Holy Spirit? Was it when the scales fell from his eyes? Was it at his Baptism? The text doesn't say, and we don't know, so we shouldn't try to be too precise. What's clear is that by the end of it he is converted. He does not simply fear Jesus Christ, but he also trusts Jesus for his salvation.

Then we see the fruit of his conversion when this man who came to Damascus to persecute the disciples of the Lord now proclaims in the synagogue that "[Jesus] is the Son of God" (9:20). It's a radical conversion, but it's really not that different from yours and mine. He is baptized, just like every other Christian. He hears the Law, just like every other Christian. He hears the Gospel, just like every other Christian. He experiences contrition over sin and faith in Jesus Christ, just like every other Christian. And he receives the gift of the Holy Spirit, just like every other Christian. The notable differences are that he heard the Law part from Jesus himself, and there was a miracle of healing when he regained his sight. Other than these two special circumstances, his conversion wasn't much different than any other Christian conversion.

The order of things is not always the same. In the case of adults, like Saul, the preaching of Law and Gospel come first, and then Baptism. This happens a lot in the book of Acts, because we see a lot of adult converts. Anytime the Gospel spreads to an area where it hasn't gone before, there are necessarily adult converts. This is what we see the most of in the book of Acts.

But we also see entire households with children converted, and the children were baptized right away (e.g., 16:15, 33); they didn't wait for the children to grow up and make their own choices. And in Peter's sermon at Pentecost, the promises of Baptism are explicitly offered to children (2:39). So we are right, biblically, to baptize our children. And then the preaching of Law and Gospel follow.

In fact, this preaching of Law and Gospel continues throughout our entire lives. For this new life in Christ to live and flourish, the teaching of the Word of God is necessary. We remember Christ's instructions when he commissioned his Church to **"make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you"** (Matt. 28:19-20). The typical order, according to Christ's own command, is Baptizing and teaching. Even when someone hears the preaching of Law and Gospel before Baptism, and they are converted, they must still continue to hear it after Baptism, because this strengthens the faith created when we were born again of water and Spirit (John 3:5).

CONVERTED (Acts 9:1-22)

So Saul's conversion was different in some ways, but also similar in many ways. One of the great comforts illustrated by Saul's conversion is that there is no sin too great. There is no enemy of God who is too far gone. Saul, just like the rest of us, must have had many sins. We know he continued to struggle with sin even after his conversion (e.g., Rom. 7:15-20). We don't know what troubled him the most, but his most public sin was that he persecuted and murdered Christians. This is a pretty serious sin, and Jesus took it personal. But how did Jesus deal with Saul? What did Saul have to do to make up for his sin? Nothing. Jesus dealt graciously with him. And this is grace: that God does not require you to atone for your sin. He searches for and finds you when you are far off. He forgives you and he calls you his own. Your Lord Jesus Christ was crucified for you. He bore every one of your sins in his own body. So which of them are left for you to atone for? Not a one, not even one. He has paid for them all, and there is nothing left for you to pay. He has given you salvation, and he has called you his own, so that, just as he is risen from the dead and lives forever, you will too. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.