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Acts 9 "Saul"

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Let's have a word of prayer: "Father in Heaven thank You that there are no orphans, outcast or strangers with You. But You love us so deeply, so powerfully. Lord as we open Your Word now, we are asking that Your love will be taught today, and will be experienced. We pray that the very words You want us to hear, You will speak them to us. The very thoughts You want us to think, we will think. And the very emotions You want us to feel, we will feel. We pray Heavenly Father that our hearts will be changed, and that Your presence and Your power will be miraculous in our midst. We ask this in Jesus' name, Amen."

I'd like for you to open your Bibles to Acts chapter 9. We are going to be looking at the story of most famous conversion in church history. It's the story of Saul. We are looking at verse 1, we have in Acts 9, we are going to read just 9 verses, and then we'll double back and unpack the story. Acts 9 verse 1: "Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" And he said, "Who are You Lord?"

"Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads." So he, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" Then the Lord said to him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one. Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank."

That's our study passage for today. The background is that earlier Stephen had been stoned. Stephen was the first Christian martyr. And right after that a great persecution broke out upon the church there in Jerusalem. And all the people were scattered. They went all over except for the twelve apostles. They remained in Jerusalem. And the next chapter, in chapter 8 you have the story of Philip. And now we come to the story of the conversion of Saul. Luke is the author of this. Luke will become a traveling companion of Saul. And Luke is writing this after all their travels. It's a recollection of their journeys together. And that's what makes his introduction of Saul even more interesting. Because Luke is writing about Saul after they've known each other for years.

In verse one it says: "Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder..." The phrase, "Still breathing threats and murder" in the Greek is a very powerful, powerful phrase. It is referring to a wild and ferocious beast. This in fact, the phrase is not used anywhere else in the New Testament. If you have the Old Testament which was originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic, if you have it in the Septuagint, which is the Greek of the Old Testament, you will find that the phrase is used there. It's used in Psalm 80 verse 13. I'd like for you to turn to Psalm 80 verse 13.

Psalm 80 verse 13 it's describing the destruction of Israel. Israel is likened to a vine, and that's found in verse 8. But in verse 13 it says: "The boar out of the woods uproots it, and the wild beast of the field devours it." That expression, describing a wild animal, that's the very type of picture that Luke is giving us of Saul. He is like a wild animal. He is out of control. He is just uprooting, and destroying anything that he can that is associated with Jesus Christ.

Now this is not the first time that Saul is mentioned in Luke's writings. Saul is mentioned at the death of Stephen in chapter 7 verse 58. It is when Stephen dies; the clothes are cast at the feet of Saul. He is giving approval to it. And then in Acts 8 verses 1 and 3, it talks about him reeking havoc, arresting men and arresting women, and putting them in prison. So now we come to him in chapter 9. Saul, like a wild animal is seeking to destroy the disciples of Jesus. It says in verse 1 that he went to the high priest.

Now I'll give you a little background again. The high priest during this time period is Caiaphas. It's the very same guy that Jesus was brought in front of when He was tried. Caiaphas in fact would be the high priest from the year 18 to the year 37. So he's got a few more years yet to go. So when Saul comes to Caiaphas, and he says, "Hey, I want papers that give me authority to arrest people, to bring them back here to Jerusalem to stand trial, people who are Christians," he has a ready ally because Caiaphas wants this thing stopped too.

Now again, a little more background. What Saul is seeking to do is to excise authority that has been given to the high priest from the government of Rome. At this time, Israel is under the jurisdiction of Rome. And sometime before this took place, there were some Jewish malcontents, people who broke the law. They broke the law in Israel and then they fled to Egypt. And the high priest appealed to Caesar, and Caesar gave the high priest authority to send temple guards, police or soldiers as they are called to Egypt and extradite those people back to Jerusalem where they held trial. So that precedence is out there. If somebody messes up in Israel, and they flee to another country, the high priest has the authority by the Roman government to write the letter to the country where the people have gone, and take them, bring them back.

So Saul has this in mind, he goes to the high priest, and he wants extraditing authority to bring the malefactors back to Jerusalem. Do you know what this is telling us? It is now, in history of the church, at this time against the law to be a Christian. That's what it is. They can be arrested and put in prison. Now let's go to chapter 9 verse 2. It says, "And asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus..." Those letters will give him the authority. Damascus is in the Roman province of Syria. It's not in Israel, so he needs those letters to arrest people and bring them back. Damascus is one of the oldest cities in the world. It was there in the days of Abraham, 1800 years before Christ. We know from the writings of Josephus, and Josephus wrote about the Jewish wars. Those Jewish wars took place from 66 to 70, the temple being destroyed, the city being destroyed in 70.

During that time period, Josephus records that in Damascus 18000 Jews were massacred during the war. Though we know there is a large number of Jews that live in Damascus. It says they had many synagogues. Now here is what was happening back in those days. The people, who grew up with all the pagan teachings and all the pagan gods, had a great dissatisfaction. And many of them would go to the synagogue to listen to the preaching of the Word of God. They found

stability there; they found things that made sense, and so the synagogues were kind of a booming thing at that time. And as mentioned last week, there were two groups of folks that were closely associated with the synagogue. One was the proselyte. That would be a gentile who became a Jew. He would be circumcised and keep the law. And Jesus came along and changed it to baptism, and I am grateful for that process. I think it's a little nicer. And so that's how we join the church now. And there was another group called "the God fearers." They didn't actually join, but they hung out and they appreciated the things that were taught, and they appreciated God.

Now in the day that Saul is working, in the synagogues you have these proselytes and you have these God fearers, their background, they are gentiles. And when the folks from Jerusalem were kicked out of Jerusalem, they went all over to different towns. Apparently a number of folks had come to Damascus, and they were teaching about Jesus Christ. And as Saul's custom will be later when he goes out on his missionary journeys, they went to the synagogues first. And the most ready listeners were the proselytes or the God fearers, and they were accepting Christ. And then, other Jews were accepting Christ. And Saul heard about it, and he wants to put an end to it.

So he goes and he gets letters. He requests letters. I was reading this story to my wife last night. We were talking about it. And I was saying, "Karen, what strikes you about this?" And she said: "Who does he think he is?" And that's an excellent question because nobody asked him to do this. He is self appointed. He is going to do this on his own. In fact, he is self appointed, self absorbed and self assured as you will see. Turn back to Acts chapter 5 for just a moment. In Acts chapter 5 you have the comments of the wisest man of their day, called Gamaliel. And often you will read in the writings of Paul that he would say, "I was the Pharisee of the Pharisees, I was a student of Gamaliel." He was a follower of this wise man. When the 12 apostles were arrested and brought to trial, they were about to be killed, but here is what Gamaliel said. In chapter 5 verses 38 and 39: "And now I say to you keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing. But if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it – lest you even be found to fight against God."

So, that great wisdom of Gamaliel says, "Look, if this is man made it will come to nothing, but if it is of God, don't fight it lest you end up fighting God." Well now, his star pupil, Saul, acting on his own, being self appointed, self absorbed and self assured, has gone to the high priest and said: "Hey, I'll do something about it. You give me the papers, and you give me a contagion of men, and I'll go to Damascus, I'll arrest this people, I'll bring them back here and you can try them, and you can do what you want with them after that." So the high priest was more than willing to let them go.

Chapter 9 verse 3: "And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus." Now to understand what's happening here, Damascus is 140 miles from Jerusalem. You would come down the slope of Mount Herman, and you would be able to see Damascus. It was a very fertile area there. This is a description of Damascus given from the writers of Saul's day, quote: "A handful of pearls, and a goblet of emerald." It was a beautiful, beautiful sight, these white buildings all surrounded by this green, plush area.

Now he journeys. It's a 140 miles. Some people say he rode a horse. And that's, some people believe that's where we get the saying, "Knocked off your high horse." I don't know. Other

people say, there is no evidence of that, he walked. Either way, it would have been 4 or 5 days of a journey that he walks to Damascus, or he rides a horse to Damascus. He would go right through the region of Galilee, the place where Jesus had done most of His teaching. Now there are few things we know about regarding the journey. Number one, this Pharisee of the Pharisees would journey alone. Now already you may be questioning, "What do you mean? I thought you said he would have temple of police with him?" He would, but he would journey alone. He is a Pharisee; he is not going to associate with them. They would be way behind him or they would be in front of him. And only minimal contact would be afforded them. You know if they are going to talk about something, where are they going to stop or something like that? But Saul would not associate with them; he is too holy. So he is either a way in front, or he is way in the back. And all along this journey, four or five days, he is doing a lot of thinking. He is going to be thinking about a lot of things.

You know, I don't know if you realize this or not, but Saul is about the same age as Jesus. It's very likely, being such a bright, young man, that he also was invited into the special classes of the Temple during the Passover service. He may have been there when Jesus showed up at age 12, and started asking questions. It is more than provable that he would have heard the sayings and the teachings of Jesus. Because those would have been debated among the Pharisees and he was a Pharisee. It is very likely that he would have seen Jesus the last week of Jesus' life when He was there in the Temple teaching. And he would have known that Galilee was the place of Jesus' greatest teachings and greatest miracles. In fact, Saul may have been there to see some of them? And he is walking through Galilee or he is riding through Galilee, and he is thinking about all these things that are on his mind.

He's got to be thinking about the followers of Christ. They are strange breed. They have a joy, they have a peace, they have a hope that is never seen in any other people. He's got to be thinking about Stephen's death. How when Stephen is being stoned unjustly by people who hate him, he looks at them and he prays that God will forgive their sins. And even during the trial, it is noted that his face radiated like an angel. And then, as he is dying, he says: "Look, I see Jesus, I see Him standing at the right hand of God." Saul is got to be thinking about these things on this journey to Damascus.

He's also got to be thinking about, "How do we stop this stuff?" I mean, you squish it down here and it pops up over there like kudzu, you know, you don't know how to get rid of it. These Christians are, they are proliferating you know, just everywhere you go there they are, we got to get this down. So all these stuff is going on in his mind, and they come down the side of Mt. Herman. And all of a sudden, he'll see a blinding light.

William Barkley, a famous commentator of the Bible has this thought. This is not a quote from him, but this is his idea. It is likely that Paul's experience is not a sudden conversion, but a sudden surrender. You see Jesus has been working on him for a long time. In fact, it's very unlikely anybody ever has a sudden conversion. God is working on all of us all the time, drawing our attentions towards Him. And so Saul's conversion though, it sudden in appearance, will be more of a sudden surrender. The light shines from heaven and he is blinded.

Now let's go to verse 4. "Then he fell to the ground and he heard a voice saying, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?'" Now it's interesting that when God has communicated with man in the Old Testament, He uses that same formula. He calls their name twice. "Abraham, Abraham, Jacob, Jacob, Moses, Moses, Samuel, Samuel, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

Now, I want you to know something; that your experience in this world, if you are a follower of Jesus Christ, is so important to Jesus that any injustice that happens to you, happens to Him. That any pain you are going through is pain He is going through. You are, biologically, spiritually, supernaturally His body. And what affects You, affects Him. This great God who knows when a sparrow falls, and knows when another hair is gone, knows your pain. He experiences it Himself. He doesn't say to Saul, "Why are you persecuting my people, my followers, those who care about me. Why are you persecuting them?" He says, "Why are you persecuting Me?"

You see, an attack on God's people is an attack on God. And He asked that question. In verse 5, Saul asked a logical question. "Who are You Lord?" And I know in your Bibles, it will have "You," the "Y" will be capitalized and so will the "L" on Lord. And that's proper to write it that way because it's Jesus that he is talking to. But he doesn't know it is Jesus. In the Greek, the word that is used is translated, "Sir." It's what you say to somebody that you know is an official, but he doesn't know this is God at this point. "Who are you Sir?" And the Lord said: "I am Jesus!" Wow! Do you have any understanding of what that meant to Saul? That means that all the lies about the resurrection are true. That means that everything Stephen said it's true. That means that Stephen actually saw Jesus at the right hand of God, that everything he is fighting against; it's like Gamaliel said, "You are fighting against God." "I am Jesus, I am Jesus!"

Now I'll tell you, one of the most amazing things about this story, think about this. In Acts chapter 8, Luke concentrates on two experiences of Philip. Philip goes out into Samaria, he preaches the Word of God, he tells stories about Jesus. Miracles are wrought by his hand, demons are cast out, and people's lives are physically, they are physically healed and hope comes in, and joy comes in their lives. And the whole area of Samaria is converted to Jesus Christ. Those people listen to a man preach.

Then the scene changes -- the camera if you will swings over to another scene, and here is a man seated on a chariot, reading the scroll of Isaiah, all by himself, trying to understand what God's word says. An angel tells Philip, "Go!" And when Philip arrives on the scene, God Himself shows up and speaks through Philip to the man. And together, this guy is brought to Christ. Now, you had a crowd that listened to Philip, you had an individual that listened to Philip. Now you have an individual who won't listen to anybody. He is not listening to anybody. Jesus Himself comes. Now think about this. If you are praying for your children, family members, loved ones and friends, and they are not listening to you? Don't give up your prayers; don't give up your hope. They will listen when Jesus comes on the scene, amen? And He will do it if necessary.

Jesus comes on the scene. "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads." A goad was a sharp object. It was arranged in such a way, if you were a farmer, you were plowing with an ox, you would lather it in such a way that when you pulled it or pushed it, it would pock into the ribs of the ox. And that was to keep the ox in line. If he started

getting wild and carried on, you would ram him with that goad. And the pain of it would drive the ox into obedience. And Jesus is repeating a very familiar phrase. It was used back in their day. Jesus knew the language of the “hood” if you will. And He is sharing it, “...hard to kick against the goads.” You are fighting something, and you are not going to win.

It begs a question. What is Paul fighting? I cannot prove this by his experience, but I can illustrate it by mine. Here is what I believe he is fighting. I believe he is fighting his conscience. I believe that he is fighting the stinging pain of inadequacy and failure. I know that pain from my own life. In fact, when I was an alcoholic, that’s why I drank. I could make it through most days without drinking, but not a night. Because you lay down at night, and all of a sudden, your conscience is screaming at you. “You are an idiot here, you are bad here, and this on and on,” and it just overwhelmed me until I drank every night just so I could sleep. And I know that there are many people, maybe some here in this congregation whose consciences are screaming so loud and so painfully to you that you are seeking anyway to anesthetize yourself and stop that screaming.

I believe Saul is fighting his conscience. He knows what he is doing is wrong, and God has indicated it to him. And it’s hard; I know it’s hard to kick against that goad. But I will tell you, you let Jesus into your heart, and when your conscience kicks up its heels, seek Christ on your conscience and it’s all taken care of. It’s all taken care of! Verse 6: “So Saul, trembling and astonished said, ‘Lord, what do you want me to do?’ And the Lord said to him, ‘Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.’”

Here is a man who is self appointed, self absorbed, self assured, nobody tells him what to do, he makes his own plans, he does his own thing, he does what he wants to do. And here he is in the presence of God, and he says, “Lord, what do you want me to do?” And the Lord says, “Go to town and then you will be told what to do. God reaches us right where we are at. This man needed a huge dose of humility. So he goes into town, and he won’t even eat or drink water for three days. He is blinded by the experience, as the story goes on; he is led by hand into the city. This big, tough guy comes to arrest all these bad Christians, led like a child into the city.

What’s the significance of this story for us? What does it mean for us? You know one thing I want to share. We might not experience blinding, flashing lights and the voice of Jesus in our conversion experience. We might not experience that. But we must experience the change of heart that Paul experienced. We must experience that. And it will come in the fashion that God brings it to us. But we must experience the change of heart.

In this story, nestled quietly in the story, are probably the two most important questions you can ask in your life. “Who are You Lord?” Who is God? You know, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, beyond our ability to understand, yet, He has said in His word we can know Him. We can have a relationship with Him. “Who are You Lord?” That should be the quest of our devotional life. It should be the drive of our spirituality, “Who are You God, who are You God?” And as we read His book, we are looking for Him. We are looking to understand Him. He will reveal Himself to us. And we’ll discover that He is a God who can be known. He is a God of love, of mercy and kindness, forgiveness, and patience. And He is a God who cares deeply for You. He is a God who will work miracles on your behalf, “Who are You Lord?”

The second question, also found in this story, is simply, “What do You want me to do?” You see, once a person has come to Christ, the first question that comes to their heart and mind is: “Lord, what do You want me to do? What do You want me to do?” And that becomes the quest for the rest of our lives. As we are seeking to know God better, we are continually asking the question, “Lord, what do You want me to do? Here I am. I am upset, I am angry; I’ve already blown my top. There is my spouse or my child, or somebody, what do You want me to do God? What do You want me to do because I know what I want to do. But what do You want me to do?”

In every situation of our lives, everything that comes up, the question is: “What do You want me to do Lord?” He, brothers and sister, He will respond to us through the context of a relationship as we are seeking, “Who are You Lord? What do You want me to do?” I will tell you a broad-brush stroke that one of the responses God will give you is, obey Him, serve Him and walk with Him by faith. How do you know what to do in every situation? I don’t know. But I know God is honored if we ask Him what He wants us to do. And then we do the best we can. You do that, there is no way you can make a wrong decision even if it wasn’t the best decision. God will turn it into a good thing, into a wonderful thing because you approached it with humility, seeking to honor Him.

Well, what are the implications for us? Saul was supernaturally encountered by Jesus on the way to Damascus. Where are you going? Where are you going today? Where are you going in your life? What are your plans? Did you come here today to meet Jesus? As some authors say, “The arrester was arrested by Christ.” I have a question for you. Do you know Christ as your Savior? If someone were to say, “Who is Jesus?” Would you be able to say, “He is my Savior!” Then secondly, if you have Christ as your Savior, have you reached that point of trust and confidence in Him where in every aspect of your life you are saying, “Lord what do You want me to do?” So, if you have accepted Christ, and you want a deeper experience, I am going to ask you to respond. If you’ve never accepted Christ, and He is confronting you on your busy road, I want to encourage you. Man, if you want your conscience put in the dust, if you want a life of hope and a life of peace and a life of courage, a life of wisdom, a life of understanding and a life of knowledge, a life, A LIFE if you will; if you want that, Jesus is right here today. And He wants to stop you. On whatever destructive course you are on, He wants to come into your heart.

So today, if you want to accept Christ for the first time, or maybe again, or if you want to strengthen your experience with Him, I am going to ask you to stand. “Father in Heaven, thank you for a Savior, thank you for Jesus; we are now asking Him to come into our hearts. Lord please, take our conscience and set it aside, and give us Your peace. And please Lord; help us by Your grace to know the answer to what You want us to do. And give us the strength and the courage and the faith to do that. We pray in Jesus’ name, Amen.”