

I am Jesus...

Acts 9:1-19

Most people that have a little familiarity with the Bible know that the book of Acts is primarily about Paul, the Apostle Paul. And, of course, they are correct. And yet we have studied 8 chapters now, almost one third of the book, and only now in chapter 9 is Paul introduced. In my own presentation and preaching, we have had 37 sermons so far, and Paul has only been mentioned once, in passing, and with an emphasis of his guilt and sin. Remember when we began to study Stephen's defense of the gospel which ultimately led to his murder. He was the first martyr of the church, put to death because of his Christian faith. And so we read and studied Stephen's death by stoning at the end of chapter 7.

Acts 7:57 "Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; 58 and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul."

Saul, of course, was Paul's name prior to the time of his conversion. Chapter 8 then begins,

Acts 8:1 "Now Saul was consenting to his death."

Saul approved of his death. He was part of it, part of the mob, part of the murderous violence that brought an end to Stephen's life. And that's it, so far. We've studied Peter in the leadership role that he assumed among the apostles at Pentecost. We studied Stephen, one of the first deacons. And then Philip, the deacon, and the evangelist who went to Samaria, then all the way to Caesarea on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, preaching in all the cities as he travelled. And last week we studied Philip's ministry of the gospel to the Ethiopian official. And now, chapter 9, Saul assumes center stage.

I try to give some broad meaning and significance to all my sermon titles, so this week I starting thinking about a good title with reference to Saul. But then I decided not to emphasize him with the title I chose, because this chapter really isn't about Saul at all. So very intentionally, I decided to emphasize verse 5.

v.5 And [Saul] said, "Who are You, Lord?" Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."

So the subject and theme of this chapter is not Saul. The theme is in those words I just read, "I am Jesus." This chapter is all about what Jesus does in the life of Saul, and that is the point I want to stress as we begin. "I am Jesus."

To be sure, in order to understand what Jesus does in this text, what he does in the life of Saul, you have to know what Saul was like. So we return to the thoughts I've already mentioned about Saul's complicity and guilt with reference to Stephen's death. And the obvious starting point is the emphasis upon,

I. Saul the unbeliever.

It is not a pretty picture at all.

v.1-2

I have often commented how good and thorough a historian Luke is in writing this book, and these verses are another good example of that. We learn about a specific detail, that Saul "went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus." There was a formal relationship there, a formal request. And just off-handedly, we learn about a name or title given to these new Christians in this newly forming church. They are called "the Way." That same reference is used a couple other times in Acts, and likely, we can assume, there is a reference to Jesus' own words,

John 14:1 “Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. 2 In My Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also. 4 And where I go you know, and the way you know.” 5 Thomas said to Him, “Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how can we know the way?” 6 Jesus said to him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”

Jesus is the way, the way to God, the way to the Father. Jesus is the way to eternal life, to heaven itself. And so the whole body of Christians is very appropriately given that label, the Way. And Saul is seeking them out to arrest them, to bring them to Jerusalem, under arrest, bound, to face the consequences of Roman justice. What is so obvious in all those details is that Saul the unbeliever is...

A. The enemy of God’s people.

Luke leaves no doubt of the extent of Saul’s crimes. In verse 1, Saul was “still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.” He had approved of Stephen’s death, and he continued to pursue Christians to death. Intentionally. Deliberately. Just because of their identity with and allegiance to Jesus. Just because they were members of the Way. He would later describe that hypocrisy when writing to the Philippians about his past,

Phil. 2:5 “...concerning the law, a Pharisee; 6 concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.”

Blameless. And so perfectly righteous, so completely zealous in his righteousness, that he even boasted about persecuting the

church. And though he would have claimed in his devotion to the Pharisees that he was righteous, without sin, he was more truthfully worthy of death himself because he persecuted Christians unto death. He was, so clearly,

B. A lawbreaker worthy of death.

He was a murderer. He should have been judged a criminal. Rather than arresting Christians, in a just society he himself would have been arrested. And according to the Old Testament law, he should have been put to death himself. And that is the person whom God chose to be the apostolic evangelist to the Gentiles, to all the nations of the world. And so we see here,

II. SAUL THE CONVERTED.

Let me read the verses again.

v.3 “As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. 4 Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” 5 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.” 6 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.” 7 And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one. 8 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. 9 And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.”

I expect this account is familiar to you. I certainly hope that it is. Let me emphasize that which is so abundantly obvious, the point that just jumps out at you as you read those words. This is an account of,

A. The sovereign intervention of God.

Some Christians struggle with the doctrines regarding God's sovereignty, especially when that is emphasized in terms of predestination, a word the Bible uses very plainly. Sometimes Christians struggle to understand how that works, how it relates to our human responsibility and accountability. And sometimes, a detailed, biblically based answer is worthwhile and very helpful. I've certainly been there myself. But sometimes, in addition to that sort of logical and rational explanation of biblical texts, sometimes the best way to gain clearly understanding of God's sovereignty in salvation is simply to look at the examples that he gives us in the Bible. Case study #1, Saul.

Did Saul respond to the gospel with faith and repentance? Of course he did! Was he responsible to turn from his sins and to trust in Jesus, to accept Jesus and proclaim Jesus as Lord. Of course he was, and he did. But note the spiritual state in which Saul was bound, which I have just described in my first point. Just consider the man as he was as an unbeliever. Now ask yourself the question, what happened first? Did Saul turn to God of his own free will, with some sort of goodness within himself that caused him to cry out to God? Of course not! Just read what happened. God appeared to him as a bright light and blinded him.

v.3 "As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven."

That light blinded him.

v.9 "And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank."

God came to him, of his own sovereign will. He would himself describe that event with these words,

Gal. 1:13 "For you have heard of my former conduct in

Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it. 14 And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers. 15 But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, 16 to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles."

God had separated Paul, chosen Paul to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, while Paul was still in his mother's womb! That's called "predestination." That's called "election." God's purpose of election. Paul would be "a chosen vessel," according verse 9 of our text. And that is because of the sovereign intervention of God himself. And continuing in our text, we read of the words of God's call to Saul, words of rebuke which brought about his conversion.

v.4 "Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

That's not an idle question, but a challenge at the very heart of what faith is all about. Why are you persecuting ME! Why are you, a man, a creature bound by his own mortal and finite existence, why are you challenging and resisting God Almighty, the creator of heaven and earth? What a powerful question, and one worth asking any unbeliever today. Why do you think you can stand up against a sovereign and almighty God, resisting his demand that you serve and submit him with the whole of your life. "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" Those were the words God used unto Saul's eternal salvation.

The conversation continues. Saul's rather penetrating response, obviously struck by what has happened to him. He cries out, "Who are you?" Interesting, he adds the word "Lord," making us realize that he already knows something of the answer to his own question. There is almost an expression of faith in

that, and perhaps, God has already regenerated his heart and caused him to be born again. “Who are You, Lord?”

Then the answer, the personal answer. “I am Jesus.” I am Messiah, the Christ, Paul would have likely realized, knowing his Old Testament prophecies so well. Jesus is the Greek form of the name Jeshua, or Joshua, meaning God saves. That’s who I am, Saul. I am the God who saves! Thus we recognize and understand...

B. The personal grace of Jesus.

I am Jesus, who saves you. That’s a matter of grace, God’s grace. I am the God who has come to redeem you from the curse of your own sin. I am Jesus. The words that follow in the New King James are not in the ESV and other Bibles that rely upon the oldest manuscripts, which I believe are the most accurate. But the later Greek manuscripts do have those words, words that were likely added as a later commentary, indicating the way in which Paul was drawn to Jesus, recognizing that resisting him was nothing but the bondage of slavery. They are words that ARE found in the parallel passage in Acts 26, so they are true, inspired biblical words from that chapter, included here simply by reference.

v.5 “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads.”

Paul’s own fuller explanation is recorded in,

Acts 26:14 “And when we all had fallen to the ground, I heard a voice speaking to me and saying in the Hebrew language, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’ 15 So I said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ And He said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 16 But rise and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of the things which you

have seen and of the things which I will yet reveal to you. 17 I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, 18 to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.’

It’s hard to resist me, isn’t it? It’s hard to kick against the goads, if you are an ox constrained by those goads, which had a sharp point that would poke the animal painfully if they tried to stray. A goad is a cattle prod, and very effective. Here they represent God’s grace, for it is by grace that God sought out Saul to save him from his sins. And in doing so, we then see,

C. The miraculous power of God.

Regeneration is a supernatural work, in anyone whose heart God makes alive! Being born again means to be born of the spirit, born from above, born of God. It is the miracle so thoroughly represented by that great Old Testament prophecy of,

Ezek. 36:26 “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.”

The miracle described by that prophecy is put on display in the following chapter,

Ezek. 37:1 “The hand of the LORD came upon me and brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD, and set me down in the midst of the valley; and it was full of bones. 2 Then He caused me to pass by them all around, and behold, there were very many in the open valley; and indeed they were very dry. 3 And He said to me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” So I answered, “O Lord GOD, You know.” 4 Again He said to me, “Prophecy to these bones, and say to them, ‘O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! 5 Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: “Surely I will

cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live. 6 I will put sinews on you and bring flesh upon you, cover you with skin and put breath in you; and you shall live. Then you shall know that I am the LORD.” 7 So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and suddenly a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to bone. 8 Indeed, as I looked, the sinews and the flesh came upon them, and the skin covered them over; but there was no breath in them. 9 Also He said to me, “Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, son of man, and say to the breath, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: “Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.” 10 So I prophesied as He commanded me, and breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great army.”

That’s what the sovereign work of God in salvation is all about. That’s what it means to be born again, to be regeneration. God says to a bunch of dry, dead bones, “O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!” Here is how the salvation of God is represented and illustration, and exemplified by Paul’s own experience, “As I prophesied, there was a noise, and suddenly a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to bone. Indeed, as I looked, the sinews and the flesh came upon them, and the skin covered them over; but there was no breath in them. Also He said to me, “Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, son of man, and say to the breath, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: “Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.”

That’s the supernatural power of God. That’s the sovereign intervention of God. That’s the miraculous power of God. And we see that same miraculous power at work in our text, as Saul was blinded for three days.

v.6 “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.” 7 And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one. 8 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. 9 And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.”

So there is Saul’s conversion, though as I said at the outset, this story is not about Saul the convert. It is the account of Jesus the savior. And in that context, we then see,

III. SAUL THE CHOSEN VESSEL.

Chosen not just for salvation, but as I’ve already noted, chosen for ministry. Chosen for service. Chosen for ministry. Chosen for apostleship. And every step of the way we see,

A. The sovereign purpose of God.

We are introduced to Ananias, in order to demonstrate that purpose of God.

v.10 “Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, “Ananias.” And he said, “Here I am, Lord.” 11 So the Lord said to him, “Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying. 12 And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him, so that he might receive his sight.”

Ananias response is not surprising at all. It is very normal, and human, understandable. He knew all about Saul.

v.13 Then Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. 14 And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name.”

It is all God's purpose. Saul is no longer the focus, God is. And Ananias no doubt is beginning to understand that very well, for he received God's word from his vision and obeyed, despite what he knew about the dangers the Saul posed for God's people. So what becomes the focal point of this whole encounters is,

B. The sovereign call and equipping of God.

The Lord's answer to Ananias is plain and straightforward.

v.15 "But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. 16 For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake."

Then, with Ananias humility and obedience, we see God's call placed upon Saul outwardly, with the laying on of Ananias hands'. And we see Saul's call to be an apostle and his equipping by the Holy Spirit expressed in the inspired, prophetic words of Ananias, speaking the words which God had put into his mouth to speak,

v.17 "And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.

So Saul's call from God was demonstrated again by this display of supernatural power.

v.18 "Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized."

The passage ends with Saul's human needs being satisfied,

v.19 "So when he had received food, he was strengthened. Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus."

So let me come back to the main point of this whole encounter. The key words are back in verse 5, "I am Jesus." And the unbelieving lawbreaker who had been the enemy of God's people would be God's chosen vessel to preach the gospel of Jesus to the Gentile nations of the world. All of this, because of God's power and ability to fulfill his own sovereign purpose and grace, "to the praise of his glory."

Please marvel at this sovereign intervention of God in the instrument he provided to be a significant part of that apostolic church upon which the whole church would be built. Paul's own testimony would never again leave out that sense of his own sin, such that his salvation could only be a matter of God's grace. May the same be for each of you, for if you do believe, if you do trust in Jesus for your salvation as he is offered to you in the gospel, then let the sense of Paul's own testimony be yours always,

1 Tim. 1:12 "And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, 13 although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. 14 And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. 15 This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. 16 However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life. 17 Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen."