

## Acts 9:1–19

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[ 0 : 00 ] Our scripture reading today is taken from the book of Acts, chapter 9, verses 1 through 19. This can be found in the White Bibles on page 1016.

Again, the scripture text is Acts chapter 9, verses 1 through 19, on page 1016 of the White Bibles. 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 at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

And he said, who are you, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.

The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were open, he saw nothing.

[ 1 : 23 ] So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. 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. 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. 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. But Ananias answered, Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem.

And here he has authority from chief priests to bind all who call on your name. But the Lord said to him, go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry out my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.

For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name. 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.

[ 2 : 42 ] And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized and taking food. He was strengthened.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated. Well, good morning and welcome to Holy Trinity.

I want to add my own greeting to you, especially if you are visiting with us today. We hope that this will be a family, faith community that you will return to and give your life to the pleasure of being in relationship to one another as we together learn about Jesus and what it might mean to take up in following his way.

This morning we heard already from one of our church members their own personal story of coming to follow Jesus.

It was arresting for its simplicity and its wonder. How is it that a young girl, age eight, is brought along to a church service where she is taught of Jesus at such a time in her life when her own parents don't even attend church?

[ 4 : 14 ] It indicates the astonishing miracle of one person coming to know who Jesus is and what Jesus might mean for her.

Last week in the text of chapter eight, we saw the equally gripping story of how another person became a follower of Jesus.

He was known to us as the Ethiopian eunuch. He was one who had been intrigued concerning the things of Judaism and found his way along.

But miraculously, while never being led to a Sunday school class where he would hear something taught, a further follower of Jesus was led to an open desert road wherein he would have a conversation that would forever change his life.

And get this, by Acts chapter eight, that gospel which was promised through the apostles to go to the end of the earth is already moving to the far reaches of Ethiopia long before the apostles got up from their seats to extend themselves anywhere beyond Jerusalem.

[ 5 : 36 ] Astounding. Today, in the text that was just read for you, we have a third story. The most unlikely conversion of an adult man who became one of the more well-known followers of Jesus throughout church history.

In the text, he's introduced as Saul. He will become, later in the scriptures, the apostle Paul, who single-handedly rises above the apostolic band in speaking to others about Jesus.

And so, if you're wondering what is going on in our midst in this church family over these weeks, evidently, it is the repetitive power of the personal story of someone who took up with Jesus.

Whether they be a young child. A far-off foreigner. Or someone well-schooled and yet a future missionary.

What can we learn from this story then? And what can we take away from it? First, notice Saul before he was a Christian.

[ 7 : 00 ] Chapter nine, verses one and two. He was decidedly against the followers of Jesus. Take a look.

My Bible reads, 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.

Today's story of someone who became a follower of Jesus begins with an indication that, as an adult, he was decidedly against the followers of Jesus.

Notice the way the text opens. That little word there, still, is intriguing. But Saul, still breathing threats and murder.

An indication that the writer's aware that if you've been reading, this individual has already been mentioned. And while Philip was doing all of these wonderful things and traveling to Samaria and winning people to Christ, and then off to a desert road to meet with the Ethiopian eunuch, something was still viscerally at work in this one named Saul.

[ 8 : 24 ] Some observations. We met him, didn't we, in chapter 7, verse 58, where Stephen was cast out of the city, and witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.

That's the first indication of who he was. It indicates he was a young man. So who was he before he met Jesus? Or, with his own story, he would probably say before Jesus met him.

In all the ways they speak of this term, young man, in the ancient world, he's categorized certainly not as an infant and not as an elder. When you look at the lists of the division of the use of the terms, the term used here puts him almost definitively within his 20s.

Young to middle to later 20s. He's a 20-something. But he's a 20-something who was a very angry someone.

Take a look at chapter 8, verse 1. Saul approved of his execution. The word approved is used elsewhere earlier in Luke's Gospel, chapter 11, to speak of those lawyers, but by that they mean Old Testament scholars.

[ 9 : 55 ] The Old Testament scholars of Jesus' day who approved of the rationale for the killing of the prophets of old.

And when you take into consideration here that Saul was at the persecution and stoning of Stephen, and one who voiced his approval, and one who later in Acts 22 will use this same term to indicate his own complicit nature in that act, it is likely that Saul, as a young man, was a firebrand against followers.

The only time we're spoken of are things at the feet of people in Acts to this point, that one whose feet things fall are people of authority and movements.

Whether it be Barnabas, who brought his gift to the feet of the apostles. Whether it be Ananias and Sapphira, who brought their gift to the feet of the apostles. Whether it be Barnabas, who brought their gift to the apostles.

It is likely that Saul, as a young, learned firebrand, was complicit in the act of Stephen's stoning, had cast himself with those who felt stones ought to be thrown, and who indeed was a leader of the movement.

[ 11 : 25 ] And if he wasn't a leader at the stoning, it's obvious that before he met Jesus, he became a leader of those who were against Jesus. Because look at chapter 8, verse 3. We're still acquainting ourselves with a charcoal sketch of the character before he came to know Christ.

Verse 3 of chapter 8. Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. He's now the leader of the charge, and the word ravaging is actually used in Psalm 80 in the Greek translation, in reference to wild boars who make their way through the forest.

So when you think of this unlikely convert, as a young man, he was angry, he was against the followers of Jesus, he was a firebrand, and then in our own text, still breathing threats and murder, he requests papers from the high priest, verse 1, that give him letters of extradition, verse 2, that as far away as Damascus, he can, in a sense, suppress the spread of those who would know Christ. He's not just looking for a hall in which he can debate Christians, like some learned professors, both here and in Europe, who would try to undo the growth of the gospel through what they say. He was an activist who had a plan to stop the accelerating nature of other people who would name the name of Jesus.

[ 13 : 22 ] It's fascinating to me that he chooses Damascus. Why? Well, from what we know in the text already, the gospel has spread through Philip in the Ethiopian eunuch.

It's already pushed out of Jerusalem some 1,600 miles to the southwest. We also know from chapter 8 with Philip that the gospel had actually moved north to the Samaria, the capital city of the north, and that the apostles had returned back to Jerusalem to speak about it.

Damascus is the capital city of Samaria, some 150 miles to the north and east of Jerusalem. So Saul is walking this direction.

The eunuch has gone lengthily that direction because he wants to suppress what he feels will be the outer ring of men and women who are becoming Christians in his own place.

They've been fighting fires on the west coast. How do you fight a fire? One tactic, one strategy, is to create a fire break, a line of where the fire is moving that if you can clear a space of the fuel that would allow it to continue, you might actually get up to that point and then stop.

[ 14 : 56 ] I feel that's probably what Saul is envisioning here. He knows the gospel has pushed north to Samaria. He knows there are further synagogues in Damascus.

And he wants to get to an outer ring that will reign it in. So there he is on his way to Damascus to suppress people, it says there, who are belonging to the way.

One of the unique Lucan terms for Christians. They would have been followers of the way. He uses it some three or four other times.

We'll have more time to look at it as we make our way through the book. But that's Paul or Saul before Jesus.

Decidedly against. Verses three to nine. He had a dramatic counter with.

[ 16 : 09 ] This is a stunning telling. His own personal narrative. As he went on his way, he approaches the city and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him and falling to the ground.

He heard a voice saying, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? And he said, who are you, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

But rise and enter the city and you will be told what to do. A dramatic encounter with Jesus.

Encounter might even be too tame of a word. It's a jarring confrontation concerning him running into Jesus.

In other words, the rising star of the world in verses one and two, Saul, the rising star, who had the capacity to put out the light, is now blinded by a light from heaven that arrests him in his tracks.

[ 17 : 26 ] This is a life-altering event. I've often found that when people begin following Jesus as adults, there's something in their own story that they point to where suddenly their life as they knew it before needed to be re-evaluated.

And without that instance in their life, without that experience, they just would have kept on going as they were going. We sang a song earlier today about how the Lord teaches you things in places that you did not choose.

Well, here's a moment of Saul's life that he did not choose that necessitated a re-evaluation of his commitments, his direction, his convictions, his understanding.

There is this dramatic encounter with Jesus. And notice, it almost happens as this a theophany, an appearance that almost comes like God coming from the air.

But yet we know that the light is given a voice and the voice is given a name and therefore the light is equated with the glory and the outshining of Jesus himself, the one whom Paul thought was crucified but not resurrected.

[ 19 : 00 ] And yet he now encounters the resurrected Jesus and the outshining glory of his brilliance and it actually blinds him to where he can see nothing.

He's undone. He's forced to stop. He's no longer in charge.

The clarity of his vision is replaced with a few days of absolute confinement and waiting. Now, if any of us had that kind of experience, we would almost think it would be an hallucination.

When is the last time Saul drank water on the journey? Perhaps he was dehydrated? But it seems to be, according to Luke, an actual encounter with Jesus.

The persecutor is spoken to by the one persecuted. And that phrase there in verse 5 is dramatic for its accent or emphasis.

[ 20 : 17 ] Notice it says, and he said, I am Jesus. He doesn't just say, Jesus. It's emphatic. I am Jesus.

And you are the one who is persecuting me. This is an astonishing moment in a man's life. One that we would dismiss and one that certainly he would have dismissed other than the malady that it brought to him forced him to actually stop and reconsider.

I love verse 9. For three days he was without sight and neither ate nor drank. I'm not making any connection to three days of Jesus in the tomb. Don't believe I'm trying to read the Bible with such shallow spiritualized lenses.

But the three days he was without sight and he neither ate nor drank. And we know later in a few verses down that he was giving himself to prayer. Evidently, the experience in his life laid him out. And he gave himself to prayer and fasting to discern whether he ought to make a correction in what he gave his life to. Decidedly against the followers of Jesus this dramatic life experience and encounter with Jesus and then that gives way in verses 10 to the end really from this encouragement and confirmation that was won by one who was sent to him by Jesus.

[ 21 : 55 ] Jesus. That's really what begins to move in his own story. Interestingly, he had been given refuge in his blindness on a straight called street from which I am told, never having been to Damascus myself, the capital of Syria, is the street that would have actually run from the eastern edge of the city all the way to the western edge.

So it would have been one of the only streets in the whole city that was straight and he comes in onto the main street and he's given refuge in the home of someone named Judas here verse 11 which is a fascinating little detail that his name is there because it's an indication that in the early church Judas probably was a member of the church that somehow, some way, unbeknownst to Saul, he's given refuge in the house of the name of one that the church actually knows who the man is.

Entertaining behind your own door those who are decidedly against and they're providing through hospitality a salvation to one that will bring the welcome of God to the world.

So he's in this home, but I want to get to the point of Ananias. The point of these verses is that there is an encouragement and confirmation that will come to Saul from one who is sent to him by Jesus. Notice it's Ananias who has a vision too. Saul's not the only one. Saul had his vision on the Damascus road. Ananias had his probably in his own bedroom or kitchen area.

[ 23 : 59 ] And it's a stunning vision. Rise, go to the street called straight, to the house of Judas, look for a man from Tarsus named Saul. He's praying in a vision.

He's seen a man named Ananias. I mean, there's no way for Ananias to get away from this. It wasn't just that somebody's going to get this done. This is my assignment for you to get done unless you know of another Ananias who will go for you.

And then you're to tell him, in a sense here, Ananias says, you've got to be kidding me. This guy is the guy who's decidedly against. And then it says, but the Lord said, go, he's a chosen instrument of mine.

I mean, this is a central seminal moment in the text. Verse 15, go for he's a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and children of Israel, for I will show him how much you must suffer for the sake of my name.

So Ananias departed and entered the house and laying his hands on him. Well, you know the rest of the story. Regain your sight. But the point is this. There's no way Saul would have actually gone on with Jesus unless there was confirmation given to him that what happened to him on the road was real.

[ 25 : 18 ] God. I wouldn't have believed it. He wouldn't have believed it unless there was an independent source without any knowledge of the event that would confirm it to him.

That's why God doesn't just appear to Saul again and say, hey, you're the chosen guy. Go after it. There is independent confirmation confirmation for an adult who will begin to follow Jesus.

So that those who are decidedly against, who have a dramatic encounter with, and who are stunned to wonder for a moment in their 20s or 30s, whether or not it's real, there are people by name who begin to confirm.

For him, not only was your vision real on the road to Damascus, but the implication of it, the Jesus whom you met on the road is alive.

He became a believer in the resurrection as a real resurrection rather than some hallucinatory experience through dehydration because there was an independent source that confirmed it in his own life.

[ 26 : 38 ] So here it is. The experience is genuine. And the implication was clear. The conversion was legitimate.

And yet Paul's own calling became known. Jesus was alive. And yet Paul knew it was his name now that must be delivered.

The past event on the road was authentic. And the future was now undeniable. all of that happened in a moment with Ananias before him the words from his mouth heard by Saul in the silence and in the darkness of the room.

And the anointing and the scales falling and the blind man now sees. What a stunning confirmation. Paul would need nothing else for the rest of his life to know that what had happened to him was true. So let me make some comments on the power of this story.

[ 27 : 57 ] Because we've seen an enemy of the followers of Jesus who had a personal encounter with Jesus and had that confirmed by others that were sent to him by Jesus.

But what we need to think about here is how is this an example for those who become followers of Jesus. I want to say two things and I'm done.

Two things and I find my seat. Two things and you sing your song. One, Paul will look back on this event and hold his conversion as an example for those who are following Jesus.

As an example not of his experience should be your experience. As an example of the patience of God. Take a look.

If you're familiar with the Bible, if you keep turning to the right, you'll come to one of Paul's early letters to Timothy. 1 Timothy chapter 1 and Paul is now reflecting on what God did with his life.

[ 29 : 13 ] And he says, I thank him that he put me into his service. Verse 13, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, insolent opponent, but I received mercy.

I had acted ignorantly and unbelief. And the grace of our Lord overflowed to me with faith and love that are in Christ. And then this wonderful saying, deserving of full acceptance, that Christ came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

But I receive mercy, here it is, for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.

I want to talk to you about your life. Have you been decidedly against Jesus? Have you been indifferent toward Jesus? Have you been ignorant concerning the things of Jesus?

Paul's story, Paul's eye opener, is an example of the patience of God that is extended to you in Jesus.

[ 30 : 33 ] How patient God has been with us all. There is no one here this morning, no insolent opponent, no indifferent academic, no streetwise Chicagoan, who can look at the story of Saul and say God isn't patient with sinners.

And he's patient because he wants people to begin following. hey, maybe today is your day.

Secondly, not only does this story teach us something about the patience of God, but it says something about the persuasive power of a personal story.

Paul will keep telling this story throughout the rest of his life. In fact, Luke will record a retelling of this in the mouth of Paul twice more before we even finish the book of Acts.

So, the personal narrative in Saul becomes the story that Saul tells.

[ 32 : 17 ] And he will do it in Acts 22. He will do it in Acts 26. He will do it later. We've already seen in 1 Timothy 1. He will do it in the book of Galatians. The point, the takeaway for those of you who are followers of Jesus is not just do you have the ability to tell his story from all the scriptures.

We saw that last week, did we not? The Ethiopian eunuch Philip had the capacity, he trained himself in the scriptures to be able to tell the story of Jesus from all the scriptures.

But it's not just telling his story. In this chapter, it's do you have the power to tell your story? I'm not talking about tell the world your truth.

I'm talking about tell the world the truth of how Jesus met you. It gets that simple. Are you able to say, before Jesus met me, I was like this.

After I met Jesus, I've given myself to this. And the difference in my life came through this dramatic event where I had to reconsider what was going on.

[ 33 : 36 ] it doesn't argue for the truth of Christianity. It's not making claims about all that Jesus is or what the gospel involves. It's simply saying, like the blind man in John 9, all I know, all I know is once I was blind and now I see.

In other words, you deal with it. I'm different. It's a complete experiential argument. Now, you've got to be able to do both.

But it's this. There's a persuasive power in the personal story of those who are following Jesus. I heard it this morning from Jane Hensel.

Imagine, I don't know how many followers of Jesus we have here. I know we have some here that are decidedly against Jesus. I know we have some here that are exploring whether or not to begin following Jesus.

How many of us are here who are already following Jesus? Do you know how to tell your story?

Can you simply say to someone this week, before I was a Christian, I was kind of like this.

[ 34 : 56 ] I had this like wild thing happen in my life, almost unexplainable, but confirmed to me later through others and through the word that it was real. and now I'm like that.

Well, we're going to see that that's immediately what Paul begins to do. What a story. The scales fell, he regained his sight, he took food, and he was strengthened.

Our heavenly father, I now pray that this story told so often in the scriptures of how this man became a follower of Jesus in the most unconventional of ways.

I pray that it would encourage us. May it help us to know that you are patient.

May it help us to know that you initiate and want to be known. May it help us to know that the dramatic events in some lives here today which almost seem to derail them are really your gracious provision for them.

[ 36 : 20 ] and may you confirm this in this family as we live together in Jesus name. Amen. We're going to stand.

We're going to sing together.