

On the Road to Damascus

I. Saul saw the real Jesus

II. Jesus showed Saul his real power

(Acts 9:1-19) Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest {2} and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. {3} As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. {4} He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" {5} "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. {6} "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." {7} The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. {8} Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. {9} For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything. {10} In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. {11} The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. {12} In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight." {13} "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. {14} And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name." {15} But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. {16} I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." {17} Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord--Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here--has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." {18} Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, {19} and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

I expect that some of you know that my wife, Sarah, works at an eye surgery clinic where cataract surgeries are performed. Every once in a while, Sarah will tell me about a patient who comes into the office, raving about what a difference the surgery made in their vision. "I can see so much more clearly!" "The colors all around me are so much brighter!" Or the flip side, "I never realized how much dust there is on my furniture." Maybe some of you have experienced that same kind of dramatic change in your vision, whether it be after cataract or LASIK surgery, or maybe when, as a child, you put on glasses for the first time. "Mom, I can see what the teacher is writing on a chalkboard." For me, that "aha" moment came the first time I wore my contacts when I was snorkeling. It's like, "Wow! Look at all these fish down here! I used to not be able to see anything. Now I can see them so clearly." And of course, that clear vision had an impact on my behavior. Suddenly I couldn't wait to get out in the water. Mom is asking, "Where is Robb? O yeah, he's looking at the fish!" That's what happens when you can suddenly see things more clearly.

Well, this week we continue our sermon series entitled, "Life through Easter Lenses."

We're focusing on how a clear view of Jesus' resurrection changes how we see everything else in life. Our view of our resurrected Lord has an impact on how we think and speak and act.

In our text for today, we meet a man whose life was also dramatically changed by his vision of the resurrected Lord. We want to draw some parallels between Saul's experience and what we've experienced. And we'll do that by meeting Saul, where? Yes,

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For you see, that's where

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First, a little background information. When you think about the history of the Christian Church immediately after Jesus' resurrection and ascension into heaven, what do you think of? Well, the first major event after his ascension was Pentecost, when 3,000 people came to faith in Jesus in one day. Throughout the first few chapters of Acts you read a number of statements like Acts 2:47: *The Lord added to their number daily those who are being saved.* Or Acts 5:14, *More and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.* Or Acts 6:7, *The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a larger number of priests became obedient to the faith.*

But right along with that explosive growth of the Christian church—or maybe even as a reaction to that growth—the Christian church also experienced a great deal of what? Persecution. We read about how the apostles were flogged or jailed, or in the case of Stephen, were stoned to death. And the man who was spearheading a lot of that violence against the church was a man named Saul. Scripture tells us that after the death of Stephen, *Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison. (Acts 8:3)*

But it wasn't just in the city of Jerusalem that Saul tried to stamp out the Christian church. In his zeal to exterminate Christians, he traveled to foreign countries like Syria, to the city of Damascus. In fact, that's where our text for today picks up. Luke, the author of the book of Acts, tells us, *Saul went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus (Damascus was about 150 miles north of Jerusalem.), so that if he found any there who belong to the Way (apparently, that's what Christianity was called in those days—maybe a reference to the fact that Jesus called himself the Way, the Truth and the Life.) Anyway, if Saul found anyone who belonged to the way, whether men or women, he would take them as a prisoner to Jerusalem.* Oftentimes, that would mean death for these Christians. St. Paul would later confess to King Agrippa, *"I put many of the saints into prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. (Acts 26:10)*

Well, it is precisely while Saul was on one of these search and destroy missions against Christians that who decides to make an appearance to Saul? Luke records the event: *As Saul neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Saul's response? "Who are you, Lord?"* Actually, a better translation there would be "Who are you, sir?" You see, at this point, Saul doesn't realize who he's talking to. "Who is that?" He doesn't know who he's talking to—until the voice speaks a second time. *"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."*

Just for a minute, I want you to put yourself in Saul's shoes. What are you feeling? How about pure terror?!? It's like, "Uh-oh!" Reminds me of the time by buddy and I snitched on the two biggest thugs in his school. They caught us alone, behind the school garage. It's like, "Uh-oh. We're in real trouble now. This is not going to be pretty."

But now, I want you to notice two things about Jesus' words to Saul. "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? Do you see how, first of all, Jesus connects himself to his people? Jesus is saying, "Saul, if you persecute Christians, you are persecuting me." Isn't that exactly what Jesus meant when he told his disciples, "*He who listens to you, listens to me; but he who rejects you, rejects me. (Luke 10:16).*" But, secondly, notice what Jesus is asking Saul to think about, namely, "Why, Saul? Why are you persecuting me?" Again, if you were in Saul's shoes, what do you think you would say? Why was Saul so vehemently opposed to the Christian faith?

Well, let's understand, it's not that Saul had no idea who Jesus was. Saul had heard all about Jesus. The whole city of Jerusalem knew about Jesus of Nazareth. The real question was, what was Saul's opinion of Jesus? Well, chances are, Saul looked at Jesus the same way all the Pharisees looked at Jesus. They thought Jesus was 1. Someone who refused to live by all the laws of Moses. Jesus was out doing miracles on the Sabbath day. 2. They thought Jesus was someone who did not show proper respect to the religious hierarchy. Jesus preferred to hang out with the tax collectors in the sinners. And 3. Saul saw Jesus as someone who claimed to be the promised messiah, in fact, who claimed to be the Son of God. And that, the Jewish Sanhedrin determined, was blasphemy, a crime punishable by death.

My friends, that's why Saul thought he was on the higher moral ground by opposing this Jesus and his misguided followers. Saul saw himself as the defender of God's inspired Old Testament rules and regulations. Saul thought he was on God's side. You might say that Saul thought was on a mission from God!

And then, there on the road to Damascus, God appeared to Saul and said, in effect, "Saul, you think you are fighting on God's side. Well, you're not. You're fighting against God. And you thought Jesus was a liar when he said that he would die for the sins of every sinner and then rise from the grave on the third day. Well, guess what? I'm Jesus, and I'm alive and now you are an eye-witness of my glory. But not for long. For now, Saul, you will be blind. Luke tells us, *Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything (Acts 9:8-9).* Yeah, I'll bet. Who could think about eating and drinking after you just witnessed what Saul had seen and heard? Talk about turning your whole world upside down! How could Saul not be thinking to himself, "Man, what am I guilty of doing, killing the people on God's side? Whose team does that put me on?"

But it wasn't just Saul's life that was turned upside down by what happened on the road to Damascus. How about Ananias? God comes to this believer and says, basically, "Go find Saul of Tarsus and heal him of his blindness." Ananias' response? In effect, he said, "Are you kidding me, Lord? Saul of Tarsus? I've heard about that guy. He'd just as soon I was dead than alive."

But what was the Lord's answer to Ananias? "*Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.*" (Acts 9:15) So, what did Ananias do? He put his trust in the Lord and in the Lord's ability to change people's hearts, including the heart of Saul. Notice how Ananias addresses Saul. He says, "*Brother Saul*" (in other words, Ananias acknowledges that this man is now a believer). *Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—he sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.*

And with that, Scripture says that *something like scales fell from Saul's eyes.* (I don't know, was that something like instantaneous cataract surgery? Maybe.) The point is, Saul received not just physical sight. He received spiritual sight. He received the gift of the Holy

Spirit, and with it, saving faith in Jesus as his true and living Savior and Lord. And with that he stood up and was baptized.

Now, just for a minute, I want you to think about what just happened here. What could have possibly made such a change in a man like Saul? To go from a violent, self-righteous persecutor of the church to a passionate, faithful ambassador for Christ? What has the power to make that kind of change in a person? Granted, seeing the resurrected Lord with your own eyes, or having the blinding glory of God knock you to the ground, would have an impact on anyone's heart. But when it comes right down to it, it wasn't God's glory or his splendor that changed Saul's heart. Rather, it was God's...grace.

I mean, think about it. Here is Saul, trying to stamp out the Christian church and when Jesus confronts him on the road to Damascus, what does Jesus do? Does he flog Saul? Does he destroy Saul? No, he forgives Saul. He calls him out of his spiritual blindness and makes him one of his own. That, my friends, is grace! And make no mistake about it, St. Paul, who was once called Saul, never forgot what that grace meant for his life. Many years later, Paul put it this way, *Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor in a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief.* Paul goes on. *The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. (1 Timothy 1:13-14).* Paul knew that he had experienced the real power of God not so much by witnessing the glory of the resurrected Lord, but more importantly, by knowing the grace the God had shown to him in Christ.

The question is, what about you and me? Have you ever thought about where you fit into this account of Saul on the road to Damascus? To a certain extent haven't we all stood in Saul's shoes? We thought we had everything right. We thought we were standing on the moral high ground. We looked down on people we thought were worse than we are, and ended up hurting the people who were members of God's family. We stubbornly opposed God. And by our actions we deserved to be cast aside by God forever.

But instead of condemning us for our sins, what has Jesus done? He has forgiven us. Instead of driving us away, he's pulled us close to himself. He says, "I've given my life to make you my own. There is nothing you can do to make me love you more than I already do." That, my friends, is grace. God's undeserved love. It's what melts human hearts, which by nature are so hard. It's what changes people's lives as we bring the message of God's saving love to the people of our world. And it's grace that opens our eyes to see things like we've never seen them before.

There's nothing quite like being able to see things clearly. As we look at life with Easter lenses, we get to look into the pages of Holy Scripture and see the real Jesus show his real power, by sharing some real grace to someone who truly needs it: Saul, and you and me. To God be the glory! Amen.