

April 5, 2020

THE CONVERSION HEARD ROUND THE WORLD

Acts 9:1-31

(7 of 17 in a series through Acts)

One of the enjoyable things about preaching through a book of the Bible is that you're able to get the flow of the writing and narrative that the biblical author is crafting. For example, by the time you get to Acts 8, you should have a question on your mind. Let me explain. I mentioned last week that Acts 8 answers a question that could have been lingering since Acts 1. In Acts 1:8 Jesus had said to his disciples that they were to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. And yet, over the first seven chapters, all they're focusing on is Jerusalem. Then, chapter 8 begins with persecution breaking out and scattering the believers to Judea and Samaria, where they "went about preaching the word" (8:4). In other words—as we noted last week—the Lord was working to carry out his mission of moving his church to bear witness in Judea and Samaria even through this time of persecution.

But this raises another question, doesn't it? What about the ends of the earth? I mean, it's one thing to have persecution scatter the disciples to nearby Judea and Samaria, but how in the world is the Lord going to reach the ends of the earth with the gospel? And then, right as that question is rising up in our minds, Luke begins chapter 9 by bringing us back to Saul, this man who had been ravaging the church, approving of Stephen's martyrdom, and who was about to see the risen Christ, get converted, and take the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Now, we know Paul (called Saul in this text) as the great—Johnny come lately—apostle to the Gentiles, who was the last to see the risen Christ. In fact, he sees him only as Jesus appears to him in the sky, days after his resurrection—something we read about in this chapter. And we know him as the author of much of the New Testament. The portion of our New Testament that runs from Romans to Philemon (13 letters) was written by Paul. And one of the interesting things about his letters is that if you read them, he argues that some of the elements related to his own conversion to Christ are not unique to him. That is to say, when you read about Paul's conversion and think to yourself that what you're reading is exceptional, you only have to turn to Paul's letters where he tells us what the Lord has done our hearts and lives to save and transform us, and we find out that much of what is true about Paul in Acts 9 is true of us as well. Therefore what I want to do is make three notes about what the Lord does when he saves us (when we're converted), show them to you in regards to Paul in this chapter, and consider how glorious these realities are for us as well. Let's begin with the basic reality that when we're converted it's because the Lord brings us to himself.

The Lord brings us to himself

In other words, I simply want to stress that our salvation is the gracious work of the Lord, taking the initiative, and bringing us to himself. Look how Luke begins this chapter. He writes, "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” (vv. 1-2).

Just in case that’s not clear, let me explain what is going on. Remember when persecution broke out in Jerusalem in 8:1 how Luke tells us that all except the apostles were “scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria”? Well, Saul sees this group of believers who have scattered as escaping the punishment, imprisonment, and even death that they deserved. So he wants to go after them. He gets the high priest to give him jurisdiction to go get them, bind them, and bring them back to Jerusalem to face punishment. That’s how Saul’s conversion story begins—perhaps not as one might expect.

And then, Luke tells us, that Jesus appeared to Saul with a bright light in heaven, so that he was knocked to the ground, and Jesus said, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (v. 4), identifying himself as “Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (v. 5), before telling him to enter the city and wait to be told what to do (v. 6). Then, later, as the Lord spoke to Ananias about Saul (a part of the story we’ll look at more in a bit), the Lord identified Saul as “a chosen instrument of mine” (v. 15).

Now, here’s what I want to argue: these details about Saul’s conversion are true for us as well. We were enemies of Christ (not looking for him), called to Christ by name, and specially chosen by him to be his beloved children.

It’s clear that Saul wasn’t a seeker of any sorts. He was saved when he was “still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.” And you might think in one sense that you were far different from that. Maybe you think of yourself as always in good standing with the Lord, or perhaps always seeking the Lord. But think of all the things that Paul alone wrote about our salvation. He would write to the Romans that “None is righteous . . . no one does good, not even one . . . [and] no one seeks for God” (Rom 3:10-12). He would write to the Ephesians, “You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked . . . and were by nature children of wrath” (Eph 2:1-3), and in case we think maybe the Ephesians are exceptions he adds that they were children of wrath “like the rest of mankind” (2:3). Then, in a glorious text in which Paul writes of God’s love for us, he declares that “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us . . . while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son” (Rom 5:8-10).

Do you see? We’re more like Paul than we might have imagined. Perhaps we weren’t breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, but we were dead in our sins, children of wrath, enemies of God, and not seeking him. And yet, though there was nothing in us deserving of salvation, our Lord saved us. And that kind of grace should move us. It did Paul. After his conversion, he would write to the Corinthians, “I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am” (1 Cor 15:9-10). That’s our testimony as well—mine and yours. We are unworthy to be children of God, but praise God for his grace!

But not only are like Paul in our state before being saved, but we also are chosen and beloved children whom Jesus has called to himself by name. Paul would write to the Ephesians that God “chose us in him before the foundation of the world” and “in love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ” (Eph 1:4-5). We are his chosen, precious, beloved children, and he has called us by name. Jesus speaks of calling his people to himself as the good shepherd, saying, “The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice” (John 10:3-4).

I shared a few weeks ago that multiple shepherds would often house their sheep in the same sheep pen so that the sheep of multiple shepherds would be intermingled in the pen. But the sheep would know the voice of their particular shepherd so well that he could call them out by name and each of them would come running to him at the sound of his voice, working in and out among the other sheep, just to get to their shepherd whose voice they heard calling them.

Jesus uses that illustration to say that this is true for us as well. Jesus said, “Saul, Saul,” when he called Saul to himself. Saul may well have been thinking as he reflected on this whole episode, “How did the resurrected Jesus Christ know my name?” Well, the answer is because—to use Paul’s own words—God had chosen him in love and predestined him to be his adopted child. Paul was one of his sheep, and Jesus calls his sheep by name, and they follow him, just as Paul went and did what Jesus told him to do.

In fact, we find out that when Jesus calls us to himself, he unites us so intimately to himself that we become one. Notice that Saul was persecuting the church, but when Jesus addresses him, he asks him, “Why are you persecuting me?” and then adds, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (vv. 4-5). That is how closely the Lord has bound himself to you and me. What one does to his church—whether good or bad—Jesus considers as having been done to him. What love he has for us and what a gracious reality that we are his children!

What a glorious truth to realize that all of this is true of us—chosen, loved, bound to him, and called to him by name. Think of your own testimony. For me, I was raised in a home with believing parents who spoke the gospel to me, but by the time I was nine years old, I knew I needed forgiveness of sins and was eager to express my trust in Christ alone—whom I knew had lived, died, and been raised for me. What was going on then that caused that in my heart? Here’s what was happening—the Lord was calling me by name, “Lee, Lee, come to me,” and miraculously my heart recognized the voice of my shepherd and came to him and followed him. And don’t you dare believe anything less than that in regards to yourself because if you do you’ll miss out on realizing the particular and glorious love that Christ has for you, and it’s that love of Christ for us that Paul would later pray that God’s people—like us—would have the strength to comprehend in its height, width, breadth, and depth.

So, let us first realize and give thanks for the fact that in conversion, the Lord brings us to himself. Second, the Lord calls us to one another.

The Lord calls us to one another

One of the amazing things in this chapter that records Saul's conversion is how much the Lord utilized the church. I mean, Saul is converted by the resurrected Christ appearing to him in the sky—which is a unique element in Saul's conversion—but the rest of the chapter he constantly utilizes the church. First, the Lord directs Ananias to go to Saul so that he might lay hands on him, receive his sight, and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Ananias—knowing who Saul is—is a bit hesitant, but the Lord answers, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry 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" (vv. 15-16). And so Ananias went, prayed for Saul, and Saul regained his sight, rose, and was baptized.

Again, the Lord could have given Saul his sight directly, but he utilized Ananias. Why? I think it's because when the Lord calls us to himself, he also calls us to one another, and the Lord was making this known to Saul right out of the gate. The next thing we read is that Saul "For some days . . . was with the disciples at Damascus" (v. 19b). Then, he came to Jerusalem to join with the disciples there, and they were (again, obviously) afraid of him, but Barnabas brought him in, told the others about Saul's conversion, and how Saul had been preaching Jesus. And so Saul began to fellowship with the other saints and the church was continuing to be built up and multiplied.

Isn't it interesting that the first words Saul would have heard from a believer—a believer whom he would have been seeking to persecute only moments earlier—were, "Brother Saul"? That's the first thing Ananias says to him, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me' (v. 17). Brother? Yes, because when the Lord unites us with himself, he also unites us with other believers so that we become a family.

In fact, later, when Paul heard that the Corinthian church was divided, he would write to them, "I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you," asking them, "Is Christ divided?" (1 Cor. 1:10-13). Why would he ask that? He asked it because the reason we're united as believers is because all of us individually are united to the same Jesus. And the only way we could be divided is if Christ himself were divided.

This is a reality that I want all of us to delight in as well. We do not pray for one another, love one another, care for one another, encourage one another, serve one another, and even sacrifice for one another because we feel some odd, outside pressure to do so. We do this as a church because we're a family, united as one in love because we're united in Christ. It's why—and I trust this is true—we so desperately long for the time when we'll be able to gather in this room again and worship corporately. In fact, it's our love for one another, Jesus tells us, which will be evidence to the world that we're his disciples. When Jesus calls us to himself he also calls us to one another. And, finally, the Lord sends us out into the world.

The Lord sends us out into the world

One thing that is made crystal clear is that the Lord didn't call Saul to himself merely so that he could sit silent. Rather, he was calling Saul to himself because he was ensuring that the gospel was going to go to the ends of the earth, and Saul was going to lead in that cause. This is what the Lord is saying when he tells Ananias, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel" (v. 15). And immediately Saul begins bearing witness to Jesus. We read in verse 20, "Immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God.'" And we read in verse 22, "But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ." Finally, we read that when Saul got to Jerusalem and was introduced to the other disciples, "He went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord" (v. 28).

Now, this isn't a recommendation that we thrust new believers in to the practice of preaching, like I'm doing now. But we are, even as new believers, able to bear witness that Jesus lived, died, and was raised so that he now commands all men everywhere to repent and believe in him. That's what Saul was doing. And it's what he continued to do. And it's a reminder that this is what the Lord does with us as well. He calls us to himself and to one another, but he also sends us out into the world to be his witnesses, to tell the gospel to others so that they might believe, be baptized, and as part of a local church be taught to obey all that Christ commands.

And it's a task that can be costly. The Lord told Ananias that Saul was going to suffer for Jesus' name's sake. And even in this chapter, we read that two different times groups were trying to kill him (vv. 23-25, 29-30). So it is with us. Jesus doesn't call us to himself and one another so that we might never face danger or suffering. He sends us out as his precious sheep in the midst of wolves. And believers over the years have faced suffering, persecution, and even death simply for bearing witness to Christ's name. The call to follow Christ is a call to take up the cross.

But I also want to correct a potential mistake we could make at this point. We are not fatalists in regards to suffering. That is, we don't seek suffering or refuse to avoid it if harm might come to us. On both of these occasions when Saul got word that people were trying to kill him, he escaped their threats. Once we are told the "disciples took him by night and let him down through and opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket" (v. 25) and on another "they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus" (v. 30). Missionaries aren't doing wrong to take up their families and flee suffering if men are after them, any more than Saul wasn't doing wrong. But if the time comes where we either suffer or deny Christ, the choice is made. We belong to Christ, and we have been called to bear witness to him in this world.

Brothers and sisters, what a blessing we have as disciples of Jesus Christ and children of God. The Lord has brought us to himself, united us with one another, and has sent us to bear witness to his name in this world. May we then delight in his love for us, exercise love for one another, and continue to look for opportunities to tell the world that the one who lived, died, and was raised for sinners offers life and forgiveness to all who will believe. May he strengthen us to these ends by his grace through his Spirit. Amen.