

In the early days of the church, the gospel turned the Jewish world upside down. The good news, spread by the Apostles, challenged every area of Jewish tradition and faith. It is human nature to resist change, or a challenge to convictions, and so the Jewish establishment opposed the gospel at every turn. The gospel continued to spread, however, in spite of increasing opposition.

The apostles were beaten, and thrown into jail for sharing the gospel with the people. The opponents of the gospel murdered Stephen, and a great persecution broke out against anyone and everyone who professed Jesus Christ as Lord. Saul went from house to house, and drug people out of their homes to take them to prison. Many fled from Jerusalem to escape. Philip was one who escaped, and as he fled to Samaria, he led many of the Samaritan people to the Lord.

From a Jewish believer's perspective, this was another great obstacle. Does the Lord's sacrifice for sin extend to the Samaritans? Is it possible for this godless people to find saving grace through faith in Jesus Christ? The answer was yes, and confirmed by the Apostles, and the Holy Spirit. If Christ's sacrifice covered the sins of the Samaritans, then the Jewish believers might wonder about the limits to God's grace.

Philip crossed the next boundary in his encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch, and showed that Christ's sacrifice covered the sins of gentiles who worshiped Yahweh God, when they surrendered their life in faith to Jesus, and trusted in His sacrifice for their sins.

In each step of Luke's accounting in Acts, the gospel continues to spread out, until it includes everyone, regardless of their race, or the amount of sin in his or her past. Tonight, and through the first half of chapter 9, we see what happens when the greatest single persecutor of the church has a personal encounter with the risen Savior. If Christ can forgive Saul, and use him in the spread of the gospel, then God can forgive and use anyone who comes to Him in faith. To see how God continued to work to spread the gospel, please read along with me, Acts 9:1-9.

What we just read sets the stage for the gospel expanding to the gentiles in chapter 10 and beyond. Our passage begins with words that capture the heart of this young man named Saul. He was still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. What zeal he must have had. His anger and indignation against the people in this Christian sect of Judaism consumed him. Murder is a strong word. Saul gave his approval at Stephen's murder, and the bible here indicates that he had murder in his heart towards those who accepted Jesus as Messiah. Did Paul actually murder some of the believers? Maybe he did, maybe not. The bible does not tell us for sure.

Notice his twisted sense of legalism. In the Ten Commandments God said thou shall not murder. Saul justified murder in his heart, and at the same time asked permission from the high priest to hunt down Christians in Damascus, because he wanted to have a legal right to do so. His hatred for these people clouded his judgment, and thinking he was justified in his actions, he became the greatest single opponent to the movement of God in the world.

We see this same spirit alive within factions of Islam. Muslims threaten and murder Christians and Jews thinking they are doing God a favor. Even among some in Christian denominations, there is a spirit of hatred against others who do not believe their doctrines exactly. I have had people that I have never met, call me out of the blue, on my office phone and tell me that I am lost because I do not preach out of the King James Bible. They were not reaching out in love to try to win me over, or to encourage me in ministry; they were condemning me for not falling in line with one of their convictions. I used to work with a man

who insisted that I was still lost in my sin because I was not a member of the Church of Christ, not to proselytize me, but to condemn me. Another man from the church of Christ called me out of the blue to tell me that I was going to hell because we use musical instruments in our worship services. Still others have said that I am lost because I have not given evidence of the Holy Spirit by speaking in tongues.

All but one of these happened after I became a pastor in this church. In each of these examples, the people who condemned me had deep convictions. None of them exhibited the love of Christ towards me, but each one thought that they were somehow doing God a favor by attacking me. In their zeal they actually place obstacles in the path of the spread of the gospel, and they become a hindrance to people who need Jesus in their life. At all costs, we must ward off the spirit of legalism, so that we too do not become an obstacle to the gospel message.

Saul went to the High Priest to get letters that would give him authority to go into the synagogues in Damascus, so that he might arrest the Christians he found there, drag them back to Jerusalem, and throw them into prison. Damascus was on the Mediterranean, north of Samaria. In order to not defile himself, Paul would have taken the long way around Samaria to get to his destination. The high priest had no authority up there, but there was an extradition agreement between the two parties. If Saul went up there without those papers, they might arrest him.

Think of how much trouble Saul went to, in order to chase down these people? He was driven by hatred. He was obsessed with the destruction of those belonging to the Way. This is the only place where the bible refers to the church as “the Way.” The term probably comes from Jesus’ teaching where He said, “I am the way, the truth and the life, and no man comes to the Father, but by me.” This teaching infuriated the Jews because basically it said that their faith was vain unless they came to God through faith in Jesus the Messiah. Saul and the Jewish leaders probably referred to the church using “the Way” as a term of disdain, which further showed their hatred for those who trusted Jesus.

As he traveled, Saul had a Damascus road experience. This is where we get that phrase. We speak of it today whenever a person has a personal encounter with God that forever changes their life. A bright light, and the audible voice of the Lord accompanied Saul’s personal encounter. It was unmistakable, powerful, and would forever change every area of Saul’s life. It brought about a change of heart. Saul went from being the greatest persecutor of the church, to becoming the greatest evangelist of the church. God transformed his zeal for the law into zeal for the church and the spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Because of this encounter, Saul later dropped his Jewish name and went by Paul, the Greek equivalent. Instead of persecuting the church, Paul would become among the persecuted because of his faith in Christ, and his stand for the gospel.

Not everyone has such a dramatic encounter with the Lord, and sometimes people wish that God would speak to them in that way. God has spoken to me a small number of times in what I perceived as an audible voice. These were at critical crossroads in my life, and ministry, where the Lord knew that I needed Him to make His calling on my life so unmistakable that I could not ignore Him, or justify in my mind that God wasn’t speaking to me so directly. But most of the time, God speaks to me through His word and through the Holy Spirit that is in me. This is how God speaks to all Christians, day by day, who are in love with Jesus and completely submitted to His will.

I believe the light that Saul saw was the Shekinah glory of God, which blinded his physical eyes. Out of the midst of His glory, Jesus called out to Saul and asked, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” “Who are you, Lord?” “I am Jesus, who you are persecuting.”

Imagine the shock that went to Saul's soul, to hear the voice of God convicting him for doing what he believed, up until then, to be a favor to God. If he could, Paul might have argued that he had not been persecuting Jesus, but instead he pursued the followers of the Way. But here, Jesus so identifies Himself with His church, that the two are inseparable. In this passage we find the origins of the doctrine that Christians are "in Christ." Through faith, and by the Holy Spirit, spiritually, we exist in the sphere of Christ. We are in Christ, and Christ is in us. It is an essential element of being born again, and necessary to our personal relationship with God. In his letters, Paul uses the phrase "in Christ" extensively when explaining the doctrines of our faith.

After convicting Saul for his actions against the church, Jesus instructed him to go on to Damascus and he would be told what to do. When God speaks, expect a revelation of God's will. A direct word from God requires a step of faith. A walk of faith comes with a progressive revelation of God, and His will.

When God reveals His will to you in a direct and unmistakable way, don't think that you are going to have all the answers right then. Don't expect to know exactly how everything is going to work out, or what the future will hold. An answer to God's call requires a step of faith. If we do not take that step of faith, we cannot move forward. But when we move forward in faith, God gives us just what we need to take the next step. Along the way, He teaches us and prepares us for what lies ahead.

Paul will undergo many years of training, and preparation, before he takes his first missionary journey. After he begins that ministry, he has to take steps of faith day by day, as he continues to grow and mature in his relationship with the Lord. It is no different for us today. God has a plan and a purpose for all of our lives, and we see the fulfillment of His will when we live in faith, and obedience, moment-by-moment, and day-by-day.

The bible says that the men with Saul were speechless, in shock, because they heard the voice, but did not see Jesus. When Saul got up off the ground, he could see nothing, because the glory of God blinded him. While the bible is not definitive on the issue, some believe that the damage to Paul's eyes had a permanent effect, and this was his throne in the flesh, which Paul speaks of in his second letter to the Corinthians.

Notice the contrast between Saul of verse one, and Saul of verses eight and nine. Saul began as a man full of himself, breathing threats, and murder, against the disciples of the Lord. He was intent upon destroying the church, the gospel, and anyone who had faith in Jesus. Bold and brash he went to the High Priest to get what he wanted. But after an encounter with Jesus, everything changed. He was blinded. He who led others, had to be led by the hand into town. He was humbled, helpless, dependent, and uncertain about his future, as God stripped him of his pride, and reduced him, until he was moldable in the Lord's hands. For three days he was completely blind, as he fasted and prayed. He didn't know what to do, so he waited on the Lord to give him the message that Jesus promised. There are lessons for us in Paul's experience.

Students of God's word know the rest of the story, and we know of the man Paul became. He was the great evangelist, church planter, and writer of half of the New Testament Scriptures. We know of his great suffering for his association with Christ, and of how God used this man who was so opposed to Jesus and the gospel, to carry the good news to the gentile world of his day.

You and I will probably never rise to such heights in God's service, but each one of us should embrace God's plan for our lives, and be obedient to His revealed will. We may never have a Damascus Road experience to compare with Paul's, but if we have been sealed with the

Holy Spirit, and we embrace a biblical worldview, God will speak to us, reveal His will to us, and use us to His glory, but, it takes is a lifelong series of steps of faith as we live in Christ.

It has to begin with knowing, in the depths of our soul, that we belong to Christ, that we have confessed and repented of our sins to the Lord, and have received Jesus into our hearts as Savior and Lord.

Jesus was God in the flesh, who came to offer His own physical life as a sacrifice for our sins. He proved that He was the Savior, and that He won the victory over sin and death by His resurrection from the grave. He ascended into heaven where He makes intercession for all who follow Him. He is coming again, and it may be soon, so there is no time to waste. If there are any here who have not received Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, now is the time of your salvation. Right now God calls out to you to surrender your life in faith. If we can help you to make your decision, or help you to take your first steps of faith, we will be happy to meet with you right after church or most any other time, at your convenience.