



# GRACE

REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

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## THE BOOK OF ACTS

### Sermon Notes

#### *The Conversion of Saul, Part I*

*Christ Reveals Himself to Saul*

Acts 9:1-9

July 8, 2007

- I. **Saul Pursues the Christians in Damascus [in order to Persecute them]**
- II. **Christ Reveals Himself to Saul**
- III. **Christ's Revelation [of Himself to Saul] Humbles Saul**

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- ❑ It would be difficult to overestimate the profound impact of Saul's conversion on his later life and ministry.
- ❑ Saul's understanding of grace and the sovereign power of God, no doubt, in large part come from this single experience.
- ❑ Furthermore, Saul's radical conversion was also significant to Luke, as he refers to the details of this encounter three times in Acts: here, in Acts 9:1-30, then in Paul's speech before a Jewish crowd in the temple area (22:3-21), and finally in his defense in front of King Agrippa (26:2-23).
- ❑ However, the modern-day reader should never look at Saul's conversion experience as more 'dramatic' or 'radical,' for every conversion of a spiritually dead individual is equally miraculous. For every conversion is nothing short of God's work in creating spiritual life out of nothing [that is, out of spiritual death].

### **I. Saul Pursues the Christians in Damascus [in order to Persecute them]**

- ❑ Acts 9:1 is the fourth time that Luke has mentioned Saul in the Acts narrative. The first was when, in 7:58, we read about the witnesses to Stephen's death laying 'aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul.' Secondly, in 8:1, 'Saul was in hearty agreement with the

putting him [Stephen] to death.’ Thirdly, in 8:3, ‘But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.’

- Luke begins Acts 9 [**Verses 1-2**] by stating, ‘Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belongings to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.’
  - Luke’s point at the beginning of Verse 1 is quite clear. Saul was present and in agreement with the stoning of Stephen [Chapters 7 and 8], and was ravaging the church, attempting to destroy it [Chapter 8]. Beginning, here, in Chapter 9, Saul has not changed; rather, he *still* is breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.
- Throughout the history of Israel, religiously zealous men were willing to go to violent extremes in order to fight against the enemies of God. Such men included, but were not necessarily limited to, Phineas [Numbers 25:7-13], Elijah [1 Kings 18:40; 19:10, 14]; and Mattathias (the father of the Maccabees and the revolt which reclaimed and rededicated the Temple) [1 Maccabees 2:23-28].
- It seems that Saul viewed himself as a successor of these Jewish men of Israel’s long history.
- On scholar [J.A. Alexander] wrote that Saul’s ‘breathing threats and murder against the disciples’ was ‘an allusion to the panting or snorting of wild beasts.’
- The truth was that Saul was willing to do whatever it took to stamp out this new movement known as the Way

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- Luke, then, states that Saul had gone to the high priest to ask for letters from the high priest to the synagogues in Damascus.
- According to the Jewish historian Josephus, in 47 B.C. Julius Caesar declared that the Jewish nation, and particularly the high priest himself, would have the right of extradition within the region.
- Therefore, it would make sense, then, that the Saul would go to the high priest [likely this would have still been Caiaphas], ‘and ask for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus...’
- Again, Saul’s request to the high priest, in Verse 2, was, in today’s language, a request for extradition – to bring the new Christians back to Jerusalem in order to try them and persecute them [quite possibly even put them to death. Recall Stephen].
- NOTE: Luke refers to the early Christian movement as ‘The Way.’ He will use this several times throughout the Book of Acts (19, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). It was certainly an appropriate term, as the members of this new group were followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, who Himself is the Way, the Truth, and the Life [John 14:6].

- Luke, in **Verse 3**, then says that, ‘**As he [Saul] was traveling**, it happened...’
  - In other words, **as Saul was pursuing the Christians with all of his might**, Christ appeared to him.
  - It was as though Saul was going 100 mph and as he was moving, Christ appeared to him.
  - Christ did not slowing calm Saul down, put him in a ‘neutral’ position; rather, as Saul was ‘breathing murderous threats’ and passionately pursuing the people of God, Christ appeared to him.
  - This demonstrates one of the most powerful truths concerning our salvation. It will also powerfully influence Paul’s writings as well. God does not save us ‘after we come to our senses concerning Him.’ He does not slowly woo us into gradually believing in Him. Rather, we were all dead in our trespasses and sins, and at that very moment, when we were at enmity with God, He saved us.
  - This calls us to recall two of the most powerful words in all of Scripture: **But God.**

**Ephesians 2:3-4**: ‘Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging in the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He love us, **even when we were dead in our transgressions**, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)...’

**Romans 5:8**: ‘But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.’

- Therefore, it is obvious here that **Saul was not seeking after Christ** when Christ revealed Himself to Saul. Rather, of course, Saul was seeking to persecute the people of God.
- This, too, demonstrates a timeless Biblical point: no one seeks after God.

**Romans 3:10-18**:

as it is written,

‘THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE;  
 THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS,  
 THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD;  
 ALL HAVE TURNED ASIDE, TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME USELESS;  
 THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD,  
 THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE.’  
 ‘THEIR THROAT IS AN OPEN GRAVE,  
 WITH THEIR TONGUES THEY KEEP DECEIVING,’  
 ‘THE POISON OF ASPS IS UNDER THEIR LIPS’;  
 ‘WHOSE MOUTH IS FULL OF CURSING AND BITTERNESS’;  
 ‘THEIR FEET ARE SWIFT TO SHED BLOOD,  
 DESTRUCTION AND MISERY ARE IN THEIR PATHS,

AND THE PATH OF PEACE THEY HAVE NOT KNOWN.’  
‘THERE IS NO FEAR OF GOD BEFORE THEIR EYES.’

## II. Christ Reveals Himself to Saul

- Then, Luke writes [**Verse 3**], ‘As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him;’
  - When Christ revealed Himself to Saul, Saul and his companions had almost arrived at their destination – Damascus.
    - Damascus was about 150 miles from Jerusalem, a journey of about 6 days.
    - **NOTICE** as well, that, consistent with the theme of the Book of Acts [the universality of Gospel message – beyond geographical Jerusalem], that, as with Abraham and Moses, **the LORD revealed Himself to Saul OUTSIDE JERUSALEM!**
  - In Acts 22:6, Saul would later say that this encounter occurred at ‘**about noontime.**’
  - Recall another great act of God in Exodus 10:

**Exodus 10:21-23:** ‘Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Stretch out your hand toward the sky, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, even a darkness which may be felt.’ So Moses stretched out his hand toward the sky, and there was thick darkness in all the land of Egypt for three days. They did not see one another, nor did anyone rise from his place for three days, but all the sons of Israel had light in their dwellings.’

- Just as God demonstrated His power over the sun in the Exodus by turning the sun black, so Christ demonstrates the superiority of His glory to the sun, the brightest object in the created order, by outshining it at noonday!

## The glory of Christ powerfully outshines even the Middle Eastern sun at noonday!

- In other words, when God pursues His people, NOTHING is able to stop Him: not a stubborn will, not a violent heart...not even the brightness of the noonday sun!

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- This encounter with the brightness of the glory of Christ influences Saul, later the Apostle Paul, for the remainder of his life. As he writes in 2 Corinthians 4:

**2 Corinthians 4:4, 6:** ‘in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God...For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.’

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- ❑ Notice, as well, what happens to Saul once Christ revealed Himself to him: **Verse 4** states, ‘and he fell to the ground...’
- ❑ So powerful was the revealed presence of the risen and exalted Christ that Saul could not even stand.
  - One scholar [Walker] writes that Saul laid ‘prostrate at the feet of his conqueror.’
- ❑ This certainly calls to mind the account in 1 Kings 8, when the ark of the covenant was brought into the Temple in Jerusalem:

**1 Kings 8:9-11:** ‘There was nothing in the ark except the two tablets of stone which Moses put there at Horeb, where the LORD made a covenant with the sons of Israel, when they came out of the land of Egypt. It happened that when the priests came from the holy place, the cloud filled the house of the LORD, so that **the priests could not stand** to minister **because of the cloud**, for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD.’

- ❑ Not even the brilliant, Gamaliel-educated, Saul, the passionate, zealous persecutor of the Church could stand in the presence of the glory of Christ.
- ❑ He was **immobilized**. So often in our lives, God, in order to use us, immobilizes us...takes us to the end of ourselves, that we might fully rely on Him.

‘For what other thing can befall man, but that he must lie prostrate and be, as it were, brought to nothing, when he is overwhelmed with the present feeling of God’s glory?’ John Calvin

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- ❑ As Saul fell to the ground, he heard a voice [**Verse 4**] saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’
  - There is a bit of irony here. The last person to see the resurrected and exalted Christ was Stephen, and Saul played a role in his death.
  - It is quite significant that Jesus said, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting **Me**?’
  - Certainly, at this point, Saul denied the validity of the claims of the early Christians that Christ had been raised, ascended and sat at the right hand of the Father in glory. In fact, Saul, at this point, simply believed, no doubt, that Jesus was a blasphemous Galilean who had died justly because of his sins.
  - Yet, Jesus asks Saul, ‘Why are you persecuting **Me**?’
    - This answer to this fundamental question becomes clear when we begin to understand the nature of our **covenant relationship in and with Christ**.

When we are regenerated and believe, we are united with Christ in an eternal covenant.

- This relationship is, as is so often the case with New Testament truths, rooted in the Old Testament.
- In **Genesis 12**, we read of God's words to Abram, and the basis of the Abrahamic Covenant. In this Chapter, the LORD tells Abraham [Genesis 12:3], 'And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse...'
  - In other words, in the Covenant between Abram and the LORD, the enemies of Abram become the enemies of the LORD. So closely are the two [Abram and the LORD] associated or united that to curse one is to curse the other.
  - **So it is with our covenantal union with Christ, the seed of Abraham and the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant.**
  - Augustine wrote, 'it was the head in heaven crying out on behalf of the members that were still on earth.'
  - Our union Christ is clearly revealed throughout the New Testament, primarily in the writings of Paul Himself [1 Corinthians 6:17; 2 Corinthians 12:2; 13:5; Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 2; 3:17; 5:30; Colossians 1:27; 1 John 5:20] (\* there are countless other Verses as well).

**Therefore, Christ's words to Saul reveal that, because of the union of the early believers with the resurrected and exalted Christ, attacks on them by Saul were just as 'serious' as attacks upon Christ Himself. So, it is with us today. When we are believers in the LORD Jesus Christ, we are covenantally united with Him so that He is personally offended when we are attacked or attack other believers.**

- Then, in [**Verse 5**], Saul asked, 'Who are You, Lord?'
  - The word, 'Lord', in this context, may not be a reference to Christ's deity; rather, it may be that Saul is simply saying something like, 'Who are you, sir?'
  - However, some individuals think that the word 'Lord' here, on the lips of Saul, takes on the full meaning of the address – that Christ is LORD – fully God.
  - The reason is that those who assert this, rightfully recognize that Saul may have had contact with Christ when He was on trial in Jerusalem and, therefore, Saul may have recognized the voice.

Donald Coggan writes, '[It is] more likely that [Jesus and Saul] were contemporaries pretty close in age to one another. It is therefore probable that they both visited Jerusalem and the temple at the same time, in which case is it not possible, indeed highly likely, that the young teacher from Galilee and the younger Pharisee from Tarsus would have looked into one another's eyes, and that Saul would have heard Jesus teach?'

- To which Christ replies, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting,'
  - These words echo the words of the LORD to Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3.

#### **Exodus 3:13-14:**

'Then Moses said to God, 'Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, "The God of your fathers has sent me to you." Now they may say to me, "What is His name?" What shall I say to them?' God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM'; and He said, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

- In Exodus 3, when Moses asked the identity of the speaker, the LORD replied, 'I AM'; here, in Acts 9:5, when Paul asked for the identity of the speaker, the LORD replied, 'I AM...**Jesus!**'
  - In the Greek, Jesus' words were the famous '*Ego Eimi* [εγω ειμι].'
  - These were the same Greek words used in the Gospel of John where Jesus gives the seven I AM [*ego eimi*] statements. These statements included, 'I AM the Way, the Truth and the Life.' 'I AM the resurrection and the life.' 'I AM the light of the world.' 'I AM the bread of life.'
- Could Saul, at least upon later reflection, have ever pondered the parallel?
- Then, in **Verse 6**, Luke writes that Jesus told Saul, 'but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do.'
  - Saul is no longer in the 'driver's seat.' He is no longer persecuting followers of Jesus Christ, the Way, he is now **receiving orders from the very One he was persecuting.**
- Luke informs the reader, in **Verse 7**, that, 'The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one.'
  - The other men present with Saul, no doubt, were terrified by the mere voice of the risen and exalted Jesus – so much so that they were speechless.
  - Further, Luke states that the men heard the voice, but saw no one.
  - This demonstrates at least two powerful truths in this narrative:
- 1.) Even though the witnesses heard the voice of Christ, they did not see Him, for He did not reveal Himself to them. Christ's special revelation of Himself

that leads to salvation is always **particular**. The Father, through Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, **particularly** calls **each** of His children out of darkness and into His light.

2.) Secondly, the presence of the multiple witnesses helped to establish the truth of Saul's experience and later testimony. [It is worth noting that virtually every major event in the New Testament was accompanied by and verified on the basis of two or three witnesses] This is based upon the Old Testament: Deuteronomy 19:15.

### III. Christ's Revelation [of Himself to Saul] Humbles Saul

- In **Verses 8, 9**, Luke writes, 'Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing...And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.'
  - Luke continues, here, describing the powerful impact of Christ's revelation of Himself to Saul.
  - One of the immediate effects of Christ's revelation was that it blinded Saul.
  - To a modern-day, Gentile reader, the reason for this may seem unclear. Some may think that the blinding of Saul was a result of the brightness of light; however, this level of understanding misses the point of what Saul was experiencing.
  - Saul was a Jew of Jews, a Pharisee of Pharisees. He knew the Scriptures; yet, he had missed the very point of the Scriptures – that they pointed to Christ.
  - However, when Christ reveals Himself to Saul, and says, 'Why are you persecuting Me?' the revelation is accompanied by blinding.
  - It is quite possible, even probable, that the reason for Saul's blinding was to reveal that **he was under the curse of breaking the Law, apart from Christ**.

Deuteronomy 28:28-29 states: 'The LORD will smite you with madness and with blindness and with bewilderment of heart; and **you will grope at noon**, as the blind man gropes in darkness, and you will not prosper in your ways; but you shall only be oppressed and robbed continually, with none to save you.'

- In other words, one of the Old Testament **covenantal curses** [for breaking the covenant] was **BLINDNESS**.
- Not only this, but Deuteronomy 29 states that 'you will grope at noon.' It is likely no coincidence that this is the time when Christ revealed Himself to Saul.
- Therefore, as Saul was blinded for three days, he most certainly spent those times contemplating how the revelation of Christ 'squared' with the Old Testament.



- He most certainly considered his current state of blindness, in light of the Old Testament Law. Thus, he likely realized that the blindness was a result of reject Jesus as the Messiah, the fulfillment of the Law.
- Hence, it would have most likely been the revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ, in light of the Old Testament Scriptures [Deuteronomy 28:28-29, specifically] that led Saul to Christ. Like the Ethiopian eunuch, the Old Testament pointed the Way to Christ.
- Luke also says that Saul was ‘three days without sight.’
- This also calls to mind God’s judgment and ‘curse’ upon Jonah who fled from the face of God.

‘Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to Him, ‘Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.’ But He answered and said to them, ‘An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; for just as JONAH WAS THREE DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS IN THE BELLY OF THE SEA MONSTER, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.’ Matthew 12:38-40

- Up until this point in his life, Saul would have certainly NEVER considered himself like Jonah – that is, willfully disobeying the LORD. Yet, Saul, here, suffers a similar judgment, thus humbling him to the point where God will now use him.
- Luke concludes, in **Verse 9**, stating, that Saul ‘neither ate nor drank.’
  - This was, most likely, not an act of humble reverence, rather, Saul had been so impacted, so humbled, so profoundly ‘brought low’ that he probably was **unable** to eat or drink.
- Finally, in **Verse 8**, Luke writes that, as Saul was now blind, his companions were ‘leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus.’
  - The profound irony here is inescapable: **Saul was going to Damascus in order to arrest Christians and ‘bring them bound to Jerusalem’**; however, Saul has now been **arrested by Christ**, and finds himself being led, helplessly by others into Damascus.

John Stott writes, ‘He who had expected to enter Damascus in the fullness of his pride and prowess, as a self-confident opponent of Christ, was actually led into it, humbled and blinded a captive of the very Christ he had opposed.’

- The ‘fire-breathing’ persecutor of the Church had been ‘brought low’ by the presence of Christ, and, now Christ was going to transform him and make him one of the boldest heralds of the Gospel the world has ever known.
- ❖ One of the truths in this passage that parallels Isaiah’s vision is this: when God revealed Himself to Isaiah, the prophet was so overwhelmed by the majesty of the Lord, that he cried out, ‘Woe to my, I am ruined/undone.’ Isaiah knew that, in the presence of Almighty God,

he could not stand...He was unworthy...beyond words. Therefore, Isaiah quickly realized that anything short of complete and utter annihilation was but God's grace. Hence, his words, 'Here am I Lord, send Me!' He counted it the greatest privilege to be able to serve the God of the Universe.

- ❖ So it seems to be with Saul. He was so overwhelmed by the presence of the glory of Christ, that he realizes what He **deserves**. Yet Saul, and all believers in the Lord Jesus Christ even today do not get what we deserve. This is why complete submission to the will of the LORD should not be a burden to us, but an act that is born out of a heart that knows what true grace really is.

“If we ask what caused Saul's conversion, only one answer is possible. What stands out from the narrative is the sovereign grace of God through Jesus Christ. Saul did not ‘decided for Christ’, as we might say. On the contrary, he was persecuting Christ. It was rather Christ who decided for him and intervened in his life. The evidence for this is indisputable.’

John Stott