

Who Are You Lord?

Scriptures: John 21:1-19; Acts 9:1-20

Saul of Tarsus

Last week we talked about Peter and the other disciples standing up against the Sanhedrin and chief priests. The disciples had filled Jerusalem with their preaching and teaching about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who came and lived a sinless life, was crucified on the cross and buried in a borrowed tomb, and three days later rose again, conquering death! People hearing about Jesus, and seeing the amazing changes in His followers, who a month earlier had been hiding in fear for their lives, must have certainly had compelling evidence in those days. It should also be compelling evidence for people today!

This morning we're going to continue reading in the book of Acts. We'll be looking at Acts 9:1-20. It's what has become known as the conversion experience of Saul, who the Church today knows as Paul, on the road to Damascus. If you have your Bible, or a Bible app handy turn there with me. I'll be reading from the New International Version. **Read Acts 9:1-20.**

Saul of Tarsus. It was a name that struck fear into the hearts and minds of the early Church. Luke, the writer of the book of Acts, tells us why. He says, "Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest, 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," (Acts 9:1-2). Before this, Saul had been there when Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was killed by stoning. It's also likely that Saul was in the Temple compound and present when Peter and the other disciples were brought in and questioned by the Sanhedrin, which we talked about last week, because he was a student of Gamaliel, who was a member of the Sanhedrin.

With the letters from the high priest, Saul had the full authority of the entire Sanhedrin behind the actions he was preparing to carry out in Damascus. We have something amazingly similar today. When an alleged crime occurs, what happens? The law enforcement officers – Saul was a follower of the law to a tee – get search warrants, and go looking for stuff. Or they get arrest warrants, and go out in search of people. So today we might call these letters "search warrants," or "arrest warrants."

Persecuting the Church

Picture that, Church, in those days, if you publicly professed faith in Jesus Christ, you ran the risk of being arrested, put on trial, and executed. In some places yet today, the same thing can still be said. Following Jesus Christ is counter-cultural in every society – even ours – and in every era. If you get a chance to go down this hallway

sometime heading out towards the parking lot, stop and look at some of the things hanging up out here.

For the last two years I've been putting a map up out there which we get annually highlighting some of the most dangerous places in the world for Christians to live in the present time. You'll be amazed at how many countries around the world stand in opposition to the Restorer of relationships. It's quite sad, actually. Law enforcement in some of these countries, and even some of their own family members, go in and do all sorts of heinous things to people simply because they've made the decision to follow Jesus.

Something happened to Saul. We read, "as he 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?'" (verses 3-4). Paul talks about his conversion experience in Acts 26, and when you read that account, he says it's around noon when this happens. What we have here is a very specific way that Christ appears to him – as "a light from heaven which flashed around him."

Flash From Heaven

Now friends, I'm no meteorologist, but what do you think of when you hear the words "light flashing from heaven?" Lightning, right? Boom! It's here, then it's gone. That fast. And while we have some dialogue here between Saul and Jesus, I think it was all probably very instantaneous, because look at what's recorded in verse 7. Luke writes, "The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone." They heard the sound – we hear the thunder – but we generally don't see people in the lightning flashes. They also apparently didn't hear the voice speaking with Saul, either.

I do want to get into what Jesus says to Saul, because it's compelling, as is Saul's response. The light flashes, Saul falls to the ground, and hears Jesus speak to him. If you've got a copy of the Bible with Jesus' words in red letters, you'll notice that verse 4 has red letters in it – it's Jesus talking. Saul's running around like a chicken with his head cut off, scrambling to catch as many Christians and kill them as he can. He's persecuting the Church – he's trying to hunt and round them up so they can be put on trial and executed. We know the Church is the body of Christ, so in a very real way, Saul is persecuting Jesus Christ Himself.

How does Saul respond? "Who are You, Lord?', Saul asked," (verse 5a). It seems like such a goofy question to ask. Perhaps Saul was so awe-struck that he didn't have any idea of what to say. What do you say when you're face-to-face with the King of Kings and Lord of Lords? What can any person say when they're laid out on the ground before the God of all other gods? I'm convinced even the most eloquent person in the world – Shakespeare, or some other great wordsmith – would lay in

awestruck silence at the enormity of that situation. I will say, that in looking through Scripture, in Jewish tradition, a voice from heaven would have been understood as being the voice of God Almighty. In a nutshell, Saul knows and understands who he's talking to.

Seeing the Light of Jesus

But just to make sure, Jesus tells Saul who He is. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," He replied. 'Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do,'" (verses 5b-6). These are some pretty vague directions which Jesus gives, but He knows – and expects – that Saul is going to do what Jesus tells him to do. I'm going to pause right there and say this. In a similar vein, Jesus expects the Church to do what He tells us to do, today – to love God, love others, and make Him known throughout the whole world. His Word hasn't changed in 2,000 years. The Bible we have today are the same collection of books the ancient church read on rolls of parchment paper. It's the most copied piece of literature in the history of the world.

We find out that as a result of seeing Jesus Christ in His glory, Saul has been changed in more ways than one. He's now got a physical problem of blindness. Friends, these eyes of ours are not fully equipped to view the beauty of the Risen One. There are a few times recorded in Scripture after Jesus has resurrected, where He appears, and the disciples do not immediately recognize Him. Saul's blinded by seeing Him, and has to be led "by the hand," (verse 8), to Damascus.

So much for his career in law enforcement! I've never encountered a blind cop. Have you? That aspect of Saul's life is gone, and he knows it, because notice what he does. "For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything," (verse 9). What do you suppose Saul was doing those three days? Fasting? Praying? It's what we'd do, if we were in that situation, I hope!

Ananias

The next person we encounter in the text is Ananias, a follower of Jesus Christ, who hears from Jesus in a vision. Jesus tells Ananias, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying," (verse 11). There's what Saul's been doing for the last three days! Fasting and praying is hard work, but when you do it, and in a way that doesn't let on to other people that you're doing it, it's a good combination to get in closer proximity with God – especially when you couple it with a daily habit of Scripture reading. It can be a real clarifying experience.

Jesus tells Ananias exactly what Saul has seen while he's been praying and fasting. "In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight," (verse 12). What we have here is one of the biggest persecutors of the ancient church waiting for a church member to show up and restore

him. What would we do today in this situation? Probably the same thing Ananias did! We would question it, just like Ananias did. “‘Lord,’ he answered, ‘I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on Your name,’” (verses 13-14).

Saul’s reputation as a persecutor of the Church is well-known by the Jewish Christians outside Judea by this time period. They’ve heard of him. Ananias even knows Saul’s original reason for coming to Damascus – to hunt down and arrest the followers of Jesus Christ. Jesus gets pretty blunt with Ananias. He says, “Go! This man is My chosen instrument to carry My name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for My name,” (verses 15-16).

Ananias is reluctant to go because of Saul’s reputation. Look, from his point of view, Jesus is asking him to put his life on the line by going to Saul. But Jesus sees the big picture. How often we hesitate to do what we’re supposed to do, and what we know the Lord wants us to do, because we can’t see the big picture! Jesus gives Ananias just a snippet, a fragmentary piece of the bigger picture here.

Jesus’ Bigger Plan

Jesus has a bigger plan for each of us that’s beyond our capacity to imagine. Keep that in mind. Jesus sees one of the chief persecutors of the ancient church – instead of being a persecutor – as a missionary who would almost single-handedly spread the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire. There is some evidence which suggests Paul the Apostle traveled as far as Spain on some of his missionary journeys. That’s about as far from Judea as you can get and still be within the Roman Empire! According to Church tradition, Paul the Apostle was martyred – by being beheaded – for his faith in Jesus Christ in the city of Rome.

Notice what Ananias does next. He does what Jesus tells him to do! He goes to the house, puts his hands on Saul, and says – watch this – “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,” (verse 17). Brother Saul. That’s a powerful statement. Calling an enemy “brother,” or “sister,” that’s a hard thing to do, and nearly impossible for us to do when we’re operating in our natural, human tendencies.

Ananias does something here, which we should take note of – he gives credit where credit is due – to Jesus Christ! Jesus sent him. Jesus is the One who gives sight. The laying on of hands by Ananias is simply the means to the end. Ananias doesn’t restore Saul’s sight. Jesus does, but Ananias is the vessel that Jesus uses in that moment to deliver His healing touch.

The Rest of the Story

We know the rest of the story. “Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God,” (verses 18-20). Saul was a changed man by his encounter with the risen Savior. He went from being chief persecutor of the Church to being one of its greatest advocates.

Thomas Chisholm, one of our Methodist Episcopal brothers wrote these words in 1923: “Morning by morning new mercies I see... Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth, Thine own dear Presence to cheer and to guide; strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow, blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!”¹ I’m sure on the day Saul’s sight was restored, he could have said the same thing about Jesus Christ. When we encounter Jesus, in our awe-struck silence, we may also wonder, with Saul, “Who are You, Lord?” And then later realize, that in the meeting of Him, He’s always been lovingly involved in every aspect of our lives. Maybe your question is more along the lines of, “Who are You Lord, that You would have any concern or any consideration for someone like me?” How He loves you! Even to the point of taking the nails for you on the cross to wash away sin. How about you? Do you know it today? Do you have that connection with Him? If you don’t, and you want this connection with the One who loves you most, I want to pray right now with, and for, you.

(Extemporaneous Prayer)

In a moment we’re going to celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion, where all are welcome. In the holy silence of that sacrament, we gather around the Lord’s table, with the whole Church – here below, and there above – Jesus invites every person to come. What a beautiful, glorious God we serve!

Prayer: God of victory over death, Your Son revealed Himself again and again, and convinced His followers of His glorious resurrection. Grant that we may know His risen Presence, in love obediently feed His sheep, and care for the lambs of His flock, until we join the hosts of Heaven in worshiping You and praising Him who is worthy of blessing and honor, glory and power, for ever and ever. Amen.

¹ Thomas Chisholm, “Great is Thy Faithfulness,” *The United Methodist Hymnal*, (United Methodist Publishing: Nashville, 1989), page 140.