

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study guide is to facilitate the study of Acts 9:1-19 as a supplement to the sermon. It is based on my (Michael's) study and meditation on the passage. This handout can be used for personal study or community group conversation. (I hope you join a group!)

ACTS 9:1-19 ESV

1 But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2 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. 3 Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. 4 And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" 5 And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 6 But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." 7 The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. 8 Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. 9 And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. 10 Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." 11 And the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, 12 and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." 13 But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. 14 And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name." 15 But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. 16 For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." 17 So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." 18 And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; 19 and taking food, he was strengthened. For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus.

STRUCTURE

- I. Jesus appears to Saul (9:1-9)
 - a. Saul approaches Damascus to persecute Christians (9:1-2).
 - b. Jesus blinds Saul with light, rebukes his opposition, and requires obedience (9:3-6).
 - c. Saul approaches Damascus to await instructions from Christ (9:7-9)
- II. Jesus appears to Ananias (9:10-19a)
 - a. Jesus speaks to Ananias in a vision, challenges his hesitation, and requires obedience (9:10-16)
 - b. Through Ananias, Jesus heals Saul, fills him with the Spirit, and commissions him (9:17-19)

GENERAL COMMENTARY:

In 7:60, Stephen prays for Jesus to forgive his enemies while Saul approves of his execution. Finally, in chapter 9, Jesus answers Stephen's prayer with the conversion of Saul. As the ascended Lord, Jesus has authority to forgive the sins of whomever He chooses. Not even the most hardened foe can resist His will.

Not only does the answer to Stephen's prayer reflect the sovereign freedom of Christ, but so does every aspect of the story. Throughout the narrative, Luke portrays Saul on the receiving end of divine initiative: Jesus appears in a blinding vision, rebukes his opposition, demands obedience, and then appears to him in a second vision. Saul in no way sought Jesus, and in fact, opposed Him. By appearing to him "on the way" to destroy "the Way"—Christianity—Jesus displays sovereign freedom. Grace *interrupts*.

In the second section, Jesus appears to Ananias, who is a disciple in Damascus. Unlike Saul, who asks, "Who are you, Lord?" Ananias responds with, "Here I am, Lord." Ananias models appropriate availability for those who know the Lord Jesus. At the same time, his subsequent hesitancy warns us to believe Jesus is sovereign enough to save anyone. By the same grace that saved Saul, Ananias overcomes fear and obeys the call to pray over his former persecutor.

Saul's experience with Ananias is portrayed as a sort of death and resurrection. Like Jesus, Saul dwells in darkness for three days; like Jesus, Saul sees the light after three days; like Jesus, Saul emerges to announce the good news. Luke employs this imagery to teach us about conversion. Conversion is not just reform. It is not turning over a new leaf. Conversion is death and resurrection. Luke reinforces this by tying Saul's baptism (going under the water = death; coming out = resurrection) to his emergence from darkness into the light.

VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY:

1 But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2 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.

—"But Saul": In contrast to the Ethiopian who went on his "way" rejoicing (8:39), Saul persecutes those "belonging to the Way."

—"still breathing threats and murder":

- The young men laid their coats at the feet of Saul to murder Stephen by stoning (7:58); Saul "was ravaging the church, and entering house after house" as he "dragged off men and women and committed them to prison" (8:3).
- Nothing has changed in Saul's disposition. He "still" pants like a ravenous beast after the blood of God's people.
- Saul was so passionate about his mission that he traveled 130 miles (a six day journey) north to fulfill it! By God's grace, this missionary of death who traveled from house to house would be transformed into a missionary of life who planted churches from house to house.

—"against the disciples of the Lord":

- In this section, God's people are referred to as "disciples" (9:1), "those belonging to the Way" (9:2), implicitly—the body of Christ (9:4-5), "saints" or "holy ones" (9:13), "all who call on your name" (9:14), and "brother" (aka, God's family)—9:17. Each name has special meaning, explored in the following commentary.
- Briefly, however, we can say that as "disciples," we follow Jesus; as "those belonging to the Way," we are spiritual pilgrims; as the body of Christ, we are one with Jesus; as "saints" we are made holy by the blood of Christ; as those "who call on your name" we are a praying people; as "brother" and sister—we are God's family.

—"went to the high priest... asked for letters":

- The temple wars continue. God has rejected His old temple. His new temple, made not *by* people but *of* people, spreads to the ends of the earth. But old temple authorities employ their greatest weapons against its expansion.
- The earthly high priest competes against the heavenly High Priest—Jesus—and he doesn't stand a chance.

—"belonging to the Way":

- I have commented extensively in other study guides about "the Way" as an identification for Christians. Briefly, this word can be translated as "road," and it is no accident that Saul is on the "road" or "way" north when Jesus meets him; the eunuch was on a "road" to the desert when Jesus met him; the eunuch went on his "way" rejoicing; Saul will have his way made straight—where?—on none other than "Straight Street" (9:11). Jesus meets us on our way, makes our way straight, and then sends us on our way rejoicing and preaching the good news.
- Additionally, there is an Old Testament allusion in this label, "the Way."
 - [Isa 40:3 ESV] 3 A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the **way** of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God."
 - [Isa 42:16 ESV] 16 And I will lead the blind in a **way** that they do not know, in paths that they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground. These are the things I do, and I do not forsake them.
 - [Isa 43:16, 19 ESV] 16 Thus says the LORD, who makes a **way** in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, ... 19 Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.
 - [Isa 48:17 ESV] 17 Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: "I am the LORD your God, who teaches you to profit, who leads you in the **way** you should go.
 - [Isa 49:9, 11 ESV] 9 saying to the prisoners, 'Come out,' to those who are in darkness, 'Appear.' They shall feed along the **ways**; on all bare heights shall be their pasture; ... 11 And I will make all my mountains a **road**, and my highways shall be raised up.
 - [Isa 51:10 ESV] 10 Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, who made the depths of the sea a **way** for the redeemed to pass over?

- [Isa 57:14 ESV] 14 And it shall be said, "Build up, build up, prepare the **way**, remove every obstruction from my people's way."
- [Isa 62:10 ESV] 10 Go through, go through the gates; prepare the **way** for the people; build up, build up the highway; clear it of stones; lift up a signal over the peoples.
- In the above passages, Isaiah presents a "new exodus" brought about through a forerunner (John the Baptist, Isa. 40:3) and the Messiah to whom he pointed. Christianity is thus Exodus 2.0. Jesus opens a "way" through the sea of death and judgment, guiding us on our pilgrimage to the shores of New Jerusalem.

—"men or women":

- Saul's persecution is ruthless—it includes women.
- Saul's persecution is purposeful—it intends to stop the spread of the gospel. Implicitly, women served an important role in this regard.

—"bound to Jerusalem": Saul intends to bind people in Damascus. Instead, due to temporary blindness, he is guided as one bound. The hostage-taker becomes a hostage of grace.

3 Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. 4 And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" 5 And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 6 But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."

—"Now as he went on his way":

- God could have met Saul at any time. He could have met him while he was eating a bowl of cereal or sitting in a rocking chair. Instead, he chose to meet Saul while he was on his way to destroy Christians. Why?
- On a literary level, Luke is reinforcing his theme that Jesus meets us "on the way," interrupts our journey, and redirects us in His "way"—which is THE Way.
- On a theological level, Luke emphasizes the sovereign grace of God by turning the heart of a God-hater *in the act* of exercising hatred. Jesus catches Paul red-handed—and then bleaches them white as snow.
- On that note, Paul explains God's choice in 1 Tim. 1:12-17: *I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, **though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.***

—"suddenly a light from heaven... falling... heard a voice":

- These phenomena are typical of "theophanies" in the Old Testament—appearances/revelations of God—but this is slightly different. It is a "Christophany"—an appearance/revelation of the God-Man.
- We don't get the impression that, after much study and prayer, the identity of Christ just "dawned" on Saul. Quite the opposite. The text emphasizes Christ's unsought intervention. Not all of us have such a dramatic salvation experience, but some characteristics of Saul's conversion apply to all believers:
 - Jesus intervenes while we pursued our own "way." As Paul says elsewhere, "No one seeks God, no, not one" (Rom. 3).
 - The light of God, like the light of creation, enters our hearts while we dwelt in darkness and preferred it (2 Cor. 4:6; Jhn. 3).
 - Even if it seems to us like the voice of a preacher or a parent or a friend, when we hear the good news, we hear the voice of Jesus and place our faith in Him (Jhn. 10).
 - The whole experience is a work of grace.
- Could Saul have disobeyed the heavenly vision?
 - In 26:10, Saul retells his conversion story, saying he was "not disobedient to the heavenly vision." Some suggest this means Paul "could" have disobeyed, but even then, it depends on how we define "could."
 - In his book *God Reforms Hearts*, Dr. Thaddeus Williams unpacks three forms of necessity, which inform whether our love for God is forced or voluntary. (He is responding to the

charge that if God sovereignly chooses us, then we can't freely choose love, and thus it is not real love because it is forced.)

- Case 1: Jim, a mad scientist desperate for love, installs A.A. (artificial affection) hardware in Claudia's brain that programs her to "love" him. Claudia says, "I love you," and cannot do otherwise.
- Case 2: Jim, a neurotic desperate for love, holds a gun to Claudia's back and commands her to love him. Claudia says, "I love you," and cannot do otherwise.
- Case 3: Claudia has a powerful internal desire to maximize Jim's welfare, a propensity so strong that she cannot bring herself to reject him. Claudia says, "I love you," and cannot do otherwise.
- Williams remarks: "The third case stands apart. Claudia does not merely say 'I love you.' She means it. Her heart has not been bypassed but is so deeply intertwined with her action that it serves as the very reason that she cannot do otherwise. Her expression of love follows necessarily from her internal propensities."
- God's salvation of Paul—and us—most resembles Case 3. Grace does not "force" us to choose God by bypassing our hearts (as in Case 1) or coercing us externally (as in Case 2). Rather, grace transforms our hearts (as in Case 3) so that we willingly love Him. He takes our heart of stone and replaces it with a heart of flesh (Ezk. 36). He resurrects our hearts when they are dead in sin (Eph. 2). The doctrine of "irresistible grace" is thus sometimes misunderstood as resembling Case 1 (where we become robots) or Case 2 (where God forces us, as if at gunpoint). When God saves us, however, His grace is irresistible *in the sense* that He transforms our hearts to fall madly in love with Him. After this transformation, we choose Christ of our own volition. The choice is uncoerced, for it is native to our new heart. In that sense, the love is MORE real, for it flows from deep within.
- When I reflect on my relationship with Alicia, it was this way. I had planned to not be in a relationship for a long time. I was delightfully single. But then we met in Scotland on a study abroad trip, and shortly afterward, we attended a school function together. We laughed the whole night. After that, it was like I had no will to resist. But I also had no *desire* to resist. All at once, my inward disposition changed.
- Cultures have mythologized about this with such language as "falling helplessly in love," and "lovestruck" and the image of cupid shooting an unsuspecting person who necessarily falls in love. In the same way, grace strikes the unsuspecting, and it transforms our inward disposition.
- I'm reminded of the quote Augustine, who called God a "delightful conqueror," and of Turretin, who said God exerts strength so "powerful that it may not be frustrated [and] sweet that it may not be forced".
- Coming back to the question of whether Paul "could" disobey the heavenly vision: in the sense that Paul had a choice to obey or disobey Jesus, yes Paul "could" disobey; in the sense that Paul's heart had, by grace, fallen madly in love with Jesus—he could not disobey. God's grace in Paul's heart was thus *effectual*. It got the job done. God did not make Paul His "chosen instrument" (9:15) only for Paul to say, "no thanks." Just like Claudia had "a propensity so strong that she cannot bring herself to reject" her lover, Paul likewise had this propensity toward Jesus.
- I spend extra time exploring this issue because *it's the point of the story*. We should not read Paul's conversion and come away thinking, "Paul was a neutral observer to these events and with unaided free will made the careful selection to follow God." Rather, we should think, "Jesus intersected His most hardened foe, melting his heart with infinite love, transforming him from a murderer to a missionary."
- Validating these conclusions, in Paul's other writings, he describes his conversion like this:
 - [Gal 1:15-16 ESV] 15 But when he who had **set me apart before I was born**, and who called me by his grace, 16 was **pleased to reveal his Son to me**, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone;
 - [2Ti 1:8-9 ESV] 8 Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, 9 who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of **his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began**.
- Stott (alluding to CS Lewis' description of his own conversion): "Sensing God's relentless pursuit of him, he likens him to the 'great Angler' playing his fish, to a cat chasing a mouse, to a pack of hounds closing in on a fox, and finally to the divine chess player maneuvering him into the most disadvantageous positions until in the end he concedes 'checkmate.'"

- Stott: "Divine grace does not trample on human personality. Rather the reverse, for it enables human beings to be truly human. It is sin which imprisons; it is grace which liberates."

—"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?... I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."

- The name is spoken twice—as in, "Martha, Martha" or (the city), "Jerusalem, Jerusalem." It reflects deep emotion and pain over disobedience. Jesus' body hurts because of Saul's persecution; Jesus' heart hurts because of Saul's sin.
- The emphasis is not merely the supernatural phenomenon of a light and an audible voice, but the theme of persecution. Jesus doesn't begin by saying, "Hi, Saul, My name is Jesus. I'm real!" After a highly personal address, quoting his name twice, Jesus asks him the question, "Why are you persecuting Me?" Then when asked to introduce Himself, He doesn't just say, "I am Jesus," He says, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting."
- Jesus considers Saul's persecution not merely as harm to His church, but harm to Him! Whatever we do to the church—for good or for bad—we do to Jesus.
- Saul would go on to teach us about church as "the body of Christ," of which Christ is the head. He had experienced firsthand this revelation. Just like harm to my body is harm to me, harm to the church is harm to Jesus.

—"Who are you, Lord?": Paul does not say "Lord" in the same way that people in his culture called rulers and husbands and masters "Lord." He knows this is a heavenly vision and thus not just a mortal. He knows this is his Lord—but he also knows, perhaps for the first time, that his Lord is a stranger to him.

—"I am Jesus":

- Just like God reveals Himself to Moses as "I AM"—the eternally existent and independent God—He reveals Himself to Saul with similar language: "I am Jesus." See John 8:58 ("Before Abraham was, I AM").
- Just like God reveals Himself to Moses by announcing his name twice (Moses, Moses), He reveals Himself to Saul by announcing his name twice (Saul, Saul).
- Saul will help spearhead a "new exodus," where God makes a "Way" for His people, who belong to the "Way."

—"But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do":

- Saul doesn't receive all his instructions at once. He must trust Jesus. He is saved in this moment, even though Ananias does not baptize him for three more days. Faith enters his heart here.
- Jesus interrupts Saul's journey and alters his mission, but he doesn't change Saul's destination. Likewise, the Ethiopian eunuch continued south after he met Jesus. In the same way, Jesus interrupts our journey, but we continue down the same road. In our case, this might mean that we continue in the same vocation and with similar daily routines, but with one major difference: Jesus journeys with us. He journeyed with Saul to Damascus and the eunuch to Ethiopia. He journeys with us wherever we go.

7 The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. 8 Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. 9 And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

—"The men... stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one": They were still blind to the glory of Jesus. The privilege of beholding his glory belonged to Saul.

—"although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing": Why did God perform this miracle?

- It forces him to rely on Ananias to pray for him and be healed.
- It appears that the brightness of the vision and blindness of Saul bear symbolic meaning. I say this based on how Saul's testimony is later articulated:
 - Acts 26:16-18: *But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'*
 - Darkness represents spiritual blindness to Christ's glory, and light represents the illumination of Christ's glory.
 - Saul's blindness and subsequent healing represents the spiritual blindness of the Gentiles that Saul will reopen as Christ's "chosen instrument."

- Saul's blindness also represents the spiritual darkness in which he had walked when he opposed Jesus. As Jesus said to the blind man, "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind" (Jhn. 9:39), and then to the Pharisees, "If you were blind, you would have no guilt, but now that you say, 'We see,' your guilt remains" (9:41). The Pharisees claimed to "see the light" even though they were blind guides. Saul, the Pharisee, would have to admit that he had been blind all along for his guilt to be forgiven. His blindness thus serves as a lived-parable of his past and future life.
 - Like Saul, all of us are blind before we meet Christ. Coming to Christ requires us to admit our former blindness and repent.
 - 2 Corinthians 4:4-6 depicts Saul's conversion and every conversion in "creation" language that emphasizes God's work and matches the blindness/light motif of this story.
 - 2 Cor. 4:4-6: *In their case the god of this world [Satan] has **blinded** the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the **light of the gospel of the glory of Christ**, who is the image of God. For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "**Let light shine out of darkness**," has **shone in our hearts** to give the **light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ**.*
 - The short-term blindness of Saul resembles the short-term muteness of Zechariah (Lk. 1:20, 22). Both resulted from unbelief.
- "they led him by the hand": Saul sought to have Christians "bound" (9:2) and brought to Jerusalem. Rather than leading Christians by the hand, Saul himself is led by the hand. Rather than imprisoning believers, Saul the believer is arrested by grace.
- "three days without sight, neither ate nor drank"
- Saul undergoes his own version of resurrection. Just as Jesus did not eat or drink during three days of darkness, Saul does not eat or drink for three days of darkness. The darkness/light motif parallels a death/resurrection one. Luke intends both to depict Christian conversion. We who were blind now see; we who were dead now live. Conversion displays God's miraculous work, not ours.
 - Why did Saul fast? Jews fasted to mourn their sins and repent. To join fasting with repentance is like shouting "sorry" to heaven. Saul is undone.

10 Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord."

—Jesus said Saul's name twice in the vision. Here, he says Ananias' name once. Could this be because Ananias had already attuned his ear to hear to God's voice?

—Saul says, "Who are you, Lord?" Ananias says, "Here I am, Lord." Saul didn't know Jesus; Ananias both knew Him and was available for Him.

—Let us not be like Saul, who had to be held by the shoulders and shaken, as it were, to hear the voice of Jesus. Let us rather be like Ananias, ever ready to hear and obey.

—Had it not been for Ananias, there would be no Saul! The "heroes" who stand out so much all depend on nobodies. We often underestimate how large of a difference some small act of service can have. Ananias is never heard of again, before or after this scene.

—That Jesus appears to both Saul and Ananias in a vision shows how He intimately directs His global mission.

11 And the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, 12 and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight."

—"And the Lord said to him": Jesus said to him. Jesus is the Lord. The same Jesus who appeared to Saul now appears to Ananias. Jesus reveals Himself when and where and to whomever He pleases.

—"street called Straight": comments above about the symbolism of this street name.

—"Tarsus": a metropolis of Cilicia, overseen by Rome and of the region of Syria. Saul's Jewish name came from the first king of Israel, but his other name—Paul—derived from his background as a Roman citizen. Incidentally, God never changed his name from Saul to Paul. People get confused because Luke more often calls him Paul after his conversion. Luke probably does this to associate his Roman name with his calling to reach Gentiles.

—"praying... vision":

- It was in the context of prayer that Saul received his vision of the Lord. This is common. Peter is praying when he sees a vision in Acts 10-11. The leaders of Antioch are worshipping with fasting when the Spirit speaks in Acts 13.
- If we want to hear God speak, we should talk to Him more. God wants a friendship, and friends dialogue. The more we speak to God, the more we hear God speak to us.

—In this chapter alone, the Lord has appeared to Saul twice, and He has come to Ananias in a vision once. Jesus ensures the success of His mission by giving visions. He's doing the same thing around the world, as 25-40% (I have read both statistics) of Muslims who come to Christ first see Him in a dream or a vision. Lord, do the same thing here in OKC!

—"Ananias... lay his hands on him...": the self-sufficient Saul needed others. He needed Jesus to save him, and he needed Ananias to pray for him.

13 But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. 14 And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name."

—Ananias' obedience to the vision requires serious courage.

—At the same time, his hesitation highlights our own struggle to believe that God could convert anyone.

—"call on your name":

- This is a phrase that appears in 2:21 as a quote from Joel 2. It's part of the fulfillment of prophecy about God's people in the Last Days. It's a phrase that appears twice in this chapter (9:14, 21).
God's people are by nature a praying people.
- Joel 2 says that God's people will call on the name of the LORD to be saved. Luke does not portray this as a one-time exercise, however. Saul calls on God at salvation, but then he joins the company of those who call on the name of the Lord as a lifestyle. Stephen, in his dying breaths, calls on the name of the Lord. Every day, we call on God because every day, we need saving.

—Every instance of calling on the name of the Lord in Acts:

- [Act 2:21 ESV] 21 *And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.'*
- [Act 7:59 ESV] 59 *And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."*
- [Act 9:14, 21 ESV] 14 *And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name." ... 21 And all who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?"*
- [Act 22:16 ESV] 16 *And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.'*

—On the last one—Acts 22:16—this shows how closely baptism should be tied to salvation. It was so closely tied that language associated with salvation could apply to baptism. This does *not* suggest that baptism does the literal saving or washing, however. Paul was clearly saved when he obeyed Jesus, headed to Damascus, prayed and fasted (in repentance), and obediently waited for Ananias. Likewise, in Acts 10:44-47, the Spirit falls on Cornelius and his household before they are baptized. As we saw last week, baptism consummates conversion, but faith and repentance take pride of place. Nevertheless, baptism closely links with salvation—so much, that authors of Scripture could speak interchangeably of faith, repentance, and baptism. This is similar to how we speak interchangeably about various aspects of getting married. We might say, for instance, that a couple is "officially" married when the marriage document is signed; we might say they are "officially" married when the preacher publicly pronounces them husband and wife; we might say they are "officially" married when they consummate it intimately. The flexibility of language in this scenario occurs in every language. It's called a "synecdoche," which means "part for the whole." For instance, if someone says, "King David went up against the Philistines," we don't mean that David went alone. We chose part of Israel's army—David—to speak for the whole. In the same way, Scripture can speak of "faith" or "repentance" or "baptism" using language that applies to salvation even though salvation technically occurs at the moment faith awakens in the heart. This is synecdoche. It uses part of the process of turning to Christ—whether faith or repentance or baptism—to speak for the whole, thus associating it with salvation. It does this even though faith and (its Siamese twin) repentance more technically save us.

15 But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. 16 For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

—"chosen instrument":

- God chose him. Very clearly, Saul's "choosing God" was a response to God's "choosing him." Saul had been running the opposite direction; so are all of us. We didn't choose God because we were smarter than all the Muslims. We chose God because in sovereign grace, He chose us. All we can do is be grateful.
- God did not just choose him for salvation, however; God chose him as an "instrument" for bringing salvation to others. As Paul says elsewhere, God "prepared beforehand" good works for us to do (Eph. 2:10). God choosing us for good works presupposes His choosing for salvation, but the emphasis in this verse is on God's ministry calling in Saul's life.
- I am reminded of Jeremiah 1:5: *"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."* Like Jeremiah, God knew Saul intimately—in a saving way—even before birth; like Jeremiah, God set Saul aside and appointed him to the nations, even before birth. The same is true for all believers (Gal. 1:15-16; 2 Tim. 1:8-9). God chooses us and appoints us before birth to make disciples of all nations.

—"to carry my name":

- This language hearkens back to the third commandment about not taking the LORD's name in vain. We often reduce this to avoiding God's name as a swear word, but the command means much more. Dr. Carmen Imes says to bear God's name is like having a tattoo that marks us for God, which the whole world sees. When we go before the world, as those marked by God, we must represent Him well. Israel was reminded of this when the high priest pronounced the famous Aaronic blessing over them. Afterward, Moses says, *"So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them"* (Num. 6:27).
- For Saul to carry Jesus' name before the world meant that He would go forth as an ambassador, "tattooed" by Christ, representing Him in word and deed.
- Like Saul, we want to bear the name of Christ, not in vain, but as ambassadors of Christ in all we do: *"In whatever you do, in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him"* (Col. 3:17).

—"Gentiles... kings... children of Israel": all three of these categories appear in the Acts narrative, but the emphasis of Saul's ministry is on Gentiles (Gal. 2:9).

—"For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name":

- The persecutor will be persecuted.
- "suffer for the sake of my name" reminds us of "carry my name" in the prior verse. Saul will carry the name of Jesus BY suffering.
- Perhaps the greatest way in which any of us bears the name of Christ is by suffering well. When the world sees us suffer, they pay special attention to how we represent Christ. Suffering is a magnifying glass. It enables the world to see what our life truly magnifies—whether Christ or creature comforts.
- It's hard to imagine someone being as persecuted as Paul. He recounts his persecutions in 2 Cor. 11:23-28: *Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant? 30 If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.*

—Saul leaves Jerusalem to persecute disciples. He returns to Jerusalem as a persecuted disciple.

17 So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

—"entered the house":

- Saul once entered houses to lay hands on Christians and arrest them; now Ananias enters a house to lay hands on Saul and pray for him.
- Acts has portrayed the movement of God's presence from His "house" in Jerusalem—the temple—to houses across the ancient world. God's home is His people, and He meets us from house to house, wherever we gather in His name.
- The temple representative now experiences the temple-glory of Christ—first on a road and now in a house.

—"Brother Saul":

- Saul had already become a believer by this point. Notably, this occurs before baptism.
- Although Ananias and Saul shared Jewish blood, what made them family was that they shared Jesus' blood. The church is God's family.
- This touches my heart. The man who had ruthlessly murdered perhaps some of Ananias' friends and family is called, "Brother Saul."

—Saul received the judgment that Jesus spoke of in John 9: he realized that he could not see without God, and because of this, God opened his eyes to see. It's only those who claim to see on their own who don't see. God opens the eyes of the blind who know they're blind. But he seals shut the eyes of the blind who think they see.

—"the Lord Jesus who appeared to you... has sent me": the ascended Lord appeared to a sworn enemy and then sent a devoted friend. Jesus directs His mission from heaven as He sovereignly chooses—uninhibited by enemies and empowering His friends.

—"...and be filled with the Holy Spirit": This would be both a Spirit-baptism and Spirit-filling (as in Acts 2). But Saul will be refilled with the Spirit in Acts 13. We need the filling of the Holy Spirit to fulfill our mission. See Study Guide from October 2 about the Baptism versus Filling of the Holy Spirit, accessible online.

18 And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; 19 and taking food, he was strengthened.

—As suddenly as Saul was blinded, he "regained his sight." This is how conversion happens. Like God spoke creation into existence, making everything out of nothing, He speaks the word of life over us, and the scales fall off.

—"scales fell from his eyes": some scholars have suggested that "scales" implies a connection to the Serpent. Saul's temporary physical blindness spoke of a lifelong spiritual blindness, which owed to the devil's deception (2 Cor. 4:4).

—"Then he rose and was baptized": the Greek word for "rose" (*anistemi*) occurs throughout Acts to depict Christ's resurrection (Acts 2:24, 32; 3:26; etc.). Just as Jesus dwelt in darkness for three days, so did Saul; just as Jesus rose, so did Saul. By linking Saul's baptism with resurrection, Luke displays the meaning of baptism. If faith places confidence in Christ, and if repentance turns from sin to Christ, then baptism identifies with Christ—especially His death and resurrection. In identifying with Christ, we affirm belief in His death and resurrection, and we also align our lifestyle with His death and resurrection. This means that we die to our old way of living and rise to walk in newness of life. We mortify our flesh and live by the new way of the Spirit. To be baptized is to commit ourselves to this lifestyle publicly. In this way, Christian baptism resembles John's baptism, which is called a "baptism of repentance" (Acts 13:24). Christian baptism is also a baptism of repentance, but we identify not with John (Acts 19:3) but with the Triune God—Father, Son, and Spirit (Matt. 28:19).

—"taking food, he was strengthened": after three days of darkness, deprived of food, now he sees light and is strengthened. Like a caterpillar emerging from the cocoon, the transformation is complete. Conversion is metamorphosis. It is resurrection.