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Acts of the Apostles - Lesson 9A

Chapter 9:1-22

P.O. Box 702107
San Antonio, Texas, 78270
210.319.5055

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- Luke has temporarily suspended his account of Peter's ministry to describe three men who contributed to the movement of the Gospel outward from Jerusalem
 - First we saw Stephen, whose death created the environment for the Gospel to spread
 - Then we read about Philip, who became the first evangelist of the church
 - And now we learn about Saul, the man God selected to lead the spread of the Gospel to the Gentiles
 - And in perhaps the greatest irony of the New Testament, the strongest persecutor of the early Church becomes its most important minister
- Because Saul (Paul) is so central to the spread of the Church and to the story of Acts, we should take a few moments to consider Saul's background, based on what we find in Scripture and tradition
 - We know from Paul's own testimony in Acts and later in his letters, that he was raised in Tarsus
 - Tarsus was an important Greek city, containing one of three known medical schools in his day
 - Jews were forced to move to Tarsus after Alexander the Great conquered the area
 - It was featured at times in the history of Cicero, Augustus Caesar, Mark Anthony and Cleopatra
 - Tradition says he was raised by parents who fled the upper Galilee after the Roman invasion in the first century BC
 - Paul tells us he was raised as a Pharisee, which means his parents would have followed strict Jewish practices in this regard
 - He began studying scripture at age 5
 - At age ten, he moved to studying rabbinical teachings (tradition)
 - At 13, he had a bar mitzvah
 - During his teen years, he would have lived in Jerusalem where he studied under Gamaliel
 - He may have lived with a sister, who Paul says in Acts 23:16 resided in the city
 - Paul also tells us that he was a Roman by birth, which means either his father or perhaps his grandfather had been granted citizenship by the Emperor
 - Usually, citizenship was granted by political favor or as a reward for loyal service to the Emperor
 - It brought significant benefits in Rome, including protection from degrading punishment
 - The child of a citizen was granted citizenship if the child was registered within 30 days
 - Registered infants received a certificate as legal evidence of citizenship
 - Paul apparently possessed one of these documents, and he may have carried it with him as he traveled in his missionary journeys

- Roman citizens assumed three Greek names
 - We only know one of Saul's three Roman names: Paullus (or Paul)
 - Saul was his given Jewish name
- Saul was well educated, obviously very intelligent and trained in critical thinking and argument
 - He also spoke at least four and perhaps more languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek and Latin
 - Though his intellect was impressive, his physical stature left something to be desired
 - By Paul's own testimony, he was a poor speaker and suffered physical illnesses and frailties
 - He must have been rather short, since the Greeks assumed him to be the short god, Mercury, rather than the more important (and taller) god Jupiter
 - As he completed his missionary journeys, he suffered persecution to the point of marking his body with wounds, according to Galatians 6:17
- As we move now to Acts 9, we witness perhaps the greatest conversion in the history of Christianity
 - Even Paul himself made his testimony of the events portrayed in this chapter multiple times, both in Acts and in his letters
 - We can safely assume that Paul gave his testimony on many occasions
- The scene is set for Saul's conversion in the first two verses of the chapter

Acts 9:1 Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest,
Acts 9:2 and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

- Luke reminds us of Saul's hatred for Christians
 - We remember how Saul was ravaging the church as Luke describes it in Chapter 8
 - Saul has become focused on persecuting Christians after his experience at the stoning of Stephen
 - He thinks he can find and destroy every single believer in the process
 - Now we see the extent to which Saul went to accomplish his self-appointed role of chief persecutor
 - He follows the pattern of the Sanhedrin
 - First giving threats followed by taking action (murder)
 - But now he has taken to involving the Roman authorities
 - The Romans had granted to the Jewish leadership by treaty the right to issue letters of extradition in cases involving violations of Jewish law outside the jurisdiction of the Sanhedrin

- The Caesar extended this right over all Jews in the Roman empire
 - With these letters, a Jew like Saul could enlist Roman authorities to arrest Jews and bring them back to the Sanhedrin for trial
 - In fact, this step was necessary since Jewish Christians had fled Jerusalem precisely to avoid the reach of the Sanhedrin after the death of Stephen
- Saul went looking for members of the “Way”
 - This was the term for the early Jewish believers, because they were said to follow the “way” of Jesus
 - Just as in the Old Testament the prophets talked about Israel following the way of Jehovah or the unbelievers following the way of the wicked
 - When Saul found them he brought them back to Jerusalem bound, which led to beatings, imprisonment and even death
 - Paul himself says he was responsible for the deaths of Christians
 - It makes me wonder if Paul’s future in heaven will include a glorious reward
 - What kind of reward awaited those who were killed by Saul?
 - And what kind of reconciliation took place when Paul entered the Lord’s presence and met those he had killed earlier?
 - This trip to Damascus appears to be Saul’s first attempt to track down and retrieve Christians from outside the Land

Acts 9:3 As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him;

Acts 9:4 and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”

Acts 9:5 And he said, “Who are You, Lord?” And He said, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting,

Acts 9:6 but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do.”

Acts 9:7 The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one.

- Saul was approaching Damascus, we’re told, which means Saul had almost made it to his destination
 - But God intervened in the last moment to redirect him
 - As Paul tells this story later in Acts, he mentions that the event happened at midday
 - This tells us that the sun was at its brightest in the sky
 - And yet another light even brighter appeared to blind Saul
 - With the light was a voice, the voice of Christ Himself
 - The voice asks Saul, Saul why are you persecuting Me?

- The repeating of Saul's name reminds us of how God typically addresses men in a critical moment
 - Like Abraham, Abraham
- And the name Saul is written in its Hebrew form in the text, indicating that the voice spoke in Hebrew
- Though Saul never met Jesus personally in His earthly ministry, here he has a personal encounter with the Lord
 - This encounter and all that follows later become Paul's validation for his claims to be an apostle
- Jesus' first words to Saul ask an interesting question
 - Why was Saul persecuting "Me", Jesus asks?
 - The statement is understandable in at least two ways
 - First, as Saul persecutes Christians, he persecutes the Body of Christ, of which Jesus is the Head
 - We can take comfort in knowing that as we suffer persecution for our faith, Jesus feels it with us
 - Secondly, it reflects that persecution of the Church is suppression of the message of the Gospel, which is the Word
 - Again, when the Gospel is attacked, it becomes an attack against Jesus Who is the Word made flesh
 - The question is also interesting precisely because it is phrased as a question
 - Why not simply say "Saul stop persecuting me"
 - Yet Jesus asks Saul why does he persecute the Lord?
 - It seems the question was calculated to shock Saul all the more
 - Saul was zealous for the Lord and for what Saul thought was truth
 - By asking the question, the Lord shocked Saul to consider that he had been fighting against God all this time rather than for Him
- Saul's answer can be confusing without proper perspective
 - He answers, "Who are you, Lord?"
 - Saul's use of the term "Lord" could be confusing, because it suggests that Saul immediately came to know Jesus as Lord
 - In reality, the word is commonly used as a respectful term, like "sir"
 - In this context, it seems likely that Saul is using it in that way
 - After all, if Saul didn't know who this voice belonged to, how would he have known to call it Lord except in the generic sense?
 - The fact that the voice originated in the heavens gave Saul an immediate clue he was hearing from a heavenly source, perhaps God Himself
 - As a Pharisee, Saul would have been intimately familiar with the Old Testament accounts of patriarchs or prophets hearing from God in such a manner
 - He must have been terrified and prostrate as men of the Old Testament

- often were in these circumstances
 - Still Saul asks who was speaking, because he couldn't make sense of the question itself
 - But then Saul gets a specific answer
 - The voice is the very person Saul has been disparaging and persecuting – Jesus
 - Without waiting for Saul to respond (for what could Saul say at this point... sorry?), Jesus gives him instructions
 - Saul was to continue to Damascus but wait for instructions from Jesus
- Meanwhile, Saul's traveling companions were speechless
 - They heard a voice but saw nothing
 - Actually, later in Acts 22 Paul clarifies that they heard something, but they couldn't understand the words
 - Only Saul understood what was spoken by Jesus
 - This fact tells us something important
 - Saul DID see something, perhaps even Jesus Himself
 - In contrast to Saul, these men see no one, we're told
 - God's sovereignty is firmly on display here
 - First, the Lord is seen to be sympathizing with His people in persecution
 - To the point that He Himself feels the persecution
 - Secondly, He interrupts the plans of men to preserve (and later grow) His Church
 - And He does so by turning the chief persecutor into the chief builder
 - Third, He takes action without the involvement of another human agent
 - God Himself appears to Saul on the road
 - No ambassador or intermediary is required for God to intervene and change the course of man's plans
 - Fourth, God will immediately guide Saul into a new walk of life according to God's purpose
 - God lays out a new plan for the man from the start
 - Fifth, Saul is never given a choice
 - Saul is never asked if he would like to "give his life to Jesus?" or "invited" to welcome Jesus into his heart
 - The only question Saul is ever asked is, why are you persecuting Me?
 - Saul's life had been committed to God's purposes even before Saul knew who the voice belonged to
 - Finally, God has purposely selected Saul to hear the words while not permitting his companions to have the same experience
 - God's plan of salvation operates according to His sovereign will and purpose

- This experience impacted Saul both spiritually and physically

Acts 9:8 Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus.

Acts 9:9 And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

- Saul has been blinded by the encounter
 - So his companions must lead him by the hand into Damascus
 - And while in the city, he ate and drank nothing for three days
 - God's purpose of the blindness was to reinforce the reality of what happened to Saul
 - As Saul sits in complete darkness, he is alone with his thoughts
 - And his last visual memory will be that encounter on the road
 - Ironically, Saul had been blind spiritually though he could see physically
 - Now his situation was reversed at least for a time
 - Later the restoration of Saul's sight also becomes an opportunity for the Lord to build Saul's relationship with the wounded church that fears him
 - When his eyes are opened, Saul will see the church in a new way
 - And the church will see Saul in a new way as well
 - Spiritually, Paul referred back to this event numerous times
 - Both in defense of his commission as apostle
 - But also in contrition to give evidence that he was the least of all apostles
 - Undoubtedly, Paul's memory of his days before his conversion gave him an inexhaustible supply of motivation to reach the world for the Lord

Acts 9:10 Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord."

Acts 9:11 And the Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying,

Acts 9:12 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."

Acts 9:13 But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem;

Acts 9:14 and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name."

Acts 9:15 But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel;

Acts 9:16 for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake."

- Clearly, the church had made its way as far north as Damascus

- And in that city was a man named Ananias
 - God gives Ananias a vision with instructions
 - He would find Straight street
 - It was named straight because in ancient cities, streets were usually crooked
 - This street was straight and that made it unusual and gave it its name
 - Then he would walk down the street asking for Judas' house
 - When he found the house, he would meet Saul of Tarsus
- And this Saul will be praying
 - And through his prayer, he will be given an answer that his blindness will be removed by a Christian named Ananias
- Isn't it amazing to watch God at work here?
 - Saul is praying for a miracle to regain his sight
 - Meanwhile, God selects a man and directs him to Saul
 - Even the names of each man are revealed to the other, so that when they meet, they will recognize God's work in their lives
 - Remember this story as you share your concerns with God and ask His forgiveness and intervention
 - And then remember that the reason Saul is in this situation was because God made him blind
 - But then remember that his blindness was a part of the way the Lord saved Saul from his sin
 - Finally, take note that the answer to Saul's prayer includes a new mission and a revelation that his mission will include much suffering for God's glory
 - As you reach out to God in prayer, remember that even your needs were produced by God
 - And therefore the solutions are at his disposal as well
 - And consider that whatever answer God brings may leave you all the more needing prayer and intervention
 - But always to God's glory and ultimately to our blessing
- Finally, Ananias responds in the way you might expect
 - In fact, he says what I would have said
 - In a word, no way!
 - Ananias points out that Saul isn't one of the good guys
 - He has been persecuting the church
 - He has letters to arrest and take them away to Jerusalem
 - Despite Ananias' effort to "help" the Lord, Jesus corrects Ananias
 - Saul is a chosen instrument of God
 - Notice, again, the lack of choice or free will in any of this

- Never is Saul asked or recruited by God
 - Scripture never describes our relationship with Christ as a personal choice
 - It only describes it as God's choice
- Saul's future has been set and it will include suffering, as Jesus indicates
 - Specifically, Saul will be the Apostle to the Gentiles
 - Secondly, he will testify before kings
 - Finally, he will testify to the Gospel before the Jewish people
 - Though they are not the focus of his ministry, Paul always gave the Jews opportunity to believe first
 - He never stopped looking for the remnant
 - Luke's account in the second half of this book is his exposé of Jesus' promise that Saul would suffer for His sake
- Did you notice that Jesus doesn't expect much from Ananias in this transaction
 - Ananias isn't supposed to convert Saul or change his mind on anything
 - Ananias will simply lay on hands
 - Jesus will do all the talking
 - With these words, Jesus persuades Ananias to go and attend to Saul

Acts 9:17 So Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

Acts 9:18 And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized;

Acts 9:19 and he took food and was strengthened.

Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus, **Acts 9:20** and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."

Acts 9:21 All those hearing him continued to be amazed, and were saying, "Is this not he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and who had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?"

Acts 9:22 But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Christ.

- Ananias finds Saul, and his words and actions display supreme faith
 - First, to even enter Saul's presence must have taken great courage
 - It would be the equivalent of walking across a battle field and stepping into the bunker of the enemy without fear of being shot
 - Ananias must have been terrified of Saul, yet he goes none the less
 - Secondly, he addresses Saul as "brother" from the beginning

- Ananias isn't waiting for Saul to prove himself
- The Lord has declared he is converted, and therefore Ananias operates from that presumption
- Jesus' use of the man Ananias to confer this new calling upon Saul is notable for who Ananias is NOT
 - Specifically, Ananias is not an Apostle himself
 - Jesus converted Saul without the direct involvement of any other Apostle so to make clear that Jesus didn't intend to work exclusively through the 12 to build His church
 - He could and would raise up other disciples and even apostles by His own hand
 - Also notice that Saul's conversion – easily the most important conversion of the book of Acts – occurs without signs of the Spirit
 - No speaking in tongues, no miracles
 - Saul is converted without any of those manifestations, because the Apostles were not present and there was no purpose in such signs in this situation
 - Still, God did show Himself through miracles nonetheless, so that He could demonstrate to Saul and others that a real change was taking place
 - The same reason for signs and wonders in every case within Acts
- As Paul regained his sight, his first instinct and desire was to be baptized, even before he broke his three day fast
 - Here's another reminder that the first responsibility of a believer is to submit to water baptism at the first opportunity
 - If they pass up the earliest opportunity for water baptism, they enter into a state of disobedience that must be dealt with eventually
 - Having been baptized, Saul then eats and gains back his strength
 - He spends a few days with the disciples
 - And then he immediately begins to preach in the synagogues
- His preaching has two effects
 - First, it amazes the church as they try to reconcile what they see with what they had heard about Saul
 - God was already using Saul to edify the church by building their confidence that the Lord will build His church against all odds
 - Secondly, his preaching confounds the Jews in their arguments over the claims of Christianity
 - The greatest threat to the church has become its greatest defender overnight
 - But naturally, this stirs up the Jews yet again against the Church
 - And now they have a new target in Paul, formerly Saul