

# **GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL THROUGH JESUS GIVING SIGHT TO THE BLIND**

## **Acts 9:1-19**

### INTRODUCTION

We discovered last week that we have a flying squirrel living in one of the oak trees in our back yard. Flying squirrels are nocturnal; they only come out at night. A couple of nights ago as I was taking our dog out into the back yard before I went to bed I noticed that the squirrel was sitting on our bird feeder, eating seeds. I quickly ran back into the house and got Jane so she could come take a picture of it. When we came back the squirrel had jumped from the feeder onto the oak tree. I could see it hanging face down, flattened against the tree. However, Jane could not see it. We walked to within ten feet of the tree and no matter how much I pointed and exclaimed, "It's right there," she could not see it. She pointed her camera in the direction I was pointing and snapped a bunch of pictures but she didn't see it until it finally moved, then she saw it.

Probably all of us have had that sort of frustrating experience where we see something that others do not see or where we are the ones who do not see what others see. It is not only in the arena of physical sight that we have this experience. All of us have also been amazed by the blindness of others to the truth we see. Many see global warming to be caused by human activity and the greatest threat in the world and are astonished and perplexed when they discover people who do not see the same thing. Many see the financial bailout of the banking system as the certain sign that the U.S. is turning into a socialist country and are shocked at the blindness of our political leaders. Most citizens of the U.S. see that we have done nothing that should provoke the extreme anger of Moslem people and are sure they are blind to reality. Many parents can clearly see where the foolish decisions of their children are going to lead them and are full of panic as they watch their children walk blindly into destruction. More than one spouse can clearly see the faults and errors of their husband or wife and cannot fathom how it is that their spouse does not see the problem. We all know that other people are blind to at least some truth.

It is one of the most common assessments of God of the human race that all of us are people who have eyes but who cannot see. We are by nature blind to God and the truth he has revealed about himself in creation, in Christ and in his word. God tells the prophet Ezekiel, "Son of man, you are living among a rebellious people. They have eyes to see but do not see ... for they are a rebellious people (Ezek. 12:2)." It is a well known fact that blind people have no ability to see and thus if they are going to see, someone must give them sight. In the OT one of the more common promises associated with the coming of the Messiah into the world is that he was going to make the blind to see. Jesus is that promised one God has sent to make the blind to see as he said to the blind man that he made to see in John 9:39. In this story of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus we witness how it is that Jesus continues to give sight to the blind.

### MAIN POINT

**Only Jesus can give sight to the spiritually blind because...**

#### **I. We are willfully blind (vv. 1-6)**

The chief evidence of Saul's blindness is to be seen in v. 4 when Jesus, after knocking Saul to the ground and blinding him with light asks him, "Saul, Saul why are you persecuting me?" Saul is utterly confused by the question and needs to ask the speaker to identify himself. Jesus responds to his question by saying, "I am Jesus who you are persecuting." Saul was blind to who Jesus is and who the church is. There was no way that he could see Jesus was in heaven or that the Christians he was pursuing were Jesus on this earth. If ever there was a person who was absolutely convinced that he could see fine it was this young Jewish Pharisee named Saul, from the city of Tarsus. He was raised in an orthodox, Jewish home. He was trained in the best of Jewish theological schools. He knew the OT backwards and forwards. He was zealous in his devotion to Yahweh and

determined to honor the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob by keeping the law as perfectly as possible. He knew without question that God had chosen the Jewish nation to be his people. He knew there was only one way to worship God and all other ways were wrong.

We don't know if he ever saw or heard Jesus teach prior to Jesus' death. We do know that he was in Jerusalem during the months following Jesus' ascension. He was present in Jerusalem as thousands of Jewish men and women professed faith in Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God and the Savior of the world. He either witnessed or heard first hand testimony of the miracles being performed by the apostles. We know that he was present when Stephen was seized and dragged before the Jewish ruling council. He listened as Stephen was falsely accused of speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God. He heard Stephen's biblical exposition demonstrating from the OT that Jesus is the promised Messiah. Saul witnessed how the entire ruling council became enraged and dragged Stephen outside of Jerusalem and stoned him to death as he cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

Saul did not only witness his death but approved of it. He was absolutely convinced that Stephen's claim that the Jewish people had murdered their Messiah was ludicrous. He rejected the claim of Jesus and his apostles that the Jewish people, especially the sect of the Pharisees of which he was a part, were lawbreakers. He viewed this teaching that the crucified imposter, Jesus was raised from the dead and thus the divine Son of God, to be a wicked and evil perversion. Saul viewed the followers of Christ, who at this time were mostly Jewish, as traitors to the one God. He believed they were breaking the first commandment; "you shall have no other gods before me." Following Stephen's martyrdom he began conducting a house-to-house search of Jerusalem in order to discover and arrest and punish these depraved people. Saul viewed this new sect who followed the martyred Jesus the same way we view terrorists. They were wrong and if allowed to flourish would bring destruction to the Jewish culture and religion. He thought of himself as a modern Moses killing 3000 of the golden-calf-worshipping Israelites or as a modern Elijah killing the 450 Jewish prophets of Baal or King Josiah killing the Jewish men and women who were conducting worship services on the high places to Asherah.

This phrase, "breathing out murderous threats" is a poetic way of saying that Saul was consumed with destroying the church. He was plotting and planning ways to destroy the church with every breath that he took. He lived to destroy the church. The mention of women is significant. He cared nothing about families or children. He had no sympathy for anyone who claimed to be a follower of Christ. He aimed to stamp out this vile and deadly cult like New Yorkers seek to wipe out the rats that infest their city; like the U.S. and its allies are seeking to destroy the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Saul was oblivious to any and every argument that could be made to prove that Jesus is the Messiah. He was indifferent to the patient endurance exhibited by those he arrested. Stephen praying that God would forgive those who stoned him did not make him wonder if Jesus might be real but further enraged him. You could no more reason with Saul as he marched to Damascus than you could have reasoned with one of the 9/11 terrorists as they flew jetliners towards New York or Washington, D.C. He was as impervious to every plea for mercy as a suicide bomber laden with explosives standing at a bus stop in Iraq. Here was a man who was convinced beyond any doubt that he was serving God; he was doing God's will; he was one of the good guys in his fierce opposition to Christ and his followers.

Saul is willingly, thoughtfully blind. He is absolutely convinced he is right and that his course of action is the right course of action. He would violently disagree with any who would accuse him of being blind. This is true of every human being. All of us are convinced that what we believe to be true is true, that what we have defined as moral behavior is moral behavior. We all have reasons for believing what we believe and acting the way we do. We all are by nature impervious to contrary descriptions of reality. Blind people like Saul, like us will remain blind unless God acts to heal us of our blindness.

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- *And because...*

## II. He alone is the sovereign, gracious Lord (vv. 3-16)

The main actor in this story is Jesus. This Jesus who acts is the sovereign, creator God who is known in the OT by the name, Yahweh. This is shown in a number of the details that Luke records for us. First, a light from heaven suddenly flashes around Saul. The first indication that this is God who has shown up is that the light is from heaven. Who else is in heaven but God? Second, it is a regular feature of God's appearances in the OT that light, fire and lightning mark his appearance. The burning bush that Moses saw, the fire and lightning on Mt. Sinai, the chariot of fire that takes Elijah to heaven, the brightness and lightning and fire in Ezekiel's dramatic vision of God and the numerous poetic descriptions in the Psalms of God's manifesting his presence by light and lightning all point to this bright light being the visible sign that God himself is present. Third, a voice speaking is without exception the chief evidence of God's presence. Every time God shows up he has something to say. God shows up to tell his people the truth. Fourth, the twice repeated name, "Saul, Saul..." reminds of God calling "Abraham! Abraham!" in order to stop him from killing Isaac or of his calling to Moses from the burning bush, "Moses! Moses!"—or of God calling the boy Samuel in the temple, "Samuel! Samuel!" Fifth, several times in the OT God shows up and speaks to a person who is in the company of others and those others, while knowing that something supernatural has happened do not understand what has been spoken (see Daniel 10:6-7). Sixth, Saul himself recognizes that this is a revelation from God as he calls the speaker "Lord." He is confused about how it is that he is persecuting God but he does recognize that God is speaking. Finally, Jesus appears in three visions in this text. In the OT it is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who appears in visions. Through these details Luke shows us as Jesus showed Saul that he is not merely the crucified, resurrected Son of Man but also the divine Son of God. He and the Father are one God.

However, the main thing in this story is the wonder and the power of God's grace, his unmerited favor. Actually, I think wonder is not the right word in thinking about what Jesus is doing here. Rather I think we are seeing the scandal of grace in this text. While blind Saul is led into Damascus Jesus appears to a Christian living in Damascus by the name of Ananias. Jesus tells him that he is to go the house of Judas on Straight St. where he will find a man named Saul praying. He tells him that this Saul has had a vision in which he has seen Ananias visiting him and laying his hands on him so that he can regain his sight. Ananias knows immediately who this Saul of Tarsus is. He tells the risen Christ that this is the man who has been harming the saints of Christ in Jerusalem and who has come to Damascus for the very same reason. I think it is quite humorous that Ananias feels the need to inform the Lord Christ of who Saul is when Jesus knows exactly where Saul is and what he is doing at this moment. The Son of God is in control of everything happening here and yet Ananias seems to think that Jesus needs to have things explained to him. Why does he do this? I think there are a couple of reasons. First, he is afraid. Essentially he is asking Jesus, why would you send me to the hangman? What reason could you have for sending me on an errand that will only lead to my death?

Second, and related to his concern for his personal safety is the more fundamental unbelief that he has. Why would Jesus have anything to do with someone as vile and perverse as Saul? He is killing Christians. If he were blind, that's a good thing, why would we want to give him back his sight? That Saul, this wolf, could become one of Christ's sheep is beyond anything that Ananias could ever imagine. He exhibits a very common point of view among us. It makes sense that I'm a Christian. I wasn't that bad but there is no way that such an evil person as Saul could ever become a Christian. Ananias feels the injustice of grace. Perhaps some of his family has been thrown into prison by Saul. He certainly would know of Stephen's unjust killing and Saul's association with that evil deed. This is an evil man, Jesus. Why would you save him? We regularly make decisions for God as to whom he may or may not save because we don't really get grace. Nobody deserves to be saved, not even me. If you believe in Christ now there was a day when you were as blind as Saul. There is no sin that can prevent God from saving whomever he will. There is no one beyond the reach of God's grace and no one who deserves that grace. Salvation, as Paul says in Romans 9 "does not depend upon man's desire or effort but on God's mercy." God has mercy upon whomever he wants to have mercy, including violent persecutors like Saul. Ananias needs to be reminded of that.

Look at what he tells Ananias (v. 15). Saul is Jesus' chosen instrument. As Paul says about his conversion later in his letters (cf. Galatians 1:13-16, etc.), the Triune God decided before the world began that he, Saul, contrary to what he deserves, would not only become one of his sheep but that he would become one of his primary shepherds. It was God's plan from all of eternity to overcome all of the resistance in Saul's heart to Christ and to grant him to not only believe in Christ but to also suffer for Christ. It was God's sovereign plan to turn one of the principle enemies of the church into one of its foremost defenders. It was his will to turn this wolf into a sheep. There can be no question, when Saul becomes a Christian and then becomes Christ's chief spokesperson to the Gentiles and the author of half of the NT that he is what he is by the grace of God. Saul becomes, as he says dozens of times in his letters, the number one example that salvation is a work of divine, sovereign grace from beginning to end. No one deserves to be saved. No one has any interest in being saved. No one is able to do anything to contribute to his or her salvation, just like Saul as he comes to Damascus to destroy Christ's church. People become Christians because God chooses them, freely without any consideration of anything in them, to become Christians. If Saul's conversion teaches us one thing it is this, we are not in control of salvation, God is. He saves whom he will, according to the pleasure of his own will and not due to anything in any human being.

However, grace is not only seen in Jesus' actions to save his wicked man but also we can see the effect of grace upon his man. In v. 9 we are told that he was blind for three days and did not eat or drink. Also, as Jesus informs Ananias he is praying. In a moment, Saul's entire world has been turned upside down. His going without food or water is not merely a religious response to this crisis but the physiological response of the human organism to profound shock. I have observed this sort of indifference to eating and drinking in a man whose fiancé broke the engagement, in a man whose wife told him she wanted a divorce, in parents when their child was profoundly injured in an accident. When we are the subjects of life altering, fear producing events we lose our appetite and if we are religious people, we pray. Consider why this brief encounter on the road to Damascus with the risen Christ brought Saul into such a state of shock.

First, Saul is forced to see that he was wrong about Jesus being dead. He had heard the claims of Christians that Christ was risen from the dead and seen by hundreds of his followers. He had scoffed at such a claim and ridiculed it. But he was wrong because Jesus was clearly alive, he had spoken to Saul. Second, he was not only wrong about Jesus being the Messiah, but in viewing Jesus as merely a man. Saul was forced to see that Jesus was the Son of God. In other words, while Saul sincerely believed that he was serving God by opposing Christ, he was actually fighting against God. My guess is that this more than anything else was the greatest shock to Saul and the source of his greatest terror.

Third, Saul is confronted with the fact that all of his good deeds are worthless. All that he had done in the service of God was worthless as it was all done in service to a false god. His entire conception of himself and of how God related to human beings has been shown to be nothing but a pile of manure as he says in another place. He is not good and his righteous deeds are as filthy rags before God. He has presumed that God was pleased with him because of all his righteous law abiding work. However, he discovers in a moment that everything that he had built his life upon and around was shown to be a house of cards in the brilliance of the glory of Christ shown to him on that road.

In one dazzling moment Saul discovers that he is wrong in every way that it is possible for a human being to be wrong. He has built his life on a lie. All the good that he believed he was doing turns out to be the very work of the devil. He is overcome with guilt and fear and shame. He waits as men wait on death row as the hour of their execution approaches for the word of pardon to come. He knows that he does not deserve clemency and yet he knows that because he is still alive there is yet hope of mercy. The encounter on the road to Damascus could have been, should have been, an encounter with his judge and executioner. So he waits for further word from the God whom he has sought to kill, praying for mercy while he waits.

Many years later, this same Saul, now the apostle writes to a young Christian pastor named Timothy. In his letter he recounts his conversion. He says the reason God showed this mercy to him, the worst of sinners, was so that “Christ Jesus might show his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.” Jesus’ confrontation with Saul is an example of the merciful confrontation he aims to do in the lives of all his people. We all naturally and sincerely believe we are right in what we believe and how we live. It requires regular confrontation by the risen Christ to reveal to us our blindness. It begins with our conversion but continues throughout the course of our life. The resurrected Christ, through his word and by his Spirit is regularly revealing to us how blind we are so that we can see. He seeks to regularly bring us into this state of shock so that we are prepared to hear his word of forgiveness as we now observe coming to blind, fasting and praying Saul.

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### **III. It takes faith in Christ to see (vv. 17-19)**

In this final paragraph we see the faith of both Ananias and of Saul. In both cases this faith is in Christ and is the result of Christ’s work in each of them. We can see Ananias’ trust in Christ as he goes to the house of Judas and lays his hands on Saul. The vulnerable sheep boldly approaches the ferocious wolf. Perhaps the greatest act of faith we observe here is Ananias calling Saul his brother. He calls murderous Saul his brother because he recognizes that Jesus is turning this wolf into a sheep. He recognizes that Jesus has indeed done this miraculous thing; he has forgiven Saul his many sins and caused him to be born again by the HS. Saul, the enemy of Jesus has now become his brother and a child of the Father.

Saul for his part submits to Ananias in obedience to Jesus. He knows that what Ananias says and does is what Jesus says and does because he now believes what Jesus said, the church is Jesus on this earth. He doesn’t shrink back from having some anonymous disciple lay hands on him but humbly accepts the grace of Jesus from the hands of this human instrument. Then he submits to water baptism at the hands of Ananias thus expressing his faith in Christ. Just like with the Ethiopian eunuch we see Saul submit to this visible symbol of the invisible salvation of Christ. Thus Saul shows that he is united to Christ by faith, that his sins are washed away by Christ’s blood, that his heart has been made clean by the HS, that he has passed safely through the waters of God’s wrath through Christ, his ark, and that he is now a part of the true people of God, the church. In seeing Christ and then in trusting Christ he has come to see reality for what it truly is.

Finally, I want to draw your attention to one of the main things that Saul now sees because he is trusting in Jesus as the crucified, resurrected and exalted Messiah and Savior. Saul sees the identity of the people of God. The risen Christ twice told him that by persecuting Christians he was persecuting the divine Son of God. So Saul sees that the church of Jesus is the people of God, not national, ethnic Israel. Saul, who becomes Paul now zealously promotes and protects the church. He tells the church in Colossae, “I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.” The people he zealously persecuted are now the people for whom he endures the most extreme forms of persecution.

Paul sees that how a person thinks about and treats professing Christians and Christian churches is how you are treating Christ. If you want a motive for why you should think well of other Christians and why you should be eager to forgive and be kind to other Christians, here it is. How you treat Christians is how you are treating Jesus. Your loyalty to the church is a reflection of your loyalty to Christ. If you are angry with a Christian, you are angry with Jesus. If you treat the suffering of a Christian with indifference you are treating Christ with indifference. If you are indifferent to the church of Jesus you are indifferent to Jesus. Listen to me, how you and I treat one another is how we are treating Jesus. You cannot claim to love Jesus while you hate a Christian

because how you treat Christians is how you are treating Jesus. When you have faith in Jesus then you love other Christians and you love the church because when you see Christians you see Christ.

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