

Bibles???

The Word of God is the Absolute Truth and the Final Authority

Turn your bibles with me to Acts 9 –

We have been seeing how the Holy Spirit worked among the early church – and in the same way – continues to work within the church.

As He empowers faithful individuals with the ability to do great wonders and preach Jesus Christ to the world.

Now, this past Sunday, in our study through 2 Kings – we looked at the life and reign of King Manasseh.

And I pointed out that Manasseh was the wickedest king Judah ever had.

Not only did he bring back idolatry into Judah, as he eliminated all of King Hezekiah's reforms – he led Judah further into the path of turning their back on God.

In fact, I mentioned that the reforms that we will see Josiah make this coming Sunday – they only delayed God's judgment.

But at the end of our study, we looked at 2 Chronicles where the author tells us that Manasseh, as he was sitting in a prison in Babylon – he humbled himself and repented and God heard his prayer and the scriptures tell us that Manasseh knew that the Lord was God.

Manasseh is a perfect example in that no individual is beyond God's grace.

And it just so happens that this evening we are going to see what many people would say that Saul of Tarsus is the NT equivalent to Manasseh.

He hated the early church with a passion

He persecuted the church

He was responsible for the death of many believers – and the scriptures tell us that he even tried to coerce some into rejecting Jesus Christ.

And as we will see in our study – he wasn't beyond God grace.

Let's pray...

[Act 9:1-19 NKJV] 1 Then Saul, **still breathing threats and murder** against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2 and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of **the Way**, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

From the end of chapter seven – when Saul gives the thumbs up to the rest of the Sanhedrin to stone Stephen until the beginning of chapter nine – the persecution of the early church by Saul had centered on Jerusalem and the immediate surrounding area.

And even though many of the early disciples moved to other parts of Judah and into Samaria – Saul was not satisfied.

I had you make a note of the phrase “still breathing threats and murder” – this means that Saul was consumed in his persecution of the early church.

He dedicated his life to the cause.

When he woke up in the morning – he asked himself, “What believers am I going to go after today”

I want to point out that Saul – at this point in his life – he thinks he is doing this for God.

In his letter to the Philippians (3) he writes that there was no one who was as zealous for God as he was – that is why he persecuted the early church.

So here, he gets word that some of the disciples that scattered – some of them went up to Damascus and just like in Samaria, Christ was being preached – people were getting saved – and Saul wants to put an end to it.

Keep in mind that Damascus is 140 miles away.

I had you make a note of “the Way” and the reason is that this is what the early church was called – we don’t see the word Christian being used to refer to the early church until we get to Acts 11 – when Saul and Barnabas arrive at Antioch.

3 As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. 4 Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him,

"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

Three times in the book of Acts – Saul provides the details of his conversion.

Here in Acts 9, Acts 22 and Acts 26

By taking all three accounts – we know that this occurred at midday.

We know that those that were with him saw this light – so none can say he was imagining things - think about how bright the light was – in order to shine in the middle of the day, Paul says that it was brighter than the sun.

And I asked you to make a note that he fell – whether he fell from on top of a horse or if he was walking and he fell – we don't know – the scriptures don't reveal this to us.

However, I believe that this fall coincides with his pride.

You see church, conversion requires humility.

A proud individual is going to argue that they can get to heaven on their own. And this is one of the reasons that people are not receptive of the gospel –

But when we are humbled by God, when we understand that we are in need of a Savior and that we are nothing apart from Him, and that is when respond to the Holy Spirit working in our heart and we cry out to Him.

That is what is going on here.

So Jesus says to Saul, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

Now, wait a minute – Saul had been persecuting the church – not Jesus. Right?

But in Matt 25 - Jesus had this warning - 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.

Any persecution we face – they are doing it to Jesus

And it works both ways -

If we fail to serve our brothers and sisters – we fail to serve Him as well.

5 And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It [is] hard for you to kick against the goads."

I had you make a note of Saul's response – Who are You, Lord.

Saul knew who it was – he addresses Jesus as Lord.

And then at the end of verse 5 – we get a little insight to the internal struggle.

To kick against the goads is to reject correction – I have told you that the goads were the sticks that people would use on their ox to steer them.

So it appears that for some time – Saul had been struggling with the conviction of the Holy Spirit –

It could be that deep inside – he knew that the apostles were right and the gospel was true.

It could be that he was so moved by the grace that Stephen demonstrated when he was being stoned – that it rocked Saul to the core.

But Saul kept on resisting God's conviction – and the harder he kicked, the louder his conscience spoke that he was wrong.

6 So he, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do You want me to do?"

Then the Lord [said] to him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." 7 And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one.

Here we see proof of Saul's conversion.

Notice the first question he asks is, "What do **You** want me to do?"

He has completely surrendered to the Lord.

And this church should be our response to conversion – we should ask, What do You want me to do? – not, I am willing to do this and not that. What do You want me to do?

And Jesus provides the very first lesson to Saul – waiting on the Lord.

The Lord always directs us one step at a time.

Paul was to go into the city and then the next step was going to be revealed.

We saw last week the same thing with Philip.

Philip – pick up your things and go to the middle of nowhere – on the road to Gaza.

That was it – and then when the Ethiopian approached – “Philip go overtake that chariot.”

We desire the big picture – but God gives us little snippets. And when we are obedient to those snippets – more is revealed to us.

Notice also that those who were with Saul left stunned – they saw the light, they heard a voice – but saw no one.

8 Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought [him] into Damascus. 9 And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Here we see the contrast between how Saul left Jerusalem and how Saul arrived in Damascus –

When he set out from Jerusalem – he was proud and arrogant, with the power and authority of the high priest.

When he arrives in Damascus, he is a broken man, blinded – being led by one of his men, with the authority of our High Priest – Jesus Christ governing his life.

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

The name Ananias means – whom Jehovah has graciously given –

And in the book of Acts, we have three Ananias'

We already saw one Ananias – the husband of Sapphira – the couple that God struck dead because of their hypocrisy.

Later on, we are going to see that there is a High Priest by the name of Ananias.

The Ananias here is the only one of the 3 that actually seems worthy of his name.

Notice that Ananias is not an apostle or a deacon – we are starting to see the God using an ordinary disciple – a follower of Jesus Christ.

11 So the Lord [said] to him, "Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for [one] called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying. 12 "And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting [his] hand on him, so that he might receive his sight."

So here we see that the Lord has given both Ananias and Saul different visions.

Now, the difference between a vision and a dream is that a vision is received when one is awake.

In his vision, Ananias is told to go get Saul –and also that Saul, himself has received a vision.

Now, I had you make a note that in the vision to Ananias – Saul is praying,

You might say – what is the big deal.

Paul was a religious zealot, was a Pharisee – meaning that in according to the law – he was praying at least three times a day.

However, in the gospels, Jesus warned His disciples that when they prayed, not to be like the Pharisees.

Because the Pharisees were all about praying on street corners – and their prayers were all about vain repetition – never from the heart.

And their intent was never to have fellowship with God but to grab the attention of men.

So people can see how religious they were.

So for God to acknowledge this prayer from Saul means that there must have been something different about his prayer. Maybe it was the first time in his life that Saul had truly prayed from the heart.

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

We see Ananias here show reluctance in obeying the Lord.

“Did I hear you correctly Lord in that you want me to go heal Saul of Tarsus?”

This guy is one bad dude!!!

Have you heard what he has done?

Do you know what he is capable of?

I think one of the things that happens when we are reluctant to obey what God has called us to do is that we begin to allow logic get in the way of our obedience.

And many times is because we don't have the big picture – so we are arguing with God based upon what we see.

Think of Jonah – Go to Nineveh – no way.

Why? Nineveh is bad – they are our enemy.

That is what Ananias is doing here – as far as he knows – Saul is still Saul – he doesn't know the work that God is going to do through Saul.

So he comes us with excuses - just like we do.

Over my almost thirty years in the Lord – one of the things that I have found out is that God doesn't pay much attention to our excuses – He just repeats Himself until we learn to obey.

By the way, this is the first time that we see the term saints applied to the church.

15 But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. 16 "For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake."

Again, the Lord didn't pay much attention to Ananias excuses – He simply repeated His command – Go.

Saul was just a simple vessel – but what made him precious was that he was God's chosen vessel.

Notice that God is disclosing this to Ananias before He disclosed it to Saul.

Saul is going to be the vessel that the gospel is proclaimed to the gentiles and the Jews and kings – and in doing so, he was destined to suffer.

Turn with me to 2 Cor 11 –

Because here Paul provides us with a list of the things that he suffered.

[2Co 11:22-28 NKJV] 22 Are they Hebrews? So [am] I. Are they Israelites? So [am] I. Are they the seed of Abraham? So [am] I. 23 Are they ministers of Christ?--I speak as a fool--I [am] more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. 24 From the Jews five times I received forty [stripes] minus one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; 26 [in] journeys often, [in] perils of waters, [in] perils of robbers, [in] perils of [my own] countrymen, [in] perils of the Gentiles, [in] perils in the city, [in] perils in the wilderness, [in] perils in the sea, [in] perils among false brethren; 27 in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in

fastings often, in cold and nakedness-- 28 besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches.

Now, I want to make sure to add that Paul wasn't a great minister for Christ because of the things that he suffered.

Suffering doesn't automatically make us a great ambassador for Christ.

Paul wanted to serve Jesus, and if these hardships were part of the job description – he was fully on board – that is what made him a great minister for Christ.

17 And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

Saul's blindness was to end when Ananias prayed for him.

It wasn't one of the Apostles who led Saul to Christ; it was just one of the believers in Damascus.

God wanted Paul, who more than any other would be responsible for the growth of the Church in the Gentile world, not to be led to faith in Jerusalem or by one of the original

He wanted Saul & all to realize that salvation is sovereignly a work of the Spirit, done through the humble hands of His people – regardless of who or where they are.

Notice that Ananias laid hands on Saul – previously we had seen Peter and John laid hands on the individuals in Samaria to receive the filling of the Holy Spirit

18 Immediately there fell from his eyes [something] like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized. 19 So when he had received food, he was strengthened. Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus.

The Lord's healing of Saul's blindness allowed him to once again see.

But it is also an illustration of what happened within Saul's heart as he no longer suffered from spiritual blindness.

The scales that surrounded his heart had been removed as well.

And notice, the first thing he wanted to do when he received his sight was to get baptized – to identify with the death and resurrection of his Lord – Jesus Christ.

Let's pray...

To Receive Christ do the following:

Admit, "I am a sinner."

Confess and be willing to turn from your sin.

Believe, by faith that Jesus Christ died for you on the cross.

Receive, through prayer, Jesus Christ into your heart and receive eternal life.

Dear Lord Jesus,

I know that I am a sinner and need Your forgiveness. I believe that You died on the cross for my sins. Please forgive me for my sins and cleanse me by Your blood. I accept You by faith as my personal Lord and Savior. Give me a thirst for Your Word and Help me to follow You all of my days. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

[Num 6:24-26 NLT] 24 'May the LORD bless you and protect you. 25 May the LORD smile on you and be gracious to you. 26 May the LORD show you his favor and give you his peace.'