



IN THE GRIP OF GOD'S GRACE

SERIES: *THE SPREADING FLAME*

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Acts 9:1-19

14th Message

Gary Vanderet

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In chapters 6 through 8 of the book of Acts we read the stories of Stephen and Philip, two Greek-educated Jews who became pioneers in the gospel's advance from Jerusalem out into the Greek speaking Gentile world. In chapters 9 and 10, Luke records two extraordinary conversions that actually began that mission; first, Saul of Tarsus, who became the apostle to the gentiles (chapter 9), and then Cornelius, a centurion, the first gentile convert (chapter 10).

Saul's coming to faith is the most famous conversion in church history. It is no exaggeration to say that it was one of the most significant events in history. This story is so important that Luke shares it three times, here in chapter 9, and again in chapters 22 and 26. Throughout the ages, people have come to faith simply by trying to disprove or explain away this beautiful, miraculous story. Young Saul of Tarsus, the enemy of the church, the persecutor, the relentless hunter, was stopped in his tracks on the road to Damascus, marvelously converted, and recruited to share the gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth. The pursuer became the prey. The hunter became the hunted.

For those of us who are Christ's, this story is a wonderful picture of how we came to belong to him. God is still in the business of pursuing men and women and converting them to his own purpose. I pray that as we catch a glimpse of his providence we will be filled with awe and joy.

Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, 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. (Acts 9:1-2, NAS95)

Saul was hardly a "seeker." His mind was anything but open. Actually, he was bent on destroying the church. Luke, who would later become Saul's friend and associate, uses strong language to describe this man's anger. He has already mentioned Saul three times, describing him as a cruel opponent of the gospel.

In his account of Stephen's martyrdom, Luke wrote, "And when they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him, and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul" (Acts 7:58). "And Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death. And on that day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, ex-

cept the apostles. But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house; and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison" (Acts 8:1-3)

Here, Luke says that Saul was "still breathing threats and murder against the disciples." Saul's hatred and antagonism had gone unabated since Stephen's death. In fact, the language that Luke uses to describe Saul's behavior portrays him as more animal than human. In 8:3 he said that Saul began ravaging the church. This is the same verb used in Psalm 80:13 of a wild boar devastating a vineyard, and of the ravaging of a body by a wild beast. Saul was an out of control, frightening, violent enemy of the young church.

Later on, in Acts 26, in his appearance before King Agrippa, Paul tells the king how he felt at this time: "I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them" (Acts 26:9-11, NIV).

Stephen's speech to the Sanhedrin had enraged Saul. Hearing Stephen proclaim that the temple was no longer necessary, Saul realized that this movement could not be ignored; it had to be stopped. Thus he sought and received extradition papers from the Sanhedrin to go to Damascus, about 150 miles northeast of Jerusalem, a week's journey, and destroy the Christian community there.

This then is the man who in just a few days would become a baptized believer. In his obsession, he had not planned on the sovereign grace of God.

As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do." The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. 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. And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank. (Acts 9:3-9)

As Saul and his companions were nearing the end of their weeklong journey, approaching the beautiful city of Damascus, an oasis in the desert, suddenly there was a blinding flash of light. Later accounts say that it was around noon, but the light was brighter than the sun. It blinded Saul, knocking him over, leaving him trembling in the dirt. The captor lay captive. The one seeking to arrest Christians was himself arrested. Then a voice addressed him directly and personally, in Aramaic, "Saul, Saul (that double vocative is reminiscent of the way God's voice was often heard in the Old Testament), why are you persecuting Me?" Saul's response, "Who are You, Lord?" could simply mean "sir," as "Lord" was often used simply as a term of respect. But he must have realized he was in the presence of God. He wasn't prepared for the answer to his enquiry about the speaker's identity: "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting."

These words must have hit him like a bolt of lightning. The use of the earthly name Jesus, rather than a divine title, triggered an explosion in his mind. He realized at that moment that Jesus was alive, that his claims were true. He was confronted with the truth that he would later so wonderfully understand and explain – the spiritual unity between the Savior and the saints. Jesus so identifies with his followers that to persecute them is to persecute him.

Lying prostrate in the dust of the road, Saul received instructions to go into the city, where he would be told what to do next. So this religious zealot, bent on confidently entering Damascus, is actually led by the hand into the city, blind, weak and impotent, now a prisoner of the very one he was seeking to destroy. A different man now, the first thing he will experience is the love of the body of Christ. The very ones who were being pursued will minister to the pursuer.

As will be the case with Peter and Cornelius in the next chapter, God's arrangements are confirmed by a double vision.

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." 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, 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." But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name." (Acts 9:10-14)

God's choice to help Saul was Ananias, whom Paul describes later in Acts as "a devout observer of the law

and highly respected by all the Jews living there" (Acts 22:12, NIV). Imagine the conversation between the Lord and Ananias. I picture Ananias responding excitedly and positively, asking a question or two: "Go to Straight Street? All right, Lord. I know where that is." (By the way, this street is still the main east-west thoroughfare in Damascus.) "The house of Judas? All right. A man from Tarsus? Fine. Saul? Hold it right there. *The* Saul? The beast who has been destroying the church? Are you sure, Lord? But don't you know that he has come here to arrest us? Am I turning myself over to the police? This is suicidal!"

Ananias's fears were understandable, but the Lord doesn't answer his misgivings directly.

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; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake." (Acts 9:15-16)

The Lord repeats his command, "Go!" The sovereign Lord had spoken. This is all the rationale that Ananias, or any of us for that matter, needs. But in his mercy the Lord tells Ananias that Saul has a new status: He is "my chosen instrument." And he has a new assignment: he will "bear my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel." And he has a new relationship to persecution: to "suffer for my name's sake." Ananias has nothing to fear from Saul.

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." And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized; and he took food and was strengthened. Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus, (Acts 9:17-19)

William Barclay describes Ananias as "one of the forgotten heroes of the church." We never hear of Ananias again, but his sensitivity to God's voice allowed him to be a part of a great work of God. Both his words and actions are very moving. Imagine laying your hands on someone who was bent on arresting you! At the same time he addresses him as "Brother Saul." Those are words of forgiveness! Ananias probably knew some of the believers who had been killed by Saul.

These may have been the first words that Saul heard from Christian lips following his conversion. They must have sounded both sweet and strange to his ears. The arch-enemy of the church is now welcomed as a brother. The feared revolutionary is now received as part of the family. Heaven rejoiced! Ananias explained that the same Jesus who had appeared to Saul had sent him so that this former enemy might both recover his sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.

As Ananias laid his hands on Saul, Luke says that the scales fell from his eyes and he could see. What a picture of the conversion process! Paul would later write to the Corinthians, "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor 4:6, NIV). According to the apostle, the conversion process can be compared with what occurred at the original creation. Then everything was dark, and God said, "Let there be light," and the light shone. This was how it was in Saul's heart. It was black, and filled with evil motives and murderous thoughts, so that he couldn't see. Then God said, "Let there be light," and suddenly he could see.

I would like to spend our remaining time thinking through the implications of Saul's conversion. Let me share with you three reflections.

Conversion comes a result of a divine initiative.

Just as Jesus orchestrated that Damascus Road encounter, so he arranges our conversion encounters as well. Saul did not make a decision for Christ. He was persecuting the Lord. It was Christ who decided for him and intervened in his life. God always makes the first move. We search for him only in response to his prior advances.

The Hound of Heaven, the well-known poem by Francis Thompson, written out his own experience, traces Jesus' ability to pursue a man or woman like a relentless hound. Kent Hughes, in his book *The Church Afire*, shares Thompson's background: "Thompson's early life was very difficult. He studied to be a priest, but never finished. He studied medicine, but flunked out. He joined the military, but was let go after one day. Eventually he became an opium addict in London. But he couldn't get away from God's persistent love for him. In the midst of his despair, he was befriended by someone who recognized his poetic gifts and helped him write his experiences in verse."¹

Many have personally experienced the truth of Thompson's powerful words:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears
I hid from him, and under running laughter
Up vistaed slopes I sped,
And shot precipitated,
Down titanic gloom of chasmed fears,
From those strong feet that followed, followed after.

Christ is always the hunter, the initiator. He brings us to the place where we acknowledge our need for him. Even if we are trying to get away from him he pursues us with his love. He is the hound of heaven. He chooses us. The Lord told Ananias, "This man is my chosen instrument to bear my name." And Saul would gladly proclaim Christ for the rest of his life. He would later write to the Ephesian church: "For he chose us in him

before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will" (Eph 1:4-5, NIV).

And yet we also see, as John Stott points out, that God's sovereign grace is gentle. Gradually and non-violently, Jesus pricked Saul's mind and conscience with his goads. Then he revealed himself by the light and the voice, not to overwhelm him, but to enable him to make a free response. God's sovereign grace doesn't crush our personality. In fact, it does the opposite: it enables us to be truly human. Sin imprisons us. God's grace frees us from pride and self-centeredness and enables us to repent and believe.²

C.S. Lewis, in describing his own conversion some years after the fact, said:

I did not see what is now the most shining and obvious thing; the divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms. The Prodigal Son at least walked home on his own feet. But who can duly adore the Lord who will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape? The words...compel them to come in, have been so abused by wicked men that we shudder at them; but, properly understood, they plumb the depth of Divine mercy. The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men, and his compulsion is our liberation.³

One significant inference we can draw from this truth that God takes the initiative, and in fact does so with the least likely of people such as Saul the persecutor, is that we should never give up on anyone. We can't pronounce anyone hopeless. In 1 Timothy, Paul said that the fact that he, the worst of sinners, could be converted, is a sign that the least likely of all people can be converted (1 Tim 1:16). That should encourage us to continue to pray for those who are resistant to the gospel.

Conversion involves a surrender to the Lordship of Christ.

Conversion, at its root, is not so much a decision or commitment, though certainly both are involved; it's a surrender to the lordship of Christ. Conversion is a revolutionary change of government that results in a radical change of behavior. It is a change from thinking that you can run your own life to an acceptance that God holds the plan in his hands, and he has the right to tell you what to do.

That is the first thing that Saul experienced when Jesus arrested him – his right to be Lord and to tell him what to do. He was on his way to Damascus, and the Lord stopped him in his tracks. Seeing the blinding light, his response was, "Who are you, Lord?" He didn't understand fully, but he knew that this was someone who had come to take over. From that point on his life changed. Before that he regarded Jesus as merely a Palestinian street preacher with no credentials to preach.

Then, suddenly, he saw him as the risen God. That changed his whole life. From that time forward, Saul would no longer be giving the orders.

Though our conversion might be less dramatic than Saul's, it ought to have the same effect – breaking our compulsive independence and arrogance and bringing us to the place of submission to Christ. He brings us to our knees, acknowledging how desperately we need him. Paul would later say to the Corinthians, “You are not your own; you have been bought with a price” (1 Cor 6:19-20).

Conversion involves a personal encounter with Jesus Christ.

We all meet Jesus in different ways. None of us here has been blinded by a light and knocked to the ground. Jesus has not appeared to any one of us. None of us has heard his actual voice. But if we are converted we have met him and entered into a personal relationship with him. Jesus himself said, “This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3, NIV).

And remember, we are talking about a personal, not an academic relationship. Christianity isn't knowing about Jesus, but knowing Jesus. Do you know the difference? Let me illustrate it. My wife Kathy and I have been married for over 27 years. Suppose I told you

there is a great book at Amazon.com entitled “The Amazing Kathleen Vanderet,” and I read you some of the chapter titles: “Her Godly Parents and Loving Home; Her Incredible Ability to Nurture Life; Her Marvelous Wisdom; Her Gentleness and Kindness; Her Numerous Acts of Mercy; Her Unique Sense of Humor.” Now you could read that book and learn a lot about Kathy Vanderet. But, I *know* her! That is the kind of relationship that God wants us to have with him though his son Jesus Christ. For Saul, that new relationship began on the Damascus road.

Father, thank you for this amazing story and the truths it teaches. Thank you for taking the initiative to find us and bring us into your kingdom. Teach us to grow in grace. We pray that we will not write anyone off. Help us become like you, seeking others with the good news of life in Christ. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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1. R. Kent Hughes, *The Church Afire* (Wheaton: Crossway), 129.
2. John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity), 173.
3. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised By Joy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955), 229.