



# THE LIGHT OF LIFE OVERCOMES THE DARKNESS

SERIES: *LIFE UNLEASHED*

Acts 9:1–19a

15th Message

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For our Thanksgiving celebration Emily placed a cutout turkey on the wall and had everyone make a feather for the turkey and write on it what he or she was thankful for. My grandson was thankful for his mommy and daddy and little sister; one of my daughters was thankful for honesty, authenticity and adventure; I wrote that I was thankful I didn't die when I fell off my bike; and a friend from Scotland wrote, "I am thankful God invented Scotland first." Reflecting on what the apostle Paul might have written on his Thanksgiving feather, listen to what he writes in his letter to Timothy.

**"I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." (1 Tim 1:12–14 NIV)**

This first week of Advent Isaiah's prophetic words ring with the clarity of a church bell in Luke's account of the conversion of Saul.

**The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,  
on them has light shone. (Isaiah 9:2 ESV)**

Luke Timothy Johnson suggests that Saul's conversion is one of the greatest evidences that Jesus was the Messiah and Lord.

The turning of a Pharisaic persecutor into the apostle of the Gentiles is a paradox so profound that it requires multiple retellings, with each version bringing out some further nuance of significance. Saul's conversion, after all, is the paradigmatic expression of the ironic truth spoken by Gamaliel (5:38–39): No one worked harder to root out the messianic movement than this agent of the chief priest; his failure to stop it and his being transformed into its boldest advocate stands for Luke and his readers as the surest sign that the crucified Messiah was indeed Lord, that their movement "was from God."<sup>1</sup>

Luke's account should give us hope that God is in control, even in the midst of our terror-stricken world where vast numbers of zealots of a different kind carry out mass murder in service to their god. In addition to hope, God is going to challenge you with an invitation to be part of what he is doing.

## I. The CNN Report: Arrested by the Holy (Acts 9:1–8)

### A. The terror escalates

**But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 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. (Acts 9:1–2 ESV)**

This is Luke's fourth reference to Saul, filling out his portrait as a fierce enemy to those who follow Christ. We were first introduced to him as the young man who was an accomplice to those who murdered

Stephen, watching over their garments and giving his approval as they stoned him. Then with holy zeal we find Saul carrying out a systematic reign of terror in Jerusalem, making a house-to-house search for Christians throughout the city. Later he admits that he "not only locked up many of the saints in prison," but also cast his vote to put them to death (26:10). These vicious attacks forced Jesus' disciples to flee Jerusalem into the outlying regions of Judea and across the border into Samaria. Others hoping to escape his reach fled further to Damascus, where several synagogues supported a large Jewish colony.

Saul's inability to contain the followers of Jesus to Jerusalem further fueled his rage. "In a raging fury against them" (26:11) "he hatched a plot for their liquidation and persuaded the high priest to sanction it."<sup>2</sup> As N. T. Wright explains, as a Pharisee, Saul had no authority of his own.

The Pharisees were a populist pressure group, not an official body with any official power. Saul, zealous for God and the law, was prepared to do more than the high priest had yet envisaged. No doubt, like many rulers, the high priest was only too glad to have someone else willing to do the dirty work.<sup>3</sup>

Like Hitler's SS, Saul was relentless and determined to hunt them down, one by one, showing no mercy to man or woman alike.

Imagine how you would feel had you been one of the refugees who had fled to Damascus and in the morning news you learn that Saul was en route to your city? Would you immediately gather up your family and go on the run again? Where would you go? Would you go into hiding? Who could you trust? Would you think to pray? Given the rapid escalation of violence, it would be easy to lose faith and give in to hopelessness, believing that God had abandoned you and there was little you could do.

### B. Prophetic hope

But as we have observed throughout our studies in Luke-Acts, no human authority operates outside the purview of the risen Lord, who reigns supreme upon his throne and "brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness." (Isa 40:23). In our text last week we saw how God used Saul the persecutor as his instrument to spur the evangelization of Samaria. Today's text will be no less surprising, fulfilling yet another one of Isaiah's great prophecies.

**Thus says the Lord GOD:**

**"Behold, I will lift up my hand to the nations,  
and raise my signal to the peoples;  
and they shall bring your sons in their arms,  
and your daughters shall be carried on their shoulders.  
Kings shall be your foster fathers,  
and their queens your nursing mothers.  
With their faces to the ground they shall bow down to you,  
and lick the dust of your feet.  
Then you will know that I am the LORD;  
those who wait for me shall not be put to shame."**

(Isa 49:22–23)

### C. The light overcomes the darkness

Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground he 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 rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. (vv. 3–7)

Armed with the necessary legal documents and a military escort, the self-appointed inquisitor headed off on a Roman road through the Syrian wilderness for 150 miles towards Damascus. As a devout Pharisee for whom prayer and meditation was a daily practice, we can imagine Saul zealously preparing himself for his sacred mission.

Before Israel’s prophets were qualified to combat idolatry within the nation, they were given a vision of the Holy God on his throne, Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1 being the most notable examples. In both cases the encounter was shocking to the core. Ezekiel fell on his face and Isaiah recoiled in horror, fearing his sin would kill him on the spot. Yet, both were purified by God’s grace and forever changed by the experience. N. T. Wright suggests that these prophetic texts may give a realistic context for God’s intervention and show that God is answering Saul’s prayer in a way he never imagined.

People who studied the scriptures deeply, and longed to share the vision of the God they loved and trusted, would use the first chapter of Ezekiel in prayer, hoping that somehow they might be allowed to glimpse the same glory, to see God face to face on his throne, even if the sight of such glory would hurl them flat on their own faces on the ground.<sup>4</sup>

After a week’s time they approach Damascus, a beautiful oasis surrounded by desert. Suddenly the one who came to arrest those “belonging to the Way” is taken captive by the Lord of the Way. A light, which he later describes as “brighter than the sun” (26:13), flashes around him with such force it knocks him to ground. As he lay on the ground he hears a voice addressing him in Aramaic (26:14), his mother tongue, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Saul recognizes he is on holy ground, but he doesn’t know that the One with whom he is talking identifies himself with those he is persecuting. So he asks “Who are you, Lord?” Then comes the shocking realization, the One he sees on the throne is Jesus, who is alive in a new and more powerful way than he could have ever imagined.

This is not the first time God intercepted someone traveling on the road and commissioned him with a new itinerary and purpose for living. When the patriarch Jacob fled his home to escape the murderous rage of his brother, he encountered the living God in Bethel. The encounter transformed his exiled flight into a holy pilgrimage. The imagery of the flashing light and the commanding voice of God is particularly reminiscent of Moses’ encounter with God at the burning bush, a theophany that was re-enacted on a national scale in the giving of the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai. Every encounter with the holy is fearfully shocking, but never has one brought such radical upheaval in one’s perception of reality. As Wright explains,

Suddenly Saul’s world turned upside down and inside out. Terror, ruin, shame, awe, horror, glory and terror again swept over him. Years later he would write of seeing “the glory of God in the face of Jesus the Messiah” (2 Cor 4:6)...but this “seeing” went far, far beyond a mere qualification for office...It confirmed everything Saul had been taught; it overturned everything he had been taught. The law and the prophets had come true; the law and prophets had

been torn to pieces and put back together in a totally new way...it showed him that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, had done what he always said he would, but done it in a shocking, scandalous, horrifying way. The God who had always promised to come and rescue his people had done so in person. In the person of Jesus... We call this event a “conversion,” but it was more like a volcanic eruption, thunderstorm and tidal wave all coming together.<sup>5</sup>

### D. Leading the blind in a way they do not know

The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. 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. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. (vv. 8–9)

Those who were traveling with Saul heard the voice but did not see the risen Lord. When Saul was finally able to get up, he opened his eyes but he couldn’t see. So his companions led him by the hand through the gate in the city wall to the place where they had presumably made preparations to stay. As Isaiah prophesied,

**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 42:16)**

Saul remained in a state of blindness and didn’t eat or drink for three days. Whether Saul didn’t eat because he was fasting as an act of humility and repentance in order to prepare himself to receive revelation (13:2–3), or because the experience so overwhelmed him he physically couldn’t eat, Luke doesn’t tell us. As a gifted storyteller, Dr Luke keeps us in the hunt for additional information to prevent us from making premature judgments about the credibility of Saul’s conversion. Given Saul’s religious zeal and violent past, Luke doesn’t want us to jump on the evangelical bandwagon too quickly, nor does he want us driven by past prejudice. We should be open to the fact that God can change lives, but we should never be naive or dismiss our doubts too easily.

Today when shocking events occur the news media descend upon the scene to report on the facts. After the initial reports are run, 24-hour news stations drone on and on, summoning a vast array of “experts,” who offer their points of view, but add very little to our understanding of what occurred. Despite our quest for immediate answers, it takes time for authorities to conduct a proper investigation. With the passage of time, we often find that someone who was on the “inside” of what occurred comes forth and gives an illuminating perspective as an eyewitness—the “Insider’s Report.” But it can take years and decades before we are able to understand the full significance of the event, which filmmakers capture in a documentary.

Similarly in Luke’s initial account of Saul’s conversion, he gives us the minimum of facts, but not enough to know whether the impact of God’s intervention had a lasting impact on this zealot. Now he gives us the “Insider’s Report” from a reliable eyewitness.

## II. The Insider’s Report: Ananias (9:10–19a)

### A. Ananias’ task

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.” 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, 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.” (vv. 10–12)

As the story moves to Damascus, we find the Lord preparing another disciple to play an important role in Saul’s conversion. The kingdom of God is not an island, but a community of tight-knit human relationships. Conversion is meaningless if an individual remains in isolation. It is an absolute necessity that Saul be welcomed and embraced by a respected individual in the community. Though it is surprising that there are any followers of Jesus left in Damascus with Saul at their doorstep, Ananias is there and he knows how to listen to the voice of Jesus. F. F. Bruce suggests that “he was probably not one of the refugees from the persecution of Jerusalem,” for later Paul speaks of him as “a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there” (Acts 22:12). “It appears that the gospel had already made its way independently to Damascus—possibly from its northern base in Galilee.”<sup>6</sup>

“Ananias” is the Greek rendering of the Hebrew “Gracious is Yahweh.” The fivefold repetition of his name in the story presses home the theme. The “Lord is gracious” and he insists that his servant live up to his name by being gracious to Saul as his representative. But it won’t be an easy task. Ananias is well aware of Saul’s reputation through the influx of refugees from Jerusalem. So you can imagine his astonishment when the Lord directs him to go to the street called Straight where a man of Tarsus named Saul is staying in the home of a man named Judas. No one in his right mind would go straightaway (“straight” also means “immediately”) to the home of man named Judas, who has welcomed a known terrorist named Saul without hesitating. Does God have a sick sense of humor? Ananias has seen this movie before.

Knowing this doesn’t look good, the Lord attempts to alleviate Ananias’ fears by telling him that, “Behold, he is praying.” Unconvinced, Ananias thinks to himself, “Of course he’s praying, all devout Jews pray, all zealous Pharisees pray.” To further address his doubts God adds, “he has seen in a vision a man named ‘Gracious is Yahweh’ come and lay his hands on him and pray for him so that he might regain his sight.” Still flustered, Ananias wonders, “This is really getting complicated. Now there’s a vision within a vision and I’m supposed go to him to lay my hands on a blind man and heal him as your representative. Are you kidding me? I’ve never healed anyone before, let alone an enemy agent.” Ananias finally gives voice to his fears.

#### B. Ananias’ fears addressed

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

In assessing the situation Ananias appears realistic. “Ok, we have a blind terrorist and two simultaneous visions bearing witness to this guy’s change of heart. But I can’t turn a deaf ear to everything I have personally heard from those who were forced to flee their homes in Jerusalem and have relatives who are now either in prison or have been executed. Nor can I turn a blind eye to his current agenda in Damascus and the legal muscle backing him up. Lord you know my heart, I am no skeptic, but neither am I naive. No hotheaded zealot who has been indoctrinated in religious zeal since childhood and sits on the top of the food chain drinking in the euphoria of power dripping with blood can turn his life on a dime.”

**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.” (v. 15)**

The Lord responds, “I’ve had my eye on this man from Tarsus for quite some time and I have chosen him to be my instrument to broadcast my name further than anyone before. The magnitude of his calling is equal to or even greater than that of Moses, for he will be expounding the meaning and implications of the New Covenant beyond the borders of Israel to the nations.”

Ananias is stunned thinking, “So you’re calling him a new and greater Moses? And the person you’ve chosen to spearhead the work of proclaiming good news to the pagan world, to those who are ignorant and know nothing and could care less about our laws, our history, our traditions, or our God, will be a hardline, fanatical, ultra-nationalist, super-orthodox Pharisaic Jew? Right!”<sup>7</sup> It’s like saying the head of Hamas is going to be President one day. But the Lord has one more card up his sleeve. “For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” (v. 16)

The call comes with a price, an unspeakable cost. There is no glory without a cross. Just as Saul had inflicted suffering on others who put their faith in Jesus, so now he will endure even more suffering for the sake of the privilege of making Jesus’ name known. It is only with the hindsight of 2000 years that we are able to comprehend the breadth of that promise. While the magnitude of Saul’s calling stirs Ananias’ imagination, hearing of the unspeakable cost it required gives him the ultimate assurance and compassion he needed to carry out the task.

#### C. Mission accomplished: Ananias is gracious

**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.” And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; and taking food, he was strengthened. (vv. 17–19a)**

Ananias’ actions show that God’s grace has done its work in his heart, living up to his name. Despite his fears, he obeys straightaway and goes to Judas’ home where Saul is staying. In a bold act of identification, he lays his hands upon him and prays that he would be healed and that the fullness of the Holy Spirit would come upon him to empower him for the ministry God had called him to. John Stott discerns a wealth of kindness in Ananias’ embrace of Saul.

I suspect that this laying-on of hands was a gesture of love to a blind man, who could not see the smile on Ananias’ face, but could feel the pressure of his hands. At the same time, Ananias addressed him as Brother Saul, or “Saul, my brother.” I never fail to be moved by these words. They may well have been the first words that Saul heard from Christian lips after his conversion, and they were words of fraternal welcome. They must have been music to his ears. What? Was the archenemy of the church to become a brother? Was the dreaded fanatic to be received as a member of the family? Yes, it was so.<sup>8</sup>

Everyone gets a second chance because “the Lord is gracious.” Think on these names —Ananias, Saul and Judas. In each case the name reminds us of failure —Ananias lied to the Holy Spirit in search of prestige and was killed; Saul was a wicked king who controlled his people through murder and ended his life in suicide; Judas betrayed our Lord and hung himself. Because the “Lord is gracious,” he is going to redeem the reputation of each name from failure, betrayal and murder to courage, faithfulness and sacrificial love. Perhaps the

greatest demonstration of God's grace is in giving the Sanhedrin a second chance to repent by replaying Jesus' trial through his servant, Stephen. And out of that crowd who witnessed Stephen's death one has repented.

#### D. A modern day "Ananias"

The New York Times Bestseller, *Son of Hamas*, tells the inside story of Mosab Hassan ("Joseph") Yousef, the oldest son of Sheikh Hassan Yousef, a founding leader of Hamas. After the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, Yasser Arafat launched an all-out crackdown on Hamas, locking up the top leaders of Hamas, including Yousef's father. Filled with anger and a desire for revenge, Yousef and a friend began searching for guns. Israel's security forces quickly caught up with him and placed him in the Maskobiyeh Detention Center, better known as the Slaughterhouse. Shin Bet agents offered him freedom if he would agree to go undercover and become their informant on Hamas activities. During the next sixteen months he was sent to prison in Megiddo. There he witnessed the brutality of Hamas operatives, who tortured imprisoned suspected collaborators. When he compared the humane treatment he received from Shin Bet agents with that of Hamas, he began to doubt his absolute faith in Islam and Hamas and accepted their offer to become an informant. Yousef's ultimate desire was to prevent bloodshed. After his release from prison in 1997, he became Shin Bet's most reliable source of information, preventing dozens of suicide bombings and assassination attacks upon Jewish leaders.

In 1999 Yousef was walking past the Damascus gate, which in his words, "Significantly, brings people into the old City at the border where the historic Muslim Quarter meets the Christian Quarter."<sup>9</sup> Like Saul of Tarsus, Yousef was about to have a surprising encounter that would change his life forever. There he met a modern day "Ananias" from the United Kingdom, who invited him to a Bible study. Yousef thought, "If I could learn so much from the Israelis, maybe other 'infidels' might have something valuable to teach me as well."<sup>10</sup> After their first meeting Yousef's new friend gave him a New Testament translated in Arabic and English. He couldn't put it down, as "every verse seemed to touch a deep wound in my life."<sup>11</sup> He was thunderstruck and set free reading Jesus' words, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." "That meant I could love anyone. The only real enemy was the enemy inside me."<sup>12</sup> Over the next years he fully embraced the gospel and in 2005 was baptized in Tel Aviv. In 2007 he was granted political asylum in America.

Given the unprecedented escalation of the war on terror, we must understand that the answer for world peace does not lie with our politicians or military war machine, but with those who follow the Prince of Peace—who love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them. The question for you is "Are you willing to be an Ananias?"

### III. The Documentary – Saul of Tarsus becomes Paul the Apostle

Imagine three decades after Saul's conversion a full-length documentary is made on the apostle's life. After years of careful research everything comes into focus. The filmmaker documents the long process that led up to Saul's conversion, the three years in Arabia where he spent time alone with the Lord, and a decade of working out the implications of this new life in his hometown of Tarsus. As we follow Paul suffering sacrificially throughout his missionary travels, any doubts we may have had about the authenticity of his conversion evaporate like dew under the midday sun. In accordance with Isaiah's promise, a former terrorist has become a "foster father" and "nursing mother" (Isa 49:22–23). In his own words he reminded the believers in Thessalonica, "we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children...and how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory" (1 Thess 2:7, 11–12). Like his master before him, he sacrificed everything for the kingdom, "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil 1:21). As N. T. Wright concludes,

If the death and resurrection of Jesus is the hinge on which the great door of history swung open at last, the conversion of Saul of Tarsus was the moment when all of the ancient promises of God gathered themselves up, rolled themselves into a ball, and came hurtling through that open door and out into the wide world beyond.<sup>13</sup>

1. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, SP 5 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1992), 166.
2. John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church & the World*, BST (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990), 168.
3. N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone: Part One, Chapters 1–12* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 144.
4. N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone*, 139.
5. N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone*, 140–42.
6. F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 199.
7. The give and take dialogue between Ananias and God is adapted from Wright, *Acts for Everyone*, 144–45.
8. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 174.
9. Mosab Hassan Yousef with Ron Brackin, *Son of Hamas* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2011), 119.
10. Mosab Yousef, *Son of Hamas*, 120.
11. Mosab Yousef, *Son of Hamas*, 122.
12. Mosab Yousef, *Son of Hamas*, 122.
13. Wright, *Acts for Everyone*, 142.