

The Damascus Road  
Acts 9:1-19

Deuteronomy 32:1-14  
Philippians 2:1-15  
Psalm 113

This morning we will be continuing our Journey through the book of Acts, looking at the first 20 verses of chapter 9. Up until this point Luke had been focusing on the ministry of the Disciples starting in Jerusalem and spreading outward because of persecution that was brought on by Saul, who we will see how God changes him as well this morning. This journey through Acts has been an interesting one, at least for me. First off because it is a challenge to take a passage from here which is cataloging a historical event and to find some deeper purpose and meaning behind what is going on to bring a lesson from it. It has not been easy, and has been an interesting task.

The one thing that for me has been the biggest take away of this book so far, is God's use of various events to spread the word. And that it is God who is using all for his purpose and glory through it. Even the persecution that arises in Jerusalem served the purpose to spread the gospel into the unknown world. After services last week, Josh and I were talking about this very thing last week, and as he had mentioned...It is amazing how we are sitting here today, in this country, 1000's of miles away from Jerusalem, and we are gathered and worshiping in God's name. If this persecution hadn't come upon the early church, and a whole host of other events we are not even aware of...we wouldn't be sitting here today.

We are the fulfillment of what God told his disciples, that they would be a witness to him in Jerusalem, Samaria, and to the end of the earth. And here we are, at the end of the earth, reading, studying and learning from the writings of these disciples 1000's of years later. Not only is it amazing how the gospel spread across the entire world, through various people groups, it has also spanned generations, with no loss of fervor, or power. We live in an era where even relative history such as events of WW2 are fading out of our memory, June 6<sup>th</sup>, D-day, one of the most significant dates in our modern history, an event triggering the end of the biggest war in history came and went largely unnoticed. It hasn't even been 100 years and already it is lost in our society. Yet here, 1000's of years later we read the writings of Luke, and we get a glimpse of God working out the spread of the gospel throughout the world, and this still has not ended, for the gospel continues to go out to each and every generation spanning across the globe.

We can take great encouragement I think from the book of Acts for in it we can see a high level of God's sovereignty, as He didn't just tell his disciples to go, and preach and then leave them to their own devices...but He steps in, interferes, causes events, and is actively, and sovereignly for the lack of a better term, manipulating all things for his glory, so that the gospel message may spread throughout the world, and reach unknown people, through unknown generations so that even we could be the recipients of it, sitting here this morning, in Holland Michigan, in the year 2022, rejoicing in his mercy and grace that we may be called Sons and Daughters of the Most High.

So often we can get caught up in our own little worlds, feeling the weight of pressures upon us, the things in our lives that cause us stress, the uncertainty of our futures, sometimes feeling like we can barely make it through a day.....and in those times, forgetting that we serve the sovereign God of the universe, who moved heavens and earth for you. The people, the events, the trials that you have gone through so far in this life has brought you to where you are today, and God has used each and every one of them to draw you closer to him. None of it is by chance, all of it is ordained by a most Holy and gracious God. What ever it is even today that seems overwhelming and hopeless is playing out to serve a purpose for God, whether it be in the ministry opportunities for those who are witnessing the working of your faith through trials, or even if it is just for personal growth so that we may be reminded again and again, and learn to lean all the more upon our savior.

The very God who we read about here in the book of Acts, who through his sovereign power to bring about his design and will for the spread of the gospel is the very same who is working in your own life. Where ever you are today in your life, this should be a great comfort to each and everyone one of us...that we are exactly where God has intended us to be. No matter the circumstance, be faithful, and trust him for even in the worst of time, through the most difficult of trials we have his promise that “all things work for the good to those who are called according to his purpose.” Even in darkness, his light shines brighter, even in despair his hope breaks through. Even in our passage today, right now we find the church to be in a rather dark place, so early on there is already a great persecution that has come upon the believers in Jerusalem forcing many to flee, but as we see they are even being hunted down in other cities....but speaking of God's light shining through darkness, and his hope breaking through despair, let us read our passage here this morning, starting in verse 1 of chapter 9 (1-19)

The man who was leading the charge of persecution of Christians, with no discrimination..both men, and women has now been confronted by Christ, has been called, and set forth as God's missionary to the Gentiles, no longer leading the persecution but instead leading many to the very one whom he was seeking to destroy. Vic had often said, that a believer must have a Damascus road experience. Being one who was saved at a young age I would always refute his statement, but the truth is he is right. The new birth is a stark difference, a change for it is not only a change in the way you live your life but in the very way that you think. As Paul wrote to the Galatians, “I say then: Walk in the spirit, and you will not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh, and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish.” Did you get that? “You do not do the things that you wish.” A stark change, a new creature has been created in salvation...one who walks according to the spirit, not according to the flesh.. seeking to fulfill that which is pleasing to God, and seeks to put to death the desires and the lusts of the flesh in our own bodies recognizing that such is sin and rebellion against the one who loves us.

We who are Christ's have been given the Holy Spirit which indwells in us, encourages, and convicts us so that we may not fulfill the lusts of the flesh, but rather seek the fruits of the spirit. Paul continues on in Galatians describing this very phenomenon. “If you are lead by the spirit, you are no longer under the law, “ That's right, Christian....you are no longer under the Mosaic law, for you have the indwelling of the Spirit, and Christ himself within in you so that you do not do the things that your flesh desires. “Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are, adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like, of which I told you before hand just as I also told you in times past, that those who practice sch things will not inherit the kingdom of God. “

These are markers of those who are still slaves to their own flesh, their own selfish desires, who have no hope of escaping them, are bound to them, because they have no spirit working in them to convict and guide. But the marks of the Christian, who has the spirit within them, is “love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control against such there is no law, for those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” A stark difference, a Damascus road experience. For we were all the former, but God has made us the latter. We were all seeking to fulfill our own desire, chasing after the hopeless and empty pleasures of the flesh...but God broke into our hearts and said, Why do you kick against the goads. A goad was a long rod with a sharpened end used to prod and lead animals to move in the desired direction. But stubborn animals would kick and buck against them, only causes themselves further harm. So to it is with us as we rebel against God, as we chose to sin, in our blind death march to destruction. In our hatred and rebellion against God we kick against the goads, only further being driven into pain and suffering and despair for that is the only outcome of a life of sin. It isn't until God breaks through, opens our eyes and awakens us to his grace that we may find peace, and salvation from the sinful lusts and desires that lead to destruction.

In Paul's case, it was a very real, physical encounter with Jesus but that does not make your own Damascus road experience any less. When Paul was confronted with the glory and light of God, he was knocked to the ground and trembling responds, Lord, what do you want me to do? This should also be our experience when confronted by our own sin, when God shines his light into our dark hearts and reveals to us how vial, and sinful we truly are...knocking us to our knees as we repent and beg him for forgiveness. Do you have this conviction? Do you have this experience when sin has been revealed you cry out to God for forgiveness? This is a mark of a believer, for it is the spirit warring against the flesh, exposing our rebellion in the flesh and a heart who loves God will feel shame, for we have acted against the one who died for us, so that we may be free from such things. But likewise the other is true, if there is no repentance there is no spirit, and if no spirit, no true faith.

Many can claim Christ, and many do, yet they still live a life defined by their own selfish desires, fulfilling the lusts of the flesh, and seeking their own will. There is little to no conviction, there is little to no repentance as they repeatedly fall trap to their sinful desires. They have not had this drastic change in their hearts, there has not yet been a Damascus road experience. Christ likened salvation to a new birth, to being born again because it really is that stark of a difference...you do become a new creature with new desires, new thoughts, new priorities. Sometimes it can be harder to recognize for God in his mercy saves some at a younger age, and that difference may not seem as stark, but it is there none the less. It should change the individual, and that is the point that James makes, “Some say, you have faith, and I have works. Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.” There is a natural out flowing of good works from the faithful, for in their new state they desire to please God, they desire to express good works, the Holy Spirit works within them to produce good fruit like we read earlier.

You can claim to believe in God all day but your claim has no value or merit if your life does not reflect the works and love of God in you. Again This is the point that James is making when he says, “What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?” He is not arguing that salvation is through an amalgamation of faith and works, but rather that faith produces works. And the example he gives is this, “If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to him Depart in peace, be warmed and filled but do not give them the things the body needs, what does it profit? “

There should be a stark difference in your life, the works that you do, reflect that internal reality. No salvation, then any good works that you may accomplish or do, merits nothing for they are done from an evil heart only seeking self recognition, and ambition. Casey gives an example of this, he calls it the economics of exchange. The entire human experience is based upon an exchange, no one does anything without the expectation or receiving something in return. Even something that may appear to be an selfless act, often times returns payment of a boost of ego or recognition. In all human interaction there is this sort of give and take....but God, out of love, and mercy and grace gave of his Son...not that he should gain merit or recognition, in fact it is seen as foolishness and only brings more mocking and ridicule. No, he gave freely of himself so that we may gain, and it is this love that lives with in us, it is this love that should reflect out of us. This is why Christians should be a giving people, not that it merits or gives any advantage but purely because it is God's love flowing outward from us.

This stark change, going from an economy of exchanges, to an economy of grace and mercy, of love and preference of another over ones self. Jesus spoke of this very thing recorded in the book of Mathew chapter 5, he says “You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” An even exchange....yet he says, “But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.” This is not the way of our human nature is it? We want justice, we want equal payment for equal cost, there must be an exchange....yet Christ says, no...let them take for it is their nature...but your nature is that like mine, be loving, be merciful, be kind and in doing so you are a witness unto me. He goes on and says, “If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also.” recognizing that all that we have is given to us by God, and it is God who provides...what is a tunic, what is a cloak if you have the love and hope of God?

“Whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two.” the Love of God working through us does not express itself in half measures, but we are to give of ourselves as Christ gave. He laid down his life and died so that we may have eternal life, so that we may be called his children...should we not also freely give what he has given us as an expression of his love and mercy toward us? Again, he continues on. “Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow for you do not turn away, you have heard that it was said, you shall love your neighbors and hate your enemy, but I say unto you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you.” Wow, that is not the human response is it? That is why this salvation is super-natural, that is why it must first be a work of God within us, for it is he who enables us to be more like him. Who live to reflect his mercy and grace, not seeking our own but seeking the please him and it is that which provokes our works, it is seeking to please God which causes us to give of ourselves expecting nothing in return. Operating outside of the human norms, and putting to shame the world, confounding the wise..for who would give of themselves and expect no gain from it? We do not give of ourselves to expect gain for ourselves, but the hope, and the prayer is for the gain of the other...that through us, they may see Christ, and gain eternal life.

As he continues on, in Matthew, you do all these things, you sacrifice all these things expecting nothing in return so that you may be sons of your father in heaven, for he makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust. For if you love only those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors an sinners do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more then others? Do not even the tax collectors and sinners do the same? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your father in heaven is perfect.” Do you see this stark difference? Do you see why every believer must have some sort of Damascus road experience?

This salvation is life changing, it truly is a new birth, creating in us to be a new creature bound in God's love, expressed by his mercy, no longer driven by selfish ambitions, but driven by the grace and mercy of God. We are no longer driven by a law of equal exchanges, but instead are driven by the law of Christ written upon our heart. It is he in us, that works through us to show grace and mercy yes, even to our enemies so that they may gain Christ. Our lives are not our own to seek our own, but they are Christ's to seek after Christ, that is, we seek after him, to be ever more like him, so that more may see him and believe. The highest that mankind can strive to achieve is to treat others as you want to be treated, but the Christian treats others how God has treated them, recognizing themselves no better than anyone else, sinners saved only by the grace of God, and it is this reality that dictates how we as Christians are to interact with this world.....with grace and love toward one another so that they may see Christ in us.

For one to truly be a Christian, there must be a confrontation of sin, and a response of repentance. We should all be able to recognize, and say, I once was this...but now, by the grace of God I am something new. I challenge you this morning to examine yourself, look at your life, measure your desires and think upon what drives you this day. Is it God, or is it your own selfish ambitions? Do you have this stark change in your life, have you had this Damascus Road experience...has God created in you a new creature? pray and meditate upon God's word that he may reveal this to you, repent, seek after him, and rest in his mercy