

## Chapter 22: The Lord is Gracious

*Acts 9:1–19a*

While Saul's membership in the synagogue that handed over Stephen to the Sanhedrin is likely ("Cilicia"; Acts 6:9), we formally met Saul in Acts 7:58, when the witnesses against Stephen had laid down their garments at his feet during Stephen's stoning. Then, Luke informed us in Acts 8:1 that Saul had personally approved of Stephen's execution. Finally, Luke told us that "Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison" (Acts 8:3). This persecution had scattered the church, resulting especially in bringing the gospel to Samaria through the evangelistic efforts first of Philip, and then of Peter and John (Acts 8:4–25). In this passage, we will see Saul continue his persecution of the church; however, in an extraordinary way, we will also see a more powerful truth: *the Lord is gracious to sinners*.

### Grace Toward the Lord's People (Acts 9:1–9)

While the church had escaped the ravages of Saul for a time, he had "still" not lost interest in persecuting them: "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" (vv. 1–2). The term "Way" has roots in the Old Testament to contrast the way of the righteous against the way of the wicked (e.g., Ps. 1:6), and it became a term used throughout the book of Acts to refer to those who followed Jesus as the Messiah (see also Acts 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22).<sup>1</sup>

As Bruce observes, Saul "was not content with driving them from Jerusalem; they must be pursued and rooted out wherever they fled, not only within the frontiers of the land of Israel but beyond them as well."<sup>2</sup> Notably, as Saul had "dragged out men and women and committed them to prison" in Acts 8:3, he again asks the high priest for permission to bring "any belonging to the Way, men or women" with him, bound, back to Jerusalem (v. 2). That is, Saul asked for approval to serve as the "arresting officer," pursuing them all the way to Damascus.<sup>3</sup> Calvin notes the significance of this detail for understanding Saul's mindset: "There is mention made of women, that it may the better appear how desirous he was to shed blood who had no respect of sex whom even armed

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<sup>1</sup> "The word ὁδός [*hodos*], like the Hebrew *derek*, is extensively used in the metaphoric and ethical sense as a 'way' or course of life, both as being marked out to be followed and as being followed." (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 352.)

<sup>2</sup> Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 193.

<sup>3</sup> "Paul's role was not one of executioner but of arresting officer. His intent was to stamp out the new movement; and when it did come to a question of execution of Christians, he did not hesitate to vote for the death penalty (ch. 26:10)." (Polhill, *Acts*, 233.)

enemies are wont to spare in the heat of war.”<sup>4</sup> We might also contrast Saul’s actions with the counsel given by Gamaliel, whom we will later discover to be Saul’s teacher (Acts 22:3), who advised the Sanhedrin to “keep away” from the Christians and to “leave them alone,” lest they be “found opposing God” (Acts 5:38, 39). Schnabel writes, “Gamaliel may have changed his mind as he observed the continued growth and expansion of the Jesus movement. Or Saul regarded Gamaliel’s position as too soft in view of the threat that the teaching of the followers of Jesus posed.”<sup>5</sup>

What happens next is something that Saul (who becomes better known as Paul; Acts 13:9) would recount two other times in the book of Acts in speeches where he defends his conduct (Acts 22:1–21; 26:2–23). As Lenski notes, in both of those cases Paul “has a specific purpose in view and tells the story so as to further that purpose,” whereas this version serves as “Luke’s objective, historical narrative which aims to present merely the facts as they occurred.”<sup>6</sup> Throughout Saul’s life, he would see his conversion as uniquely undeserved, and his apostleship as given “to one untimely born,” since, as he explains, “I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God” (1 Cor. 15:8–9). Accordingly, Bock reminds us that “Saul is the ultimate example of God’s initiative to save the enemy, who, more importantly, is still a sinner who is loved and in need of salvation. God’s rescue of Saul replaces some of what was seemingly lost with Stephen’s death.”<sup>7</sup> We may see that emphasis from the very first words uttered by Jesus here, after Saul sees a light from heaven on his way to Damascus: “And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’” (v. 4). On this address to Saul, Lenski makes an interesting observation: “One should go through the Scriptures and note these duplications: Saul, Saul — Martha, Martha — Jerusalem, Jerusalem — David’s lament over Absalom, and others. In varying ways they express an emotion of deepest concern but never anger.”<sup>8</sup>

As much as this address may demonstrate Jesus’ compassion toward Saul, the Lord focuses on his compassion for his people. After asking Saul why he was “persecuting me,” Saul responded with a question: “Who are you, Lord?” In response, the Lord reiterated his concern about Saul’s persecution: “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (v. 5). Polhill writes, “It would be hard to imagine how these words must have struck Paul. They were a complete refutation of all that he had been. He had persecuted Christians for their “blasphemous lie” that Jesus was risen, that he was the Lord reigning in glory....From this point on, Paul said nothing.”<sup>9</sup> More than the convicting effect upon Saul, we should recognize what a precious thing it is for Jesus to identify with his people in this way. Calvin draws several doctrinal applications, which are worth quoting in full:

This place containeth a most profitable doctrine, and the profit thereof is made manifold, for Christ sheweth what great account he maketh of his gospel, when he pronounceth that it is his cause, from which he will not be separated. Therefore he can no more refuse to defend

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<sup>4</sup> Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:367.

<sup>5</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, 442.

<sup>6</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 349.

<sup>7</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 350.

<sup>8</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 353.

<sup>9</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 234.

the same than he can deny himself. Secondly, the godly may gather great comfort by this, in that they hear that the Son of God is partner with them of the cross, when as they suffer and labor for the testimony of the gospel, and that he doth, as it were, put under his shoulders, that he may bear some part of the burden. For it is not for nothing that he saith that he suffereth in our person; but he will have us to be assuredly persuaded of this, that he suffereth together with us, as if the enemies of the gospel should wound us through his side.

Wherefore Paul saith, that that is wanting in the sufferings of Christ what persecutions soever the faithful suffer at this day for the defense of the gospel, (Colossians 1:24.)

Furthermore, this consolation tendeth not only to that end to comfort us, that it may not be troublesome to us to suffer with our Head, but that we may hope that he will revenge our miseries, who crieth out of heaven that all that which we suffer is common to him as well as to us. Lastly, we gather hereby what horrible judgment is prepared for the persecutors of the Church, who like giants besiege the very heaven, and shake their darts, which shall pierce their own head by and by; yea, by troubling the heavens, they provoke the thunderbolt of God's wrath against themselves. Also, we are all taught generally, that no man run against Christ by hurting his brother unjustly, and specially, that no man resist the truth rashly and with a blind madness, under color of zeal.<sup>10</sup>

It is a precious thing that our Lord would identify with us so closely, as the head of his body and the husband of his bride.

For the moment, however, Jesus simply leaves that charge against Saul hanging, without resolving it. Instead, he instructs Saul to go into the city to wait for instructions about what to do next (v. 6). Notably, Jesus convicts Saul of his sin personally, but Jesus does not personally offer grace and mercy to Saul. This does not mean that Jesus will ultimately withhold grace and mercy from Saul, but only that he will send a minister for the purpose of declaring that grace and mercy to Saul.<sup>11</sup> Until that minister would come, however, Saul was struck blind, needing to be led by the hand to Damascus, “And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank” (v. 9). On this moment, Gerald Hawthorne has pointed to Philippians 3:12, where Paul later wrote, “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.” The phrases, “make it my own” and “made me his own,” translate different forms of the same word, which might also be translated as “apprehend,” as in the KJV: “but I follow after, if that I may *apprehend* that for which also I am *apprehended* of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:12 KJV). As Hawthorne notes, this makes an interesting play on words where Paul suggests that Christ “apprehended” him in the sense of “arresting” or “seizing” him (i.e., on the road to Damascus).<sup>12</sup> To

<sup>10</sup> Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:370–71.

<sup>11</sup> “Jesus preaches the law to Saul; he confronts him with his sin and his crime; he smites and crushes Saul’s heart with a consciousness of its awful guilt. But Jesus does not preach the gospel to Saul, he orders him to go to a place where the appointed minister of the gospel will proclaim this to him; for ‘what is necessary that thou do’ does not refer to works of law but to believing and receiving the grace and the pardon for his sins.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 354–55.)

<sup>12</sup> Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, WBC (Waco: Word Books, 1983), 152.

protect his people, the Lord Jesus Christ serves as the arresting officer to take Saul into his own custody.

On Saul's being led blind to Damascus, there are two interesting parallels we should consider. First, in 2 Kings 6, when the king of Syria (of which Damascus is the capital city) sent "horses and chariots and a great army" against Elisha, since Elisha had prophetically delivered military intelligence to the king of Israel, thwarting the plans of the king of Syria. Yet when this great army arrives, the Lord strikes them blind and leads them to Israel's capital, Samaria, where they are given food and water, and then sent on their way (i.e., back to Damascus), with the result that "the Syrians did not come again on raids into the land of Israel" (2 Kgs. 6:23). In the same way, after Saul's sight is restored and he receives something to eat (vv. 18–19), he will no longer come against God's people.

Bock observes the second parallel: "The sign of blindness for Saul is like the sign of deafness for Zechariah in Luke 1:22, although it is not as long a punishment."<sup>13</sup> In both cases, the sign is a fitting punishment to address the sin of the one struck deaf or blind. In Zechariah's case, he was deaf to the message of the angel, so he was struck deaf until his son John was born. After Zechariah insisted that his son be named John, he was healed and spoke a prophetic word that echoed the message to which he had not listened. In the same way, Paul was blind to the gospel, so he was fittingly struck blind for a time. Yet, when he opens his eyes, he will see more clearly than before—no longer by sight, but then by faith (2 Cor. 5:7).<sup>14</sup>

## Grace Toward a Blind Man (Acts 9:10–19a)

As noted earlier, Jesus does not bring a word of gospel comfort to Saul personally. Instead, he sends a minister to bring that message, whose name, fittingly, is "Ananias," meaning, "the Lord is gracious." When the Lord addresses Ananias, Ananias responds, "Here I am, Lord" (v. 10), a response that is "reminiscent of the response of Old Testament characters to a vision of God, such as Abraham (Gen 22:1f.; 11) and the boy Samuel (1 Sam 3:4–14)."<sup>15</sup> To explain the mission, the Lord informs Ananias that Saul is now seeing, albeit only spiritually: "he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay hands on him so that he might regain his sight" (v. 12). Yet, when Jesus instructs Ananias to lay hands on Saul in order for him to regain his sight (vv. 11–12), Ananias responds with some concern: "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). Apparently, the news of the original purpose for Saul's journey to Damascus had become known among the believers in Damascus.

The Lord responds to Ananias's concern with a remarkable explanation of his purposes: "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (vv. 15–16). In

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<sup>13</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 359.

<sup>14</sup> "The sight of the Lord had blinded Saul's eyes. So spiritually blind had he been up to that moment. And now, in token of his pardon of Saul's guilt, that same Lord is removing that blindness from Saul's eyes, is restoring sight to him. For the eyes of his soul have been opened to the sight of faith." (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 365.)

<sup>15</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 236.

part, Jesus explains that the man who had most vehemently defended Jewish identity would be sent to bear witness for Jesus to Gentiles and kings who are far off, in addition to bearing witness to Israel.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, as Polhill observes, “The one who once was the church’s most vehement persecutor would now be the one who would willingly accept persecution for the sake of the name (cf. 5:41)....In nothing is his conversion more clearly illustrated than in his transformation from persecutor to persecuted.”<sup>17</sup> Yet, the mission and the suffering would work together, uniquely shaping Saul for the ministry the Lord would send him to do. Indeed, suffering is a tool that the Lord regularly uses in the lives of all his people. Calvin writes:

For the meaning of the words is, I will accustom him to suffer troubles: to endure reproaches, and to abide all manner [of] conflicts, that nothing may terrify him, and keep him back from doing his duty. And when Christ maketh himself Paul’s teacher in this matter, he teacheth that the more every man hath profited in his school, the more able is he to bear the cross. For we strive against it, and refuse it as a thing most contrary, until he make our minds more gentle. Also this place teacheth, that no man is fit to preach the gospel, seeing the world is set against it, save only he which is armed to suffer. Therefore if we will show ourselves faithful ministers of Christ, we must not only crave at his hands the spirit of knowledge and wisdom, but also of constancy and strength, that we may never be discouraged by laboring and toiling; which is the estate of the godly.<sup>18</sup>

Although our pain is unpleasant, the Lord always uses it to conform us to his own image and to draw us closer to himself. As Samuel Rutherford once wrote as he reflected on the great anguish that he went through because of the suffering of his wife, “Welcome, welcome cross of Christ, if Christ be with it.”<sup>19</sup>

Upon this word, Ananias went to Saul and spoke words of great comfort: “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” (v. 17). Notice how the sight that Saul regains is parallel with his being filled with the Holy Spirit. This idea is carried over into the next verse by the supernatural manner in which Saul sees again: “And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized” (v. 18). Calvin writes, “Therefore he is deprived of the sight of his body three days, that he may begin to see with his mind; for those must become fools, whosoever they be, which seem to themselves wise, that they may attain to true wisdom. For seeing that Christ is the Sun of righteousness, in seeing without him we see not; it is he also which openeth the eyes of the mind.”<sup>20</sup> Then, after being baptized, we read that Saul ate food and was strengthened (v. 19a). As Saul had not rested while persecuting the church, he will not rest before entering into the ministry to which he had been commissioned by the Lord, which we will begin to read about in the next section.

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<sup>16</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 351.

<sup>17</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 237.

<sup>18</sup> Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:381–82.

<sup>19</sup> Samuel Rutherford, “Letter 8,” *The Letters of Samuel Rutherford* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2006), 49.

<sup>20</sup> Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:383.

## Discussion Questions

1. What have we seen about Saul so far (Acts 6:9; 7:58; 8:1, 3)? How does he continue in his path at the beginning of Acts 9? Where is Damascus? What does the comment about “men or women” suggest (v. 2)? Why does Jesus state twice that Paul has been persecuting him (vv. 4, 5)? What does that communicate about Christ’s relationship to his people? How is Paul’s physical blindness a fitting sign to reflect the nature of his spiritual blindness?
2. What does the name “Ananias” mean (v. 10)? What does Ananias’s response, “Here I am, Lord,” echo from the Old Testament? Why is it significant that Saul had “seen in a vision” that Ananias would come to restore his sight (v. 12)? Why is Ananias hesitant to go (vv. 13–14)? How does the Lord Jesus reassure Ananias of the necessity of his mission (v. 15)? How does Jesus’ response in v. 15 communicate grace toward Ananias, toward Saul, and toward others?
3. What will Saul’s mission be, once he regains his sight (vv. 15–16)? What is significant about the fact that Ananias calls Saul “brother” in v. 17? What should we take from the description of how “something like scales fell” from Saul’s eyes (v. 18)? How does the restoration of Saul’s physical sight parallel his newly found spiritual sight (v. 18)? How does the story of persecuting God’s people in or from Syria, a vision of bright light, being struck blind, and eating parallel 2 Kings 6?
4. How should the story of Jesus’ conviction of Saul for his sin convict us of our own sin? Why do you think that Jesus sends a minister to declare his grace to Saul? How do ministers today bear witness for Jesus about the law and gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ? How does Jesus’ protection of his people communicate God’s grace toward the church? How does Jesus’ grace toward Saul extend the hope of the gospel to sinners today? How should you respond to this story?