

Sermon – October 15, 2023
“Regain your sight and be filled with Holy Spirit”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Acts: 9:1-20

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill our open hearts, and anoint my sharing of these words. May they be a blessing for your people that ignites our continuing transformation into Christ's image and leads us to fruitful labor as those sent into Jesus' mission right here, right now. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

The Spirit of Jesus in me greets the Spirit of Jesus in you, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Good morning! For those reading along in your Bibles, we are now in Acts chapter nine. We might recall that when Stephen was being stoned, Luke shared with us that the coats of those who stoned Stephen were laid at the feet of Saul. We might also recall that following Stephen's death, a severe persecution breaks out in Jerusalem at Saul's hand and drives out many of the Jewish believers. Today we encounter Saul again, on the road to Damascus, planning to search for and arrest any followers of the Way who are part of the Jewish synagogues there. Saul is carrying letters from the high priest in Jerusalem that will allow him to extradite anyone he arrests. As Saul nears the end of his 150 mile walk to Damascus, he is ready to continue his persecution of Jewish believers who are part of the Jewish enclave in Damascus. Not far from the city everything changes for Saul. A light flashes around him, a light that pierces

deep within his heart. He falls to the ground as one who has encountered the holy and he hears a voice: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”ⁱ The doubling here of Saul’s name should remind us of other times in the history of Israel when God has spoken a person’s name with doubling. Abraham on the mountain with a knife in motion to kill Issac is stopped by a double call from heaven of his name. Moses, standing on holy ground before a burning bush that is not consumed, hears his name repeated twice as well. Saul’s initial response of falling to the ground points to his experiencing the Holy, the Shekinah glory of God. Notice Saul’s response. He asks, “Who are you, Lord?” His reply to this question using the word Lord to address the speaker expresses his recognition of the voice as connected with God. The answer he hears is, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”ⁱⁱ Everything that Saul believed is now undone. The followers of the Way, whom he has been locking up and even murdering, who had insisted that Jesus was alive, have just been proven to be correct. Jesus has spoken to Saul from heaven. Saul has encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus. Not only has Jesus spoken to Saul but Jesus has made it clear that when Saul persecutes Jesus’ followers, he is persecuting Jesus, the divine. Jesus is connected to his followers; they are Jesus’ body on earth, and what they experience, Jesus experiences. Saul received undeniable evidence that Jesus is alive, living in heaven and in his followers on earth. Jesus has called Saul into his service, telling him to get up and go into the city where he will be told what to do. Notice what Saul does when he sees Jesus and hears his voice commissioning him. He obeys. He gets up and goes into the city. And for three days Paul eats or drinks nothing. He is fasting and praying to God, repenting, seeking Jesus’ guidance and direction, waiting for Jesus to tell him what to do. Paul is also blind when he stands up from falling on the ground before a resurrected Jesus. The last sight Saul sees is the glory of the risen Lord and now his eyes are dark. He sees nothing and must be led by the hand into the city.

Let’s look at Paul’s conversion, the transformation of one who is intent on the wiping out of the body of Christ, the Church, to one who will shortly proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord in Damascus. The focus for today’s scripture is when Jesus appears to Saul and Saul realizes that what he has been fighting to destroy is the truth and is of God. While we might see this as an instant conversion, it is not. Jesus has long been at work in Saul’s life. Many are the days of Jesus lovingly seeking this lost sheep. Luke places such emphasis on Saul’s conversion that he repeats the event three times in Acts, once in the narrative and twice in Saul’s own words. As

Luke expands the details, we learn more of what occurred. In one of Saul's sharing of his encounter with Jesus, he states that Jesus told him it is hard for Saul to kick against the goads. Goads are part of the training of a young bull to be an ox. As the young bull resists and kicks at the constraints, called the goads, there is pain that comes to the bull. Jesus uses that image to help Saul understand that he has also been kicking against the goads Jesus placed in his life. We might ask what are the goads that Jesus is referring to? Let me identify a few and I think as we encounter them, we will see that Jesus has long been seeking to bring Saul to conversion, to belief in Jesus. The first goad is the word of God. Saul has been diligent in learning God's word and in keeping the requirements he found there. Saul exceeded others of his age in learning, and as he is driven to learn the things of God, he has been encountering Jesus in God's words. Saul is yet to begin to associate the scripture he knows with Jesus. He in fact sees Jesus as inconsistent with God's word, but he has filled his mind with God's word and is seeking to live what he has learned. As Saul encounters Jesus and his teaching, he will have doubts emerge about his understanding of God's word, and it hurts him within to push those doubts aside. Saul and Jesus are about the same age. Saul lived in Jerusalem and would have been to at all of the festivals Jesus attended. We do not know if he heard Jesus teach. We do not know if Saul looked into Jesus' eyes at some point in their common experiences, but we do know he was familiar with Jesus' teaching. But he would have to allow his understanding of God to override any of Jesus' teaching he was aware of. He has been kicking against the goad of doubt.

Another goad we find is Stephen and all of the Christians that Saul is persecuting. Stephen's death, where Saul was present with the coats of those who stoned Stephen piled at his feet, would have been a time when he witnessed an innocent man die, a time when he saw the angelic face of Stephen and heard him cry not for vengeance of God on his murderers but for their forgiveness. Saul would have also heard Stephen's claim that he saw Jesus in heaven at God's right hand, a claim that angered him as a Pharisee. And Saul would have been a witness to the peaceful death of a follower of Jesus. All of these "goads" would be items he would need to rationalize and set aside as false so that he could continue to hold to his false understanding of God and Jesus. All of those long-standing goads in his life came to an inflection point when Jesus appeared to him on the Damascus road and Saul saw and spoke with the risen Lord. Saul can no longer hold to his false ideas of God and Jesus. His world is turned upside down; he has encountered the risen Lord in his glory. He has a new lens, a resurrected Jesus, through which to

view all he knows about God and what God is doing among His people. Saul has a new understanding of the claims of those he persecutes. Saul has personally met Jesus and he can no longer deny a resurrected Lord. Remember that when Saul meets Jesus on the road those with him also hear the voice. This is not a vision that Saul alone has but is an encounter with Jesus Christ in his resurrected glory. The events that lead to Saul's conversion are widespread and span a great deal of time. When Jesus appears to Saul, Saul has to make a choice: to accept Jesus' call, to set aside all he believes and how he formally followed God, to repent and align with Jesus or to get up and go on as he had been going. Saul makes a free decision based on what he has experienced and surrenders fully to Jesus Christ, stepping into amazing grace. Saul obeys Jesus, gets up, goes into the city, and waits in prayer and fasting for Jesus his Lord to tell him what to do.ⁱⁱⁱ The time of kicking against the goads has ended for Saul. He has fully surrendered his life to Jesus Christ. Gone is the hope of being a member of the Sanhedrin and sitting in judgment on others. Gone is Saul's hope for a chief priest position and the associated honor and prestige that position would bring him in Israel. Born is a follower of Jesus Christ who now waits in prayer and fasting to be shown by Jesus what he is to do.

Let's pull from Saul's experience on the Damascus Road some aspects of conversion that we should be aware of as followers of Jesus. First, conversion comes as a result of a divine initiative.^{iv} Jesus is the one seeking Saul. Jesus is the hound of heaven who has been pursuing Saul. Jesus reveals himself to Saul. The same is true for us. Any hunger we have for a relationship with Jesus is because of grace Jesus extends us. Wesleyans call this prevenient grace. God desires all to come to salvation and He works in our lives to bring this about. When Saul speaks of salvation in his letters, it is often expressed as a light that pierces the darkness, not only external darkness but the darkness in our hearts. It is an inward light that shines into believers.

We should realize that conversion is a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. We each meet Jesus in a different way through different means, but if we are converted to a Christ follower, we will have a personal relationship with Jesus. I find a statement by Carson helpful for my understanding of this idea. He states, "Eternal life is not so much everlasting life as personal knowledge of the Everlasting One."^v The idea of a personal relationship is a move from head knowledge to heart knowledge. We do not rely on our knowledge of the words about Jesus, but we have a personal relationship with him.

Next in the concepts of conversion is surrender. Paul uses the word “lord” when he replies to Jesus and asks him who he is. The Greek word is “kyrie” and it can mean “lord” as master or “sir” as a respectful greeting. I think it is clear from the text that Saul means lord. The idea is not that we commit to Christ or we decide for Christ. The idea is we have surrendered to the lordship of Christ and now recognize Jesus as the supreme authority in our lives.^{vi} Saul’s surrender can be seen in the total fast for three days that he enters as he waits for Jesus to tell him what to do. There are two more points here about conversion we need to be mindful of, but we need to look at additional scripture to see them come alive in Saul’s life.

Into Luke’s account enters a disciple named Ananias. We know very little about Ananias other than when Jesus needs a disciple in Damascus to go to Saul, he calls Ananias. Notice that there is no doubling of Ananias’ name when Jesus calls him. Ananias is one who is attuned to his master’s voice and is ready to do his bidding. He responds to the master calling his name with the words “Here I am, Lord,” the response all of us should be seeking to have on our lips when Holy Spirit gives us those little nudges. Look at what Jesus asks Ananias to do: “go to a man of Tarsus called Saul who is praying and has seen a vision of you coming in and laying your hands on him so that he might regain his sight.”^{vii} We have to notice that when Ananias hears these instructions from Jesus, his response is “Are you sure?” His response is not defiance of his master, but a question to a friend, as carrying out this request could cost him his life. Jesus assures Ananias that he is to go and Ananias obeys and goes to the house where Saul is praying and fasting. He enters into the house, lays his hands on Saul, and says, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”^{viii} For our discussion on conversion, I want to draw our attention to the address Ananias uses for Saul. He calls him “Brother Saul.” The first words Saul hears from the Church, the body of Christ, is “Brother Saul.” Ananias welcomes Saul into the body of Christ and recognizes him as his brother in Christ. Can we imagine going into a place and laying our hands on someone who has come to murder us or our family? That is what Ananias does as one who has surrendered his life to his Lord and master, Jesus Christ. Welcoming new believers as the Church is the next point in conversion. When we have someone come into a new relationship with Jesus, we as the Church, the body of Christ, are to fully welcome them into the kingdom of God. We should ask ourselves if we could do what Ananias did. Could we respond to a call to go into the Gaza Strip to lay our hands on a member of Hamas who has converted and

call him brother or sister? Do we do this in our church for those who join, or do we wait and see if they measure up to our standards before we welcome them?

One last point this morning from Saul's conversion. Notice in verse 20 what he begins to do as soon as he regains his strength. He spends time with the disciples in Damascus and he begins to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying of Jesus, "He is the Son of God!" Paul realizes he has one job to do for Jesus, to be his witness in Jerusalem, to all of Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. Jesus commissioned Saul to do what he was told to do, and the first action is to be a witness to what he had experienced. We have to ask ourselves, "Are we being witnesses for Jesus?" If not, what are we waiting for?

I think there is one last aspect of Saul's experience on the Damascus Road that we need to be clear about. I realize this could be a lack of clarity that is unique to my growth in the body of Christ, but let me make clear that Saul's experience on the Damascus Road is unique in that Jesus reveals himself to Saul. Jesus' revelation of himself to Saul is the last appearance of the resurrected Lord. And as one to whom Jesus chose to reveal himself, Saul is an apostle. Saul becomes a source of revelation about Christ. His revelation, found in the letters of our New Testament, are the words of Jesus. They are not in some way lesser than the other inspired words of God found in the Gospels. What Saul writes in his letters under the inspiration of Holy Spirit is the same as Jesus Christ speaking. Saul is the author of the largest part of our New Testament. If we read his letters, we will find a witness in them to this moment of conversion, to this moment when Jesus Christ chose to reveal himself to Saul and Saul was converted to one fully surrendered to his Lord. Saul was transformed by Jesus Christ from one who was breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord to one who was willing to suffer for Christ. Saul's conversion is why we as believers never cease to pray for even the foulest sinner to be washed clean by the blood of Jesus Christ. No one is beyond the reach of Jesus' love. He is the Son of God. If you do not know Jesus as your personal savior, if you can't find in your heart the love of Christ but only have the knowledge of him in your mind, let me invite you to come to the altar and receive Lord Jesus and enter into personal relationship with the Eternal One.

Pray with me: Lord Jesus, we ask that our hearts might be filled with your love and that we may grasp more completely that we are sons and daughters of the King of the universe. Lord, give us the courage to surrender fully to you and to be willing to lay our hands on those whom you have called into a personal relationship with you and who have fully surrendered their lives

to you. Lord, give us courage to reach out and touch those we fear to touch and give us hearts that we may call them brother and sister and welcome them into the body of Christ. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Listen for Jesus to call our name and then go in courage into Jesus' mission to all people. Amen

ⁱ Acts 9:4 NRSV

ⁱⁱ Acts 9:5 NRSV

ⁱⁱⁱ Stott, John. *The Message of Acts (The Bible Speaks Today Series)*. InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

^{iv} Fernando, Ajith. *Acts (The NIV Application Commentary Book 5)* (p. 425). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

^v Fernando, Ajith. *Acts (The NIV Application Commentary Book 5)* (pp. 425-426). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

^{vi} Fernando, Ajith. *Acts (The NIV Application Commentary Book 5)* (p. 426). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

^{vii} Acts 9:12 NRSV

^{viii} Acts 9:17 NRSV