

Key:

Purple – Introduction, Conclusion, Main Points, and Sermon Thread

Blue – Explanation/Exposition

Red – Application

Green – Illustration

Brown – Quotation

Yellow – Sermon Notes

Was Blind, But Now I See

Acts 9:1–19a

Let's turn in our Bibles to Acts 9. I have a good friend who is a pastor in the D.C. area that I went to seminary with. His name is Hang Tu. He was born in Vietnam and came to America as a child. Together we took a class at Moody called "Evangelism and Apologetics." And we went around in a circle and gave our testimonies. I gave my testimony and others gave their testimonies in 3 to 5 minutes. But when we got to Hang, his testimony went like this—"Was blind, but now I see." Next!

That was apropos for Hang. Hang is a musician. And his statement, "Was blind but now I see," was an homage to John Newton's great hymn: "Amazing Grace." Some of you may know that Newton went blind late in life, so the words of his hymn took on new meaning. But when he wrote "Amazing Grace," he wasn't talking about physical blindness. He was speaking of spiritual blindness.

John MacArthur writes this about Newton: "He lived a life of rebellion and debauchery. For several years, he worked on slave ships, capturing slaves for sale to the plantations of the New World... Eventually he became the captain of his own ship. The combination of a frightening storm at sea coupled with his reading of Thomas a Kempis' classic *Imitation of Christ*, planted the seeds that resulted in his conversion. He went on to become a leader in the evangelical movement in eighteenth-century England, along with such men as John and Charles Wesley, George Whitefield and William Wilberforce."¹ If Newton was here today with us, he might give a testimony like this, "Was blind, but now I see."

Similarly, at the turn of the twentieth century, there was a wretched sinner named Mel Trotter. Mel Trotter was a barber, but he was also a drunkard and scoundrel. One night he got so drunk after his young daughter died that he stole the shoes she was to be buried in and pawned them for money to buy booze. One night he staggered into the Pacific Garden Mission in downtown Chicago, a gospel-centered rescue mission. And lo and behold that night, Trotter gave his life to the Lord. And after his conversion he began opening similar missions around the country, eventually founding sixty gospel-centered rescue missions from Boston to San Francisco.² God turned this great man's life around. And if Trotter were here today he might give a testimony like this, "Was blind, but now I see."

Here's another example of God's grace in the life of a helpless sinner. In the fourth century, there was a man from North Africa whose name was Augustine. He was a brilliant scholar, yet he was also an immoral, licentious profligate. He was enslaved to his carnal urges for sexual pleasure. And despite his best efforts, he couldn't conquer his sexual cravings. And he bounced around from one religion to another to find a remedy for his sinfulness.

But one day he was sitting unhappily in his garden questioning the meaning of life, and a child's voice began singing, "Take and Read." And after that his eyes chanced upon a passage of Scripture. Here's how he tells the story in his book *Confessions*, "I stemmed my flood of tears and stood up, telling myself that this could only be a divine command to open my book of Scripture and read the first passage on which my eyes should fall... I seized [Paul's Epistles] and opened it, and in silence I read the first passage on which my eyes fell, 'Not in reveling and drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in quarrels and revelries. Rather, arm yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ; spend no more thought on nature and on nature's appetites' (Rom 13:13–14)." Augustine got amazingly saved that day, and he went

¹ MacArthur, *Acts 1–11*, MNTC, 263.

² Taken and adapted from MacArthur, *Acts 1–11*, MNTC, 263.

on to become one of the most influential Christian thinkers in church history.³ If Augustine were here today he might summarize his Christian conversion something like this, “Was blind, but now I see.”

Well before any of those individuals (John Newton, Mel Trotter, Augustine, Hang Tu) went from spiritual blindness to spiritual sight, there was a man, an apostle, who went from spiritual blindness to spiritual sight just a few years after Christ’s death. Other than Jesus, and maybe the apostle Peter, he is the most important, most influential person in the NT. And his conversion happened in a curious way, because in a very real sense, a physical sense, he was blinded. He lost the function of his eyes, which for a hard-driving strong personality must have been devastating. But ironically and intentionally, God used that short time of physical blindness to bring about spiritual sight.

The person that I’m speaking about is of course Saul or Paul (Saul is his Hebrew name, Paul is his Greek name... Just so you know, I’ll be using those names interchangeably throughout today’s sermon).⁴ What happened with Saul? Well, he went from spiritual blindness to spiritual sight.⁵

Later in life, after his conversion and after significant leadership in the church, Paul writes this, and I wonder if he had his own experience with spiritual blindness in mind when he wrote this in 2 Corinthians 4:3–4, “And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has *blinded* the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” At one point Paul was blind like that. But after his conversion, after the event that’s recorded in our text today, Paul could say, “Was blind but now I see.”⁶

We’ll talk in a moment about the physical blindness that Paul experienced. But first let’s deal with his spiritual blindness. Acts 9:1 says this,

¹ But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord,⁷ went to the high priest² and asked him⁸ for letters to the synagogues at Damascus,⁹

Now Luke is piggybacking here on what he has previously written about this character, Saul. For the last two sermons, we’ve been looking at the work of Philip, the faithful evangelist who takes the gospel to the Samaritans and then takes the gospel to the Ethiopian eunuch. And those great gospel works are sandwiched between two ominous statements about this guy Saul, as if to tell us God is working through Philip, yes, but Satan is at work as well through this guy, Saul.

Before Philip is mentioned in Acts 8, look what Luke writes about Saul in verse 1: “And Saul approved of [Stephen’s] execution” (Acts 8:1). When the Jewish leaders were hurling stones at Stephen and breaking his

³ Taken and adapted from MacArthur, *Acts 1–11*, MNTC, 263–4.

⁴ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 205: “According to tradition, the parents of Saul came from Gush Halav (Gischala) in Upper Galilee. They fled to Tarsus during the Roman takeover of the country in the first century B.C.”

⁵ JOHANN SPANGENBERG: “Saul had to become externally blind so that he could be internally enlightened. For during the time he could not see with his external and physical eyes, he saw with his internal and spiritual eyes the Creator of all things.... It was then that he obviously learned the gospel.” Quoted in Chung-Kim and Hains, *Acts: New Testament*, RCS, 123.

⁶ RUDOLF GWALTHER: “Although we ought diligently to consider the conversions and callings of all apostles, yet Paul’s conversion of all others deserves to be particularly noted: partly because it contains in it a rare example of God’s mercy toward sinners, and partly because Paul labored more than all the apostles, nor is there any other whose writings are more often cited, either of the old writers or new, in matters of faith and religion. It is therefore necessary that we know who he was, how God called him and converted him, that we may have his doctrine with more authority, which is the cause of why Luke writes his history so diligently.” Quoted in Chung-Kim and Hains, *Acts: New Testament*, RCS, 120.

⁷ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 354: “The expression reflects Saul’s highly hostile attitude toward believers. It may not mean that he seeks to murder them himself, given that execution remains in Roman hands, but it expresses what he hopes will be the result of his arrests.”

⁸ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 208: “Verse 1b states that Saul, a Pharisee, went unto the high priest, who was a Sadducee. This shows that now there was a political and religious unity against the Jewish believers, a combined Pharisaic and Sadducean conspiracy.”

⁹ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 208–9: “According to 1 Maccabees 15:15–24, a treaty was made between Rome and the high priest, giving him the right of extradition in religious cases. Furthermore, both Julius Caesar and Augustus Caesar granted jurisdiction over Jews in foreign cities to the high priest and the Sanhedrin. This authority was not always recognized in every local community outside of Judea, but it was recognized in Damascus... Many of those who fled Jerusalem in Acts 8:4 went there in order to be outside the jurisdiction of the Sanhedrin. Saul’s purpose was to bring them back under that jurisdiction.”

bones and puncturing his vital organs and crushing his skull with rocks, Saul is looking on and saying, **“This is good. This is really good. I approve of this!”**

After Stephen’s death, Luke writes in **Acts 8:3**, “Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.” The language used there (“ravaging”) is the language of a wild animal that would tear its prey to shreds. Saul was ripping the church apart like a wild beast.¹⁰

And Luke tells us “still” in **9:1**... he’s *still* doing this.

¹ But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord,

That’s another vivid picture here. Saul is still seething against the church, this time referred to as “the disciples of the Lord.” He’s breathing out threats and murder. **He’s snorting at them like a wild animal. He’s breathing fire like a dragon. He’s inhaling and exhaling like a bull about to gore its enemy.**

You might remember Gamaliel, Saul’s teacher, in **Acts 5**. He said **“Just let it be. Just let it be, man. If it’s from God it’ll last, if it’s not it won’t.”** But Paul has distanced himself from his teacher.¹¹ He hates these disciples and he wants to stamp them out. He’s a terrorist terrorizing the church!

Why is Saul so dead-set against these “disciples” of Jesus Christ? Have you ever wondered that? The reason he hates them so much is because their faith nullifies everything that he believes in and has worked towards. Here’s what I mean. Paul described himself before conversion as a “Pharisee of Pharisees” who had every reason to boast in the flesh. Later in life, in **Philippians 3:4–6**, he said, “[I was] circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”¹²

In other words, he had given his life to these things. **He was the Michael Jordan of Judaism.**¹³ And now these disciples of Jesus Christ come in and say, **“That doesn’t matter anymore. It’s not about you’ve done for God, it’s about what Christ has done for you. It’s not about your education or your works of righteousness or who’s family you belong to. Faith in Christ is what counts! Even heathen sinners can be saved. Even Samaritans can be saved. Even Gentiles can be saved.”** And that premise which Christianity is built on made Saul furious. **“The nerve of these Galilean fishermen and their crucified Messiah! Preaching salvation by faith in Jesus!”**

And Saul was breathing out threats and murder against the disciples.

¹ But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues¹⁴ at Damascus,¹⁵ so that if he found any belonging to the Way,

Notice that—“the Way.” In **verse one**, Luke refers to the church as “the disciples of the Lord.” In **verse 2** he describes them as “belonging to the Way.” This is the first of several occurrences of that term (**9:2; 19:9**,

¹⁰ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 355: “Paul himself confesses that he was a persecutor of the church (1 Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:13–14; Phil. 3:6; 1 Tim. 1:13).”

¹¹ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 442: “Saul’s active persecution of the followers of Jesus contradicts the advice that his teacher Gamaliel had given earlier in a session of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem (5:34–39). Gamaliel may have changed his mind in the meantime, observing the continued growth and expansion of the movement of the followers of Jesus. Or Saul regarded Gamaliel’s position as too soft in view of the threat that the teaching of the followers of Jesus posed, in his view.”

¹² MARTIN LUTHER: “Paul was a learned man, thoroughly acquainted with Scripture... Nevertheless, he did not possess the [right] understanding of holy Scripture [to know] that one must search for Christ, the true Savior and Messiah, in Moses and the Prophets. He neither thought nor believed that Christ was hidden there. The Scripture and the understanding of Scripture were closed to him; he did not pay attention to what Moses spoke clearly: ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you and your brothers—him you shall obey.’” Quoted in Chung-Kim and Hains, *Acts: New Testament*, RCS, 121.

¹³ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 441: “The description of being a ‘Hebrew of Hebrews’ indicates that he was brought up speaking Hebrew and Aramaic and that the family adhered to the Jewish way of life regulated by the stipulations of the law, avoiding as much as possible assimilation to Gentile customs and maintaining contact with the Jewish community in Palestine.”

¹⁴ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 443: “The reference to ‘synagogues’ (Acts 9:2) indicates that there were several synagogues in the city.”

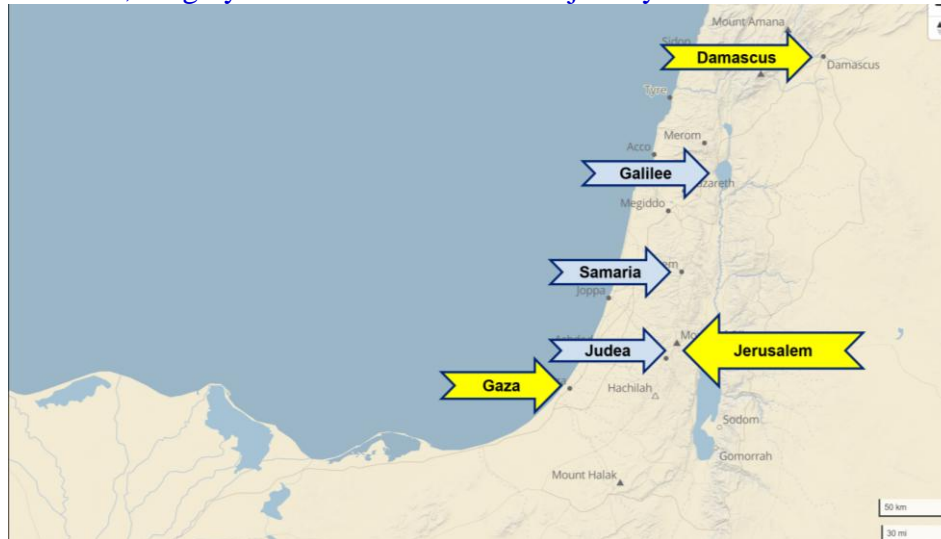
¹⁵ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 356: “Damascus was a commercial center on the way between Egypt and Mesopotamia. It had a substantial Jewish population.² The mention of Damascus is significant, for Luke has not told us anything about this church yet. In Acts the church has now moved north to Samaria (Acts 8), west and south to the coast, and east to Syria (Acts 9).”

23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). That's a term that refers to Christians, because Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (**John 14:6**).

so that if [Saul] found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

By the way, you would have to be a pretty vindictive, heartless person in this era to bind and imprison women as well as men. This is a description of how hateful Saul really was toward these Christians.

Let me show you on the map where Damascus is (**see map below**). Damascus is about 135 miles north and a little east of Jerusalem, roughly the same distance and trajectory from San Antonio to Temple, Texas.¹⁶



Damascus and other coordinates from Acts 8–9¹⁷

And Damascus was an important ancient city. It's one of the oldest, continually inhabited cities in the world. At this time there was a large Jewish population in Damascus, supporting several synagogues. And conceivably what happened is that some of the Jews in Jerusalem had gotten saved, and they were run out of the city by Saul and the other persecutors. And some of them must have resettled in Damascus.

And so, the church was growing there, just like it had in Samaria. And you'd think that Saul would be content as long as they didn't come back to Jerusalem. But no! He wanted to travel 135 miles away and extradite these "disciples of the Lord" back to Jerusalem to punish them for believing in this crucified Messiah. That was the depth of Saul's hatred for those belonging to "the Way." And that's why a divine encounter with our risen Lord was the only thing that was going to turn this guy around. Something dramatic has to happen to get through to this terrorist's heart.

Look at **verse 3**.

³ Now as he went on his way,¹⁸ he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed¹⁹ around him.

When Paul recounts this story later, he says that it was noontime when this event happened. So noontime in a sunny, arid region like Damascus was already bright. And so this flash from heaven must have been absolutely luminous...like Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. Or think about God when he revealed

¹⁶ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 355: "Christianity has already spread as far as Damascus, an important city 135 miles north-northeast of Jerusalem. This is the first city outside the land of Israel to be noted as having Christians."

¹⁷ Atlas taken from Logos Bible Study, Computer software. *Logos Bible Study Atlas* (Bellingham: Faithlife, LLC), May 3, 2025. Some geographical points added by author.

¹⁸ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 443n2056: "A tradition that goes back to the time of the Crusades localizes the site of Saul's conversion in the village of Kaukab, about 15 kilometers south-west of Damascus on the road to Quneitra, adjacent to the volcanic hill of Mar Boulous (St. Paul); cf. Otto F.A. Meinardus, 'The Site of the Apostle Paul's Conversion at Kaukab,' BA 44 (1981): 57–59; in 1965 Patriarch Alexius of Moscow donated a "Church of the Conversion of St Paul" at the site."

¹⁹ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 356: "Two of the three versions of this event use the verb περιεστράπτω (*periastraptō*, to flash around) to describe Jesus's initial appearance to Saul. They are the only two occurrences of the word in the NT (Acts 9:3; 22:6). The term refers to something shining all around an area. So the appearance of Jesus lights up all that Saul sees."

his glory to Moses on Mount Sinai. Something like that happens here. It was the “shekinah glory” of the Lord, and it immobilizes Saul.

In fact, it was a beam of light smackdown, because look at **verse 4**.

⁴ And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul,²⁰ why are you persecuting me?”²¹

The flash of light was so luminous that it knocked Saul to the ground. **Have you ever been so impacted by a burst of light that you fell to the ground? I can’t imagine how terrifying that must have been.** And to add to the terror, Saul hears this voice crying out, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” So this isn’t like God showing Moses his glory in the wilderness, because Moses talked face to face with God. This isn’t like the Mount of Transfiguration where Jesus was showing his glory to Peter, James, and John. This is a confrontation! This is terror-inducing. This is God the Son terrifying the terrorist and saying, **“why are you persecuting me?”** It just gives you shivers thinking about it.

Let’s stop here and make a note. Go ahead and write this down as the first point from our message.

1) Jesus **arrests** Saul’s attention (9:1–3)

As we follow along with Saul on this journey from blindness to sight, the person who is enacting this transformation is Jesus Christ. These are four works of Jesus at Saul’s conversion. There’s no witness. There’s no ambassador. Paul’s conversion is unique in that way. His personal encounter with Jesus is actually something that he uses later in his life to argue for his identity as an apostle of Jesus (Gal 1:1; 1 Cor 9:1).²² He had the authority to write Scripture and instruct the church because he met face to face with the risen Christ.

Paul went into Damascus to arrest the disciples of Jesus Christ, and instead he was himself arrested by the glory and the power of Jesus Christ. That’s one of the many ironies that are present in this passage.

We’ll talk more about this later, but let me just say at this point, “Don’t ever say to yourself that person is beyond the reach of God and the power of salvation.” Don’t ever doubt the power of God to bring even the worst of sinners to himself. God can do it, and he has done it. Saul was essentially the Osama Bin Laden of his era. He was a violent extremist. And God stepped in and said, “enough.” And God can do that in our day as well. God can save murderers. God can save the sexually immoral: serial adulterers, homosexuals, sex-addicts, etc. God can save terrorists. God can save rapists and pedophiles and the most despicable sinners on planet earth.

By the way, don’t ever forget when you are grieved by the heinous sins of others, that God says, “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). I’m not saying you shouldn’t grieve the sinfulness that is present in the world. I’m not saying even that all sins are created equal or have the same consequences. I’m not saying that. I’m just saying that *any* sin and *all* sin is an affront to God. And *any* sin and *all* sin can be forgiven by the blood of Jesus. And we are all sinners in this room. Nobody earned their salvation. And God can save any sinner and any person, no matter the depth of their wickedness.

Now let me point out something else for you from **verses 4–5**. Jesus’s statement is curious here, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” It’s curious for two reasons. If you were Jesus in that moment what would you say? Probably something like this, **“Saul, prepare to die!” Or “Saul, it’s time for you to get what’s coming to you. You will feel the full effects of my wrath!”** And Jesus would’ve been perfectly justified in saying that. Right? Paul deserved instantaneous retribution. We all deserve that.

But there’s a tenderness that Jesus conveys here and not just for Saul.

²⁰ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 357: “The double calling out of the name of Saul indicates intense emotion (Luke 10:41 [Martha]; 22:31; Gen. 22:11 [Abraham]; 46:2 [Jacob]; Exod. 3:4 [Moses]; 1 Sam. 3:4, 6 LXX [Samuel]; 2 Sam. 19:4 [Absalom]; 2 Bar. 22.2 [Baruch]).”

²¹ AUGUSTINE: “Had Paul climbed up to heaven then? Had Paul even thrown a stone at heaven? It was Christians he was persecuting, them he was tying up, them he was dragging off to be put to death, them he was everywhere hunting out of their hiding places and never sparing when he found them. To him the Lord said, ‘Saul, Saul.’ Where is he crying out from? Heaven. So he’s up above. ‘Why are you persecuting me?’ So he’s down below.” Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 103.

²² Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 443: “In 1 Cor 9:1 Paul asks the rhetorical question, ‘have I not seen (ἐώρακα) Jesus our Lord?’ In 1 Cor 15:5–8 he argues that he is an apostle because he has seen the Lord as the Twelve have seen him, i.e., in a real (‘tangible’) encounter with the risen Jesus.”

"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

⁵ And [Saul] said, "Who are you, Lord?"

And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."

Now hear me on this. This is a very important point. The second curious thing from **verses 4–5** is that Jesus says, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" "Why are you persecuting me?" Again Jesus says in **verse 5**, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting?"²³

"No, no. Jesus, you're wrong. Saul's not persecuting you! He's persecuting your followers. Get your facts straight, Jesus." Anyone want to say that to the Lord?

I think this is very instructive for us. We learn from this text that Christ feels the pain of his church.²⁴ And he identifies with us, his bride. Our pain is his pain. There is solidarity with Christ, our Lord, when we suffer. He feels it.²⁵

Every time someone calls you naive or simpleminded for your faith in Jesus Christ, Christ feels that pain. He suffers alongside you. Every time someone persecutes you for taking a stand against wickedness or godlessness, Christ is there with you. He suffers alongside you. Every time someone discriminates against you for your Christian beliefs and your Christian lifestyle, Christ is with you. He feels that pain alongside you. And he loves it when you fear God and not man. He loves it when you honor him, even when that means the disrepute of others.

Write this down as a second point in your notes.

2) Jesus **identifies** with the suffering of his saints (9:4–6)

Ajith Fernando puts it this way. I love this quote. "While Saul was hitting the church, Jesus has actually been feeling the pain."²⁶ Saul was abusing the church and Jesus was absorbing the blows! John MacArthur says it this way, "No blow struck on earth goes unfelt in heaven by our sympathetic High Priest [Jesus Christ]."²⁷ I don't know about you, but that is such an encouragement to me!

Well Jesus isn't done with Saul just yet. He's going to turn the tables on this persecutor of the church. Jesus says, "I am the one whom you are persecuting... but... **verse 6**.

⁶ But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."

⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one.

There's a great scene in Shakespeare's Hamlet where Hamlet sees and talks with the ghost of his father. And his father wants him to avenge his death. And Hamlet's mom is right next to Hamlet when he sees the ghost, but she can't see or hear it. And she thinks her son is crazy, because he's seen this vision.

Well this scene is different. The people around Paul hear something but they don't see what he sees. They were spooked by this vision, but the only one who received specific orders was Paul.

Paul tells us later when he gives his testimony that these travelers didn't understand what Jesus was saying (**Acts 22:9**). They heard a voice, but probably it was just unintelligible babble to them or whispers that they couldn't make out. Paul, on the other hand, heard what Jesus said with crystal clarity.

Look at verse 8.

⁸ Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing.

Something was blocking his eyesight.

²³ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 357: "Jesus asks why Saul persecutes him, although Saul does not yet know who is speaking. This curious remark is unexplained at first but points to Jesus's corporate solidarity with the church. To persecute the Way is to persecute Jesus. Jesus closely identifies with his own (Matt. 25:35–40, 42–45)."

²⁴ BASIL THE GREAT: "Even the adversities that happen to us the Lord makes his own, taking upon himself our sufferings because of his fellowship with us." Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 104.

²⁵ Bede: "He did not say, 'Why do you persecute my members?' but 'Why do you persecute me?' Because he is still suffering from enemies in his body, which is the church. He declared that kindnesses bestowed upon his members are also done to him when he said, 'I was hungry and you gave me to eat,' and he added in explanation, 'So long as you did it to one of the least of mine, you did it to me.'" Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 103–4.

²⁶ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 296.

²⁷ MacArthur, *Acts 1–11*, MNTC, 268.

So they led him by the hand²⁸ and brought him into Damascus. ⁹And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Write this down as a third point in your notes.

3) Jesus **exchanges** Saul's spiritual blindness for physical blindness (9:7–9)

Jesus is actually going to use this season of physical blindness to bring about spiritual sight for Saul.²⁹ Here's another interesting thing that happens in this passage. Paul had to be led into Damascus by his friends because he was blind. Saul had planned to come into Damascus as a conquering hero. He was going to liberate the Jews in Damascus from this rogue religious sect called "the Way." But instead of entering Damascus as conquering hero, he enters as a helpless blind man who embarrassingly needs to be led by his accomplices, because he can't see. And this is all part of God's plan to eradicate Paul's spiritual blindness.

Now this was quite a shake up for Saul. Probably for the first time he had started to question whether or not he really knew the Lord. And he was so shaken by this encounter with the risen Christ that he just stops eating and drinking. We find out later that Paul spent this time praying.

So Paul is fasting and praying in Damascus. And as he does that, God starts to work behind the scenes with another person in Damascus, a man named Ananias. [Notice this is not the same Ananias who died in **Acts 5** with his wife Sapphira. Just so you know, Ananias was a common name among first century Jews.]³⁰ This is a man who shows up in **Acts 9**, and then we never hear from again. He is lost to history after what happens here.³¹

Here's what happens in verse 10.

¹⁰ Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord [Jesus] said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord."

When people get called in the OT by the Lord, that's what they say, "Here I am."³² In Hebrew it's הִנֵּנִי (*hineni*). **"I'm here, Lord. What do you need? What do you want me to do? I'm at your disposal."** It's a statement of surrender and willingness to heed the voice of the Lord.

Look at verse 11.

¹¹ And the Lord said to [Ananias], "Rise and go to the street called Straight,³³ and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, ¹² 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."

Saul must have received subsequent visions from the Lord after his "Damascus road experience." Probably while he was praying and fasting in Damascus, Jesus appeared to him again. And Jesus told him that a man named Ananias will come and lay hands on him so that he would have his sight restored.

So now Jesus is syncing up that vision to Saul with his appearance to the man, Ananias. **"You guys get together. I've got a purpose for both of you and I need you to get together."**

²⁸ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 445: "Seeking to persecute those who described themselves as "the Way," he is now unable to find his own way."

²⁹ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 359: "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. It is an outcome of having seen such glory and shows Saul reduced to powerlessness and helplessness before the Lord... There is precedent for this kind of action in the OT and in Judaism (Gen. 19:11; Exod. 4:11; Deut. 28:28; 2 Kings 6:18–20; Zech. 12:4; Let. Aris. 315–16; Le Cornu and Shulam 2003: 492). However, this act is not so much a judgment as it is a time for Saul to pause and reflect as his eyes have reacted to the strength of God's glory."

³⁰ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 282: "Ananias Ἀνανίας is a Hebrew name (הַנִּינִי, 'Yah[weh] has shown favor'), and was a popular name among Palestinian Jews."

³¹ MARTIN LUTHER: "Ananias was not even one finger tall before Paul—he was like a candle before the sun. Still, Paul in this way received light from this little matchstick, from this little doctor Ananias." Quoted in Chung-Kim and Hains, *Acts: New Testament*, RCS, 125.

³² E.g. Abraham in Gen 22:1, 11, Jacob in Gen 33:11, Moses in Exod 3:4, Samuel in 1 Sam 3:4–14, and Isaiah in Isa 6:8.

³³ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 360: "The locale of the meeting is a bit ironic, as usually in Acts the term used for 'straight' (εὐθεῖαν, *eutheian*) means to be ethically straight (8:21; 13:10). This street is still a major road in the city (Bruce 1990: 237). It runs east and west in the eastern portion of the old city and is known today as Derb el-Mustaqim, although its direction has changed slightly since that time. It was known to have had major halls with colonnades and two great city gates at each end, making it a 'fashionable' street (Haenchen 1987: 323). It was fifty feet wide (Le Cornu and Shulam 2003: 497)."

And, at first Ananias was super eager to hear from the Lord. **“Here I am, Lord.”** And who wouldn’t want to be graced with the Lord Jesus’s presence? This is probably the greatest experience of Ananias’s life!³⁴

But Jesus’s message to Ananias is disconcerting to say the least. Let’s just say that Saul’s reputation precedes him. Because look at **verse 13**.

¹³ But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many³⁵ about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem.

There’s another great term for Christians in this passage. We have “disciples of the Lord” (9:1). We have “the Way” (9:2). And here we have “saints.”³⁶ **For the record, I admire Mother Theresa and all that she did in support of the sanctity of human life, but I won’t call her “Saint Theresa.” I love Augustine. I told you his story earlier. But I won’t call him “Saint Augustine.”** Not unless we call everyone saints. Because every believer in Jesus Christ, biblically, is a saint. They have been rendered holy (i.e., sanctified) by the blood of Jesus.

Look at **verse 14**.

¹⁴ And here [Saul] has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.”

There’s another term for Christians—“[those] who call on your name.” These are people who call on the name of the Lord. Ananias expresses concern to Jesus that Saul has authority from the chief priests!

I’m sure Jesus was like, **“O no! Not the chief priests! Heaven forbid that they gave Saul authority!” Have you ever noticed how when you get fearful or anxious, all logic just goes straight out the window? I get that way sometimes when fear gets the best of me. “O no, Lord. Not Saul. He’s got the authority of the chief priests!”**³⁷

Jesus is like, **“What am I, chopped liver?” “You know what, I’ve got authority too, Ananias! I rose from the dead! What did those chief priests ever do? They’ve got nothing on me!”**

Of course Christ didn’t say that, but he could have. **It’s just amazing to me how when we get fearful, we just start to lose perspective on who God is and on how powerful he really is. I’ve been guilty of that.**

So what does Jesus do? **Verse 15**.

¹⁵ But the Lord said to [Ananias],

“Man up, Ananias! Act like a man! Quit whimpering like a little schoolgirl!” Is that what he says? Not exactly. He says, **“Go!”**

*“Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine³⁸ to carry³⁹ my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.”*⁴⁰

Saul would be used so mightily by the Lord in the days ahead that he would not only reach the children of Israel (fellow Jews) but also Gentiles in faraway places. And Saul would even minister to kings like Felix and Festus and Agrippa (**Acts 24–25**). It’s possible that he even carried Christ’s name to Caesar himself (see **Acts 25:12; 2 Tim 4:16–17**). We can’t say that for sure, but it’s a possibility.

Look at **verse 16**. This is an uncomfortable verse.

³⁴ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 446: “The content and purpose of appearances of God in the Old Testament are never the entertainment of the person who experiences the theophany. God appears to individuals in order to convey a directive or commission. The same is true in the appearances of the risen Jesus, as the two christophanies in vv. 3–9 (Saul) and vv. 10–16 (Ananias) and the two visions in 10:3–6 (Cornelius) and 10:10–16 (Peter) demonstrate.”

³⁵ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 448: “This information comes from ‘many people’ (ἀπὸ πολλῶν)—followers of Jesus who may have fled from Jerusalem to Damascus, perhaps also local Jews who had visited Jerusalem and who were informed about the crackdown of the Jewish authorities on the followers of Jesus, with Saul playing a prominent role.”

³⁶ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 361: “Ananias also calls believers saints (ἁγίους, *hagiois*), the first time this designation appears for Christians in Acts (9:32, 41; 26:10; 3:14 [of Christ]; 3:21 [of the prophets]; 6:13 [of the temple]; 7:33 [of the ground at the bush]).”

³⁷ JOHANN SPANGENBERG: “It is as if he wanted to say, ‘Dear Ananias, be at peace! Do not fear, do not worry! Do you believe that I want to send you to a wolf or a murderer? No, Ananias. ‘Are there not twelve hours in a day?’ Do not fear, I will make everything right. It is true that he has been a wolf, but I have made a lamb out of a wolf, a preacher to the Gentiles out of a persecutor of Christians—out of a Pharisee, an apostle and witness who will carry my name before the entire world.” Quoted in Chung-Kim and Hains, *Acts: New Testament*, RCS, 124–5.

³⁸ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 449: “In Gal 1:1 Paul formulates his self-understanding as Jesus’ envoy in precisely this manner: “Paul, an apostle (Παῦλος ἀπόστολος)—sent not from men not by a man, but by Jesus Christ (διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ) and God the Father, who raised him from the dead.”

³⁹ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 449: “The word ‘carry’ (βαστάσαι) means here ‘to confess’ in a missionary context.”

⁴⁰ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 449: “Paul preaches the gospel to the uncircumcised and to the circumcised (1 Cor 9:19–23).”

¹⁶ For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”

Ooph. That’s not going to be fun for Saul. Here are passages that catalogue Paul’s suffering in the NT: **1 Corinthians 4:9–13; 2 Corinthians 11:23–29; 2 Corinthians 12:7–10**. Those passages speak of the unbelievable amount of suffering that Paul endured for his Savior, Jesus Christ.

O and by the way, according to church history, Paul was beheaded by Emperor Nero.

¹⁷ So Ananias departed [He obeyed the Lord despite his fear... good for him] and entered the house. And laying his hands on [Saul]⁴¹

I envision Ananias creeping slowly up to Saul and putting his hands in front of him to make sure he couldn’t see. And then kind of slowly putting his hands on him to make sure this isn’t a trap.

Remember this guy, Saul, came to Damascus to arrest guys like Ananias. He was supposed to bind these Christians and drag them back to Jerusalem. But things haven’t gone according to plan.

Now maybe Ananias was still a little fearful of Saul during this climactic encounter with Saul. Or maybe he wasn’t scared at all, since the Lord had assured him earlier.

And laying his hands on him he said, “Brother⁴² 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.”⁴³ ¹⁸ And immediately something like scales⁴⁴ fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; ¹⁹ and taking food, he was strengthened.

I’m going to stop in the middle of verse 19 and pick up there next time. That might seem like an odd place to stop, but keep in mind that the versification of Scripture isn’t inerrant. Chapter divisions date back to the ninth century AD, and they were standardized in the twelfth century by a man named Stephen Langton.⁴⁵ The versification of the Bible was added even later in the sixteenth century by a man named Robert Stephanus.⁴⁶ Unlike Langton and Stephanus, I see a section break right here in the middle of verse 19.

But go ahead and write this down as a fourth point.

4) Jesus **cures** Saul’s blindness through faithful, fearful Ananias (9:10–19a)⁴⁷

⁴¹ JOHN CALVIN: “Apart from other causes of terror, that voice could still have been ringing in his ears, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ And there is no doubt that the anxious anticipation of a full revelation strangely tormented his mind, and the reason why the Lord kept him waiting for three days was that he might fan his ardor for prayer into stronger flames.” Quoted in Chung-Kim and Hains, *Acts: New Testament*, RCS, 124.

⁴² Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 450: “Ananias addresses Saul as ‘brother’ (ἀδελφός). This may simply be the term that a Jew uses when he addresses another Jew. Since Ananias has been informed by Jesus in his vision that Saul has been blinded but will be healed, and that Jesus has chosen Saul to confess him as Messiah and Savior before Jews and Gentiles, he may have concluded that Saul has already come to faith in Jesus. Further, since Ananias would have spoken to Judas, in whose house Saul has been staying, refusing to eat as he was praying—Judas would have heard these prayers—he may have concluded from Judas’s report about Saul’s condition that he had come to understand the truth about Jesus as the promised Messiah and Savior. Thus, the term ‘brother’ probably suggests that Ananias greets Saul as a fellow believer who belongs to the group of followers of Jesus.”

⁴³ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 362: “It is significant that here a non-apostle is the mediator of the Spirit. The church’s ministry is expanding in ways that mean that non-apostles will do important work... Three times in Acts the laying on of hands is tied to the Spirit. The other two scenes are in 8:17–18, through Peter and John to the Samaritans, and in 19:6, through Paul to John the Baptist’s disciples.”

⁴⁴ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 451: “The term translated as ‘scales’ (λεπίδες) refers in Greek literature not only to the scales of fish and snakes, but also the coat of an onion, the shell of a nut, the flakes that fly off from copper when the metal is worked on with a hammer, the blade of a saw, a metal plate, gold or silver plating, and snow flakes. The term is also used by medical writers, often with regard to skin diseases, but it is not a technical medical term.”

⁴⁵ Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times* (Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc., 1996), 186: “The first division of the Bible into chapters and verses is attributed to Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury in the late 12th century. Cardinal Hugo, in the middle of the 13th century, divided the Old Testament into chapters as they stand in our translation.” Concerning the Hebrew Bible, Thomas Hunter Weir, “Text of the Old Testament,” ed. James Orr et al., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* (Chicago: The Howard-Severance Company, 1915), 2963 states, “In modern editions of the Hebrew text the numbers of the Christian chapters are inserted. The chapters had their origin in the Vulgate, and are variously ascribed to Lanfranc (d. 1089), Stephen Langton (d. 1228), but with most probability to Hugo de Sancto Caro (13th cent.).” See also David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis–Malachi* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 18.

⁴⁶ See Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, “Bible, Canon of The,” *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 305-6.

⁴⁷ CHRYSOSTOM: “Both the fear is shown and the obedience that is greater after the fear.” Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 106.

Now I'll admit, I don't know the exact moment when Paul got saved. It's a little bit ambiguous in the text. Was it before Ananias got there? Is that why he calls him brother? Was it after Ananias got there and told him about Jesus? I don't know. For whatever reason, Luke doesn't specify.⁴⁸

And maybe you don't know that exact moment in your life, either. You just know "I was blind but now I see." Or maybe you have some conception of the approximate timeframe when you got saved, but you don't know the exact moment. That doesn't bother me, just so you know. Because according to Scripture, salvation actually takes place before time began. Paul writes later in Ephesians, "He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ" (1:4-5).

But something must have happened in that three day period when Saul was blind. Because when Ananias shows up, things move quickly. Paul is filled with the Holy Spirit. He regains his sight. He gets baptized. There's no record here of a verbal repentance from his sins or a verbal confession of Christ as Lord. I'm sure it happened. But Luke doesn't include those details here.

In fact, what's interesting to me, is that the only thing that Saul even says in this whole passage is "Who are you, Lord?" in **verse 5**. Those are the only recorded words of Saul in this passage!⁴⁹ It's like he's just a passive recipient of this salvation in **Acts 9**. God just says, **"Alright, that's enough, Saul. You're saved. I'm tired of you working for the enemy, you're working for me now."** And from this point forward that's exactly what Saul does.

And even though Saul's conversion is unique in the sense that Jesus appeared to him in his resurrected form and struck him blind. What's not unique about Saul's salvation is that it was initiated by the Lord. Let me reiterate something that I said already in this series: "Salvation is from the Lord" (**Jonah 2:9**). **You are not the author of your own salvation.**

Please don't think, "Boy, I'm so intelligent. I figured this gospel stuff out while my idiot brother in law in Dallas isn't smart enough to save himself." Nobody should have that attitude. Salvation is from the Lord. He chose us in him before the foundation of the world. And we don't come to church to praise ourselves for being such geniuses that we believed in Christ when nobody else does. No, we come to worship God, because God is the author of our salvation.

God is the author of your salvation. God is the author of Saul's salvation. And Saul doesn't waste any time getting baptized and living for the Lord. In fact, he gets right to work for his new Lord, Jesus Christ. The next passage records in **verse 20**, that this guy, Saul, immediately started "proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues" (**9:20**). We'll see more about that next time.

Here's the irony of that. This guy who came to Damascus to arrest followers of Christ is now preaching Christ in the synagogues. What's up with that? Well, God got a hold of his life. And afterward he becomes the most ardent defender of NT Christianity in church history. Saul will go on to write thirteen of the twenty-seven books in the NT, inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Listen, hear me on this. Paul's letters in the NT contain approximately 32,000 Greek words. That's 32,000 out of 138,000 Greek words in the NT. In terms of percentages, that's almost 25% of the NT. And some of Paul's words have been the most read and most memorized passages throughout the centuries. Countless people, like Augustine, like Martin Luther, have gotten saved after reading Paul's NT letters. That's what God did with this person, Saul. That's what happens when a person goes from spiritual blindness to spiritual sight. Paul could say, just like so many of us here can say, **"Was blind, but now I see."**

⁴⁸ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 447: "Since v. 18 relates Saul's immersion in water, a sign of cleansing which implied confession of sin, immediately after Ananias's visit during which he regained his eyesight, Luke clearly implies that Saul's praying and fasting for three days was the time when he was converted to faith in Jesus, the crucified, risen, and exalted Messiah and Savior whom he proclaimed 'at once' in the synagogues in Damascus (v. 20), after a brief interval of several days during which he regained his strength and had fellowship with the local believers (v. 19)."

⁴⁹ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 451: "the focus on Ananias's message to Saul underscores Saul's passive reception of Jesus' revelation, of Jesus' healing, and of Jesus' gift of the Holy Spirit. Saul will be active soon enough."

Now, before we close, let's do this. Don't zip up your Bibles yet. Let me give you three applications quickly from the text. You can see these in your notes and write them down.

You might say, "Thank you, Pastor Tony for the info. Thanks for the history lesson on Paul and his conversion. But what do I do with this? How do I apply these truths into my life?" Because as Paul says in **2 Timothy**, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness." (**2 Tim 3:16**). So how is this Scripture profitable for me? Well that's a good question, and let me give you quickly three application points that you can use to put this into practice.

1) Be **optimistic** – Jesus can save even the worst of sinners

Listen. Hear me on this. Don't ever stop praying for unsaved family and friends. Don't ever give up on people. Don't ever give into the pessimism that so easily injures your soul. Jesus can save even the worst of sinners. Sanja and I have prayed sometimes for years for people... decades even. And we're not giving up, not until they convert or Jesus comes back, whichever comes first.

I know some of you have been praying and praying and it feels like nothing's happening. Don't give up. Sometimes it gets worse before it gets better. Nobody would have seen Paul's conversion on the Damascus Road. Nobody would have said as he left Jerusalem, "O, I bet Paul is going to get saved on his way to Damascus." Nobody would have said that! God just showed up and it was over. So keep praying and don't doubt God's ability to save even the worst of sinners.

Several years ago I Facebook messaged a basketball teammate from high school. He was one of those guys who really hated me in high school. I don't know why. His nickname for me on the basketball team was "church boy." But lo and behold, several years later, he identified himself as a follower of Christ of Facebook. And he was testifying to his faith online. At the time he was living in Austin, Texas, where it seems like nobody ever gets saved. But there you go. God did that. Listen, hear me on this. Pessimism is a tool of the devil. Don't let Satan cast that spell on you.

Here's a second application.

2) Be **opportunistic** – Jesus may use you in a fear-inducing faith venture

Here's my prayer, "God, give us more Philips and Ananiases here in San Antonio. God, make us a people who respond to the prompting of your Spirit with an immediate, "Here I am, Lord... let's do this!"

If God says, "Hey you, go over there to that Ethiopian Eunuch!" You say, "Sir, yes sir! If God says, "Hey you, go to that Christian-killer Saul over there and do what I say." You say, "Really, Lord, are you sure? Okay, I'll do it!" If God says, "Hey, I want you to get in a plane and go to another country and represent me in another nation of the world." You say, "Okay, Lord here we go. Let's do this."

"Give us more of that, Lord!" Are you willing, church? Are you ready to respond to the prompting of the Holy Spirit? You might say, "Well if Jesus Christ shows up in the flesh and tells me to go witness to someone, I'll do it!" Yeah... I think we can do better than that.

There are other times in Scripture when Paul and Peter and John without the prompting of the Holy Spirit or a direct edict from the Lord went and preached the gospel. So don't just be responsive, be opportunistic. Hasn't he told us already in his word, "Go be my witness?" "Go make disciples?" So go! Look for opportunities and take advantage of them.

And by the way, you're not going to find opportunities to witness if you stayed locked inside of your holy huddle. You're not going to even have opportunities to respond to the Holy Spirit if you insulate yourself from the world and live a life of fear-filled isolation. That's not what God has called us to do.

And here's a final application. Thirdly.

3) Be **awestruck** – Jesus's work of salvation should inspire wonder and worship in his church

Don't ever stop celebrating your new life in Christ. Don't ever forget your "Damascus road experience," whatever that looked like. Don't ever stop worshipping Christ for the new life that he has given you.

Each and every one of us should come into this building on Sundays prepared to sing “Hallelujah, Praise the Lord. I can’t believe I’m saved. I can’t believe I get another chance to worship the Lord.” Each and every one of us should come into this building on Sundays praying to God and saying, “Do it again, Lord. Save someone’s soul today at church! Give someone *today* a Damascus Road experience.” Each and every one of us should be able to say and sing with joy and with wonder:

*I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.*