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Blinded to See: Saul becomes Paul Acts 13:1-13; 9:1-22

Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

Saul is such an important character in the New Testament and in church history that we naturally wish we knew more about him than we do. Still, there is a significant amount of information we can glean from a close reading of Acts and the letters that are attributed to him.

Saul was born in the city of Tarsus to a Jewish family that most likely spoke Aramaic at home and attended a synagogue where the service was conducted in Hebrew. In Romans 11:1 he declares, *“I myself am an Israelite, a descendent of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin.”* In Philippians 3:5-6 he describes his pure-bred Jewish background and upbringing saying he was, *“circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law blameless.”*

We learn in Acts 22:3 and 26:4 that as a young man he received at least some of his education in Jerusalem under Rabbi Gamaliel and that Saul was *“educated strictly according to our ancestral law, being zealous for God.”* Gamaliel was a well known Rabbi who advised the Sanhedrin (the ruling Jewish council in Jerusalem) regarding Peter and the other apostles in Acts 5:34-39. It was his calm voice of tolerance that advocated not executing or imprisoning the followers of Jesus but letting them go and letting them be because if what they were up to was of human origin it would certainly fail. If it was of God, then, he said, *“you will not be able to overthrow them – in that case you may even be found fighting against God!”* Unfortunately, Saul is a young, strong-willed individual and he fails to follow the advice of his teacher and mentor. Rather than keeping away from Peter and other followers of Jesus and letting them alone as Gamaliel advised (Acts 5:38), Saul aggressively went after them.

So when Christianity, which was known as *The Way*, was in its infancy, Saul took personal responsibility to exterminate it. We meet Saul for the first time in Acts 7:58, where the murderous crowd that drags Stephen outside of Jerusalem and begins to stone him to death, *“laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.”* *“And Saul approved of their killing him. That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. ² Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him.*

³ But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison (Acts 8:1-3)."

Saul was such an enemy of the church he was willing to travel 150 miles to Damascus in order to expand what began as a local persecution against believers in Jerusalem. So before he meets Jesus, Saul is a zealous, focused, obsessed, persecutor of the church willing to do whatever was necessary including imprisoning men and women or even approving of murder by a mob to stop the advance of Jesus' followers.

In Acts 9, Saul has a life-changing encounter with the risen Christ. Many of us who have come to believe in and follow Jesus have not had an experience like that of Saul who saw a light flash and heard a voice. However, Saul was not only far from God's will, he was actively seeking to persecute the church which is the body of Christ. So it isn't surprising that he has a rather dramatic experience of being confronted by and coming to faith in Jesus.

Given his previous activities against followers of The Way, what do you think Saul was reflecting about during his three days of blindness and fasting after his dramatic experience on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:9)? Can you picture the depths of reflection and self-examination Saul was going through thinking that in being zealous for God he had actually been doing the exact opposite of what God wanted him to do?

At the same time, how would you feel if you were in the place of Ananias? Can you imagine how you'd feel if there was a well-known person on Cape Cod who was going from town to town looking for believers and getting them thrown in prison who then the Lord told you to go meet at a certain location in order to pray for him and lay hands on him? We can appreciate Ananias's hesitation and reluctance to reach out to Saul, much less to pray for him.

Ananias is asked to go to someone who he thinks is beyond God's reach. Are there types of people you assume are beyond God's reach so that, if God spoke to you about speaking or sharing with them, you would question the instruction? The story of Saul is one of an enemy who became a brother, of a persecutor of the church who became an incredible promoter of the gospel and planter of churches.

So by the time we get to Acts 13, thanks to the intervention and encouragement of Barnabas, Saul has had the opportunity to preach, teach, lead, and disciple in a number of places. Last week, we read in Acts 13:1-3 where we learned that out of a time of worship, prayer, and fasting with a multi-cultural group of believers, the Holy

Spirit set apart Barnabas and Saul for the work to which they were called so their friends prayed for them and sent them off to Cyprus, Barnabas' island home. This brings us to Acts 13:6-12 .

“When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they met a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet, named Bar-Jesus. He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, an intelligent man, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and wanted to hear the word of God. But the magician Elymas (for that is the translation of his name) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul away from the faith. But Saul, also known as Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, *“You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? And now listen – the hand of the Lord is against you, and you will be blind for a while, unable to see the sun.”* Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he went about groping for someone to lead him by the hand. When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was astonished at the teaching about the Lord.”

When Paul was commissioned on the road to Damascus he was told three things: (1) He was to be an instrument to carry the name of Christ (2) before gentiles and kings, and (3) he will be shown how much he must suffer for the sake of Christ. The rest of Acts describes how this happens. In this passage, Saul, a true prophet of God, squares off with a false prophet, giving a stinging verbal rebuke and then praying for the hand of the Lord to take away his sight for a time which leaves the poor false prophet stumbling and fumbling around looking for someone to help him. Surely it can't be a mistake that the description of the temporarily blinded false prophet who was trying to turn Sergius away from the faith is eerily similar to Saul's condition in Acts 9:8 when he was a false prophet trying to turn people away from the faith. Blindness seems to be both a spiritual and physical reality for several people in Acts who are working against the Lord until they “see the light” and come to faith.

From this time forth in Acts Saul is known as Paul and with only a couple of exceptions, his name will appear first when used with Barnabas (I believe only Acts 14:14, 15:12, and 15:25 are still “Barnabas and Paul.”). In Acts 14:19-22 we learn that in Lystra, *“they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. But when the disciples surrounded him, he got up and went into the city.”* Ironically, Paul was the recipient of a stoning like the one he witnessed Stephen receive in Acts 8 and Paul was also supposed to be dead (Acts 14:19-20), yet he survived only

to endure more suffering and incredible hardships in living out his faith (see 2 Corinthians 6:3-10).

Paul would say after this experience,

'It is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God.'

These are remarkable words for Paul to speak and they reflect how far he has come in his spiritual journey from persecutor to persecuted. In Acts 9:4, the risen Christ said to Saul, as he was then called, *"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"*

Furthermore, Paul was able to write the church in Rome (Romans 12:14), *"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them."* And to the church in Corinth (1 Cor. 4:12-13), *"When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly."*

Paul learned that persecution does not mean God has forsaken us, through our trials and tests our faith is forged, shaped, and even strengthened – *"it is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God."* As we get closer to Holy Week words Thomas a Kempis wrote in *The Imitation of Christ*, are appropriate for us today. *"Christ was despised on earth by men, and in his greatest need, amidst insults, was abandoned by those who knew him and by friends; and you dare to complain of anyone? Christ had his adversaries and slanderers; and you wish to have everyone as friends and benefactors? Whence will your patience win its crown if it has encountered nothing of adversity?"*

Paul who stood by while Stephen was stoned, received a stoning more than once himself and yet he couldn't be intimidated or turned back. The one who dragged off men and women to prison because of their faith, became quite familiar with the inside of Roman jails and even in those dark and dreary places he proclaimed the gospel, helped folks spiritually to see the light and led them to faith.

Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:10-12, *"Now you have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, **my persecutions and suffering** the things that happened to me in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. **What persecutions I endured!** Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be **persecuted.**"*

Author Flannery O'Connor once said of Paul, *"I reckon the Lord knew that the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse."*

As we have gone through this series on *When God Changes Your Name*, perhaps you have found yourself identifying with a character or two in particular.

Perhaps the story of Saul is helpful for those of us who need to be knocked off our horse – those of us who are so sure of our selves we don't think we need any help or guidance from any one else and we're confident we're going in the right direction. Perhaps Paul's story is helpful for those who feel like the way they've lived their life to this point has put them beyond the reach of God's love.

The story of Paul is that of a man who saw the light and was blinded in order that he might truly see. It just might be that whatever your issue, problem, past or the way you messed up your life or were hurt, may become the way God uses you.

Saul who is also known by the Latin name Paul is a Hebrew who grew up in a Greek city, educated in the faith of his ancestors yet also a Roman citizen able to speak Greek, is uniquely positioned to lead the expansion of the church beyond the Jews to the Gentiles and ultimately to all people.

Each of us through our own particular gifts, experiences, backgrounds, and abilities also has a mission to fulfill in our time. I pray the Lord will help us to see what is we are to do just as the Lord helped Paul.

Let's pray,

O Lord, who orders all things for our eternal good, mercifully enlighten our minds, and give us a firm and abiding trust in your love and care in the midst of the challenges and opportunities of our life. Silence our murmurings, quiet our fears, and dispel our doubts, that, rising above our afflictions and our anxieties, we may rest on you, the one of everlasting strength. Amen.

"When God Changes Your Name"
Acts 9:1-22, 13:1-13 Saul becomes Paul
Week of April 2, 2006
Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

Background: Saul was born in Tarsus to a Hellenistic Jewish family descended from the tribe of Benjamin (Philippians 3:5, Romans 11:1). Unlike many Jews he was also a Roman citizen. He received at least some of his final education in Jerusalem under the Rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 22:3, 26:4). What had Gamaliel advised the Sanhedrin (the ruling council) regarding Christians in Acts 5:34-39? How well is Saul following that advice?

When *The Way* was in its infancy Saul was willing to take personal responsibility to exterminate it (Acts 9:1-2, 1 Corinthians 15:9, Galatians 1:13). He was willing to travel 150 miles to Damascus in order to expand what began as a local persecution against believers in Jerusalem. What does that reveal about him?

In Acts 9, Saul has a life-changing encounter with the risen Christ.

How do you understand his experience?

If you have encountered Jesus in a significant way, what was that like for you?

Given his previous activities, what do you think Saul was reflecting about during his three days of blindness and fasting (Acts 9:9)?

How would you feel if you were in the place of Ananias?

Ananias is asked to go to someone who he thinks is beyond God's reach. What types of people do you assume are beyond God's reach so that, if God spoke to you about sharing with them, you would question the instruction?

Why is it important for Ananias to go to Saul?

Has there been an Ananias in your life? Is it possible the Lord want you to play the part of Ananias for someone else? Who might that be?

In Acts 13:9 we learn Saul is also known as Paul. What might be the significance his name change? How might it be related to what God is calling him to do with the rest of his life?

Paul emerges from his experience with growing clarity about what the Lord wants him to do. What do sense the Lord wanting you to do in your life?