

Luke recorded the Ethiopian's encounter with Christ as his prelude to the forthcoming Gentile mission. But more than merely a passing glance at the first Gentile conversion, Luke constructed his account so as to emphasize the Spirit's precise ordering of this episode. The Spirit directed Philip to this particular individual and brought him to faith in Christ under specific, orchestrated circumstances in order to clearly link his conversion to scriptural promise:

As a eunuch and a foreigner, the Ethiopian personally embodied the prophetic description which epitomized the Gentile world in its alienation from God. And so, by saving this man in this way and at this time, the Spirit was testifying that the Gentile ingathering promised by the prophets was now at hand; the Ethiopian was the firstfruits of God's promise to give those who were formerly aliens and defiled outcasts an everlasting name and exceeding joy within His house.

B. The Conversion of Saul (9:1-19)

The Ethiopian's conversion heralded the impending Gentile mission, and the next crucial step toward its implementation was God's preparation of the servant appointed to spearhead it. Miraculously, and contrary to all expectation, the man who most epitomized Jewish elitism and hostility and opposition to Christ and His gospel was about to become Christ's servant, herald and minister of the gospel to the nations as well as the sons of Israel.

1. Luke previously introduced Saul as a man determined to eradicate Jesus' teaching and destroy (or at least silence) everyone who embraced it. He placed Saul at the very center of the organized persecution that drove the Christian community from Jerusalem, and here Luke picks up right where he left off. Saul had been tireless in his efforts to crush Christ's followers and their message and he deserved much of the credit for the Jews' success. With the exception of the apostles, there was no longer a visible Christian presence in Jerusalem, but Saul was not satisfied. He recognized that Jesus' disciples were taking their gospel with them as they scattered, and so set his sights beyond Jerusalem. He was intent on stamping out this "Way" wherever it might be found.

Luke turned his attention to the Samaritan mission with Saul aggressively persecuting Christ's saints, and nothing changed in the intervening period. When he again directed his narrative focus back to Saul, Luke found him still "*breathing out threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord*" (9:1). The preceding context doesn't indicate how much time had elapsed since Stephen's stoning, but the fact that the Christian community had spread as far as Damascus in Syria suggests that at least several months had passed.

Neither time nor distance had softened Saul's heart or weakened his resolve. The more he saw the gospel spreading and the Church growing the more he was committed to putting a stop to it. Far from being merely a passionate burden, Saul's cause had become an obsession marked by ferocity and violence, and it drove him to pursue Christ's saints far beyond Jerusalem and its environs (26:9-11). Saul couldn't rest until every Christian was dead or silenced and the crucified false messiah Jesus of Nazareth was forgotten, and that commitment led him to seek papers from the high priest authorizing him to work with the synagogue authorities in Damascus to arrest and return any believers to Jerusalem (9:2).

Though Saul may appear to be a unique case, he actually provides an epitomizing glimpse into human enmity against Christ, His gospel and His Church. People oppose them in various ways and with varying degrees of intensity and overtness, but all are, by nature, *opponents*. The opposition of some takes the form of apparent indifference, while others are openly hostile. Some oppose Christ and His gospel within an irreligious framework while others, like Paul, do so out of deep religious conviction. But regardless of their particular perspective or orientation, all people truly – if not consciously – oppose Christ precisely because they exist in a state of alienation from God.

This estrangement leaves them in a self-isolated and self-referential state, so that every thought, conception, word and action has its source and substance in an ultimately independent and autonomous self. In this state, *oneself* is necessarily the measure of all things, with the result that many view Jesus and His gospel with indifference because they regard them as irrelevant or foolish; others treat Him in roughly the same way, but because they trust that their lives measure up to what they believe He taught and demanded; still others, equally focused on their own righteousness, actively oppose Him. The irreligious among them do so convinced of their personal goodness and adequacy; the religious do so with the confidence that they can attain (or have already attained) righteousness through the disciplines of religion and its ethics and morality.

Saul was in the latter category. He had given his entire life to the pursuit of personal holiness in his doctrine and practice and had advanced in Pharisaism beyond his peers. Saul was fiercely proud of the fact that he could claim the credential of blamelessness under the Law (Philippians 3:1-6), and his devotion and distinction as a Pharisee were at the very heart of his personal identity and self-image. If all men are self-referential, Saul's sense of himself and his relation to God and other men was centered in his perception that he was Yahweh's faithful servant as a blameless disciple of Moses. And placing himself at the center of what it means to know, love and serve God, Saul had no choice but to oppose everything that deviated from what he believed and saw in himself.

- On the one hand, Saul's violent zeal was understandable: *"To a 'strict' and 'zealous' Pharisee, the proclamation of a Messiah who had been condemned by Judaism's leaders and executed in disgrace, and especially the view (attributed to Stephen) that this Messiah would destroy the temple and change the Torah, would sound like apostasy from the God of Israel."* (Johnson, The Message of Acts)
- On the other hand, Saul's ardor wasn't entirely altruistic. At a certain level, he misinterpreted Jesus and His teaching, and this afforded him a degree of excuse. But, in concert with Israel's religious establishment, Saul also recognized that Jesus' message debunked and illegitimized his proud confidence before God.

And so, while Paul could later insist that he had acted in the sincerity of true ignorance when he sought to destroy this new "Way," he also understood that, like his Jewish countrymen, his opposition was ultimately grounded in his determination to uphold his own righteousness – the righteousness for which he had labored so long and hard; he had acted ignorantly, but *in unbelief* (cf. 1 Timothy 1:12-13; Romans 9:30ff; John 16:1-3).

2. In his zeal for God, Saul did everything in his power to obliterate Christ's witnesses and their message. He directed his hostility against the Church, but, for all that the saints endured at his hand, Saul was actually persecuting the Lord they served (9:3-4) – the One he was convinced was dead and gone. It was no wonder that Jesus' call to Saul was met with the response, "*Who are you Lord?*" Saul was persecuting Jesus in two respects: First of all, because Christians share in His life and likeness, any treatment they receive is treatment He receives (cf. Matthew 25:31-46 with John 15:18-20). But secondly, while Saul's hand was against Jesus' disciples (26:10-11), the murderous rage that filled his heart had its true object in their Master. It was the memory of this false messiah and the "Way" He introduced that Saul was determined to stamp out (22:4, 26:9).

Saul labored to destroy this new "Way," but all his efforts only succeeded in further disseminating the message of the gospel and its fruitfulness. In the end, all he had managed to accomplish was to "kick against the goads" (26:14); *like an ox that pierces its hoof when it tries to kick back against the ploughman, Saul could lash out against Jesus, but only to his own hurt.*

3. This one who sought to destroy Jesus' Church and eradicate His gospel couldn't prevail; indeed, the Lord set Himself against Saul and He was the One who would triumph. Jesus would overcome and destroy His enemy – *not by taking Saul's life, but by giving him life.* The Lord had determined to conquer His enemy by making him His servant and witness. The man who had given all his energies to oppose Jesus and destroy His Church would now – by the exercise of divine power – see those energies expended for the sake of Christ's glory and the progress and well-being of His Church. In Jesus' hands, Saul was to become the apostle *Paul*: His chosen instrument to bear His name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel. Saul would not merely come to see Jesus as Israel's Messiah; he would become the single-minded servant and effectual agent of His messianic mission in the world (9:15; cf. esp. 26:15-18 with Isaiah 35:1-5, 42:1-7).
4. The day for which the Lord had set Saul apart had arrived (Galatians 1:13-16), but his transformation was to occur in two stages. It began on the road to Damascus and culminated in the city with a visit from Jesus' disciple Ananias.
 - a. As Saul approached the city he was confronted with a blinding light. He was likely on horseback, and the overwhelming power of that luminescent manifestation – even in the presence of the noonday sun – caused him and those accompanying him to fall to the ground. Lying there, Saul heard a voice but didn't realize who was questioning him. His companions also heard the sound of the voice, but he alone understood the words being spoken (9:7, 22:9).

Jesus identified Himself as the object of Saul's persecution and informed him that his efforts would not succeed. Taking the three accounts together, it seems that the Lord then informed Saul in general terms what He was going to do with him, subsequently directing him to continue into Damascus where His mission would be further explained (9:5-6, 22:10, 26:15-18). Saul had inflicted great suffering in Christ's name; hereafter Paul would endure that same suffering (9:16).

- b. Saul did as Jesus commanded, but as a now helpless blind man (9:8). The confident Pharisee had been reduced to groping in the darkness, dependent on others to guide him. Luke observed that Saul's companions led him into Damascus, and this is crucially important to the episode and its meaning. All had seen the blazing light and been knocked to the ground by it (22:9, 26:13-14), but only Saul had come away blinded. *The obvious implication is that Saul's blindness was divinely imposed rather than physiological.* The light didn't blind Saul; the Lord stripped him of his sight in order to teach him a profound lesson.

Sightedness and blindness are important images in the Scripture – images which always have spiritual significance even when the primary reference is to the physical phenomena. This was the imagery Jesus employed in His encounter with Saul on the Damascus road; He brought about the *physical* condition of blindness in him, but for the purpose of communicating *spiritual* truth to him.

Saul epitomized self-righteous, self-sufficient man: man as confident that, in his own wisdom and understanding (and in Saul's case, his religious competence), he "sees." In this state, people are incapable of recognizing their own blindness until they are struck with a heavenly vision. Apart from divine intervention, all human wisdom and insight are nothing more than "the blind leading the blind" (Matthew 15:12-14, 23:16ff; cf. also 1 Corinthians 1:10-29; Romans 1:18-23; 1 Timothy 6:20-21). When confronted with the blazing glory of Jesus' self-manifestation, Saul – the scholarly, self-assured Pharisee who "knew" that he perceived the Nazarene for who He really is – didn't recognize Him. This man who was so thoroughly convinced that he "saw" was actually blind (John 9:39-41), and Jesus highlighted Saul's true condition by drawing the veil over his natural sight.

Ananias' was the Lord's appointed instrument to open Saul's eyes – first physically, then spiritually by Saul's reception of the Holy Spirit (ref. 22:12-15, 26:12-18). And so it was that the once confident Pharisee was led into Damascus humiliated, broken and undone. There, awaiting the Lord's messenger, Saul prayed and fasted for three days (9:9, 11). *Like the One who now laid claim to him, Saul would also endure three days and nights of death and darkness before coming forth in the newness of resurrection life.*

- c. Saul's appointment with divine destiny came in two stages involving two divine visitations. Jesus appeared in a vision first to Saul (26:19) and then to His disciple Ananias (9:10). In the latter vision, the Lord ordered His incredulous servant to go to the house where Saul was staying and restore his sight (9:11-12). If Saul was shocked and perplexed by Jesus' visitation, Ananias was equally so (9:13-14). Rebuffing Ananias' protestations, the Lord declared His purpose for Saul; his eyes were to be opened, but that physical recovery was merely a symbol of what Jesus was going to accomplish that day: By the power of His Spirit, He was lifting the dark veil of alienation and self-righteous unbelief from this man whom His Father had set apart from his mother's womb for the sake of His gospel and the progress of His kingdom (ref. 9:17-18; cf. 2 Corinthians 3:1-16).

Saul's conversion was unique in its circumstance and particulars, but, as it demonstrates the *sovereign* and *unilateral* quality of God's saving work, it was entirely paradigmatic.

- 1) Saul was determined to destroy Jesus' work in building His kingdom, but was utterly powerless against it. He thought he was battling the merely human forces of heresy and apostasy; as far as he was concerned, Jesus was dead and gone, and once His disciples were vanquished, the same fate would befall His memory among the sons of Israel. Saul set himself against Yahweh's Stone, but found himself crushed by that Stone and a new man fashioned in his place. Such a work was beyond Ananias' expectation and became a source of amazement for the believers in Damascus (9:13-14, 21). If *Saul* epitomized man in his estranged state, *Paul* profoundly epitomized man as "new creation" in Christ.
- 2) The unilateral exercise of divine sovereignty is also evident in the preparation leading up to Saul's conversion. Jesus had categorized Paul's opposition as "kicking against the goads," and this metaphor says as much about God's intention and involvement with Saul as Saul's with Him. Like a yoked ox kicking back against its master's driving hand, Saul was seeking to oppose the divine will. But he was kicking against "goads" that the Master had prepared with full knowledge of the resistance to come; goads designed to instruct and direct him that he should be brought under the Master's control and rendered useful.

A ploughman fashions a goad to "deliver" his ox from its native stubbornness and resistance; so God had ordered various circumstances and situations in Saul's life to make him a prepared and fit instrument of His will. One such "goad" was Stephen's trial and stoning. Saul had been confronted with Christ's fragrance and gospel in this man's radiant countenance, powerful proclamation and glorious death. This goad was added to another one, namely Saul's previous exposure to Jesus' person and teaching. (Whether or not Saul had personally encountered Him, he doubtless was well aware of the things Jesus taught and claimed about Himself). *But arguably God's most powerful goad was Saul's life as a Pharisee*: In his relentless commitment to righteousness under the Law, Saul had faced the despair that confronts every man who strives against sin with the two sole human resources of *law* and *will*; these "resources" cannot secure true righteousness; their only yield is wretchedness and self-delusion (Romans 7:7-24; cf. Galatians 2:11ff).

- 3) Finally, unilateral sovereignty is evident in the nature of Saul's conversion, symbolized in his deliverance from blindness. Saul wasn't seeking to know the truth about Jesus; he had already concluded concerning Him. And even if he were seeking, his quest would have been profitless. Saul's heart and mind were darkened and he was powerless to strip the veil from them. Nothing within Saul was adequate; what was needed was a *new creation*, and, as He had done in the first creation, God caused His light to shatter the darkness of death and disorder and fill Saul's soul with the light of life (2 Corinthians 4:1-6).

Saul had set himself against Jesus, and the victorious King crushed him and took his life: He took what Saul reckoned to be "life" and gave him what is life indeed (ref. Galatians 2:15-20; cf. Matthew 16:13-25; Luke 9:18-24, 17:22-33; John 12:23-25); Jesus destroyed Yahweh's deluded, self-righteous "servant" in order to make him a true servant (9:5-6, 10-16). The Pharisee Saul had departed Jerusalem; Paul the apostle would return to it.