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Blinded by the Light

A sermon in the Spirited Adventure Series by Pastor Rob Hamilton
Delivered on July 3, 2022 on Acts 9:1-20 NRSV

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³ Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” ⁵ He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” ⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. ⁸ Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹ For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. ¹⁰ Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” He answered, “Here I am, Lord.” ¹¹ The Lord said to him, “Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment 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.” ¹³ But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; ¹⁴ and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.” ¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; ¹⁶ I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” ¹⁷ So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, “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.” ¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, ¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, ²⁰ and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.”



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Prelude

Hi! I'm Rob Hamilton, Senior Pastor at UMCG and today we're starting the last month in our series on the book of Acts, called Spirited Adventures: How the Holy Spirit moves us to the ends of the earth. If you've missed out on any of the messages genevaumc.org can help you get caught up. As you've heard Carol read today we're going to start exploring Paul's ministry as he takes the good news of Jesus Christ to all sorts of new places and people. Today, I thought it would be interesting to engage in some biography on Paul, who was named Saul before Jesus got a hold of him, and so after we pray, I am going to pretend to be Paul and have invited him to come speak to us about his life and how the Holy Spirit prepared him for adventure. Let's pray

Prayer of Illumination

Spirit Divine,
Open our eyes, that we may see glimpses of truth thou hast for us.
Place in our hands the wonderful key that shall unclasp and set us free.
Silently now we wait for thee, ready, O God, your will to see.
Open our eyes; illumine us. Amen

Sermon

I'm grateful for Pastor Rob's invitation to be part of this series on the Holy Spirit and to share with you my story. Oh, my apologies for not introducing myself I am Paul of Tarsus, but as you heard from Luke's version of my story I am also known as Saul of Tarsus... but that was a long time ago and I'm not the same person today as I was back before that blinding light that changed everything for me on the road to Damascus.



I'm not ashamed of my past... at least not anymore... not since I have learned that in all things God works for the good of those who love God, who have been called according to God's purpose. I think God was working good in my life



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in my younger years, until I took it too far and God redeemed even that to use me for God's purposes.

Just in case you don't really know my history, I'll share it with you briefly: When I went by the name of Saul, I was a Pharisee from the tribe of Benjamin. My family lived in Tarsus -over in Turkey. This means I hold dual citizenship in both the Roman Empire and in the Jewish nation. Something that has served me well so far in my young life. I was born around the year 5, but my family moved to Jerusalem about the time I turned 10.

I was glad to have grown up close to the city of God. I know most young men my age had little interest in religion. Instead, they wanted to go into the family business or make a better life for themselves. Now don't get the wrong idea, it's not that I am opposed to work. I actually like to work and I know my way around canvas pretty well, making tents. But my true passion was the defending and living the Torah, because it meant I would be considered worthy in God's eyes. So growing up in Jerusalem provided me some of the best teachers. My rabbis taught me how important it is to follow God's law - all 613 commands and so I felt called to be a Pharisee and a good one at that.

As a Pharisee, I was dedicated to working with common people teaching them about how to live God's law in our day-to-day lives, so that we could save ourselves. I used to think that since I worked so hard at keeping God's commands and found myself pretty successful at it I could earn God's favor. I thought if people would just try harder, they too could be like me, and follow God's commands and soon God would bless us by overthrowing the Romans to make Israel great again. That's one of the first things I had to reconsider after being blinded by the lights. That none of us are really capable of saving ourselves, or others, that's what Jesus did for us. We can't ever be worthy by our own merit. To be honest, every time I set out to be blameless in God's eyes, I still end up doing the things I hate. But thanks be to God for Jesus Christ who is blameless and takes away our sin, since we can't do that ourselves. For too long, I was too self-righteous.

My self-righteousness led to my persecution of Christians. I was so zealous that I felt it was my responsibility to root out and eliminate all false teachings, all the distractions for God and the Jesus followers of the Way. These people were the biggest threat to God... at least back then... that was over 20 years ago and looking back if my younger self Saul could see the man of Christ I have become in



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Paul... I'd be my own public enemy number one. Oh, the foolishness when I was a child, I thought like a child and acted like one, even though I was a grown man.

I guess that's one thing I'd want you to know about my story is that God will use anyone for God's purposes. It might sound quite foolish, but if Jesus can take his number one persecutor and turn me and my zealousness into something good for his purposes, then I know God can use anyone even with such a shameful past... sometimes I wonder if God specifically chooses people with shameful past to reach those not too different from us.

One of the questions I get a lot when I do my talks is about that day on the road to Damascus. It's really hard to believe and explain. Luke makes the whole incident seem neat and tidy like a Netflix drama series script. I can't blame Luke for making the story more concise to fit his purpose of chronicling all the ways God's Holy Spirit spread the good news of Jesus Christ around the world, but I also think the full story of what happened to me is helpful to some.

You've heard the gist of the story already. Back when I was Saul, I was on the hunt for more Christians. I had permission to hunt them in Damascus and even secured some muscle to help arrest them. On my way there, suddenly, out of nowhere I'm knocked off my horse by this blinding light. I can't see anything but brilliant light. My horse took off and I call out for help, but my companions can't hear me and I can't see them. Something was clearly wrong. That's when I heard my name. The voice came from all around me and it didn't sound like the men I was with so I shout: 'Hello?, Who's there?! What's happening? Can you help me?' The voice says back, 'Saul, why are you persecuting me?'

I still can't see. Everything is so bright. I don't know what the voice is talking about, I'm not persecuting anyone. I must be confused for someone else. So I say back in every direction, 'I don't know what you are talking about. You must have the wrong person, I'm not persecuting anyone. Who are you and can you help me?'

The voice says: 'Saul it is I, Jesus of Nazareth. The son of God, the first born of the new creation, resurrected into new life. You are persecuting my followers. Today, you will no longer persecute me, but instead you will be my witness to the Gentile nations, and kings, and even my people in Jerusalem. Go, now, to Damascus. I have prepared a place for you in the house of Judas. Go there. Wait and pray. Soon I will send you someone to help you.'

Just as quick as it started it was over. The voice and light was gone, but I still can't see. My companions finally came to my aid and get me to Damascus. They



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heard the voice too but didn't see anything. But I have to tell you, my mind was blown and my heart was broken. I spent days in alone in our host's house just trying to figure our how I had been so wrong about everything in my life.

I remember praying with Ananias "Oh Lord, how could I have been so wrong. You know how much I love your law, O God. I wasn't trying to persecute you. I was trying to *help* you - to rid us of all those who are leading your people astray. But it turns out I was the one who was astray. I was the one who is wrong. Oh Lord, you must strike me dead. I am not worthy to live. I have killed a man wrongly. I have beaten and imprisoned whole families because I thought they were leading people away from you. Lord, in trying to be a good person, I have failed you. How can someone who has done so much wrong, have committed such sins against you be allowed to live? My guilt and shame is too much to bear." Ananias was God's anointed to me. He assured me God had heard my confession and forgiven me and was calling me to serve him to reach Gentiles no less.

Luke makes it seem like I was off to the races on this new mission, with this new life and new name God had given me. But what most don't know is that I spent like 17 years relearning everything I once knew. I spent time in prayer and scripture. I debated with Rabbi's and Pharisees to better understand how everything I knew about Torah wasn't wrong, but that it all points to Jesus and how we are free by grace from the tyranny of the law. That Torah is about a loving relationship with God, not some code of conduct from a god with a killer surveillance system who is always looking for a reason to punish us. God loves us... all of us... all of creation is God's, Jesus is the first born of Creation and God desires nothing more than to be in loving relationship with his creatures, not punish us. It took me a long time to learn that and then believe it so I could share that new way of understanding God with others.

That's one of the other things I want you to know - God loves each of us simply because we exist, because God made us. We don't earn it or have to strive to keep it, God just loves us. I also want you to know that it is ok if it takes you a long time to learn that and if it takes a long time for the Spirit to do its work in your life to prepare you to share that with others. God started on me when I was young, it took the Holy Spirit over 40 years to get get me ready and 17 of those years were after I was blinded by the light of love and had my whole life transform. So there is no age limit to when God can use any of us and it may take a long time. The power of God's Holy Spirit does't often change us like Luke makes



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it seem in a 30 minute episode, but it can. More of ten than not the Holy Spirit has a lot of work to do in us before we are ready.

Lastly, I am humbled that God has and continues to use me for taking the gospel to new places and new people. I have gone in so many different directions and I have had God change my plans and help me reach new people. Sometimes it was easy. More often it has been hard. There have been obstacles and situations I didn't think I was going to get out of alive... but God used all that for good. God has plans that don't often look like my own. That's something I am still learning to listen and follow God. The more I do, even when it defies my logic and experience, it seems when God opens up a whole new reality for me and sends me to many more people. The more I trust God and let go of what I know, the more I confess and receive grace, the easier it becomes for God to use me (and easier for me to be used by God). That's something I want for everyone and what I leave with you today. I encourage you to surrender yourself to God. It's just better that way. Begin with confession and offer yourself freely to God and the Holy Spirit starts to do the rest.

In fact, Pastor Rob told me we could do that together as we gather around this sacred meal today. That we can confess, surrender, receive God's grace and offer ourselves to God. If you'll open your little black song books to 2133 we can sing a confession together. We can get right with God, no matter our age, no matter our past, no matter our shame, no matter what we think God can or cannot do through us and offer our wholesale for God's good purposes in the world.

Thanks for letting me speak today and share in this holy feast together as your pastors come back to lead us in confession and communion in the love and Spirit of Jesus. Amen.