

Saul to Paul

SCOTT HOEZEE

The preacher and writer, Frederick Buechner, once memorably summed up history's most famous conversion by saying that the man, Saul of Tarsus, set out for Damascus as a hatchet man for the Pharisees and returned a fool for Christ. The turnaround of the man who became known as the Apostle Paul is one of the most iconic moments in the book of Acts, as the power of the risen Lord Jesus confronted the very man whose number one goal was to wipe the name of Jesus from the face of the earth. Today on *Groundwork*, let's dig into Acts 9 and the Damascus Road conversion of a once-feared man named Saul.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and this is now our fourth program, Dave, of a series from the book of Acts. We are coming now to Acts Chapter 9 today, which in terms – so, Acts has 28 chapters – so in terms of literal chapters and verses, this is not the center of the book of Acts, but theologically, thematically, and in terms of almost everything that counts, this is the center of the book of Acts; and in some ways, other than the death and resurrection of Jesus, which is the true center of the whole Bible, there is a sense in which, given what happens, this the center of the New Testament because of who Paul becomes for the Church.

DAVE BAST

Yes; we are going to be looking at mostly Paul from now on in Acts; and you started out with a Buechner quote – Frederick Buechner is a great writer, great preacher of the Gospel in our time, and I have another one. Speaking of Paul, he wrote, his mads were madder and blues bluer, his pride prouder and his humbleness humbler, his strengths stronger and his weaknesses weaker than almost anybody else you would be apt to think of; and the splash he made when he fell for Christ is audible still. He knew that the God who could work through the likes of him must be a God-and-a-half. I love that! He is a God-and-a-half, the God who could convert Paul.

Scott Hoezee:

Amazing, amazing story. In our previous program, Dave, we were in Acts Chapter 8, which follows right on the martyrdom of Stephen; one of the first deacons of the Church and one of the first people who, in Acts, gets killed. He got stoned to death on account of his testimony to Jesus.

Luke, who is the writer of Acts, in addition to – who wrote the Gospel of Luke, of course – Luke is one of the best storytellers in all of scripture. We remember well the stories of the parable of the Good Samaritan, and Zacchaeus, and the road to Emmaus; all that great stuff in Luke's Gospel; but also, there are great stories in Acts; and Luke is a skilled storyteller in the sense of knowing the role of foreshadowing; and so, at the very end of Chapter 7 and the beginning of Chapter 8, he mentions that when Stephen is killed, everybody who threw rocks took their coats off first and they laid them at the feet of somebody we had never heard of before; a man named Saul who approved what they did. Then very soon, also in Acts, it like Saul saw what happened to Stephen, liked what he saw, and wanted more of it. So, early in Acts 8 we are told he becomes a terror to the early Church. Pillaging churches, dragging people off to prison; Saul of Tarsus became public enemy number one if you were a Christian.

DAVE BAST

Here is the story as we pick it up now in Acts Chapter 9 verse 1: Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest ²and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way (That is what the Christian Church was called at that point, the Way) whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. ³As he neared Damascus on his journey suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul. Why do you persecute me?" ⁵"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting, he replied. ^{6b} "Now get up and go into the city and you will be told what you must do." ⁷The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless. They heard the sound, but did not see anyone. ⁸Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes, he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. ⁹For three days he was blind and did not eat or drink anything.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, there it is.

DAVE BAST

The Damascus Road... experience.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The Damascus Road experience of Saul of Tarsus; interesting story; and we will look at this a little later, Dave, in this program. Saul was a bit of a religious climber. In his religious establishment of the day he was in the Pharisee guild, in the Pharisaic part of Judaism of his day; and he was a rising star, and he wanted his star to be in the ascendancy; and the way he was going to do that was by doing all he could to please the religious authorities who were displeased with the name of Jesus; and so, he is going to wipe the name of Jesus from the earth, and he gets permission to go to Damascus, where, had he arrived the way he had planned, he would have struck fear into the hearts of... to hear the name of Saul back in that day, it was sort of like what thoughts go through our heads today now if we hear Attila the Hun or Hitler or the Hillside Strangler or something. People were afraid of this man because he was so zealous to wipe out the Church.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and suddenly, he has a 180-degree turnaround. It is the example of examples of an instantaneous, dramatic conversion. As someone has said, he was converted between the horse and the ground when he sees the Lord Jesus actually...

SCOTT HOEZEE

An interesting part of this chapter, by the way. We are not told that he sees him; although he will later testify that he did; but Luke does not tell us that, but we get the sense that he saw Jesus because we are told the other men did not. They heard, but they did not see, and the implication is that Saul did see.

DAVE BAST

But they did not see what Paul saw. You know, you bring up an important point because this story is so significant, it is repeated twice more in the book of Acts. There are three full chapters that describe Paul's conversion. The first time is here when it happened; the other two are when Paul recounts the story before various authorities; and in one of those he repeats something further that Jesus said to him. He says that he actually saw the Lord Jesus, and that does not mean he saw a vision of Christ or a dream; some people still see those things today, they say; but because Paul will describe this as being an actual appearance of the risen Christ.

SCOTT HOEZEE

A physical encounter.

DAVE BAST

Yes, the last one. He is the last witness – the last of the Apostles.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that will authenticate his role as an Apostle.

DAVE BAST

Exactly, but in one of those other chapters, Paul says that Jesus says to him, “It is hard for you to kick against the goads. I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Paul, it is hard for you to...” So, we make much of the instantaneous nature of this, but it was not totally instantaneous. There was a preparation, surely, because what does that image suggest? That Paul has been resisting something that God has been doing in his life. He has been kicking against this.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The hound of heaven has been at his back.

DAVE BAST

Yes; he has heard some things; he has heard the Gospel; he has seen Stephen, you know. It is not quite as instantaneous as it seems.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And also, even though this was the moment, indeed, when he was converted, as you read earlier, and from the great Frederick Buechner line, Dave, you read a few minutes ago; however, instantaneous though it was, there will be a little bit of a period here. He is blind as a bat now; he cannot see a thing; and so they lead him into the city and he sits there, apparently with no more words from God for the time being for three days, so stunned he cannot even eat or drink. He just sits there; he cannot see; he stews for three days; God lets him think about this; and then he sends a very special person, finally, to break the silence. We will look at that next.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

Along with Scott Hoezee, I am Dave Bast, and today on *Groundwork* we are digging into the story of Paul’s conversion on the Damascus Road. It is in Acts Chapter 9; and Scott, let’s hear what happens next after Paul is led into the city blind.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Blind for three days; blind; did not eat or drink anything. Then picking it up in verse 10:

In Damascus, there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, “Ananias.” “Yes, Lord,” he answered. ¹¹The Lord told him, “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. ¹²In a vision, he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.” ¹³“Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your people in Jerusalem, ¹⁴and he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.” ¹⁵But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go. This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. ¹⁶I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.” ¹⁷Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here, he has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” ¹⁸Immediately something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, ¹⁹and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

DAVE BAST

You can just imagine Ananias’s reaction, can’t you? In fact, he says it here; but picture a Jewish man being told to go to Nazi headquarters and talk to a Gestapo agent there. Picture a black man being told to go to a Ku

Klux Klan rally and pray for a guy there.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It just seems like a bad idea. One thing to have Christians fed to the lions, but another thing to walk into the lion's cage on your own. Ananias is scared to death; literally scared to death of Saul.

Again, as we said earlier in the program, Dave, that is the reputation he gained. He was so zealous to wipe out the name of Jesus from the earth; so vicious that everybody knew who he was; but God says: Nope. This is my guy now and you have to go.

DAVE BAST

You know, later on – much later, when he is now the mature Apostle Paul and he is writing to the Christians in Rome, Paul will testify of his countrymen; of his fellow Jews. He will talk about his sorrow for them that they are rejecting Christ, and he will say of them: You know, they have a zeal for God, but it does not have knowledge. It is not based on knowledge of God. They do not really know. It always strikes me how that describes religious fanatics in almost every time and place. They are filled with zeal. You know, our world is a world with a lot of religious fanaticism; and they claim it is for God, but they do not know God. They do not really know God; and Paul, for all of his religion, for all of his knowledge of the Bible, he did not really know God; and so, this zeal drives him into persecution; and boy, that story is repeated over and over and over.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; what Saul – who soon will be known as Paul – finds out here is that, indeed, as the writer, Lewis Smedes, once noted, religion is almost always bad news because religion is about rules and so forth and so on. Faith is a living relationship with the one true God, where you are open to the surprises of God; and that is what Saul experiences here; and boy, talk about your surprises. There is a reason why this is – even well beyond the walls of the Church for two thousand years now – this is one of the most famous stories of the world, even in secular parlance, talking about the scales falling from your eyes. It is always a way of saying: I have been blind to something. Then the scales fell off. People who do not even go to church talk about Damascus Road experiences as turning points. That is how famous this story is; and at least part of the reason – maybe a major part of the reason – it is that famous even outside the Church is precisely because of the surprising nature of this dramatic turnaround. This is one of the most amazing moments in the entire New Testament.

DAVE BAST

But maybe part of the problem, if we could say there is a problem with this story, is that it's very dramatic nature, its very fame, makes us sometimes miss the point that this is not just a story about Paul. In some ways, Paul's experience is unique. None of us is going to be called personally by the risen Christ to be an apostle to the gentile world, as Paul was; but in other respects, Paul's story is really our story. Each of us in some way needs the scales to fall from our eyes. We need to be awakened to the reality of God and what God is doing in the world. I mean, in a way, isn't this really a template for all Christian conversions?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Sure; and when you go on to read other parts of the New Testament, you can see so clearly all of the – they are not dotted lines, from what Paul will later write to the Ephesians or the Romans – they are solid lines from what he would later write to this moment. So, when Paul will later write: While we were yet sinners, God loved us. You say, "Oh boy; did he know what he was talking about." Or when he writes to the Ephesians: You were dead in your transgressions. You were dead; dead as a doornail; but God, who is rich in mercy, made you alive. Why does he know what that was? He thinks he is religiously alive on the way to Damascus, only to discover that spiritually, in terms of eternity and salvation, he was dead as a doornail.

DAVE BAST

And it is all about grace. It is all about God's choice, not ours. You know, the way we sometimes popularly talk, we talk about accepting Christ or receiving Christ, and I get that. I mean, there is something to that

language; there is something true about it; or even deciding for Christ. I made a decision for Christ at a Billy Graham rally, you know; that is the old way of talking. Well, none of that happened with Paul. Paul did not decide for Christ; Christ decided for Paul. Paul did not receive Christ; Christ chose Paul; and it is always God who takes the initiative, and all we can do is respond to that or not. That is important; that is crucial; but God gets the glory because he is the one who does the saving.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And remembering that remains a perennial challenge all through the Church, and it remains a challenge today for us to remember that. So, when we come back we will think about what are some of the things that keep us from remembering that message? We will talk a little bit more about that.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and Scott, you just mentioned the importance of remembering and looking back on that experience when we first realize that God accepted us; God chose us and decided for us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

By grace alone.

DAVE BAST

By grace alone, right; and Paul does that. There is just a wonderful, beautiful passage where – now fast-forward many years and near the end of his life – he looks back on this and sums it up in his letter to the Philippians. It goes like this:

^{3:4b}If others think they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more. ⁵Circumcized on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrew, in regard to the law a Pharisee; ⁶as for zeal, persecuting the Church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless. ⁷But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things; I consider them garbage that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him; not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. ¹⁰I want to know Christ; yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹and so somehow attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Indeed, from Philippians 3 there, that amazing testimony, a reflection from an older but wiser Paul, we might say, writing to the Philippians of everything that he learned in that flash of light on the Damascus Road, as we have been looking at it today in Acts Chapter 9. He basically says: Look, I knew – once upon a time, I knew – I was sure I knew – I knew I knew what was what when it came to God; and it was all about totaling up merit points and working your own way to heaven, and God had a big report card in his hand and he was grading me on everything in life, and I was going to get straight A's. On my own, I was going to be a straight-A, moral student for God and I was doing really well. I was getting straight A's: Perfect Pharisee; kept the law; faultless. And then, he met Jesus. The living Jesus, as we just saw, and he says: All of a sudden, everything I thought was good was, as he says, garbage, which garbage is a nice way to put it; it really refers to cow manure; dung. So Paul says: I was sure I knew what was what. I was sure I knew what God valued the most, and it turned out it was garbage. It was just a pile of cow manure because it did not matter anything compared to Jesus – the One I met.

DAVE BAST

He talks, too, here about how his whole value system was turned upside down. Paul was really, we could say, maybe a spiritual aristocrat. We do not have aristocracy traditionally in our country. We have done away with that; hereditary dukes and earls and counts, and all that stuff, but we still have a real aristocracy; it is based on money and class and education, and have you been to the right schools and do you know the right people and do you have the right kind of job? Paul had all that stuff in spades. He was a Harvard grad; he was working in DC, connected with the right people; and that is the stuff that humans take pride in, really deep down, what do they value? Where do they find their sense of worth? It is in that kind of stuff if you are in the world. Paul said: I suddenly realized that is what is garbage. That does not make you valuable. What makes you valuable is knowing Jesus Christ. I counted it all as loss – in fact, it is kind of poignant, because he did lose it all. He lost his job; he lost his family; the Pharisees turned on him; he gained persecution. It is like that verse in Hebrews that says of Moses: He gave up the treasures of Pharaoh to suffer with the people of God. That is exactly the trade Paul made.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In the previous segment of this program, Dave, when we read from Acts 9, but when Ananias, who was sent to restore Paul's sight there in Damascus, when Ananias first hesitates, God says: No, you have to go. This man is mine. But then God says to Ananias: I will show him how much he will suffer to promote my cause now, not try to end it. Later in his life Paul will say: That sure came true. I have indeed suffered much. I have indeed suffered want. I have been stoned and rejected and some of those other things he will say later. So, he did learn that; but none of it really mattered because what he found was the surpassing worth of Jesus and his sacrifice on the cross. It is all grace; and it still is that for us today, and yet, Dave, you were just talking about the ways by which people puff themselves up; or how do we assess or merit in life? It is always based on external things. We in the Church, technically, theologically, biblically, we know better. We know that we are saved by grace, not by how good we are or how moral we live or how much fruit we produce for the kingdom; it is all grace; but we forget. We still struggle to hang on to that core Gospel message today. Our own works sometimes still loom larger on our mental horizons when we assess ourselves than does the work of Jesus. We do not mean to, but it happens.

DAVE BAST

Yes; the other thing that jumps out at me here, and I love this passage, it is one of my favorites, really, in the whole Bible. Not only a different value system based on grace, not on works, not on striving, not on human status, but a whole different set of ambitions; and so Paul says at the end here: You know what I really want? I want to be found in him. I want to shelter myself within Christ and have a righteousness that is different from the one I used to strive for and sought to establish on my own. I want his righteousness given to me based on faith. It is that great Gospel transaction, you know; we give him our sins, he gives us our righteousness. Luther said is it like getting married to him. When you get married to somebody you share – I think about my sons-in-law, who inherited my daughters' school loan debt – thank you; thank you very much. That is yours now. They give in exchange all their possessions. That is what happens with us in Christ. We share our debt with him and he gives us his riches; and that is what Paul wants; and then, yes, also suffering. I will share in his suffering.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And then the great line: Somehow, when it is all done, we are going to get raised from the dead, too. Just like Jesus. Somehow we will, by grace, attain to the resurrection of the dead, which is going to lead us to eternal life; and that is why, Dave, we said earlier, and you had mentioned it, too, we said that Acts 9 is in many ways the center point to the book of Acts; it is in many ways the center of the New Testament – second only to the death and resurrection of Jesus – but it is so, not just because it is Paul's story, this is our story – all of our stories – we are all converted this way: By grace alone, thanks be to God.

DAVE BAST

Thanks, indeed; and thank you for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. Visit groundworkonline.com to tell us what topics or passages you would like us to dig into next on *Groundwork*.

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