

# *Paul – On the Road to Damascus and Beyond*

## **Cycle # 3 – Session #4**

### **Paul – On the Road to Damascus and Beyond**

**Text:** Acts 9

## **Gathering**

### **Opening Worship**

**Light a candle** as a reminder of God's presence here and now. May your presence enlighten our minds as we study and pray together.

**Song:** *Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise* -- #66 Chalice Hymnal

### **Litany**

Come to praise God, all you faithful people!

Come, for God welcomes us and offers to draw close

**Praise to God, who rules over all the earth.**

**Praise to God, who is as near as our next breath.**

Sun and moon and stars shine in praise to God.

God created them and established for each a place.

**God has a place for us in this world;**

**We have come that God may instruct and equip us.**

Mountains and hills, trees and animals praise God.

Let all the rulers of the earth do so as well.

**God provides abundantly for our needs.**

**God makes of one family all who dwell on earth.**

**Welcome One Another.** Share briefly with one another the worst thing and the best thing that happened to you this week. Was there something in particular which you experienced as drawing you toward God?

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### Scripture

Acts 9:1-21 (NRSV)

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.<sup>4</sup> He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, *'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?'*<sup>5</sup> He asked, *'Who are you, Lord?'* The reply came, *'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.'*<sup>6</sup> *But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.'*<sup>7</sup> The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

<sup>10</sup> Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, *'Ananias.'* He answered, *'Here I am, Lord.'*<sup>11</sup> 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,<sup>12</sup> 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.'*<sup>13</sup> But Ananias answered, *'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem;<sup>14</sup> and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.'*<sup>15</sup> 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;<sup>16</sup> I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.'*<sup>17</sup> So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul<sup>\*</sup> 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.'*<sup>18</sup> And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized,<sup>19</sup> and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus,<sup>20</sup> and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, *'He is the Son of God.'*<sup>21</sup> All who heard him were amazed and said, *'Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked this name? And has he not come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?'*

## Dwelling in Scripture

1st reading - Allow people time to reflect on what they have heard.  
Note the word or phrase which drew your attention this time.

2nd reading - Invite people to talk about what they have heard and  
where it might intersect with their lives.

Before you go further spend some time simply listening to the story. This is one of those stories about which a friend of mine would say the best way to listen is to listen with “love”, the love of the words, of the drama, of the cast, even the scenery. Like any good story it has multiple characters and plenty of drama. It also points the reader toward God who intervenes not only in history, but in the lives of individuals.

## Behind the Text

What we have as two books, *The Gospel of Luke* and *The Acts of the Apostles* were originally connected to each other and were probably written by the same writer. The two were separated when the early church canon linked the four Gospels together with John being put in the middle of the story which had begun with the life, death, resurrection narrative of Jesus and the continuing story of the beginning of the church. But like many good stories, the first half needs the second half. Acts is the only succinct account of the beginning of the church and its move out into the world. Throughout the letters which are included in the New Testament, there are hints, but nothing which has the scope of information found in these few chapters.

The title, *The Acts of the Apostles*, draws our attention to the followers of Jesus and while there are many reports of God’s activity, the title invites us to look at the people who were involved. Craddock and Bohring suggest if Luke had been asked to give the scroll a title he might have called it, “*The Story of God’s Act in Jesus Continues in the Life of the Church.*” (*Peoples NT Commentary*, p. 363)

You will remember that Luke addressed all his writing to Theophilus, meaning *dear to God*, but clearly it was intended for others as well who are also seen as “*dear to God.*” Luke understood God was the God of all people and Jesus was sent to the world. Luke opens the doors to everyone.

It may be that Luke in tracing the story has other traditions, possibly even written documents, on which to draw. But whether or not he does, his story has become so much a part of him, that we hear his voice telling us not only the good news of the Gospel, but of the continuing story of the good news which will change and transform future generations. He often provides a sense of history by placing events in a time and place frame. However, history was not his primary purpose. He sees the story happening in time and place, but that is only important as it points to the deeper meaning of God’s action in the world and the Christian faith.

One of the differences between an historical account in the first century and now, is seen in the “speeches” which form a major part of the story of the early church. Since the advent of the printing press, it has been possible in many cases to have the exact words of a speech. Now we not only can have the written texts, we can participate in events and hear the speaker through electronic media. With the use of satellite, persons on one side of the globe can listen to what is being said on the other as it is being said. In the first century the writer had to depend on the memory of those who heard the speaker, perhaps the speaker’s own account, maybe some notes which had been written, the writer’s knowledge of what was likely to have been said. Out of this composite we “hear” Jesus or Peter or Paul.

The historical view of the early church which we find in Acts seems to be quite accurate historically. We do not have multiple sources telling the story so we don’t run into the kind of differences we did in the gospels where there is a mixture of fact, interpretation, and perspective concerning Jesus. In Acts we hear one writer telling the story as he knew it. We have letters, particularly those from Paul which often confirm the historical accounts found in Acts. While there are differences at times, often those can be seen to be caused by Luke’s perspective as he presents a theological truth. There are times when external historical sources confirm the accuracy of Acts and there are undoubtedly times when Luke isn’t completely accurate through misinformation or possibly misunderstanding. The great gift of the book of the Acts of the Apostles is its anchoring the Christian faith, this historical act of God, the person of Jesus, in not only Kairos, God’s time, but Chronos, human time.

By the time Acts was written in the late 80’s or perhaps 90’s Paul’s letters had been circulating among the churches to which they were addressed and were perhaps being carried beyond the first inner circle. One of the unintentional factors related to the first persecution of Christians in 64 BCE, and Christians having been scattered through the Roman Empire was their introducing the Christian faith everywhere they went. Instead of getting rid of Christianity as the Roman Empire may have hoped, their action had about the same effect as blowing on a dandelion.

The story of Paul’s encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road is probably the most dramatic and best known story of dramatic transformation. In fact it may be so familiar, it is hard to hear it or see it with fresh eyes. But like many of the stories in the pages of our Bible, it has many layers. It is about a particular moment and a dramatic change of direction, but it may also help us to go below the surface of transformation.

## **Observation**

When we first met Paul or as he was then called, Saul, he was present at the stoning of Steven, a devout follower of Jesus who was, “full of the Holy Spirit.” Steven had preached a prophetic vision and said some harsh things to the Jews. Then he had professed to *seeing* a vision, “*I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!*” (Acts 7:56) The Jews were said to be so upset, they covered their ears, rushed him, dragged him from the city and began to stone him. The stoners laid their cloaks at Saul/Paul’s feet and Saul approved. Stephen died with words of

forgiveness on his lips and from that point on there is a terrible persecution of Christians in which Saul not only participates, but is a leader. This persecution which began in Jerusalem spread out into the countryside of Judea and Samaria. Not only was Paul entering houses and dragging people away or at least causing them to be dragged away, he gets permission to do the same in Damascus.

If Paul could have gone from Jerusalem to Damascus in a straight line, he would have had to travel a distance of about 150 miles, from Israel, through Samaria, up through Galilee, through the Tetrarchy of Philip into what is now Syria. In order to stamp out Christians he was literally willing to go to the ends of the earth. He is going after these people not for any personal reason, but because he sees them as a threat to his religion, his understanding of God which he believes to be **the** correct understanding.

### **Consider**

Picture Saul who has not yet become Paul. You may want to draw on some things you know about him from later in the story. He was a well educated man, a devout Jew. He apparently was not a large man, but he certainly seems to have had a commanding presence. He had some power. He was able to get papers which would allow him to go to Damascus and arrest Jews who were becoming Christians. At what point does Saul's transformation begin? Was it as he watched Stephen, a man "filled with the Holy Spirit" die for his belief? What is your experience of transformation? Have you had transforming moments in your life? If so, what were the roots or did it simply happen? How you see the process beginning will affect how you see the rest of the story.

### **Observation**

Paul on the Damascus Road is so stunned he is unable to see, except he sees and hears Jesus speaking to him. The words connect what he has been doing with the person of Jesus. He is asked the all important question, "Why?" Notice his answer. At first he does not seem to recognize the source of the question. But when the reply comes and he is told what to do, he does it. We are told the people around him heard the voice, but saw nothing.

This is one of those passages of scripture that always seems a little troubling to me. It is in some ways reminiscent of Moses at the burning bush. A moment forever fixed in time and yet, if we had been there would we have seen and heard what Paul saw and heard or would we have been conscious of either?

### **Consider**

Why did Paul encounter the living Jesus at just that moment, in that place, and in that particular time? What might have been going on his life which had prepared him for the encounter? There is of course no way to know the answers to these questions, but they may be worth exploring because they may open doors into our own life of growth and change. Are there moments when you have gained important insights into who Jesus is and had a sense of being directed toward a particular path ahead? What were some of the factors which led you to be ready for that moment of the encounter? Have you ever

been in a place where you saw change as a threat to your faith? How did you respond? Did your view change at some point?

### **Observation**

After the events on the Damascus road Paul became in some ways a new person and in some ways he was still who he was. At that time Christianity was still a part of Judaism and Paul continued to be a good Jew his entire life. His life, however, was totally reoriented in a new direction. The zeal he had in hunting Christians down, he now had in bringing Christianity to the whole world. The one in whom he had not believed, he now believed with his whole being. He had persecuted Christians out of a deep religious conviction. He already believed God would send a Messiah and that this Messiah would usher in the kingdom of God. It appears God took the person he was and did not so much change what was basic to his personality. It was simply redirected.

### **Consider**

In a letter to the Galatians Paul speaks of the fruits of the Spirit as being *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*. Those who are growing in Christ are growing this fruit in their lives. That may be an interesting point of view from which to look at Paul on the Damascus road. What are some of the changes required of him to make room for these? If these grow in his life will he be more nearly himself as God intended or does he become someone else? Explore your own life and growth in the light of these. Which have you seen grow? Which need cultivating?

### **Observation**

Luke tells the story of Paul's conversion three times. First in this passage and then two more times in Acts 22:1-21 and 26:2-23. If you look at the accounts you will notice some differences. In the first account Paul sees the light, hears the voice and the people around him hear the voice. In the second account he sees the light, hears the voice and those around him see the light. In the third account, he sees the light, hears the voice, but does not say what the others experience. In the third account the words he hears are a little different, but very striking. Not only does the voice say, "*Why are you persecuting me,*" he also hears the voice say, "*It hurts you to kick against the goads.*"

According to the dictionary a "goad" is a pointed stick which is used to drive cattle. If cattle go against the goad, they are pricked. This has come to mean anything that pricks or urges us to go in a particular direction. To go against the direction to which God calls us, is hurtful to us.

### **Consider**

In each of the encounters the question is the same, "*Why are you doing this to me?*" But this encounter pushes it one step further. Not only is Saul/Paul's action hurtful to Jesus and the disciples, all those followers who have chosen *The Way*, it is hurtful to

him. Are there things in your own life which may be hurtful to you because you are working at cross purposes with where God is calling you?

### **Observation**

After that encounter Luke tells us *“Paul’s eyes were open, but he could see nothing,”* so he had to be led into the city. In that moment this man who has been able to command men, who has had great power on behalf of the Jews is in fact helpless as a child. At the beginning of the encounter, Paul asks, *“Who are you?”* But once he has heard the answer he seems to have made the next step, without question, or perhaps it was only his complete helplessness which led him to do as he was told.

He goes into the city and there he waits for the next step. A period of three days follows during which he neither eats nor drinks, perhaps was silent although were not told. The three days, were perhaps reminiscent of the 3 days Jesus was in the tomb, or Jonah in the belly of the fish. Those three days are not a punishment, but seem to be rather a period of time during which he moves from his place of unbelief to belief. When he truly recognizes Jesus as the Messiah, his sight is restored. He comes out of the darkness into new life and light.

### **Consider**

There are other persons whose stories are told through scripture who seem to have the ability to immediately recognize who is calling them or speaking to them, even though at first they do not know. Once they have acknowledged that, they are then able to do as they are told apparently without questioning. In some cases the journey from disbelief to belief seems to take place quite quickly. When you think of your own faith journey have there been times when that journey has seemed easy, difficult, defined by a time of waiting?

### **Observation**

Ananias is an important character in the story, but we know almost nothing about him. The same is true of Judas to whose house he is taken. Ananias was a disciple, but we are never told whether he was a native of Damascus or had come there as a refugee. Both of these disciples must have been somewhat surprised by Paul’s arrival, although there seems to be little indication of that. Both seem to respond to God’s guidance and continue to do the work of God in their dealing with Saul. It is in this passage we also learn that Paul comes from Tarsus, a large city in what is now southeast Turkey and which at that time was the capital of the Roman Province of Cilicia. It was a cultural and intellectual center, but also a part of the *Diaspora*. While he is Jewish, he is also Roman and perhaps far more cosmopolitan than we’ve been told until now.

### **Consider**

God sends those whom Paul needs to show him the path to faith. His prayer is answered in the coming of Ananias to teach him what he does not know. Paul often

refers to saints. These are the people who serve faithfully and witness to Jesus in their every day life. Most of us have had persons in our lives from whom we have learned the story of our faith, persons who have shown us what Christ is like by the way they live. Who are some of the saints you have encountered? Are they people who would be known far and wide or are they persons who simply did what they believed they were called to do?

### **Observation**

Paul has been chosen as an instrument, a missionary. And once he is healed of his blindness we see him emerge from this period and immediately begin the work to which he has been called. He doesn't continue on his way into Syria. He doesn't seem to have spent any time being reoriented to this new message. He seems to have simply discovered the message that he had been asked to take to others, was the message which had already been given to him? He simply has to be willing to use his energy, turning from being a persecutor of the Jews, to following Jesus and being the one who brings Good News to others.

### **Consider**

When you think of the various tasks to which you have been called, how long did it take you to respond? Do you have the gifts you need? Or did you have to build them from the ground up? Or did you have the basic gifts and then have opportunities to continue cultivating and growing those as you began the work which you saw as needing to be done? In the process of doing something, have you discovered you have gifts you didn't know you had?

### **Activity (Optional)**

Sometime ago you began a drawing of your life map. Are there things you now wish to add? Are there earlier events you see as connecting to later ones? Mark particular places where you have discovered something new about yourself or about God. John Calvin said, "As we come to know ourselves more fully, we also come to know God more fully." How might that be reflected in your life journey? Share your discoveries with others of your group.

### **Practicing the Presence**

Scripture: Acts 9

You may again want to spend a day or two at the beginning of this week reflecting on your journey up to this point. What has touched you? What has spoken to you of transformation not only of the heart but of your external behavior? The rest of the time focus on the scripture and study for the coming session. As you explore where Paul's experience may intersect with your own, you may wish to use this "Journey Prayer" from Juan Marcos Rivera's *Letters to Jesus*,

*Ay bendito*, Jesus! I remember when I first went down the highways and roads of this continent in order to sow the word of God. I was carrying a “thorn in the flesh,” and a “fire in my heart,” which moved me deeply. I was leaving my job behind, as well as my parents and my homeland, in order to go, “as if seeing the invisible,” on the pathway of duty. The call was imperative, and I left against the will of the lesser gods, who behaved as if they were all powerful. It was a very painful experience from which I have yet to recover. The thorn continues there, so does the demand of the word.

Each new experience rekindles the fire that cannot be extinguished. One day, I heard the song of a peasant as he worked: “The spirit and the flesh are in a fierce struggle; the flesh pulls downward, and the spirit toward the heights.” Then I understood that to persevere, one has to live and to struggle, to tolerate rough and formidable blows, to be faithful to the sovereign vocation: against all consequences.

That which once had seemed an ideal to strive for, now was revealing itself as a constant and living reality. And it was thus that I understood, to my relief and consolation, that the Spirit sustains the ministry of the word.

Since that is so, we’ll see each other around, Lord, on the road. P. 53

### **Suggested Reading Pattern**

1<sup>st</sup> Read and listen to the text. Notice phrases that seem familiar or stand out for you. You may want to read it out loud or you may want to read it with someone else.

2<sup>nd</sup> Choose a word or phrase to carry with you and reflect on it as it comes to your mind through the day. (If you read at night – let the word or phrase rest overnight and pick it up in the morning. Remember the pattern of creation –“evening and morning,” You may receive fresh insights when you waken.)

3<sup>rd</sup> During the week read, “Behind the Text” and the “Observations/Consider” portions. Even a few minutes spent each day or several times a week, will enrich your experience of the study and the experience of your small group.

### **Closing Worship**

#### **Words to carry with you - Turning Points**

Time  
turns  
taking us  
where we would not choose to go.  
Suddenly we pass a point  
we will never pass again.

Turning points interrupt us –  
there must be some mistake!  
Looking back we see them  
for what they really are:  
bittersweet raw reality  
breakthrough to beatitude  
bedrock that gives us courage  
to give ourselves away.  
The less we struggle with turning points  
the greater the strength remaining  
to return  
and turn  
again.

*Miriam Therese Winter,  
God with Us, Resources for Prayer and Praise, p. 35, Abingdon Press, 1979*

### **Prayer**

As you have done in each session, notice the person on your right and on your left. Hold them in prayer during this week. If there are special joys or concerns share them with one another.

### **Response (Unison)**

**You meet us on the road of our lives  
and invite us to open our eyes and our lives to you.  
May petty ways drop from us like scales until  
We see You in every person we encounter.  
When you call us may we hear and answer  
Without hesitating or denying who you are.  
When you show us work to do, may we accept it gladly  
and willingly begin the task you place before us.  
As we are loved, so may we love.  
As you offer us peace, so may we also offer peace to others.  
As you have helped us through the hard places,  
may we also offer help to others.  
Amen.**

### **Blessing**

**Kindle in our hearts, O God  
The flame of that love which never ceases,  
That it may burn in us this day and night  
Till we shine for ever in your presence.**

*Holy Island Prayer Book, p. 114*

**Song:** *Lo, I am with You -- #430 Chalice Hymnal*