

Acts 9:1-9 (NRSV)

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

Acts 16:1-10 (NRSV)

Paul went on also to Derbe and to Lystra, where there was a disciple named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer; but his father was a Greek. ²He was well spoken of by the believers in Lystra and Iconium. ³Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him; and he took him and had him circumcised because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. ⁴As they went from town to town, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. ⁵So the churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily.

⁶They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. ⁷When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; ⁸so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. ⁹During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." ¹⁰When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

The Spirit directs Paul toward Macedonia and Greece, introducing the Gospel to the heart of the Greco-Roman world.

Do we stop and listen well enough to bear the Spirit directing us on the paths of God?

What's in a name?

The Spirit never rests. The conversions just keep coming as the creation of the Church¹ rolls on. Two weeks ago, we had the story of the Ethiopian eunuch. Last week, we examined the pivotal conversion of the Roman centurion, Cornelius, along with his family and friends. Today, we come to the man most responsible for the development of the Church in its first few decades: the apostle Paul.

Paul's story can be confusing to those new to it simply because Luke refers to him by two names: Saul and Paul. In Acts, the apostle is referred to as Saul before his encounter with Christ and by Paul after his conversion. Saul, then Paul. Same fellow –

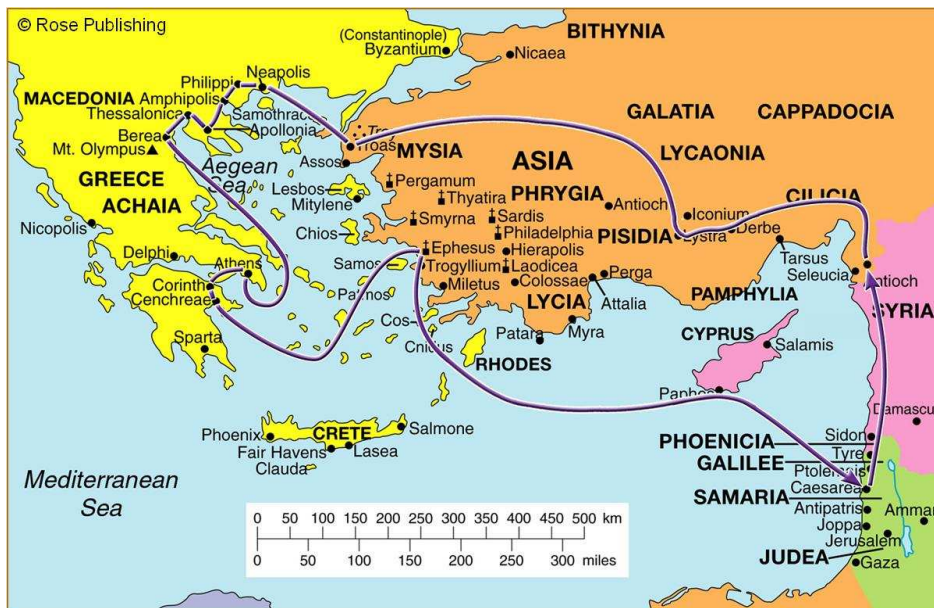
¹When "Church" is capitalized it refers to the entire community of all those who have faith in Jesus Christ, including both those who live and those who have died. The book of Acts is the story of the Holy Spirit creating the Church.

just the Hebrew version of his name and the Greek version. Why the change by Luke? Because using “Paul” *after* the man comes to faith in Christ is a way of signifying that he will be the apostle to the Gentiles – to the Greco-Roman world.

Saul/Paul’s conversion story is dramatic and not only because of his meeting Jesus on the road to Damascus. It is dramatic and powerful because Saul was a zealous and violent persecutor of Jesus’ followers in the first years after Jesus’ return to the Father. Luke tells us that Saul held the cloaks of those who stoned Stephen to death and that Saul was like a beast, tearing through the community of believers. Indeed, Saul was on the way to Damascus to round up believers when he was met by the risen Christ, who asked him, “Why do you persecute me?” In his letters, Paul would frankly admit his own guilt in waging war on the Christians. He understood better than anyone what the power of the Holy Spirit could accomplish in a person, even one like himself. After his meeting with Jesus, Paul spent the next fifteen years preparing for his mission and ministry – taking the Gospel to the Gentiles.

In the late 40’s AD, Paul, accompanied by Barnabas, embarked on his first missionary journey. It took them from the south central coast of Asia Minor northward into the interior as told in Acts 13-14. Paul and Barnabas founded churches in places such as Derbe and Lystra. It was a difficult ministry, as Paul met stiff opposition. In Lystra, for example, Paul was stoned so badly that his attackers assumed him to be dead.

In the early 50’s AD, Paul undertook a second missionary journey, which is depicted on the map below (Acts 15-18). He began by revisiting Derbe and Lystra, where Paul was joined by Timothy who would play a central role in Paul’s work.² Luke makes it clear that the Holy Spirit has a plan for Paul’s ministry and will not only empower Paul but guide him as well.



As Paul and his companions traveled northward, the Spirit tells them not to work in the province known as Asia, but to simply pass through. Then, the “Spirit of Jesus” (aka the Holy Spirit) prevents them from going into Bithynia. Finally, having been guided by the Spirit, Paul and his fellow travelers end up in Troas (near the ancient city of Troy) on the coast.

²Timothy’s circumcision (16:3) was a dramatic statement of how far Paul and Timothy would go in trying to make themselves acceptable to the Jews in the towns and cities they visited. Paul certainly didn’t think circumcision was necessary (see Acts 15), but he and Timothy would do almost anything that might get the Good News of Jesus Christ a fair hearing.

At night, Paul has a vision. It is of a Macedonian man who tells Paul to cross the Aegean Sea to Macedonia. And Paul does just that! They arrive in Philippi and begin the trek through Macedonia and Greece that would take them all the way to Athens and Corinth, where Paul would spend eighteen months before heading to Ephesus and, finally, to Jerusalem.

The Macedonian Man

What do we make of Paul's vision? In his commentary on Acts, Ben Witherington offers the following insights:

Verse 9 has been endlessly debated, in regard to the vision. The portrait here of Paul as one who had visions or revelations comports with what we find in 2 Cor. 12:7. Divine guidance was regularly believed to come in antiquity by means of dreams or visions. Here it is possible that Luke means that Paul had a vision in the form of a dream, since we are told this vision comes to him during the night. The vision involved a "certain man of Macedonia" standing and exhorting Paul, saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."

The speculation of who this certain man of Macedonia was and how Paul knew he was a Macedonian has ranged from the sublime to the curious. Some have thought that the Macedonian was Luke himself because the "we" passages begin in the next verse. The problem with this conclusion is that the person referred to by "we" in v. 10 is in Troas, not in Macedonia. Another more interesting if speculative suggestion is that since Luke refers to a *certain* Macedonian, this could be taken to mean a particular one, and certainly there was no more famous or familiar Macedonian than Alexander the Great. There is a certain logic to this suggestion. Alexander was the Greek who desired to make the world one by a shared common culture, and Luke is indeed interested in suggesting that the gospel could cross a variety of ethnic lines and make of the many peoples one true people of God. Nevertheless, Luke does not make clear that this is his intent here, and so it is best not to base anything on this sort of speculation. It is also right to point out that the nationality of the man in the vision is surely indicated by what he says—"come to Macedonia and help us." This verse is important because it makes clear the divine commissioning for what is to follow, and should be compared to 13:4 in this regard.

Which way?

So often, we need God to point us in the right direction, to show us the way forward. Perhaps not so much in east v. west, but in what is right and what is wrong, what is wise and what is foolish. We want God to guide us in his ways, on his paths.

As the psalmist wrote: "Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in the way. He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way. All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees." (Psalm 25:8-10)

The psalmist expresses his confidence that, though he is a sinner, God will "instruct . . . guide . . . teach" him God's way and show him what is right. The psalmist is confident in this because he proclaims that God is "good" and "upright" and "loving" and "faithful" and because he lives in covenant with God (v. 10). Indeed, this covenantal relationship underlies the entire psalm. In the covenantal community of God's people, the substance of discipleship is instruction in God's ways.

We too live in the covenantal community of God's people. We too seek God's way, what Peterson calls, the Jesus Way. This is all about being true disciples of Jesus Christ and embracing the Holy Spirit who is our comforter and guide and helper. The psalmist knows that the Spirit's ways are not instinctual in us, that learning to walk in the ways of the righteous is not easy. Sometimes, we can mistakenly think that if we only "choose God," then all is done. However, as P. C. Craigie says, "the road of the righteous is too difficult to walk without the companionship and friendship of God . . . [the psalmist] knows that he cannot turn back, but scarcely knows how to continue . . . so he prays that God would show him the road and make him walk in it . . . as one forgiven of sin. He is confident that God will show him the road again."

The Conversion of Saul

In his excellent commentary, *The Message of Acts*, John Stott argues that Saul's conversion into the apostle called Paul was neither sudden nor compulsory. Stott rightly emphasizes that God prepared this zealous Pharisee for his encounter with Jesus. Could Saul really have glimpsed nothing of the truth of Christ? Could he have been unshaken by the testimony and martyrdom of Stephen? Rare is the person whose faith in Christ comes completely out of nowhere. God prepares us for the revelation of the Good News. Stott sums it up this way:

The cause of Saul's conversion was grace, the sovereign grace of God. But sovereign grace is gradual grace and gentle grace. Gradually, and without violence, Jesus pricked Saul's mind and conscience with his goads. Then he revealed himself to him by the light and the voice, not in order to overwhelm him, but in such a way as to enable him to make a free response. Divine grace does not trample on human personality. Rather the reverse, for it enables human beings to be truly human. It is sin which imprisons; it is grace which liberates. The grace of God so frees us from the bondage of our pride, prejudice and self-centredness, as to enable us to repent and believe. One can but magnify the grace of God that he should have had mercy on such a rabid bigot as Saul of Tarsus, and indeed on such proud, rebellious and wayward creatures as ourselves.

C. S. Lewis, whose sense of God's pursuit of him has already been mentioned, also expressed his sense of freedom in responding to God:

I became aware that I was holding something at bay, or shutting something out. Or, if you like, that I was wearing some stiff clothing, like corsets, or even a suit of armour, as if I were a lobster. I felt myself being, there and then, given a free choice. I could open the door or keep it shut; I could unbuckle the armour or keep it on. Neither choice was presented as a duty; no threat or promise was attached to either, though I knew that to open the door or to take off the corset meant the incalculable. The choice appeared to be momentous but it was also strangely unemotional. I was moved by no desires or fears. In a sense I was not moved by anything. I chose to open, to unbuckle, to loosen the rein. I say 'I chose,' yet it did not really seem possible to do the opposite. On the other hand, I was aware of no motives. You could argue that I was not a free agent, but I am more inclined to think this came nearer to being a perfectly free act than most I have ever done. Necessity may not be the opposite of freedom, and perhaps a man is most free when, instead of producing motives, he could only say, 'I am what I do.'¹

1. from Lewis' book on his own conversion, *Surprised by Joy*

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In the past few weeks, we've had stories of angels, visions, and the Holy Spirit all actively involved in the building of the Church. It is all very dramatic and probably outside the experience of most of us, though on occasion I am told stories of visions, dreams, and angels from friends at St. Andrew. Still, I suspect that many of us have trouble being confident that God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, is guiding and directing us through our lives. *First*, how can we grow more confident that God is at work in our lives, guiding us forward? Do we even really think that God does? *Second*, what sort of guidance and direction do you think the Spirit provides? In what areas of our lives? How specific? When? What role do you think Scripture plays in this?
2. Here's another approach to these questions. Read Psalm 25, esp. v. 1-10, through a few times and then reflect on the following. In his commentary on the Psalms, J. McCann, Jr. notes that Psalm 25 offers us a model of prayer and of living that don't really square with a secular culture that glorifies the self, self-sufficiency, and instant gratification. Instead of depending on self, the psalmist depends on God. The psalmist is willing to confidently wait for God. This is a psalm about seeking not what we want, but about seeking God's will. Do you agree that the culture we live in glorifies self? If so, why do you think this is so? What do you personally find most difficult about focusing on God's will rather than your own? The psalmist prays for instruction and guidance; how open are you to God's instruction? How do we even go about finding God's guidance? God's paths can lead us to places we aren't sure we want to go. How do we deal with that? Do we sometimes "water down" God's guidance so it is more palatable and socially acceptable?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage. In this week's readings we are taking a look at the stories of Paul's first two missionary journeys.

<p>Monday, Acts 13 Paul and Barnabas are commissioned in Antioch and set off on their missionary journey. They travel to Cyprus and into Asia Minor.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Acts 14 Paul and Barnabas minister in the Iconium region and return to Antioch in Syria.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Acts 15:36-16:40 Paul, without Barnabas, on his second missionary journey, through Asia Minor and into Macedonia.</p>	<p>Thursday, Acts 17:1-15 From Thessalonica to Athens</p>
<p>Friday, Acts 17:16-34 Paul in Athens. Notice how different his message is to the pagan Greeks than it is to the Jews.</p>	<p>Saturday, Acts 18:1-22 Paul goes to Corinth, where he stays 18 months. He then heads to Ephesus and, eventually, back to Jerusalem.</p>

