Hi,

Today’s updates:

* My noon Tuesday class on Genesis will meet today on [my new Facebook page](https://www.facebook.com/Scott-Engle-St-Andrew-UMC-110365790736617/?modal=admin_todo_tour).
* The links to my on-line classes, the video recordings of the classes, the class audio podcasts, and the archive of these daily emails can all be found at [www.scottengle.org](http://scottengle.org/scotts-weekly-classes/). All the postings are up-to-date.

Today, the Holy Spirit tells Paul to head westward into Macedonia . . . and he listened and obeyed.

***Acts 9:1-9 (NRSV)***

**Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 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. Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. 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. For 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. He was well spoken of by the believers in Lystra and Iconium. Paul 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. As 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. So the churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily.**

**They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” When 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.**

*What’s in a name?*

The Spirit never rests. The conversions just keep coming as the creation of the Church rolls on. Last Friday, we had the story of the Ethiopian eunuch. Yesterday, 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 – 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. 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.

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.

*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.”

*A bit more: The conversion of Paul*

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, who experienced a life-changing conversion of his own, 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.”

‘til tomorrow, grace and peace,

Scott