

Join us, if you can, in reading this with your family and praying for our church this Sunday, May 31, 2020.

Unlikely Brother, Saul

Dear First Southern Baptist Church family,

Last week as we ended Acts 8, we spoke in part about how the salvation of the Ethiopian eunuch was a providential display of God's sovereignty and grace. This week as we talk about the conversion of a man named Saul, we will similarly see the same sovereignty and grace at work. To set the context for today's passage, Acts 9:1-19, we need to remember that we've already met Saul in the book of Acts. In Acts 7:59-8:3, as Stephen was being stoned to death for bearing witness to Jesus the Messiah, Saul was there watching the coats of the executioners and giving approval to the brutality. Not only did he approve of the killing of Stephen, he so passionately despised the church that he continued to violently drag them off to prison. The interlude of chapter 8 showed us the expansion of the church outside of Jerusalem and into the wider world. Consequently, the spread of the church is what likely led Saul to Damascus where he encountered Jesus. In Acts 9:1-19 we read:

"But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2) and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. 3) Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. 4) And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" 5) And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 6) But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." 7) The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. 8) Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. 9) And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

10) Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." 11) And the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, 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 at Jerusalem. 14) And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name." 15) But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. 16) For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." 17) So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came 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 he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; 19) and taking food, he was strengthened. For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus."

In verses 1-2, though the church was growing and thriving through the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the faithful witness of Jesus' disciples, so too was resistance to them and their Savior. Saul is described as still breathing out threats and murder. It's hard to imagine, with that description, someone who hates Christians more. The word "still" implies that the whole time the church has been growing, Saul has been working to shut it down. The word in this verse for murder can also be translated "slaughter," implying the willingness to use violence to stamp out church members. We see that because the church has scattered out of Jerusalem, Saul secured letters from the high priest to carry out his crusade against the Christians in Damascus. Again, this demonstrates the lengths Saul was willing to go to stop these Christ-followers, as Damascus was 135 miles from Jerusalem, roughly six days of travel by foot. These papers might have been something akin to extradition orders, but they were more likely introductions to the synagogue leaders to request their assistance in Saul's campaign. It's also very likely that the Christians Saul was pursuing were Jews who would have connected with the synagogues and spoken to the other members about Jesus. These early Christians likely called themselves the Way as an indication that they followed the true way of life contrary to their Jewish neighbors, or that they were followers of the true way of salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Saul's plan was to find these dissidents, arrest them, and drag them back to Jerusalem for trial; however, God in his providence had other plans.

Verses 3-6 describe Saul's encounter with Jesus. As Saul and his companions approached the city they were surrounded by a brilliant, blinding light from heaven. In Acts 22:6, Paul will say that this occurred around midday which speaks to the intensity of the light to outshine the midday sun. This light was the radiance of the glory of God and, much like Old Testament moments where someone encountered the glory of the Living God, Paul fell to the ground. As he lay there, he heard a voice full of emotion calling to him in verse 4, "why are you persecuting me?" Saul asked who was speaking and we can only guess at the emotion he felt when he heard the answer. Saul had been persecuting Jesus. He was currently in the presence of Jesus, full of glory, whose followers he had been dragging away to jail or worse. The words "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" were a complete refutation of everything Saul was and stood for. Don't miss the depth and breadth to which Jesus is united with and identifies with his people. To persecute Jesus' people is to persecute Jesus. What an amazing, gracious union; and yet, Saul found himself opposing God. Saul doesn't speak again in this text after verse 5. What else could he say? He hadn't persecuted a band of errant heretics, but the God of glory. In verse 6 we see the mercy of God because rather than destroying Saul, as he deserved, he gave him instructions to rise and enter the city where he would be told what to do next.

Notice that in verse 7, Saul's companions are mentioned. This event focused on Saul, but consider how these other men add weight and credence to Saul's story. They heard the voice, but saw no one. Again, Acts 22:9 will inform us that they saw the light, but not Jesus. This revelation was for Saul. When Saul rose from the ground, the power and brilliance of the light had blinded him. This experience utterly humiliated Saul, but it also left him weak, powerless, and vulnerable. What shame he must have felt being led by the hand, blind, into Damascus by men he had been leading moments before. Saul remained in this state, as verse 9 records, for three days without eating, drinking, or being able to see. He was left completely broken, but by God's grace he would be made new.

The text transitions in verse 10 to a Christian named Ananias. Ananias heard the Lord calling to him and, like so many faithful servants of God, he simply answered "Here I am." The Lord gave him specific instructions, in verses 11-12, that he was to go to Saul and lay hands on him for his healing.

Notice the precision of the Lord's directions, even down to the street address, what Paul had seen in a vision, and what he should do. Interestingly, the Straight Street mentioned in verse is one of the world's oldest continually occupied streets and it still is in use in modern Damascus as the Darb-el-Mostakim. All of this is a display of the careful, meticulous, sovereign hand of God guiding every detail of this text.

In verses 13-14, Ananias heard the Lord's instructions, but understandably had some trepidation about speaking to Saul. His reputation was well known among Christians, and Ananias had specifically heard of all the evil Saul had done to the saints. His concern underlines both the abject depravity of Saul, but also the overwhelming grace of Jesus. Yes, God meant Ananias to go to Saul, the great enemy of the church, that he might see. It is clear in verses 15-16 that God has a plan for Saul. In his wisdom and foreknowledge, he has chosen Saul to bear witness to Jesus among the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel. We see in God's words to Ananias a snapshot of Saul's future ministry in the book of Acts, as well as his mighty hand moving all things according to his will. Impossibly, God saved the greatest enemy of the church, and ultimately Jesus, to be one of his greatest witnesses. Verse 16 also makes clear that the one who had inflicted so much suffering on the church, would himself suffer for the sake of the name of Jesus.

Ananias, simply another faithful Christian, does what the Lord called him to do, in spite of his own fear. He went to Saul. Notice that he addressed him as a brother. This could be one Jew speaking to another, but it should more likely be seen as an understanding of conversion. It indicates Saul's willingness to believe in Jesus as Lord and by God's grace he is welcomed into the family. It also indicates something of the compassion that Ananias grew to have that he would welcome this dangerous man as a brother. Ananias' words further show the mercy and grace of God. He was there that Saul might receive his physical sight back. In his brokenness, Saul seems to have turned to trust in Jesus because not only has Ananias called him brother, but he also received the Holy Spirit as Ananias laid on his hands. Verse 18 shows that Saul was healed physically as something like scales fell from his eyes and he regained his sight. This is perhaps also a symbol of the deeper heart transformation that happened inside of him, evidenced by his immediate baptism. Consider the profound transformation here. The man who was breathing out murder and threats against people identified with Jesus has himself, through baptism, identified with Jesus. Not only that, but he is now identified as a part of the people he once persecuted. As this text ends, Paul ate, regained his strength, and remained with the church in Damascus. Again, he's welcomed and nurtured back to physical health by those whom he intended to threaten the physical health of, as he came to the city. When God saves, he saves completely. Here are some things for us to consider as we apply this text to our own life this week.

1. This text should cause us to marvel at our great God. His sovereign hand at work in the whole of this text, as well as how intricately the events of the last few chapters have fit together, display his wisdom, his sovereignty, and his authority. God reigns over time and space, guiding the cosmos; however, he also is at work in the lives of men and women all around the world. Not only is he our King, he is our good King and this text displays his reign over the earth, specifically for the sake of his mission. God saved Saul that he might use him as an instrument of grace to spread the gospel beyond Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria. How might God use you as an instrument of his grace where you are now?
2. Which, second, shows us the depth and measure of God's grace. If there was a person who we might think is beyond the reach of God's love, it should have been Saul. Yet, grace triumphs. Saul, the anti-Christian gestapo, received the salvation of the Lord. This was possible because God made a way for sinners, even the vilest sinners, to be cleansed of their sin and reconciled to himself. God sent his son Jesus who lived a righteous life, suffered and died on a cross for

sinner, and rose again from the grave. Anyone, even someone as wicked as Saul, who believes in Jesus and turns from their sin will be saved. Consider again the matchless grace of Jesus and meditate long on the overwhelming love of God displayed in this text. How might it prompt you to worship?

3. We should consider the beauty and depth of our union with Christ as he identifies with his persecuted people. When we believe in Jesus, we are united with him by grace through faith. This union cannot be undone and it should speak profoundly to us that Jesus is a part of us by how he saw himself as a part of those early believers. Speaking of this profound, undeserved love of Jesus for his people, Dane Ortland writes in his book Gentle and Lowly:

“Our unbelieving hearts tread cautiously here. Is it not presumptuous audacity to draw on the mercy of Christ in an unfiltered way? Shouldn’t we be measured and reasonable, careful not to pull too much on him? Would a father with a suffocating child want his child to draw on the oxygen tank in a measured, reasonable way? Our trouble is that we do not take the Scriptures seriously when it speaks of us as Christ’s body. Christ is the head; we are his own body parts. How does a head feel about his own flesh? . . . We nurse it, bandage it, protect it, give it time to heal. For that body part isn’t just a close friend; it is part of us. So with Christ and believers. We are part of him. This is why the risen Christ asks a persecutor of his *people*, ‘Why are you persecuting *me*?’”

What an amazing and gracious place for us to be found in Christ.