

Sunday, September 14, 2025 | Martyrs

Week 5 | Acts 9:1-19a | "The Way"

READ: Acts 19:1-19a (ESV)

¹ 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.

The way of the world is punishing and unforgiving. It's a dog-eat-dog world where the only way to get on top is by stepping on someone else. It's the sort of place where might makes right and history is written by the victors. The beasts in this world have wicked teeth, deadly tails, and

sharp talons, and though man has none of these, he is no less lethal. In fact, Friedrich Nietzsche, an immoral nihilist who devoted his life to undermining Christianity, even admitted, “Man is the cruelest animal.”

In contrast, the way of the Lord is purifying and forgiving. Christians seek not to better themselves but to further the Kingdom of God, even if it means taking a loss. Those who follow Christ are not warmongers but peacemakers. Theirs is history full of both failures and successes because the believer treasures truth above all else. And though a man unattached to Christ has the potential for great evil, nothing has more potential for good than a man attached to Christ.

In today’s passage, the way of the world intersects with the way of the Lord. Paul, the great persecutor of the church, has an encounter with Jesus Christ while he's on his way to imprison and murder believers. What happens after that forever changes the world, but, at the very least, it demonstrates the power and preeminence of the Christian Way.

I want you to notice **two** things:

i. Vs. 1-9 – A Ferocious Persecutor Sent to Hunt Fleeing Christians

Vs. 1a – The conjunction “**But**” not only opens the narrative to a new section, but it also connects it to the previous one. While Philip was on his way to Caesarea, preaching the gospel along the way, “**Saul**” was busy too, persecuting the church. Last time we saw him, he was overseeing the martyrdom of Stephen (cf. 8:1). It appears that Saul has now made persecuting believers his full-time job. In Luke's words, Saul was “**breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.**” Hunting down Christians became his obsession; like breathing, it was what kept him feeling alive.

Vs. 1b-2 – Saul was so keen to snuff out Christians that he “**went to the high priest 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.**” In other words, he wanted extradition papers to formally detain and imprison Christians. And it didn't matter if they were “**men or women,**” all were subject to search, seizure, and incarceration.

Notice that he was looking for people who belonged not to Christianity, but to “**the Way.**” “**The Way**” is the “early self-description of believers that appears several times in Acts, particularly in Saul’s defense speeches (19:19, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22).”¹ Believers won’t be called “Christians” till Acts. 11:26 in the city of Antioch. Interestingly, it is one of the first examples of a people group taking a slur and reappropriating it as a term of honor rather than shame (e.g., African

¹ Vickers, Brian J., *Acts*, ESV Expository Commentary, Vol. IX, John-Acts (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 417-418.

Americans and the N-word). In fact, it is only used three times in the NT: once by Peter in the context of Christian persecution and twice by nonbelievers in Antioch and by King Agrippa, who was also an unbeliever (cf. Ac. 26:28). But before that, they were called followers of “the Way,” which is a play on words as it refers both to a person—i.e., Jesus Christ “the Way” to everlasting life (cf. Matt. 7:14; Jn. 14:6; Heb. 10:20), and to a process—Jesus’ teachings about “the Way” of life (cf. Lu. 1:79; Ac. 18:25-26; Rom. 3:17).

Consequently, you cannot claim to be a follower of Jesus without following the way of Jesus. John says, “And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says “I know him” but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked” (1 Jn. 2:3-6).

Vs. 3 – Luke tells us, “Now as [Saul] went on his way.” By this, we can assume he got what he wanted from the Sanhedrin. He was now an official envoy of the Jews sent on a manhunt by the Jewish government to take care of the Christian problem. But given his mention of “the Way,” perhaps this is a play on words by Luke. He wants to contrast the Way of Jesus Christ with the way Saul was living his life. Rather than being on the pathway of life, Saul was on the pathway of death. Rather than walking the road of salvation, he was walking the road of persecution.

As he neared Damascus, Saul was “suddenly” surrounded by “a light from heaven.” This light, as we’ll soon learn, will cause blindness.

Vs. 4-5 – This light was so powerful that Saul was stopped in his tracks and he fell “to the ground.” As he was wallowing on the ground, Saul “heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’” No introduction. No preamble. The Lord got straight to the point: *persecution*. There was no rational justification for Saul’s actions against Jesus.

Though Saul thought he knew God, he didn’t. As we’ll soon see with Annanias’ interaction with Jesus in a similar vision, people who are followers of Jesus know the Lord’s voice. Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (Jn. 10:27). But since Saul wasn’t a Christian yet, he had to ask, “Who are you, Lord?”

The Lord reveals his identity to Saul, saying, “I am Jesus.” But he not only identified his name, the Lord also, *for the second time*, identified himself with Saul’s antagonism toward Christians, saying, “whom you are persecuting.” Saul thought he was defending the Jewish faith. Indeed, Jesus told the disciples that “whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God” (Jn. 16:2).

Saul thought that by doing violence to Christians, he was doing good for God. Far from helping God, Saul was hurting God.

Vs. 6 – At this point, if this were a secular scenario, we might expect that the Christian's deity would destroy the Christian's persecutor. Instead, in pure gospel fashion, the Lord tells Saul, “But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” Jesus did not come to destroy but to save. He did not come looking for revenge; he wanted to redeem Saul and reconcile him to God.

Vs. 7 – Luke tells us that “The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one.” Some have claimed this conflicts with other versions of Paul's conversion (cf. 22:1–21; 26:9–23). But any apparent discrepancies are easily explained by the fact that not one retelling is identical to any of the others. Each retelling is different because the audience and purposes are different. Just as we might tell some details but leave others out, depending on who we're talking to, so it was with the conversion stories of Paul.

What's clear is that Saul's interaction with Jesus isn't private but public; the others in his caravan could attest that something remarkable had happened. However, the others only had a partial experience, while Paul received the full brunt of Jesus' glory. As Bock explains,

“The larger group hears sound but nothing intelligible, while also seeing a light but not Jesus himself. Only Saul sees someone and hears in an understandable form what is said. His colleagues experience something less than the full event, which means that the appearance is neither a private vision nor merely an “inner crisis” but a public event.”²

Vs. 8 – Luke says, “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.” He who had once set his sights on Damascus could no longer lead himself into the city. Truly, God humbles the proud.

Vs. 9 – Though we do not see Paul literally repent and call out to Jesus to save him from his sin, this is still a story of Paul's conversation. We know this because for the “three days” that Paul “was without sight, [he] neither ate nor drank.” In other words, Paul fasted, which was, according to numerous OT passages (cf. Jo. 2:12–13, Neh. 1:4; Jon. 3:5), a sign of true repentance and remorse. Though blind, without the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and unbaptized, Paul was a saved man by this point.

So, what's the takeaway?

² Bock, Darrell L., *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 351.

Though directed **at the Christian**, persecution is primarily an assault **against Christ**.

READ: John 15:18–25 (ESV)

¹⁸ “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. ¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. ²⁰ Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. ²¹ But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. ²² If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have been guilty of sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. ²³ Whoever hates me hates my Father also. ²⁴ If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin, but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father. ²⁵ But the word that is written in their Law must be fulfilled: ‘They hated me without a cause.’

Saul didn’t hate people; he hated the light. He didn’t hate men and women because of their ethnicity; he hated them because they stood for the truth. He didn’t hate Christians; he hated Christ. By persecuting Christians, Saul was persecuting Christ.

So, when you’re hated for your Christian values, rejoice, for it is not you who the world hates but Christ in you. Jesus says, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matt. 5:10-12).

ii. Vs. 10-19 – A Faithful Christian Sent to Help a Former Persecutor

Vs. 10 – The focus of the narrative shifts from Saul to someone nearby. Luke says that there was “a disciple at Damascus named Ananias.” Don’t miss the irony at this point. Saul was headed to Damascus to persecute believers in Damascus, and, lo and behold, a Christian living in Damascus is called to help Saul.

The Lord calls Ananias in a vision, who responds, “Here I am, Lord.” This is the classic response of faithful followers of God—e.g., Abraham (Gen. 22:1), Jacob (Gen. 31:11; 46:2), Moses (Ex. 3:4), Samuel (1 Sam. 3:4-8), and Isaiah (Isa. 6:8).

Vs. 11-12 – God tells Ananias **four things**:

- (1) First, Jesus tells Ananias: “Rise and go to the street called Straight.” Luke has talked about the followers of “the Way” who were living righteous lives. Then Luke spoke

about how Saul was “on his way” to Damascus, entrenched in his unrighteous ways. And now, after an encounter with Jesus, Luke tells us Saul is on a “street called Straight.” The Greek word translated as “Straight” is *euthys*, and, literally translated, it means a direct line, linear, or not crooked; likewise, when it is used metaphorically, it refers to the correct path (cf. Matt. 3:3; Ac. 8:21; 2 Pet. 2:15; Heb. 12:13).³

(2) Second, the Lord tells Ananias to go to “the house of Judas.” To be clear, this is not the house of Judas Iscariot. Many people shared the same name.

(3) Third, the Lord tells Ananias, “look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying.” Ananias had likely never seen Saul before. Perhaps those of Tarsus looked/dressed a certain way. But, if not, he simply needed to look for the man “praying.”

(4) Lastly, the Lord tells Ananias that Saul “has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.” Implicit in the recounting of the vision is the Lord's desire for Ananias to “lay his hands on [Saul] so that he might regain his sight.”

Vs. 13-14 – Unsurprisingly, Ananias had some apprehensions about this situation. Though he didn't know Saul personally, there wasn't a Christian alive who didn't know Saul's name. He was infamous. Ananias gives voice to his concerns when he says, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem.” Saul was known as a man of “much evil,” and this, of course, was not a reference to his personal moral failings. The “much evil” was malevolence and violence directed toward Christians. Though Satan was the man behind the curtain pulling the strings, Saul was the one carrying out the actions. He was the face of the anti-Christian movement.

What's more, Saul's infractions weren't just directed toward innocent people. Ananias says to God that these Christians were “your [emphasis added] saints.” He's emphasizing their attachment to God. They were suffering for no other reason than that they were followers of God. The situation was bleak for believers, and Saul was the primary cause of their hardship.

Furthermore, Saul wasn't simply in Damascus for vacation. Ananias somehow knew that Saul had been given “authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.” He was on

³ Louw-Nida (1996), 702.

a diplomatic mission to purge the city of what he thought was a Jewish heresy. No one on the planet was less deserving of God's grace than Saul!

QUICK ASIDE: We'll talk about the Lord's response in a moment, but I want you to notice that the Lord does not rebuke Ananias for his question or hesitation. Had he persisted in his reluctance, God would've reprimanded him as he did when Moses repeatedly refused to go to Egypt (cf. Ex. 4:13-17). But, as we'll see, after the Lord addresses his concerns, Ananias obeys and goes to Saul. To our great relief, the Lord was patient with Ananias, as he is, with us all. **Being analytical isn't a sin; good disciples ask questions. In contrast, being obstinate is a sin; bad disciples stubbornly resist good answers. So while we shouldn't question God, it is good to bring our questions to God.**

Vs. 15-16 – Despite Ananias's rather logical and persuasive arguments, the Lord commands Ananias to “Go” anyway. Why? **Because the Lord did not only see who Saul was, but who Saul would become.** Though Saul was, undoubtedly, known for being a persecutor of the church and a man of “much evil,” he would soon be better known by two things:

- (1) **Though Saul was the great antagonist of the gospel, he will become an even greater evangelist for the gospel.** Though Saul tried to snuff out Christ's name and everyone attached to that name, he will “carry [Christ's] name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.” God has “chosen” Paul to be his “instrument” to spread the gospel to Jews, non-Jews, and royal dignitaries. As we read throughout the book of Acts, Paul will not shy away from taking every opportunity to present the gospel. If you give him even a moment to speak, he'll spend it talking about Jesus Christ.
- (2) **Though Saul was the great attacker of the gospel, he will become an even greater martyr for the gospel.** The Lord intended to “show [Saul] how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” God will put this man in front of countless people, and though many will come to Christ, many will be angered by the things he says. Later, Saul tells the church in Corinth that no one is more well-acquainted with suffering than he. He says, “Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety

for all the churches” (2 Cor. 11:24-28). Eventually, he was martyred in Rome under the reign of the mad emperor, Nero.

Vs. 17-19 – These explanations were enough for Ananias. He leaves, finds Paul, “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.**”

Notice Ananias calls Saul his “**Brother.**” Once the Lord saves a soul, even one of such a heinous and dark persuasion, that soul becomes family. David prayed, “**For the sake of your name, Lord, forgive my iniquity, though it is great**” (Psa. 25:11). It is for the sake of God’s name that we have forgiveness. It is for the sake of God’s name that we offer forgiveness. Bitterness ought not be in the hearts of believers. Matthew 18:21-22 says, “**Then Peter came up and said to him, ‘Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.’**”

After Ananias laid his hands on Saul, Luke says, “**immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight.**” Miracles are everywhere in this passage: Saul encounters Jesus, he’s struck with blindness, Philip is given a vision, he finds Saul, and then Saul’s eyesight returns. Such a preponderance of the supernatural explains Saul’s radical conversion.

But more than that, Saul’s sight being restored is symbolic of something that had already occurred. Even though he had been blind for 72 hours, those were the first three days in his entire life that, spiritually speaking, he could see. Knowing Christ as his Lord and Savior was true sight.

Luke tells us that Paul didn’t postpone his obedience, “**he rose and was baptized.**” As always, it is the model in Scripture that a new believer is baptized shortly after, **and not before, their conversion.** Except for the thief on the cross, there is no such thing as an unbaptized believer. If someone is genuinely saved, they will obey the Lord’s command to be baptized. If someone refuses to be baptized, there is more Scriptural proof that such a person is lost than Scriptural proof that such a person is saved. To be clear, baptism does not save a person. But, just as a single person cannot claim to be married without some proof (e.g., wife/husband, ring, marriage certificate, etc.), one **cannot** say they are a Christian and **not** do what Christ says. **The greatest evidence of a regenerated heart is obedience. The greatest evidence of an unregenerated heart is disobedience.**

Vs. 19 – Luke tells us that Saul took some “**food, [and] he was strengthened.**” Before his trip to Damascus, he was weak in the faith, lost, and on his way to hell. Now, he is strong in the faith, saved, and on his way to heaven. **Aside from Christ, there isn’t another man who did more good**

for the Kingdom of God than Saul. Though the world doesn't know it yet, the greatest theologian, evangelist, missionary, and pastor who ever lived is about to start his ministry. The day Saul of Tarsus was "strengthened" was the day the demons of hell began to tremble (cf. Ac. 19:15).

So, what's the takeaway?

The person we are without Christ is nothing compared to the person we could be with Christ.

READ: 1 Corinthians 15:1-10 (ESV)

¹ Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, ² and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

³ For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. ⁹ For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.

By the grace of God, the great persecutor of the church became the least of the apostles. One wonders what the Lord could do with you if you would but surrender your life to him.

Video Description:

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