

Scripture Reading:

Acts 9: “1 Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2 and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. 3 As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. 4 Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" 5 And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads." 6 So he, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" Then the Lord said to him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." 7 And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one. 8 Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. 9 And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank. 10 Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." 11 So the Lord said to him, "Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying. 12 And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him, so that he might receive his sight." 13 Then Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in 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 vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. 16 For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake." 17 And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." 18 Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized. 19 So when he had received food, he was strengthened. Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus.

"Saul is God's Chosen Vessel"

Last week we began to consider the conversion of Saul of Tarsus who the world would come to know as Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles. We considered what happened on the road to Damascus and later in the city of Damascus when God sent His servant Ananias to Saul.

- We considered what happened from a human standpoint learning once again the important and vital lesson of obedience.

Today we will consider these events more from God's perspective seeing what it means for Paul to be God's chosen vessel and Lord willing next week Mike will show us how Saul's conversion immediately began to turn the world upside down! Through all of this we must remember that the Book of Acts is the story of the advance of God's Kingdom... History is going someplace and God is going to make sure that it gets there as He planned!

Luke's Gospel was the first part of his orderly account written so his friend Theophilus, and ALL of us, "may have certainty concerning the things [we] have been taught!" In Luke's Gospel we learned how Jesus came to save His people from their sins and Luke ends with Jesus ascending into heaven as the great victor over Satan. Acts began with the same ascension and quickly followed with the coming of the Holy Spirit: The promised Comforter who established and empowered the Church: The body of Jesus, the new Jerusalem comprised of all the Saints who Jesus has made righteous.

- The rest of the Book of Acts is teaching us that the Holy Spirit will now glorify the Son by filling the earth with His Kingdom.

As I have said, if we miss the big picture here then you will think that the book ends in a strange way, perhaps looking for the 3rd installment. If we understand where the story is going then it could end in no other way than with Luke proclaiming in Acts 28 that Paul, “lived there [in Rome, the center of the then known world] and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.”

- Yes, in fact there is a 3rd installment & it is the history of the Church; where we continue this work of taking the Kingdom to all the earth until Jesus returns!

If we are to faithfully play our part in God’s great story, we need to understand that history is going someplace and that God knows exactly how it all ends. When I was working in the political realm fulltime I would often be asked how I could keep a good attitude and always be smiling when we saw so many disappointments, especially here in California! I would simply tell people that it was easy...

- I had read the end of the Book and we win!

We must all participate in, or be subjected to the civil realm in this life and that is why we often read and sing Psalm 2 here at Church of the King

- It helps us to fully understand what it means for Jesus to be the King of Kings and Lord of Lords!

Now that I am in the pastorate, there are different things that can be depressing:

- Individuals or families that chose to go down foolish paths
- Seemingly irresolvable divisions in the Church which is supposed to be the Bride of Jesus
- And of course we see the same old heresies continue to come back time and time again

BUT we can have a good attitude and a smile on our face here as well, if we remember the end of the book... The Apostle Paul does not say that the final enemy to be defeated is some major political power or even the divisions in Bride of Jesus. The only enemy left at the end is death, AFTER all authorities and powers have been brought under the feet of Jesus and after the Church has been brought to the maturity as Paul promised in Ephesians:

4: 11 “And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, 13 till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; 14 that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, 15 but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head--Christ-- 16 from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.”

- Now let’s be honest: How many REALLY think the church will look like this at some future day?

We WILL see such a Church come to pass just as surely as the civil authorities will submit to the Son the way that God has promised in Psalm 2...

8 “Ask of Me, and I will give You The nations for Your inheritance, And the ends of the earth for Your possession. 9 You shall break them with a rod of iron; You shall dash them to pieces like a potter's vessel.' " 10 Now therefore, be wise, O kings; Be instructed, you judges of the earth. 11 Serve the Lord with fear, And rejoice with trembling.”

- Can you picture President Obama, Prime Minister Putin or even dictators like Hugo Chavez bowing the knee to Jesus?
- It is just as hard to think of Roman Catholics Eastern Orthodox and Protestant Christians all worshipping together and serving Jesus as we are Biblically commanded.

God has promised that both will happen in history, and thus, these things will come to pass!

When it does, from a human perspective, it will be because of the process of obedience that we focused on last week: Kings will seek wisdom, judges of the earth will seek instruction: They will all serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with gladness and even Kiss the Son! In the Church we will have all of its leaders speaking the truth in love, growing up in all things into Him who is the head--Christ—. Is that tough to imagine?

It should be because from a human perspective it is IMPOSSIBLE...

- Just as the conversion of Saul of Tarsus would have been for the Saints in Jerusalem!

Even after God struck Saul down on the road to Damascus, Ananias is still pretty nervous about the plan: He could not see how it would end well!

- But it did because Saul was to be God's Chosen vessel!

Thus, it is also important to consider what happened that day on the road to Damascus from God's perspective. This brings us to what most consider to be the heart of the Reformed Faith: God's sovereignty! Something that we gladly affirm here at Church of the King... Something that is good for us to remember from time to time, especially in our season of ordinary time in the Church calendar when we purpose to focus on our obedience

- Yes Saul needed to ask "Lord what would you have me to do" and then to go to Damascus
- Yes, Ananias needed to conquer his fears and make that trip to Judas' house and heal Saul

BUT we must always remember that God was not sitting in heaven wringing His hands wondering if these men were going to make the right choices!

- Some will argue, that God was able to look down through history and see the choices that would be made, and thus He could then plan accordingly!

Who is the ultimate decision maker in that case? Man rather than God!

Remember our favorite definition of the reformed faith:

- "God is God and you are not!"

As Luke teaches us rightly, history is going someplace and it will get there not because God worked around a whole bunch of bad decisions made by men, but rather because history is being played out exactly as God planned!

- But modern man will cry, what about man's free-will and his significance if we say such things!

I am going to turn to Romans chapters nine to eleven to answer that question... Now this might seem a strange place to affirm man's responsibility and significance when these chapters are where we find the strongest teaching in all of the Scriptures about the sovereignty of God! They are also where we find the affirmation of man's significance and even free-will, so they are chapters we should come to love...

- Chapters we should know well since Biblically, we must affirm BOTH the sovereignty of God & man's responsibility!

I will only be able to scratch the surface this morning, so I will commend these chapters to you for further study as we reflect on what it means for Saul to be God's chosen vessel...

- Was Saul God's chosen vessel because God saw by looking down through history that he would make a great Apostle?

Or was Saul the great Apostle to the Gentiles because that was what God chose for Him from eternity past?

- In the first, it is ultimately Saul who gets to make the decision and thus play God
- In the second God is God

This is what Saul experienced on the road to Damascus and what he will later explain to the Saints at Rome. Jesus told Saul that it was hard to kick against the Goats. *[explain goats]* There are two interesting references to goats in the Old Testament that Saul would have been familiar with:

In Judges three we meet one of the more obscure judges in a verse that could easily bring the question: Why did we need to know this?

Judges 3:31 "After him was Shamgar the son of Anath, who killed six hundred men of the Philistines with an ox goad; and he also delivered Israel."

Just as Shamgar had conquered the Philistines with an ox goad, now Jesus is explaining to Saul that he has been defeated as well.

The second reference would have been a little more comforting for Saul... After the teacher in Ecclesiastes had shown that everything under sun was mere mist or vapor, we read that, "The words of the wise are like goads, and the words of scholars are like well-driven nails, given by one Shepherd. 12 And further, my son, be admonished by these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is wearisome to the flesh. 13 Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, For this is man's all. *[Ecclesiastes 12:11-13]*

The picture of how God's sovereignty and man's responsibility work together is once again given to us in a simple agricultural image or picture: The shepherd or farmer does not offer a right path to the ox or cow and then wait to see what it chooses

- The faithful farmer has his goad in hand and directs them onto the path they must take, which they then choose to take!

From our human perspective we can never fully understand how God can be completely sovereign and man completely responsible, but God gives us such pictures so we can begin to understand and Paul goes to great length to explain what it means in Romans. Paul does so in the context of wrestling with his love for the Jewish people... Remember he was persecuting the church because he thought that was the right service for the God the Jews.

- Now Paul knows that God has brought him to life in Jesus and he rightly desires it for all of the Jewish people.

In chapter nine of Romans Paul begins by saying he would be willing to give up his own salvation for the sake of his people. He discusses the many benefits of being an Israelite, but then explains that just being a physical heir of Abraham is not enough: True Israel are those under the promise of God.

Paul explains that the promise was given to Isaac and with the birth of his children explains the implications of the doctrine of election:

“And not only this, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, even by our father Isaac 11 (for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls), 12 it was said to her, "The older shall serve the younger." 13 As it is written, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated."

Paul leaves NO wiggle room here:

- **No concept of God having the foreknowledge to see what Jacob or Esau would do or choose.**

Paul says it is God’s choice not based on man’s works and this rightly brings the next question:

14 “What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! 15 For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion." 16 So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy.”

-- When God told Adam that in the day he ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil he would die, it was not an idle threat:

-- Adam & all his race were brought under the judgment of that curse and thus unless God showed mercy, NO ONE could be saved.

- **God does show mercy and this mercy is demonstrated down through history as Paul goes on to explain:**

17 “For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth." 18 Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens.”

- **Trying to understand this contrast between God’s mercy for some and His judgment for others brings the next natural question:**

19 “You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?"

- **The question is a simple one that we all ask: If all are lost and only those God chooses to save can be saved, why does he choose some and not others?**

An extension of that question is why does He not save everyone, which if not properly answered leads to the universalism that infects much of the church today.

- **Paul’s answer may seem harsh, but it is the true answer that must be given:**

20 “But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, "Why have you made me like this?" 21 Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?"

- **Whether we like it or not, that is the answer to the question...**
- **Paul goes on to give us a “what if” but it is ground that we must tread on very carefully.**

22 “What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, 23 and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory, 24 even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?"

- **As God tells His great story of salvation in history He must demonstrate both His mercy and His judgment.**

Paul goes on to discuss the relationship of how salvation came to the Gentiles and the Jews...

- He begins chapter ten with the same desire to see the Jews saved, knowing they must turn to Jesus rather than their own works.

Then the Apostle Paul, after giving the clearest teaching in all of the Scriptures on the Sovereignty of God turns right around and explains the importance of our responsibility

- Verses that teach about our responsibility often quoted by those who question what Paul just taught about sovereignty!

Paul tells us that the righteousness of faith, the salvation he was explaining in chapter nine, speaks this way: "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith which we preach): 9 that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. 11 For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame." 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. 13 For "whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

Paul affirms the Old Testament teaching that God will have mercy on whom He will have mercy in Chapter nine, but quickly reminds us that those who are to receive this mercy must respond in faith: They must repent and believe just as Saul of Tarsus did on the road to Damascus! And this human responsibility continues on in our walk with Christ as it did with Ananias as he took the Good News to Saul, something I am sure Saul remembered as he penned the rest of these words:

14 "How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? 15 And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, Who bring glad tidings of good things!"

- The final objection that could be raised which Paul deals with is the heresy of universalism:

The Bible clearly teaches that although the Gospel is preached to all, not all will believe:

17 "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. But I say, have they not heard? Yes indeed: "Their sound has gone out to all the earth, And their words to the ends of the world." 19 But I say, did Israel not know? First Moses says: "I will provoke you to jealousy by those who are not a nation, I will move you to anger by a foolish nation." 20 But Isaiah is very bold and says: "I was found by those who did not seek Me; I was made manifest to those who did not ask for Me." 21 But to Israel he says: "All day long I have stretched out My hands To a disobedient and contrary people."

- Here is the strong warning to those who would use the sovereignty of God as their excuse to ignore the call of the Gospel!

Whether it is the worldly skeptic who says, well if God wants to save me let him show himself and make the case, to the covenant child who says 'hey I watch what they proclaimed at my baptism so I am in no matter what I do or say'

- In both cases, it is NOT a good place to be and the only escape is to repent and believe!

Paul then goes into a discussion of how God has not abandoned His people: How the remnant has been saved, how the Gentiles will now be brought in and how one day we will see a revival amongst even the Jews!

Paul then turns to the great promise of Isaiah 59 which should be a comfort to us all:

“20 "The Redeemer will come to Zion, And to those who turn from transgression in Jacob," Says Jehovah. 21 "As for Me," says Jehovah, "this is My covenant with them: My Spirit who is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your descendants, nor from the mouth of your descendants' descendants," says Jehovah, "from this time and forevermore."

Now children I often turn to you to help the adults see some of the easy answers we should have, but today I want to make sure you just heard that promise...

➤ What is a descendent?

That's right: You are your parent's descendants and God promises the Word will be in your mouth!

➤ So who are decedent's descendants?

That is right, this promise carries on to your children as well and all that is required of you or them is to hear and believe!

➤ What great promises we have from our Great God!

Of course with a Great God and great promises come some of the more difficult things to understand that we have discussed today, but that is nothing we should fear. If we approach these things openly, honestly and with hearts willing to learn, we will come to know that God IS in control of ALL of history and He does know where it is going!

And, we will declare with Paul as he does at the end of chapter eleven:

33 "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! 34 "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His counselor?" 35 "Or who has first given to Him And it shall be repaid to him?" 36 For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen."

Communion Meditation: Proverbs 9:

1 "Wisdom has built her house, She has hewn out her seven pillars; 2 She has slaughtered her meat, She has mixed her wine, She has also furnished her table. 3 She has sent out her maidens, She cries out from the highest places of the city, 4 "Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!" As for him who lacks understanding, she says to him, 5 "Come, eat of my bread And drink of the wine I have mixed. 6 Forsake foolishness and live, And go in the way of understanding."