

Sermon Title: Who Are You, Lord?
Scripture Text: Acts 9:1-9 (Acts #21)

Speaker: Jim Harris
Date: 7-16-23

For today, I want you to come with me as we are going to begin Acts Chapter 9—not only a turning point in the Book of Acts, but in a very significant way, a turning point in human history. And we, as Gentiles—about six or seven thousand miles away from where this took place, and two millennia away from when this took place—this is God's calling of the man that He used to open the door for the Gospel to go full-blown to Gentiles.

The main character in this passage is Saul of Tarsus—a man named Saul from the city of Tarsus. This is the record of his conversion to Christ. We have already been tangentially introduced to him in the Book of Acts: On the day that former-deacon-turned-evangelist-turned-martyr Stephen was killed, we read this, back at the end of Chapter 7—"When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul" (vs. 58; NASB-1995—and throughout, unless otherwise noted). That implies that, at the minimum, we know Saul was *present* at Stephen's murder. More likely, he was the instigator; to lay the robes at *his* feet implies that they recognized him as the ringleader.

Saul's conversion is spectacular, and it is recorded here in Chapter 9. And we will see it recounted by Paul—as his name was changed to "Paul" after his conversion (Acts 13:9)—we will see him recount it twice on later occasions.

Right now, here in Chapter 9, we are going to see Saul's conversion, and we will see what happened shortly thereafter; and then, we will return to the ministry of Peter, and we will see how God then "opened" the "door" to "the Gentiles" (Acts 14:27), and then brought Paul along as the "Apostle" to the "Gentiles" (Rom. 11:13; 1 Tim. 2:7).

Before we dive in, I wanted to try to give you a little perspective, and I have had the question come to me a couple of times about how long it took for all of this to play out; when did this actually happen? And if we can figure out the timing of the events in the first chapters of Acts, I think it helps our grasp of what is going on here.

It's not as if Chapter 2 took place the day after Chapter 1; and then Chapter 3 the day after that; and 4, 5, and 6 in the next week or two. It took some time—it took days, it took weeks, it took *months* for these things to unfold.

Now, if we *needed* to know *exactly when*, God would have included that information in His Word, but He didn't. Nevertheless, without biblical statements—and therefore, we don't know with precision—we have a pretty good idea. And of course, even the best of scholars disagree about some of the details, but the overall framework is pretty clear.

For one thing, we have a difficulty with the calculation of years, according to *our* calendar. We operate on what is known as the "Gregorian Calendar." It has only been in use since A.D. 1582. In the first edition of it, it had a picture of a cute dog named "Gregory" on the front—hence, the "Gregorian Calendar"—or *something* like that.

The reason that the "Gregorian Calendar" supplanted the former "Julian Calendar" is because, in the setting up of the Julian Calendar, there was a slight miscalculation of the length of a day: you know, it's *just over* 24 hours. And with that miscalculation, as the

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calendar rolled over year after year, the placement of the leap years was off, and so the days on the calendar slipped steadily away from the actual equinoxes and the changing of the seasons.

So, now we have the Gregorian Calendar...but, oops!—*it* has a problem! We know that Jesus was born when Herod the Great was still alive. We know that Herod the Great died in 5 or 4 B.C.—like late winter, so it could have been 5, it could have been 4 B.C. And so therefore, the entire "B.C." and "A.D." reckoning is not *exactly* a hundred percent accurate to the year. Jesus was born "Before Christ"—go ahead and figure *that* out! But you get it—the dates had been assigned afterward.

The Crucifixion and Resurrection—we know it was in spring; it was at the time of the Passover—it most likely took place in A.D. 30. That puts the arrival of the Holy Spirit and the glorious events of Acts Chapter 2 in that late spring to early summer of A.D. 30. Now, there are some good solid Bible-believing scholars who think that the year was A.D. 29 instead of A.D. 30, so there is yet another wrinkle. But I think that the best evidence points to A.D. 30 for Jesus' Crucifixion.

Think about it: Jesus was born in 5 or 4 B.C. There is no Year Zero, either direction; it's 1 B.C. to 1 A.D. I know, it makes your brain start sweating if you try to figure out all that stuff. And it said that He "was about thirty years of age" when He went public in the ministry (Lk. 3:23), and that He ministered for about three and a half years. It adds up and comes out right. So, 30 A.D. for the Crucifixion and Resurrection—we'll assume that.

That puts the stoning of Stephen likely in the year A.D. 32 or 33. And as you can see, it is already impossible to be precise; even the very best of estimates are plus or minus a year. But what I want you to get is: It wasn't just, "Monday, Chapter 1; Tuesday, Chapter 2; Wednesday, Chapter 3; Thursday, Chapter 4"—this all took a couple of years.

We know from Chapter 8, Verse 1, that the outbreak of intense persecution in and around Jerusalem—which was fomented by Saul of Tarsus—we know that immediately followed Stephen's murder. And that persecution led to many believers leaving the Jerusalem area. *And* we know that in part of *that* exodus—part of that dispersion—that was when Philip, the former-deacon-turned-evangelist, chose to go to Samaria, and we saw what happened there in the last chapter, and we know that *that* took some time: He went there, there was a lot of evangelism going on, a lot of conversions, a whole lot going on.

And then that went on long enough that news got back to Jerusalem; then the Apostles in Jerusalem decided to send Peter and John down there to visit Philip, to see what was going on and to pray for the believers there so that they could receive the Holy Spirit—and we know that *that* took a little while. We know that Philip, Peter, and John then ministered in "many villages" in Samaria, after the Holy Spirit came (8:25). And as I said back then, in Chapter 8: If you think in terms of evangelizing Samaritans, that would have been done synagogue by synagogue; the Samaritans had their own versions of the synagogue. So at least a week would have intervened, from Sabbath to Sabbath to Sabbath, for all the stops along their journey of the "many villages" in Samaria.

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So, all of that to say: A few years have passed since the start of the Book of Acts.

Now, I have become *thoroughly* convinced that Saul's conversion took place in A.D. 33—or 34; it could have been 32, maybe 35, maybe 36. It *probably* happened in 33, and the second choice would be 34. We cannot be certain about it, *but we can* be certain that it took *at least* two or three years, maybe more, for the events of Acts Chapters 1 through 8 to unfold. It *took a while* for ten-thousand-plus people to come to Christ, and for the church to grow in Jerusalem. We know there were events and arrests of Apostles and imprisonment and all kinds of things that happened in between them.

Alright, so that's just some perspective. We are probably three or four years into the events of the Book of Acts. Now, let's see about the conversion of Saul. Here's an outline for you:

Introduction: Loathsome Persecutor Saul
Number 2: Letters From The High Priest (vss. 1-2)
Number 3: Light From Heaven (vs. 3)
Number 4: Lord Jesus Speaking (vss. 4-6)
Number 5: Leading Blind Saul (vss. 7-9)

We are only going to get nine verses into it.

So, let's talk about this Loathsome Persecutor Saul, by way of introduction.

There is no mincing words in the first description of this man. Chapter 9 starts out: "Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord..." Saul was *intent* on ridding the world of followers of Jesus Christ. He was "breathing threats and murder"—it's kind of a way to follow the figure of speech to say, "It was the *air he breathed*." There was *nothing* more important to this guy than *stomping out Christians*, and preventing the Gospel from spreading.

And notice, it says: "Now Saul, *still* breathing threats and murder..." That little word "still" gives us an important clue that *this was an ongoing thing*. It had *already* been happening. *He* helped instigate the murder of Stephen, *then* that intense persecution broke out in Jerusalem. He did *as much* damage as he could in *as many places* as he could, *drove away* as many people as possible from Jerusalem—and now, he is "*still*" doing it.

And by the way, that connects to what we have already heard back in Chapter 8, Verse 3; it says: "Saul began *ravaging* the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison." That word "ravaging" occurs only here in the New Testament; one of the ways it was used outside the Bible was for a wild boar going through a campsite. Not a pretty picture.

That followed on the heels of the stoning of Stephen. So when you see "still," it is implying that some time has elapsed. How long? We don't know, but *at least* weeks, months. And Saul was relentless—"still breathing threats and murder..."

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We know a fair amount about Saul's background, before he became known as the Apostle Paul. He was a Jew by birth (Phil. 3:5). He was not a Jew from Jerusalem or Judea or Galilee; he was one of those "Hellenistic Jews" (Acts 6:1; 9:29). Remember, "Hellenistic" means "Greek-speaking." He did not grow up near headquarters around the Temple. He was born in "Tarsus"; that was an important Roman city in the province of "Cilicia" (Acts 21:39). In case you want to do a little map research, you can find out where that was. It was about 20 miles inland from the Mediterranean Sea in Turkey, at what is now on the border of Turkey and Syria. It was a prominent city. It was known for one of the most prestigious universities in the Roman world; the university at Tarsus was a rival with the university at Athens and the university at Alexandria—so it was a Harvard/Yale/Princeton kind of category of place.

When we get up in Chapter 22, we are going to see that Paul will make it very clear that he is also a Roman "citizen" (vs. 28), which means that Saul's father must have been a Roman citizen as well. And when he gives his testimony in Chapter 22, we are going to see that he makes it clear that he studied in Jerusalem under that most prestigious Rabbi of that era: a man named "Gamaliel" (vs. 3).

So, the credentials of Saul—who became Paul—were impeccable in the world of Jerusalem. He was at the top of the heap. In some of his writings, he makes mention that he was "of the tribe of Benjamin" (Phil. 3:5), so he was knowledgeable of and proud of his heritage. He also must have followed in the footsteps of his father by becoming a "Pharisee" (Acts 23:6); that is the most strict group within Judaism; they were the ones that dominated the teachings of the rabbis in all of the synagogues, so they had the most sway over the most people, and they taught the damnable heresy of self-righteousness—that they could be "righteous...in themselves" by the works that they had done (Lk. 18:9; cf. Rom. 9:31-32). Now, you did not get to be a Pharisee who could study under someone of the stature of Gamaliel unless you were *very* well-connected and *highly* educated. That door would not even be open, it would not even be available for you to knock on.

From what we know of the customs within Judaism, Saul was most likely sent off from Tarsus to Jerusalem to spend his years in tutelage under Gamaliel when he was a teenager (Acts 22:3). Now, there is no definitive statement to this effect, but it does not seem that Paul—Saul—was ever exposed to Jesus during Jesus' earthly ministry; he met Jesus here in Acts Chapter 9. So it is likely that Saul returned to Tarsus after his studies, and that may have been well before Jesus actually came on the scene. And with training like that, he would have quickly become a leader in the synagogues there. And he was still called "a young man" (Acts 7:58)—let's say he was a contemporary of Jesus—so, a man in his early thirties was the one that was causing all of this persecution to go on.

The loftiness of Saul's reputation among the Jews is evidenced by the fact that though he was not from Jerusalem, he could navigate back and forth between Tarsus in the Greek-speaking world and Jerusalem—which was woven pretty tight among the leaders of the Sanhedrin—he could go back and forth, and be accepted in both places. He was one of those "Hellenistic Jews": born outside the immediate land around Israel, and a native Greek speaker; obviously, he also learned Hebrew.

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We know that he was very effective at what he did: He drove many Christians out of Jerusalem. And while it was evil on his part, God used it in His plan to spread the Gospel by spreading out the people that are "infected" with the Gospel. And his persecution played a role in Philip choosing to go to Samaria, and that led to Philip being used to lead that Ethiopian to the Lord. And then, remember, it says he preached his way along, down the Mediterranean coast as far as "Caesarea" (Acts 8:40). So God used Saul, even before Saul had a clue that he was being used by God (cf. Gen. 50:20; Prov. 16:9).

It may well have been that it was the impact of Stephen and Philip that might have pushed Saul over the edge, to the point of his murderous intentions against Christians. Why? Well, Stephen and Philip were *also* Hellenistic Jews; and maybe it didn't strike Saul quite as potently when this stuff was happening in Jerusalem; *but now*, it's *his* people that are turning to Christ—the Hellenistic ones—and maybe that's what fired him up.

So, for such a man to turn to Jesus Christ is *very special*—not to mention the massive work that God called him to after his conversion.

John MacArthur wrote a little summary of it at this point in his commentary. He says: "It is fitting that such a unique individual would have a unique conversion. Saul was, by birth, a Jew; by citizenship, a Roman; by education, a Greek; and purely by the grace of God, a Christian. He was a missionary, theologian, evangelist, pastor, organizer, leader, thinker, fighter for truth, and lover of souls. Never has a more godly man lived, except our Lord Himself." I suppose you could argue with that last sentence if you want to, but the point is: This is a unique guy, and his conversion is *very* significant.

Well, that's The Loathsome Persecutor Saul. Now let's move into the text itself: Letters From The High Priest.

Saul had provoked many Christians to move out of Jerusalem. Some apparently fled to Damascus. Either they fled there from the persecution, or they had been there—maybe at Pentecost; we don't know for sure. But Saul heard, "There are some Christians now in Damascus," and he pursued them with his hateful vengeance.

Later, when the Apostle Paul is going to give his testimony before King Agrippa, he will say this: It's Acts 26:9-11. I don't want to preach 26 while we are on 9, but this will help you understand it. This is Paul speaking; he says: "So then, I thought to myself that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth." "I *had* to do it," he says. "And this is just what I did in Jerusalem; not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them. And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme; and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities."

Those are strong words! And *this* is not some guy who is out there trying to slander Paul; this is *Paul* saying, "This was *me*! I felt I *had* to do these hostile things—*furiously* enraged...pursuing them even to foreign cities."

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Now here is what Paul was referring to, in the words of Luke, recounting his conversion: Acts 9:1-2—"Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem."

So he was going after "disciples of the Lord." That is not just the Apostles, that is *all* who follow Jesus Christ. And Saul heard that there were now Christians in Damascus. Now, obviously, they were Jews who had become Christians, because they were still meeting in the synagogues. The Gospel has not yet been fully unleashed among the Gentiles; we only have the record of that conversion of the Ethiopian, back in Chapter 8.

As the leader of that Jewish high court, the Sanhedrin, the Romans regarded "the high priest" as the de facto head of the Jewish state, under Roman authority. As long as they did not rebel against Rome, the Romans gave the Jews quite a bit of latitude to handle their own things. And so, Paul—Saul—knew "the high priest" was the one who had the authority to grant his request to give him "letters" authorizing him to go to "Damascus" and wreck things in the "synagogues" where there were Christians.

Since the authorization included *arresting* people, and bringing them to Jerusalem for trial, think about it: That means that it *also* included sending Temple police *with* Saul to be able to arrest these people and bring them back. So it must have been quite an entourage making its way to Damascus.

What do we know about Damascus? It was the ancient capital of Syria. It contained a large population of Jews; there would have been many synagogues there. We know that about 30 years after this, in the year A.D. 66, there were between 10,000 and 20,000 Jews at Damascus who were massacred by the Romans. So if there is that many 30 years from now, then there were *a lot* when Saul went there. And we know that among them, there would have been many who had turned to Christ.

It says he wanted authority, "if he found any belonging to *the Way*," he could arrest them. "The Way" is probably a pejorative nickname for Christians. It would be *mocking* the fact that the Christians preached that Jesus is the only "way"; we saw it in Acts 4:12—"There is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved." Jesus said: "I am *the way*, and *the truth*, and *the life*; no one comes to the Father but through Me" (cf. Jn. 14:6).

So we are confronted with this Loathsome Persecutor Saul. He gets Letters From The High Priest. And then in Verse 3 comes Light From Heaven.

When God so chooses, He can make a point in an instant. Just before Saul and his little religious army reached Damascus, something *totally* unexpected and unprecedented happened. It's in Verse 3—"As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus..." We are told that it would take a caravan five, six, seven days to get there. They were just coming up to the walls of Damascus, "and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him."

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Now, bear in mind: They are travelling in a desert region in the Middle East. The sun is *bright*. And *far over and above* the intensity of the sun came "a light from heaven." In Chapter 26, Verse 13, when Paul is describing this later, he is going to say it was "brighter than the sun," and the Greek there is literally "above the brightness of the sun," and the Greek preposition that is used there is *hyper*, from which we get our prefix "hyper." Saul says, "Something hyper-bright, super-sun appeared around us." It got his attention!

Next is: Lord Jesus Speaking.

It did not take long for Saul to learn the source of the blinding light (cf. Matt. 17:2; Rev. 1:16). Verse 4—"and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?' " This is *amazing*! The "voice" is the voice of Jesus *speaking from Heaven*, and appearing to Saul. He knows Saul by name, and He repeats it—"Saul, Saul"—for emphasis, for urgency. That's even worse than when your mother uses your full name and your middle name. You *know* this is a big deal. Then the question: "Why are you persecuting Me?"

Now, as I said, there is no indication that Saul had ever met Jesus. And furthermore, where is Jesus hanging out these days? Well, He "ascended to the Father" (Jn. 20:17; cf. Acts 1:9; 2:33; 5:31; 7:55-56; Rom. 8:34; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3; 10:12; 12:2), and this is the light of Jesus from Heaven.

So, what's with this "persecuting Me"? Saul *didn't even know* Jesus! He was attacking Christians; he was attacking followers of "the Way." Well, the point is that Jesus is so intimately identified with the people that He redeems, that to persecute Christians *is* to persecute Jesus Himself (cf. Matt. 25:41-45). If someone attacks a Christian on Earth, that blow is felt by the "faithful high priest" in Heaven (Heb. 2:17; cf. Is. 63:9; Zech. 2:8). There is *union* between Christ and His people.

Like Jesus said before He went to the Cross: "If they hated Me, they will hate you also" (cf. Jn. 15:18). And eventually, after he became Paul, he would write—ironically, from a prison cell—Colossians 1:24, where he says: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions." Now, that doesn't mean that Jesus did not suffer enough. It means that all the suffering we endure on Earth for the sake of His name and for the sake of the Gospel—*it is aimed at Him*, and since He is not available for a physical attack, the dupes of Satan attack the ones who represent Jesus; and that is us, because we are His "ambassadors" begging people to "be reconciled to God" through Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:20).

Back to Acts 9. Verse 5—"And he said, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do.' " (vss. 5-6) Now, isn't it interesting that Saul immediately said, "Who are You, Lord?" He didn't say, "Uh, hello. You've reached Saul of Tarsus. Who is calling, please?" "Who are You, Lord?"—and he used the word "Lord": "Master"! Anyone who can knock you to the ground with a blinding light is *clearly* someone to listen to! That person is the Master in that situation.

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Did he fully understand a robust Christology? I don't think so, *yet*. But it didn't take long to figure out who this was. Jesus graciously explained to Saul that, "This is just the start, Saul. There's going to be more!" "Get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do" (vs. 6).

Now, here's an interesting sidelight. Well, you know, I've read ahead. I'll tell you that there is also a man in Damascus, a man named Ananias—clearly not the Ananias of Acts Chapter 5, that was killed in front of church; it's a common name. God appeared to *that* Christian, named Ananias, and told him that Saul was coming, "and you better go talk to him." *That* was a tough day for Ananias! (cf. Acts 9:26) God does some explaining there to Ananias to get him to do that; we'll see that when we move on through Chapter 9 in our next visit to the Book of Acts.

Well, that leads us to: Leading Blind Saul.

You know, that was a pretty drastic change of plans! We are going to see what happens with Saul as he becomes Paul, and it is going to continue to be jaw-dropping.

I had one of those mischievous little thoughts. You know, my brain—I try not to let it out too much; it's too small to be out on its own. But sometimes it will wander, and it did this week. I started thinking: "I bet there are some stories from among those people who were *traveling* with Saul." They're not recorded anywhere; I've never even heard of some kind of theory about what might have happened to them. But *don't you wonder* what some of their stories might be? Wouldn't it be cool to meet a couple of them in Heaven, and hear them say, "Yeah, I was there that day, and I've seen the Book of Acts—*it was even more incredible* than those words can describe!"

Well, we don't know, but we do know *this* about them: Chapter 9, Verse 7—"The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one."

Now, "stood speechless" says a lot. When you are a policeman or a soldier, and you are traveling under the authority of this guy who is your leader, and somebody attacks the leader, you don't usually fold your hands and shut your mouth and say, "I wonder what this is going to be?" "Stood speechless"—*they were astounded!*

These were the Temple thugs! They were the same ilk that had arrested and imprisoned Apostles in Jerusalem, that had come after Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane with the help of the Romans, they had helped Saul do house-to-house searches and carry Christians off to prison; surely they cheered as the members of the Sanhedrin killed Stephen—and they "stood speechless," *dumbfounded!*

It kind of reminds me of those Roman soldiers who guarded the tomb of Jesus. I mean, face it, it has to be pretty light-duty to be a soldier, and your job is: "Don't let the dead guy escape." And remember, it says that when the angel showed up to move the stone and open the grave, they were frozen in place "like dead men" (Matt. 28:4). Kind of the same thing happened here: They "stood speechless."

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They saw the light, and they were "hearing the voice but seeing no one." You know, you can hear a voice without actually knowing who or what you are hearing. Some years ago when Mountain View High School opened, and our house is about a mile away from there, we were sitting and watching something on TV on Sunday night, and I started hearing voices. I said, "Marsha, did you hear that?" "I don't hear anything." A couple minutes later: [indistinct, distant speaking] We are hearing the PA announcer on the football field at the high school a mile away. We were hearing the voice, but we didn't see anybody. It took us a while to figure it out, and we almost went to a psychiatrist to see what was going on.

But, they are hearing it, they're seeing the light, but they don't know what is going on. We are soon going to find out, a little later down the page, that in the midst of the blinding light, Jesus actually appeared to Paul, and Paul will explain that later. The others present saw the light, but did not see Jesus. They heard the sound of the voice, but they did not hear the distinct words that were spoken. When we get to Chapters 22 and 26, I'm going to show you a *fascinating* aspect of Greek grammar that resolved what critics like to say is a contradiction; because it says in one place that they heard the voice, and another place it says they *didn't* hear the voice—and that is *not* a contradiction. And I'll show you how, and it is totally legit and extremely cool.

Well, suddenly, the mission of these Temple police was changed from making arrests to caring for their blind leader. Look at Verse 8—"Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing"—this was not the blindness of darkness, this was the blindness of light—"and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus."

And again, there are things we would like to know, and we are not told. Where did they first go in Damascus? They were probably talking about, "Well, tonight we are going to overnight at the first synagogue that we come to, and then on Saturday we'll go in and we'll start rousting the Christians and separating them and arresting them." Is that what they did? When did Saul actually get into the hands of the Christians, rather than the Jews and his entourage of Temple police thugs? *That* cannot have been a real *smooth*, easy transition!

You see, there's a lot of stuff that goes on here, and this takes some time. And I'm curious: What did the Temple police eventually say happened out there, before they got to Damascus? We know in Matthew 28, about those Roman soldiers, that they made up that really, really brilliant theory: "Well, while we were asleep, the disciples came and stole the body" (cf. Matt. 28:13) Yeah, right! If you were Roman soldiers guarding a tomb, and you fell asleep, you would not be around to *tell* the story—let alone that the disciples tippy-toed in, moved the multi-ton stone, and stole the body! What did *these* guys say? We don't know.

In coming weeks in the Book of Acts, we are going to see what God has determined that we need to know. We won't *know* all those stories, unless some of those people are in Heaven, or we can interview Luke about writing this, or Paul about seeing this. But I'll tell you: Everything we are going to see will do nothing but bring glory to Christ.

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Now, *how is that* for a change of plans? We are going to see what happens with Saul; and I promise, it will be jaw-dropping!

Saul's world was turned upside down. Look at Verse 9, and we will stop for this morning: "And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank."

Talk about a change! Suddenly, Saul's friends are going to be *his enemies*. He is going to end up *fleeing* from the people that were backing him in this quest to kill Christians. Soon, those who *were* his enemies, soon those who were the *targets* of his arrest and murder intents will become his friends. His *entire purpose for living* has been *ripped out from under him!*

You can only *imagine* all that went through his mind in those three days without sight. The verse tells us that he fasted—not a surprise. I don't think food would be your highest priority in a situation like that (Ps. 102:4; 107:18). And we are going to see, a little further down the page, that he prayed—I *guess!* And I'm going to hazard a guess that he probably did not do much sleeping those three days. And I'm sure there wasn't any small talk with those who traveled with him. Suddenly, he doesn't fit *anywhere*.

But look at this conversion. This is amazing! And you know what? It is *just like your conversion!* Well, *you* didn't see a blinding light—I'll give you that. Alright, Jesus didn't appear to you physically. Okay, He did not speak to you audibly. You probably were not struck blind. But *this was just like your conversion*, if you belong to Jesus Christ! And if you don't belong to Jesus Christ, "today" is the day that that needs to change (Heb. 3:15; cf. 2 Cor. 6:2).

How is this like your conversion?

Well, God arranged for you to be in the right place at the right time of His choosing, to hear the Gospel (cf. Prov. 16:9; 20:24; Eph. 1:11). If you have never committed your life to Christ, you are *in* the right place at the right time today, to hear the Gospel. And it may turn your world upside down—it *always does*.

This was just like your conversion, if you belong to Christ, in that *He* convicted *you* of your sin (Jn. 16:8; cf. Ezek. 36:25-27, 31; Lk. 18:13; Jn. 6:44; Acts 16:14). I had never thought about the fact that I was a sinner, "alienated" from God (Col. 1:21; cf. Is. 59:2; Ezek. 18:4). I just accepted the offer of a ride with a friend to go to the library to take back some library books. And while I was there, someone shared the Gospel, and I find myself confessing my sins. God arranged that! And if you belong to Christ, it was *something* like that for you—whether it was a moment in time, or a period of time.

If it has never been the case for you, I ask you today to ponder whether you meet God's standard. Jesus put it quite succinctly: "You are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). Perfect obedience to all of God's laws, all the time, in every situation, every second of your life—that is the standard (Jos. 23:6; Gal. 3:10; Jas. 2:10). And anything less than that, and you prove the famous words: Romans 3:23—"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (cf. Ps. 143:2; Ecc. 7:20; Jas. 3:2).

Sermon Title: Who Are You, Lord?
Scripture Text: Acts 9:1-9 (Acts #21)

Speaker: Jim Harris
Date: 7-16-23

So, for someone to come to Christ, you don't need a blinding light, a visitation from Jesus; but He arranges it. And God arranges for someone to tell you the Gospel (cf. Acts 13:48; cf. Jn. 6:37; 2 Tim. 2:10). In this case, it was Jesus Himself.

Now, if you don't know what the Gospel is, here it is: First Corinthians 15:3-4—"Jesus Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures...He was buried, and...He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures."

So, have you ever cried out to Him and said, "Lord Jesus, I need You! Forgive me! Begin to make me over into the person *You* created me to be." (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17; Phil. 2:13) Have you ever done that? Or, *will you*, today? Will you "confess" your sinfulness to Him? (Prov. 28:13) Will you admit that you are a sinner, and you know you *cannot be good enough* to stand in the presence of your Creator and your Judge—Almighty thrice-holy God? (Ps. 130:3; Prov. 20:9) Will you accept the "free gift" of "eternal life in Christ Jesus"? (Rom. 6:23) You are not *good enough* to *earn* it. You have to *receive* it as His "gift" (Rom. 3:24; cf. Gal. 2:16; Phil. 3:9).

And by the way, as we think about this man who was saved on the day recorded here, so gloriously: Do you realize what a *momentous* day that was? Because, as I said, we are the recipients of what God did through this man. God used *him* as the Apostle to the Gentiles. Here we are—to *my* knowledge, a hundred-percent Gentile audience; but maybe not, and that's fine—where we sit thousands of miles away, two millennia away, preaching the same Gospel, believing in the same Christ, enjoying the same eternal life, looking forward to the same "blessed hope" (Titus 2:13).

This is Saul, that horrible persecutor who became Paul, that beloved Apostle.

Let's pray:

Our Father, thank You for Your work, so vividly illustrated in the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. And Father, thank You that that same message is the only one that can save a soul today. Thank You that we stand "complete in Christ," we who have put our faith in Him. And, oh, Father, please: If anyone here today is just beginning—by Your grace, by the work of Your Spirit—to recognize that they need You, that they have sinned against You, that they need a Savior, may this be the day that they turn to You, we pray. Have Your way in our lives. Thank You for this glorious message that we have, and may we be good ambassadors of Your Kingdom, begging people to "be reconciled to God" through Jesus Christ, who took our sins that we might have His righteousness. Thank You for that, in His name. Amen.