

“The Eyes of Saul”

by Pastor Steve Hammond on 9/27/2020
Text: Acts 9:1-19 at FBC of Newport, NH

//Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest 2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. 3 As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"//

—Acts 9:1-4 (NIV)

Let's walk through this again, through the eyes of Saul. Through the eyes of a man who thinks he can see with 20/20 vision and a black and white sureness when it comes to taking action against these followers of Jesus, these people of “the Way.” He made murderous threats against them. One can just imagine the glaring look he would give to any of these people he met face to face. No sympathy, no mercy to be found in his expression.

Saul also knew how to use more than his eyes for looking around and finding where these people were hiding. He was smart, resourceful and determined. He would go house to house and look. He was thorough. And it didn't matter whether he saw a man or a woman. He would arrest either one or both and take them as prisoners back to Jerusalem. Any children would be of no concern. This is why he was on that road to Damascus. It was too dangerous for most of the believers to stay in Jerusalem, so they were fleeing to the nearby towns. And Saul was hot on their trail. Surely he set his eyes on the horizon at the end of the road and pictured himself finding large gatherings of surprised and terrified ‘heretics’ still following their dead Messiah.

But it was here on this road, on a clear day and in the company of his men, that Saul himself became terrified. It started with that light. Such an intense light that it was both a glory and a terror to behold. It was as if the sun itself had come down from the sky. It left him with no option but to bow down and try to hide his face.

It was followed by a voice, the intensity of which came mostly from what it said. It said his name. Twice! And it brought a charge against him for persecuting him. How could this possibly be? What in God's name is happening? WHO is this person? He asks only that last question. And the answer shocks him to the core.

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”

That name may well have been the most frightening thing Saul had ever heard. In an instant his whole world is being reversed. Instant darkness and ignorance would be a pleasure compared to this. This searing light has now penetrated through his protective hands, through his closed eyes and was now entering his very heart and mind. There that light took his every thought and sense of righteousness and spilled it over with a crash. He had been sure he was in the right taking action against believers in Jesus. He had been sure Jesus was a blasphemous and false prophet. And he was certain that Jesus was dead.

But now these things he knew, were things betraying him. They were false. He had also been sure he was doing God's will. But now he was being convicted by this light which seemed to be shining into him the very light of truth. Terrible truth.

The voice continued. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." At this the voice, the light and the presence of this "Jesus" left him on that road.

Saul tried to open his eyes. He did. But he could see nothing. This light had left him blind. His heart sank even deeper into darkness.

The men with him didn't seem to be affected. They helped Saul up and he instructed them to lead him into the city of Damascus. In talking along the way he quickly realized they had heard a sound but no voice, no name. And for them there was no intense, blinding light. Yet, they were like the blind themselves, now leading the blind down the road.

When they arrived they got a room. Saul stayed right there, helpless as a child, paralyzed with a fear of the dark in broad daylight. He did not eat or drink for three days. In this living death and darkness all he could do is think without the thoughts that had been his security and strength. He needed his whole mind and heart and life to be remade. But he didn't know where to start. Except to pray. He prayed. And he prayed to the only God he knew. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He surely prayed psalms he had memorized. He cried out in their voice for the mercy of God. And I wonder ...

I wonder if Saul found a glimmer of light and comfort in one of the darkest of all the Psalms. Not Psalm 22, though I'm sure that one would come to him eventually from the lips of Jesus himself. But Psalm 88. In a way it is even darker than Psalm 22, for it does not seem to have a happy ending. The answer it seeks must be found in words beyond itself. Yet it seems to be the perfect companion for Saul as he waited those three days as if he were in the pitch black belly of a whale.

Psalm 88 (NIV)

- 1 Lord, you are the God who saves me;
day and night I cry out to you.
- 2 May my prayer come before you;
turn your ear to my cry.

3 I am overwhelmed with troubles
and my life draws near to death.
4 I am counted among those who go down to the pit;
I am like one without strength.
5 I am set apart with the dead,
like the slain who lie in the grave,
whom you remember no more,
who are cut off from your care.

6 You have put me in the lowest pit,
in the darkest depths.
7 Your wrath lies heavily on me;
you have overwhelmed me with all your waves.
8 You have taken from me my closest friends
and have made me repulsive to them.
I am confined and cannot escape;
9 my eyes are dim with grief.

I call to you, Lord, every day;
I spread out my hands to you.
10 Do you show your wonders to the dead?
Do their spirits rise up and praise you?
11 Is your love declared in the grave,
your faithfulness in Destruction[e]?
12 Are your wonders known in the place of darkness,
or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion?

13 But I cry to you for help, Lord;
in the morning my prayer comes before you.
14 Why, Lord, do you reject me
and hide your face from me?

15 From my youth I have suffered and been close to death;
I have borne your terrors and am in despair.
16 Your wrath has swept over me;
your terrors have destroyed me.
17 All day long they surround me like a flood;
they have completely engulfed me.
18 You have taken from me friend and neighbor—
darkness is my closest friend.

In that darkness, God did give Saul a glimmer of hope, a vision for his blind eyes. It showed a man, introducing himself as Ananias, coming to the house where Saul was, placing his hand on him and healing him of his blindness. This was a new candlelight of hope. A point of faith to believe in the God who hears our cries in the darkness. But still, Saul had to wait upon God for it to become real. This proud, headstrong, always in charge man who had persecuted Christ's servants with a passion, was being readied now for becoming a fellow servant of that same Christ.

After three days there was a knock on the door from a stranger. Saul could hear voices and the man introduced himself as Ananias. He knew about Saul, his condition and asked to see Saul. The men let him in. Saul heard the footsteps grow louder as he came into his room. When the sounds stopped, they were followed by Saul feeling the pressure of a warm hand being placed upon his head. Then the sound of a voice being cleared to speak. A far more ordinary voice than the one on that Damascus road. It had just a hint of nervous fear under its control as these first words were spoken:

“Brother Saul ...”

In that instant, before the other words could proceed from the man’s lips, the candlelight in Saul’s heart glowed bright. There was no condemnation in the words or spirit of this message.

“Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has ...”

Saul must have thought: *This man, who has just called me brother, serves the same Jesus I met on that road. I was on that road in order to throw that man into prison and everyone like him. Yet he, and his Lord, have extended the hand of grace to me.* The light in Saul’s heart was now burning within him with solid faith and hope and

“... Jesus ... has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

As soon as this was spoken, the light in Saul became the full light of new creation. This was what was spoken later from this man’s own pen: “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” (2 Corinthians 4:6)

As instantly as creation itself, Saul was fully alive toward God through Jesus Christ. His vision was now true. The truth about himself, his darkest sin, was giving way to the truth of Christ, his grace, forgiveness and warmth of brotherly love. And though he did not need his eyes to see these truths, his vision was restored. Something like scales fell away from his eyes and he could see again. And the very first thing he did was walk himself to where there was water. There he was immersed in the name of Jesus. After that he ate some food and felt the strength being restored to his body.

I know this is quite a different way to preach a sermon. It’s a change of pace. And a reminder that not all of God’s messages must come in lecture form. Sometimes the message is better heard and received in the story form of what God has done. In this way the story itself can almost lecture us directly, as we put ourselves in the shoes of someone God has touched. Especially someone with the authority of the Apostle Paul, who later could say, “Follow me, as I follow Christ.” (1 Corinthians 11:1 MEV)