

**Message of the Early Church:  
The Damascus Road**  
Act 9:1-19

**Intro:** The testimony of the Apostle Paul is recorded three times in the Book of Acts. This is an important story, and we should pay attention to it.

Not only its repetition but also its profound impact upon Saul of Tarsus should make it of interest to us. Saul becomes Paul, the great evangelist who is assigned by the Holy Spirit to reach the non-Jewish world with the gospel. By and large, we are all Gentiles who have received the good news of Christ in part through the work of our brother, Paul.

We have all been on the road lately. Saul of Tarsus was experiencing some “road rage” as he headed to Damascus to throw Christians in jail. God interrupted his journey and dramatically changed his passion. He stayed on the road, but this time he was traveling as a Christian missionary rather than a hit man.

Journeys often give God an opportunity to do his work in us. Jacob was on a journey when God appeared to him at Bethel. Moses was on an occupational commute when he came across the burning bush. Elijah was on the run when he heard the still small voice.

Journeys have the potential to break up our routines, pry us out of our ruts, and help us see and hear what we may have been ignoring.

You could be on your “Damascus Road” right now, on a collision course with your Maker though you have not planned such a meeting and do not expect it. This is the intriguing dimension of Paul’s experience on the road. In some ways, it is the experience of every man who discovers the presence of God in his life.

Without invitation or even warning, God breaks into our routine and claims us for his own. All that we can do is say, “Yes, Lord.”

**I. Turn on Your Spiritual GPS:** I want you to do something scary. I want you to turn on your spiritual GPS—the little spiritual “finder” in you that tries to identify what is authentic and what is fake, that tries to give your own heart spiritual direction and truth. Turn it on. Get honest. What are the beeping beacons on your screen? Where are you headed? Are you attacking someone with all your spiritual energy? Are you angry?

A. Everyone has a spiritual GPS. Some people use it to fight Christians, as Saul was doing. Others, like atheist Sam Harris, use it to fight faith in general. He thinks that belief itself is the problem in the world. That is the setting for his spiritual GPS.

B. Everyone is on a spiritual journey. Saul of Tarsus is the unlikeliest of recruits for Christianity. He is the one person on the face of the earth who seems bent on its destruction during his lifetime. He spares no expense and reserves no energy in his fight. He is an all-out, 100 percent, full speed ahead Christian killer. He calls this an “obsession” in his testimony before Agrippa recorded in Acts 26:11.

When Paul tells about his pre-Christian passion for destroying the church, he pulls no punches. He was convinced that he should oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. He put the saints in prison. When they were tried for blasphemy, he cast his vote against them and

watched them stoned. Many times he went into synagogues, dragged out the Christians, and had them punished. He tried to force them to recant their faith in Christ. He made this his international mission (see Acts 26:9-11).

C. The Sovereign God of this universe stops him dead in his tracks on the Road to Damascus. He sees a light brighter than the sun. He hears a voice. The Lord Jesus appears to him. Paul tells King Agrippa that this experience was a “vision from heaven” (Acts 26:19).

D. Paul will later write, Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst (1 Timothy 1:15). He did not know it at the time, but that is who he was—a terrorist trying to destroy Christians and Christianity.

\*\*\*I told you last week about a young woman who was dying. She was so weak that I could not understand her instructions about how to get to her house. So I punched the address into my GPS and flew completely blind to her house, turning when the GPS said turn without knowing the whole picture.

The only thing I knew was the address. It was my point of reference.

Your internal GPS has a point of reference. It may be faith or unbelief. It may be agnosticism—confessing your ignorance and the impossibility of really knowing anything about God or heaven. Where you set your spiritual GPS is critical for every day.

## **II. You Are on God's GPS:** Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? (Acts 9:4).

A. Slapped down, lying on the ground, blinded by the light, Saul hears this: Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? (Acts 9:4).

\*\*\*\*This is like the ONSTAR commercial. You have an accident. You are sitting there behind the wheel with the exploded airbag in your lap. And a voice comes over the speakers, “Are you okay? Did your airbag deploy? Have you had an accident?”

B. God bushwhacked, waylaid, and ambushed Saul of Tarsus. I cannot see that he had any choice in this divine encounter. Have you ever felt that way about God? Has God ever knocked you down? He does that sometimes.

C. But something was going on in Saul's life. Maybe he was hearing the voice of Stephen, the first martyr of the church. Maybe he heard that voice in the dead of night. The Holy Spirit was convicting this passionate young man against all his training and all his colleagues.

I know this because bright lights and strange noises can always be explained away no matter how frightening or foreboding. Someone that day said it thundered. But not Saul. He was primed for an encounter with the Christ he was attacking.

D. You are on God's GPS. He is tracking you. God's love for you transcends what you know. It transcends your ability to run from him or argue with him or fight with him. You can run from God, but you cannot hide. You can argue with God, but you cannot win. You can fight God, but you cannot prevail.

Even today you could hear the voice of the Spirit of God speaking to you and saying your name, “Saul, Saul.”

**III. You Are on the Enemy's GPS:** I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them in prison (Acts 22:4). Paul's own testimony before the Jerusalem crowd verifies this initial account of his conversion.

A. This ought to cause you some concern. The Enemy of our souls, the Destroyer, is watching you closely. He wants to frustrate all your efforts to get to God. He has laid out a personal plan for your demise.

\*\*\*Monday night a Southern Baptist missionary named Brenda who works in the wilderness reaches of Alaska talked about the native people who worship spirits and suffer from fear. She said, "I think the Enemy is trying to destroy these native people." I think she is right—and it is also true about you.

B. You Follow A Radical and Subversive Teacher—Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples—v1. This kind of murderous passion is not created by innocuous doctrine. Saul of Tarsus is responding to the disciples as the leaders of the Sanhedrin did to Jesus. They all knew that the resurrection of Jesus was the teaching that could change the world.

C. Any Recruit to Jesus Will Pay the Price: I will show him how much he must suffer for my name (Acts 9:16).

1. Jesus guaranteed that we would suffer for his name. "In this world you will endure persecution. But be of good cheer. I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

2. Physical suffering has frequently been part of the price for following Christ. Paul was blind for three days. This was only an indication of the physical suffering he would endure for the cause of Christ.

3. Social consequences are often part of following Christ. When Paul entered the temple in Jerusalem with his traveling companions from Asia Minor, his opponents seized him and shouted, "Men of Israel, help us! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against our people and our law and this place" (Acts 21:28). After Paul had given his testimony and told the story of the Damascus Road, the crowd responded, "Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!" (Acts 22:22).

Paul escaped beating and perhaps death in Jerusalem only by appealing to Caesar as a Roman citizen.

The core teaching is this: God hand-picks his messengers.

Conclusion: Landrum Leavell was one of God's great messengers in my own life. His favorite song was "Beulah Land." The author, Squire Parsons, sang it for us at the memorial service Tuesday at the seminary. Dr. Leavell had his GPS set on Beulah Land. He has arrived safely at his eternal home.