

Theme: One Story (Acts 17:26-28)

Title: “The Church: Darkness to Light” – Acts 9:1-19

Aim: The marvel of God’s grace & plan intertwining.

Intro: In the world of espionage, about which I’m obviously an expert, given my undercover status, the practice of “turning” is the effort to convince an enemy spy to become a double spy. He/she would continue to work for his/her own country/agency while covertly spying for the enemy. I would think that such an act of turning someone would be very difficult due to the agent’s loyalty & commitment to his/her own country & cause. But turning is exactly what Jesus did w/Saul of Tarsus & for that matter, you/me, if we have been brought from darkness to light. Theme: One story – one God, one plan, one story – God’s story of redemption & the transformation of lives from death to life & darkness to light. We come to another milestone for the young Church of Christ in book of Acts. We’ve seen the Church encounter opposition from w/out & corruption w/in. We’ve seen the 1st Christian martyr, Stephen, whose death sparked persecution which thrust many disciples out of Jerusalem into Judea & Samaria & beyond. Last week Pastor Derek spoke from Acts 8, about Philip the evangelist, who went to Samaria & there we see (in David Palmer’s words) “traditional enemies” converted & transformed by “the exalted Jesus.” Then the Holy Spirit sent Philip to the desert between Jerusalem & Gaza, simply & specifically to encounter the Ethiopian eunuch, a foreigner, whose life was likewise transformed, spreading the gospel into Africa. In chapter 9 we find another milestone, resulting in the spread of the gospel into all the Roman Empire & beyond, “to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Acts 9:1-19 [READ]. We 1st met Saul of Tarsus at the stoning of Stephen at the end of Acts 7. Luke made the point of noting that the stoners “laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul” (7:58), who “approved of [Stephen’s] execution” (8:1) & soon

began a campaign of “ravaging the Church,” arresting men & women & committing them to prison (8:3). Who is this Saul? David Palmer wrote, “Saul of Tarsus was born into a devout diaspora Jewish family in the province of Cilicia around AD 5. He was a Roman citizen by birth, w/both a Hebrew name, ‘Shaul’ (Saul), & a phonetically similar Roman name, Paulus (Paul). Around the age of 15, he was sent to Jerusalem to receive a rabbinic education at the feet of a leading sage, Gamaliel. He was a zealous student, distinguished among his peers. He devoted himself to the sect of the Pharisees, learned both the written & oral Torah & was extremely jealous for the traditions of his fathers. Saul’s religious zeal could erupt in violence against foreigners & apostate Jews. He understood Israel as God’s chosen people, descendants of Abraham. He believed & prayed for the hope of Israel & longed for the coming kingdom of God. He anticipated the Lord would send a redeemer in fulfillment of His ancient promise. [But] Saul became outraged by the early Christian confession that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah. Jesus had been condemned to death for blasphemy against God, the Torah & the temple, & publicly crucified. His death on the cross was scandalous & under God’s curse. His followers were leading Israel astray.” So, can understand Saul’s fervor to get stop this movement called “the Way” & silence the followers of Jesus. We’re not told how long a time it was between 8:3 & 9:1, but Saul continued his rampage & sought permission to take his campaign further. By what Luke doesn’t write we can know that God protected the apostles, still based in Jerusalem, at least for the time being. We’re also not told of the spread of the gospel to Damascus, but obviously it did. David Brown wrote that Damascus was the “capital of Syria & a great highway between eastern & western Asia. It was about 130 miles northeast of Jerusalem & was abound w/Jews & Gentile proselytes to the Jewish faith, but the gospel had penetrated there.” Palmer notes

that Saul was probably in his late 20's when he & his team set out for Damascus. As they approached the city, a bright, blinding light shone around Saul. It either literally knocked him over, or he fell back in response & then heard a voice from the midst of the light. We don't know if Saul saw Jesus (those w/him didn't), but it was indeed Jesus who said to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" Note that those who persecute the followers of Christ persecute Him! When we stand for Jesus, we are never alone. Saul asked the logical question, "Who are You, Lord?" – recognizing he was at the mercy of the One speaking. Jesus answered, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." Palmer wrote, "Jesus pronounced the divine name, 'I AM' (we've heard it before), & He spoke as one who is (very much) alive." Jesus told Saul to get up, go into the city & He would tell him further what to do. Those w/him helped Saul get up – he was blinded by "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." Paul knew of what he wrote in II Corinthians 4:6. They led him by the hand into the city, where "for 3 days he was w/out sight, & neither ate nor drank." By this time, Saul was a believer in the risen Lord Jesus, the Messiah. It occurs to me that Saul had been spiritually blind, w/all his religious fervor. Then he became physically blind, but able to see spiritually. Soon his physical sight would be restored. During those 3 days we read that Saul was praying (vs11) & was given a vision of a man named Ananias, who would come & lay hands on him that he might regain his sight (vs12). God indeed called & sent a disciple in Damascus, one Ananias, a brave, obedient man, to lay hands on Saul so that he would not only regain his sight but also be filled w/the Holy Spirit (vs17). Saul "rose & was baptized" & then ate (he had his priorities straight). Note a couple of things, tho I don't really have "points" today. 1) No one is too far gone or unreachable by God's redeeming touch. You & I both know people we love who may even be opposed to Christianity/the Church/

the gospel. We may have thought, “they’ll never come to faith in Christ.” Don’t stop praying. Don’t stop loving. Don’t stop living out your faith. God the Holy Spirit can reach them! Even if they don’t want to be reached, He still can reach them. Some may disagree, but 2) Saul didn’t want to convert. He didn’t want to be “turned” from being a persecutor of the Church to being an apostle & leader of the Church. Jesus sovereignly did it! He met him, opened his eyes to see the truth, & made Saul His own! Here we see the marvel of God’s saving grace & His eternal plan intertwining. God told Ananias, who was understandably afraid of Saul, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine to carry My name before the Gentiles & kings & the children of Israel.” Palmer again wrote, “This was God’s sovereign design – that this zealous persecutor of the Church would be transformed into the apostle to the nations. This would involve personal suffering for Paul, but even those sufferings would authenticate his testimony & maintain his dependence” on the Christ he met on the road to Damascus. God could have chosen & called & used anyone to reach the Gentiles, but He chose & turned Saul. God raised up Paul for 2 reasons: 1) to reach the Gentiles & take the gospel to the far reaches of the Roman Empire, & 2) to set forth the apostles’ teaching in writing. Most of the epistles of the NT were, as you know, written by Paul. Saul spent time w/the disciples in Damascus & he was soon speaking in their synagogues & proclaiming Jesus as Messiah. He soon encountered opposition & was ushered out of the city by night to protect him. Luke doesn’t say so here, but it is thought it was then that Saul went to Arabia & was taught there by the Holy Spirit for 3 years, before going to Jerusalem to meet w/the apostles. Saul was written into God’s story. You & I are, too, if we believe. You can be, if you will embrace Christ by faith. Let us see what Saul saw – the risen Lord; & believe what he believed – that there is

salvation in Christ; & obey as he obeyed, following Christ & making Him known. It's one story – one God, one plan, one story!