As we resume our journey through Acts, we come to the most famous conversion story of all time, Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus. Please stand and let’s read Acts 9:1-9.

Before we join Saul on the road to Damascus, I want to remind you of what we observed last Sunday when I devoted an entire message to describing who Saul was prior to the day of his conversion. Remember that Saul is brilliant…he speaks three languages, he hails from the intellectual capital of the Roman Empire, he has mastered Greek philosophy and been trained as a Jewish Pharisee at the feet of Gamaliel, the most brilliant “master teacher” in the ancient Jewish world. Remember also that Saul has been “radicalized.” Through the influence of the High Priests and others who hated the Christians, Saul has come over to the “dark side” of religious zeal, to the degree that he thinks he is serving God by having the Christians imprisoned and executed.

Saul is a terrorist…a radicalized religious extremist in every sense of the word. If I described this man, his background, and his behavior to Americans in the 21st century but never mentioned the word “Jewish,” no doubt most people would assume I was describing a Muslim terrorist. If I mentioned this man in Russia or China and described his behavior, no doubt people would assume I was describing the KGB or the Chinese secret police assigned to eliminate religious “dissenters” within those atheist communist governments. If I mentioned Paul’s behavior and intentions in India, no doubt people would assume I was describing radicalized Hindu leaders who continue to persecute, beat, and even kill Christians in that country. Sadly, no one in our world is unfamiliar with radicalized religious extremists who set out to arrest, brutalize, and even kill followers of Jesus. Saul, however, was among the first to ever commit himself to the eradication of Christians.
In our text this morning we learn in vs. 1 that Saul is breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, and now he has obtained “letters” to the synagogue leaders in Damascus that will give him authority to arrest any and all Followers of the Way, men or women, so that he might bring them bound back to Jerusalem.

As I mentioned last week, Damascus was a city located 135 miles northeast of Jerusalem. That Paul is determined to travel such a great distance to arrest Christians reveals that the Gospel of Jesus Christ has already spread a considerable distance from Jerusalem. Damascus was an important city of commerce and trade given its location on the main road between Egypt and Mesopotamia. It is likely that the Christianity began to take root in this city because of the persecution that broke out in Jerusalem leading to the dispersion of believers throughout the ancient Middle East.

The letters that Saul carries from the High Priest were likely directed toward the synagogue leaders to inform them of Saul’s mission and to ask for their cooperation in identifying those who belonged to the Way in that city.

We don’t see this term used very often to identify the early believers, but it is worthy to note that the early Christians were considered to be those who “belonged to the Way.” Remember that Jesus said in John 14:6, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” So it’s likely that “belonging to the Way” simply meant “belonging to Jesus,” though clearly the use of this word could and likely did imply both “a way of life” and “the way of salvation.”

Luke tells us that as Saul journeyed on, he was approaching Damascus…which means he has been walking for nearly a week before this event took place. However, before entering the city, something very dramatic takes place.

Now before we get into the details, you should know that this story is told once by Luke and twice by Paul himself in the book of Acts. If you have your Bibles with you, you may wish to stick a finger on all three since we will be drawing upon all three versions of this story in order to get a clear and accurate picture of what took place. The other two versions of this story as provided by Paul are in Acts 22:6-11 and Acts 26:12-18. We will find some subtle differences among the three accounts, but we should assume that the differences are complimentary, not
contradictory, because clearly Luke would not record a story three times and knowingly include contradictions.

So, here’s what our text in Acts 9 states, beginning with vs. 3: Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” All three accounts of this story agree almost verbatim up to this point. Paul adds in Acts 26:13 that the event took place at mid-day and that the light that shone around him and those he was travelling with was brighter than the sun. The light, according to Luke and Paul, originates from heaven. Notice the light does not come from “the heavens,” that is the sky where both the sun and the moon reside. No…this light comes from Heaven…the place where God abides, and that is profoundly clear to Saul. There is no mistaking this light as the sun, or any other “natural” source. The light that now surrounds him is a “supernatural” light…brighter than a 1000 suns. We’ll see later that the men travelling with Saul also see this powerful light, and it knocks them all onto the ground…so we know this was not just a private vision for Saul, or some heat-induced stroke. God came down…that much is certain for Luke as well as for the witnesses who later would have provided testimony to that fact. Note that the witnesses did not see Jesus (they were likely blinded by the light), and though they heard a voice, they could not make out what was said. That should come as no surprise. Jesus did not interrupt their journey to have a town meeting…He came to speak to Saul the terrorist, and him alone.

All three accounts record the initial words from the light to be exactly the same, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” Notice how Saul’s name is said twice. We’ve seen this tendency on more than one occasion, where God and/or Jesus speaks a name twice in a way that shows intensity, tenderness, and a moment of great importance. Remember when Abraham was about to sacrifice his son Isaac in Genesis 22:11, God interrupts him by saying, “Abraham, Abraham!” When God speaks to Jacob, now an old man in Genesis 46, and assures him that it is his will for Jacob to move his family to Egypt, God addresses him in a dream saying, “Jacob, Jacob!” When God calls out to Moses from the burning bush with the intent of commissioning him to face Pharaoh, he begins by saying, “Moses, Moses!” as we read in Exodus 3:4. In 1 Samuel 3:10 God calls the name of young Samuel twice in a row to get his attention and to call him to serve as a prophet. In each instance when God called the names of these men, they responded, “Here I am Lord.”

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However, when Jesus spoke a person’s name twice, it was often as a form of empathy and a bit of a rebuke. Remember in Luke 22:31 how Jesus said to Peter, “Simon, Simon…Satan has demanded to have you…” He also repeated Martha’s name twice in Luke 10:41 when he was reminding her that His presence was more important than doing the dishes.

So the repetition of a person’s name, when spoken by God or his son Jesus, will usually indicate a call, an assignment, or a rebuke…and I would say in this instance on the road to Damascus, it’s all of the above!

The voice from the light of heaven states, “Saul, Saul! Why are you persecuting me?” Now, according to Paul’s testimony in Acts 26, the voice said a bit more as well in that initial moment of confrontation. We read in Acts 26:14, “And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.”

It’s OK…I didn’t know what “kick against the goads” meant either,…I had to look it up! So here’s what Dr. Chuck Swindoll writes about that expression:

Apparently, "to kick against the goads" was a common expression found in both Greek and Latin literature—a rural image, which rose from the practice of farmers goading their oxen in the fields. Though unfamiliar to us, everyone in that day understood its meaning.

Goads were typically made from slender pieces of timber, blunt on one end and pointed on the other. Farmers used the pointed end to urge a stubborn ox into motion. Occasionally, the beast would kick at the goad. The more the ox kicked, the more likely the goad would stab into the flesh of its leg, causing greater pain.

The point of the expression was simply this: stubbornness and rebellion lead to self-inflicted pain! The Lord’s use of this expression reminds Saul that the Holy Spirit has been prodding and prompting Saul for a long time now. No doubt the Holy Spirit had pressed upon Saul through the teachings of Christ, during the gruesome scourging and execution of Jesus, and during his recent violence towards Christians. Like most, if not all of us, Paul could not escape the prodding of God. We know that God presses down on us when we are doing things that are wrong…we know that God is prodding and prompting us to yield, to go, to turn around, to come home. We can sense God’s power and conviction when we hear something that is profoundly true! Thus, we

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should not think that this is the first instance of God pursuing and “prodding” Saul…no doubt Saul has been sensing the unwelcomed presence of Jesus the Messiah for some time now, yet even so he “kicked against the goad.” We’ll come back to that image in a just a minute.

Now, on this particular day, the prodding of God turns into a direct confrontation that is not just spiritual, it is also physical…now Saul cannot escape the presence of heaven and the question that he has been avoiding for some time, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”

Now that question seems obvious to us, but apparently it wasn’t for Saul. That’s how blind Saul has become to his predicament. So Saul honestly responds, “Who are you Lord?” Now that’s an interesting question.

Saul knows immediately that this is a divine confrontation. He is surrounded by blinding light; he hears the voice from heaven; he knows the voice is one of great authority (that’s why he uses the word “Kyrie”…the Greek word for “lord”); and yet Saul is confused. It never occurs to him that he has been persecuting God. In his mind he has been persecuting the enemies of God. He simply cannot fathom who in heaven he has been persecuting…he truly has no idea who is talking to him.

The voice responds, “I am Jesus (of Nazareth 22:8) whom you are persecuting.” Again, all three versions of this story agree that the voice in the light identifies himself as Jesus, and notice that Jesus says quite clearly, “whom you are persecuting.”

Don’t miss this: Jesus identifies Himself with the church. If the church is persecuted, Jesus is persecuted…He takes that very personally. Let’s ponder that point for a minute.

Many of us as Christians have come to see our identity as being established in Christ: we say that we are children of God; citizens of God’s Kingdom; brothers and sisters in Christ; we are those who have been redeemed by the blood of Christ; we are the New Community made possible by the sacrifice of Christ and the power of his Holy Spirit living in and among us…and so on. It is right and appropriate for believers to define themselves and root their identity in Jesus Christ. But has it ever occurred to you that Jesus roots and establishes His identity with us…the church? Karl Barth, the great German theologian, once wrote, “God elected never to be God apart from His relationship with us.” That is mind blowing. Most of us think of God has completely detached from us to the degree that He could be quite content to go on being God should all of humanity cease to exist. Barth says, “No…we know that by virtue of the Trinitarian expression of God…that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit…that God elected to be God in community with himself and in community with US! That is and was and forever will be God’s predetermined election…God will define Himself as a God who is in relationship with His creation.” Now you think about that and what Jesus just revealed to Saul on the road to

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Damascus. Jesus essentially says, “If you mess with them, you mess with me. I am them, and they are ME!” Now…have we ever seen or heard Jesus speak in this way anywhere else in the NT? Of course we have. Let us not forget Matthew 25 when Jesus says, “As you did unto the least of these my brothers, you did also unto me. And as you did not do unto the least of these my brothers, you did not do unto me.” Jesus identifies and enters into complete solidarity with His church…and the Bible always assumes that the church is comprised of the poor, the imprisoned, the hungry, the sick, the lonely, and the persecuted. That’s why in Christ, all of these people…scorned by the world…are deemed BLESSED. They not only have Jesus, they are those to whom Jesus says, “You are Me, and I am YOU…I am in you, I am always with you, ask anything in my name and I will answer that prayer…you and me, we are ONE.”

When Jesus prayed to the Father in John 17 he prays, “The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.”

Church…do you understand how much Jesus loves you…how much he loves US…the assembly of believers? It is true that the church is often referred to as the Bride of Christ in the NT, but note here in Acts 9 that Jesus is identifying with the Bride in such an intimate way that he says in no certain terms, “We are One. What happens to the bride happens to the Bridegroom.” The incarnation of Jesus Christ as a child born to a virgin named Mary has come to full fruition…Christ is not only one of us…He is one WITH us. And He does not appreciate Saul’s relentless persecution against the church, which is means Saul has been persecuting HIM.

Now, do you remember the words of wise old Gamaliel back in Acts 5? Gamaliel was Paul’s mentor, the wisest of all Rabbis…the Master Teacher in Jerusalem…who stated to all those angry men on the Sanhedrin, “If this movement is of God, you won’t be able to stop it. You may even find you are opposing God.”

Rest assured at this very moment those words are crashing down upon young Saul. In his efforts to oppose and brutalize the Christians, Saul now discovers he has been opposing and brutalizing Jesus Christ, the Lord, the exalted one, the risen Messiah of God who is now glorified and surrounded by light so brilliant that it outshines the sun.

Jesus continues his remarks to Saul in vs. 6, “But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” Now Luke has summarized this part of Christ’s instructions to Saul, but later on Paul will provide greater detail as to what he heard from Jesus at that moment. In Acts 26, as Paul tells this story to King Agrippa, he reveals a bit more of what he heard from Jesus in that encounter. In 26:15-18 Paul recites Jesus in this way, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a

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servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.”

We’ll dig deeper into these words of Christ when we get to Acts 26, but notice just a few things here. First, after identifying himself as the Lord whom Saul has been persecuting, Jesus immediately reveals three things: a purpose, a calling, and a goal. 1) Jesus reveals that He has a purpose in mind for Saul…that is why He has appeared to Him. Don’t miss this friends. God has a purpose for every human soul who draws breath. If we are working cross ways against the purposes of God, we can be pretty certain that God is going to poke, prod, and confront us until we yield to what His plan and purpose is for our lives. Saul thought he had that all figured out…he was sure his plans were God’s plans, and in his twisted mind, that included persecuting and killing Christians. But note how quickly Jesus says, “WRONG! You got that wrong…your plans are hurting me and hurting my church. Now…here’s my plan for you.” 2) Next, Jesus extends the call. He says, “Rise up and go.” This is similar language to the calling of Philip that we just read in the last chapter. When Jesus confronts us in our sin, the point is not for us to sit around and feel terrible about all we’ve done. Do you see how quickly Jesus transitions from “You are wrong and you have been hurtful” to “now here is my purpose for you, get up and let’s get started.” I think Jesus sees how horrified Saul is at this moment as Jewish persecutor sees his sin and comes to understand just how wrong and terrible he has been. But Jesus isn’t done with Saul simply because he has been a horrific terrorist…He has a plan for Saul that begins right now. His past sins are forgiven, Jesus will make that sin work backwards and redeem all that was lost, and now there is much for Saul to do moving forward. Which means, Jesus isn’t done with any of us, right? If Jesus can forgive, restore, and commission a former terrorist to be his servant and witness to the world, chances are pretty good He will do the same for each and every one of us. Remember how Paul later writes in Ephesians 2 that we have been saved by grace through faith, and even faith is a gift from God so that no man may boast. And he concludes vs. 10 and that whole line of thought with these words: “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

We are saved by grace…which sometimes—often—feels like a loving, firm confrontation, so that we would repent, discover the plan that Christ has for us, and then rise up and walk into that plan when we are called by God to do so.

And to what end? What is the goal of this confrontation on the road to Damascus according to Jesus? 3) Jesus reveals the ultimate goal of Christian conversion, the ultimate end for Saul’s life and witness, and our lives and witness for that matter. Here’s the goal: so that they (Jews and

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Gentiles…everyone) may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.”

Listen friends, that’s always what Jesus wants to accomplish in and through the lives of believers and the assembly of believers called the Church. Through us…through you…Jesus intends to make Himself known to all people, in every tongue, tribe and nation, so that they all may 1) turn…repent…do an about face from walking in darkness to walking in the light; 2) that all people may be set free from the tyranny of Satan to being filled with and reliant upon the power of God that is available to all believers through the presence of the Holy Spirit; and 3) that all people…no matter how terrible they have been, no matter how far they have strayed, no matter how scary or ruthless or annoying they have become…that THEY…all of them…may receive forgiveness of sins and receive a place…a room…a secured and established home among those who are sanctified (saved, cleansed, redeemed, restored, purified). How? By FAITH IN JESUS! Not faith in a generic god, not faith in ourselves, not the accumulation of good deeds or the abstinence from certain foods or habits. People will be forgiven and receive a place in heaven by faith in Jesus…and that’s the point. That’s always the point…of everything. People need Jesus in order to be forgiven and saved, and every redeemed life…every soul that has been saved…in every corner of the earth, has a MISSION, a calling…marching orders from Jesus…to rise up and go…to be servants of Jesus who bear witness to the world that Jesus is Lord.

Now, we’re going to stop here with this story and pick up where we left off next Sunday. But before we close, let me ask you once again to find your place in this narrative.

What road are you walking on, and why? Are you kicking against the goad? Do you feel the gentle and persistent prodding of God, and yet you just keep kicking back, digging in…all the while feeling the consequences of your self-inflicted torture? Who else is suffering because of the choices you make that are in rebellion against God? What would Jesus say to you should you meet face to face on your way home? If Jesus could forgive Saul…a murdering terrorist…do you think Jesus could forgive you? Would you be surprised to know that God has a plan and a purpose for the time that remains in your life?

If these questions cut you like a knife, listen to me: quit running from God. The joy, the contentment, the peace, and even the adventure that you long for can only be found in HIM, not around Him. You are not too far gone, you are not unforgiveable, and nothing has happened which God cannot and will not redeem in Christ so that His purpose might be accomplished through you. Yield to the loving confrontation of Christ. Our Father loves you too much to leave you alone…true love is always confrontational for that very reason. Hear what Jesus has to say to you…Hear what his plans are for you. Whether at the end of this service or in the privacy of

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your own room, talk to Jesus. Ask Him to reveal Himself to you and to reveal what His plan is for your life. Then pick up a Bible and read the Gospels…listen for how Jesus will speak directly into your life…the impact of doing so may very well be as dramatic and life-altering as Saul’s encounter with God on the road to Damascus.

If you are a believer, do you know and accept the plan and purpose that Jesus has for your life? Are you living each day as one who is commissioned and sent to bear witness to who Jesus is to a watching world? Jonah showed us that even prophets can attempt to run away from God’s call and plan, particularly if we sense we are being called to bear witness to people we dislike for any particular reason. All of us run from God, but make no mistake: He runs after us! Jesus loves you, He loves me, and He will confront us until we yield and allow the Holy Spirit to align our lives with His purpose. Jesus will not be content until all of His children have come home. Church, we have work to do…we have a calling, a purpose, and a commission. Let us be found faithful in the time that remains.

Let’s pray.