

## Open the eyes of my heart

Acts 9:1-20

February 26, 2006

### Introduction to scripture reading:

*Saul ... Saul ... Why do you persecute me?*

Saul was just going about his own business. Well, from his point of view, he was going about God's business! But, in any case, there he was, traveling the road from Jerusalem to Damascus, going about his business, thinking about what lay ahead for him, but anticipating no surprises, having no reason to think that this day would be different from any other day ... just like we go about our own business, day after day, thinking about lies ahead for us, but anticipating no surprises, having no reason to think that today will be any different from yesterday.

There he was, just going about his business, when in a moment, literally in a flash of light, his whole life changed. In an instant, without warning, everything he took for granted went out the window. He was brought up short, he was stopped in his tracks. Jesus stopped him in his tracks and ...

Well, listen to the story!

### **Acts 9:1-20**

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*Anything is possible. You can be whatever you want to be. You can do whatever you set your mind to do.*

That's what we like to tell our children. We want to encourage them, to stir their ambitions, to open their eyes to a world full of exciting possibilities. But we do them a disservice and we may well set them up for disappointment and failure, because it simply isn't true. You cannot be whatever you want to be.

Neither you nor I can be whatever we want to be. I will never play the organ like Bruce Bengtson or paint watercolors like Lorraine Reeves. I will never have the effervescent personality of Celeste Bembry or the people skills of Keith Jorgensen. I will never have my wife's boldness or Donna Sheridan's sensitivity.

We cannot be whatever we want to be. We are who we are. We are limited by our genetic heritage, by our environmental and social and cultural heritage. And in particular, we are limited by our innate capacities and our innate personalities.

But, no ... "Limited" is not the right word at all! "Limited" is a negative word, implying that each of us is somehow less than we might otherwise be, as if there were some ideal prototype of fully realized humanity against which each of us is measured. But there is no prototype, there is no ideal. There are only individual cases, individual human beings. We can only understand what it is to be a human being one person at a time. I cannot be whatever I want to be, and should never be measured against that expectation. I can only be who I am.

But I can choose how I will be who I am!

Saul was Saul, Saul was Paul, whichever name you want to use for him, he was who he was. What was Saul like, this man traveling the road to Damascus? He was passionate, proud, intense, zealous. He was a doer. He was not one to sit around in interminable council sessions, debating what to do with this troubling new sect they called "followers of the Way." He was going to go and do something about it himself! He was not a follower, but a leader, not a peacemaker, but a crusader. He was what you might call, an extremist.

And what was Saul like, after that moment on the road to Damascus, after his life had been forever changed? Was he passionate? Yes! Was he proud? Yes! Was he intense? Yes! Was he zealous? Yes! Was he still a doer, a leader, a crusader, an extremist? Yes and yes and yes and yes!

The man who wasn't content to remain in Jerusalem, but traveled one hundred and fifty miles one way to root out scattered followers of Jesus, was the same man who wasn't content to remain in Antioch, but traveled thousands of miles throughout Asia and Europe to invite people to become followers of Jesus! The man who couldn't sit still, but had to be doing something, was the same man who couldn't sit still in Damascus, but went straight to the synagogues to preach that Jesus was the Son of God.

He was the same man he had always been, but, at the same time, everything was changed. Something changed him on that road. Someone changed him on that road. Someone opened his eyes, but first, first, had to close them.

Because sometimes we see but don't see. Our eyes are full of what we know or what we think we know, and we do not see what is there. We see what we expect to see, we see what we have always seen, and we do not see what is there.

So close your eyes. Close your eyes. You can't see your calendar. You can't see your computer desktop. You can't see the familiar environs of your home or your school or your workplace. You can't see anything. Your eyes are closed. You can't see anything. You are blind, and as with any blind person, without sight your hearing becomes all the more acute. So what do you hear? What do you hear?

*Saul ... Saul ... Why do you persecute me?*

Oh ...

It's not a question Saul would have considered. He didn't think of himself as a persecutor, but as a defender of the faith. That's why he asks:

*Who are you?*

*I am Jesus ...*

And then Saul's eyes are opened. Yes, I know. It is still three days until Ananias comes and lays hands on Saul and his sight is restored, but it is at this moment, with his eyes blinded by the light, that Saul begins to see. He begins to see Jesus, and seeing Jesus, he sees everything else. He sees himself, as he is, and he sees those he is in fact persecuting, as they are. When we see Jesus, when our eyes are closed to everything but Jesus, Jesus opens the eyes of our hearts.

Saul was the same man he had always been, the same man he always would be, but his whole way of life was changed. He was still a passionate advocate of the beliefs he held most dear, but he now defended his Lord, not with arrest warrants, but with words of grace, not with threats of violence, but with a readiness to give himself away ... because he had seen Jesus.

He was still a proud and irrepressible man, but now he knew his place. He knew his role as a servant of God, one among many. He understood that it was not what he knew that mattered, but how he loved ... because he had seen Jesus.

He was the one who wrote this:

*The Spirit's presence is shown in some way on each person for the good of all ...*

and this:

*Knowledge puffs up a person with pride, but love builds up ...*

and this:

*These three remain: faith, hope, and love; and the greatest of these is love ...*

And this:

*There is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours though Christ Jesus our Lord ...*

He saw Jesus and Jesus opened his eyes. Jesus opened his eyes to see how much he, Saul, was loved, and that made all the difference.

Close your eyes. Close your eyes to all the things you're used to seeing. Close your eyes to all the ways you're used to seeing. Close your eyes to your life as it is, your life as it always has been. See Jesus, only Jesus, and let him open the eyes of your heart.

Let Jesus show you how you are persecuting him by persecuting his people, how you are ignoring him by ignoring his people, how you are failing to love him by failing to love his people, all his people.

And let Jesus show you how much you are loved -- anyway, as you are, now and forever -- and that will make all the difference! You cannot change who you are, but the way you choose to live who you are can be changed. May the Lord Jesus transform you entirely by opening the eyes of your heart!