



LIGHT FOR THE WAY

Acts 9:1-31

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Katherine Leary Alsdorf co-authored with Tim Keller *Every Good Endeavor*, and founder of Redeemer's Center for Faith & Work in New York City. She's a remarkable person, with a distinguished career as an executive in the tech industry. Katherine became a Christian at age forty, and Jesus revolutionized not only her personal life but also her work. Soon after her conversion she found herself Chief Executive Officer of her company—the first of three times that she would serve in this role. She says that at first she had a pretty superficial understanding of what Jesus wanted from her at work—mainly behavioral stuff like not swearing and not turning in bloated expense reports. Over time, however, she came to see how Jesus cared about the work itself. She discovered that her own creative output—and that of her company—flowed from the creativity and stewardship that have been God's design for humanity from the beginning (Gen. 1:28). As a result, she says that because of Jesus, her heart-level motivations changed, as work came to be about a lot more than a paycheck. Likewise, her interactions with employees and clients and competitors changed, as her own leadership became increasingly about following the King. Consequently the culture of the company changed, because Jesus called her to a level of integrity that she hadn't known before. It's not that she was a scoundrel or tyrant before her conversion to Christianity. She was a decent person by the world's standards. Yet when she became a follower of Jesus, it's as if all her talents and intellect and experiences now became tools in the hand of a master craftsman. Jesus used her in ways that she never could have anticipated, but it was clearly the role that she was born to play.

Katherine's story deconstructs a common misconception about becoming a Christian, especially among the kind of high-achievers who often come to work in Washington. Here's one way this misconception often emerges: you're well on your way to a distinguished and meaningful career. You've acquired the requisite education and experience and network. But you also have a secret: you've started reading the Bible and you find Jesus surprisingly compelling. So you find yourself at a crossroads, feeling torn between faith and work. If you become a Christian, will you have to abandon your career and become a missionary in the developing world? After all the work you've done to make it thus far, and perhaps more importantly, in view of that inner sense of purpose that's been driving you forward all these years, it feels like it would be such a waste if you walked away from it all to become a Christian.

This crossroads represents a false dichotomy. Jesus calls you to follow him, not so that he can waste your life, but so that you might play the role you were born to play. That's what Katherine Leary Alsdorf discovered when she became a Christian. It's also what Saul discovered on the road to Damascus in Acts 9. Though he didn't realize it at the time, Jesus was calling him to become the person God had created him to be. That's what we'll discover as we consider this passage together.

SAUL'S WAY

The tale of Saul's conversion concludes in Acts 9:31 with one of the happiest verses in the Bible: "So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied." It's a beautiful picture of vitality and tranquility, and it was a long time coming, only after an immense struggle against a formidable enemy in the person of Saul of Tarsus.

If there ever was a high achiever in the ancient world, it was Saul. For years he had studied under the greatest teachers in Jerusalem, receiving the best education possible at that time. He had a brilliant mind and was well on his way to becoming a legendary teacher himself. He was also a tireless activist for his faith at a time when the leaders of Judaism were in crisis. They had put Jesus to death, but he came back from the dead, and then faith in him spread like wildfire. If the Jerusalem Council didn't nip Christianity in the bud, it might just overtake Judaism, and then they would lose their wealth and power. So they commissioned Saul as their enforcer. Although I'm only speculating at this point, I suspect that Saul knew deep down that the Jerusalem Council was corrupt and self-serving. Nevertheless, he had come up through the system to the point that he was a lieutenant to the Council. Like so often happens in the complicated systems in Washington, Saul had to weigh the costs and benefits of taking an unpleasant job that could become a stepping stone for future success. Saul must have seen the enforcer role that the Jerusalem Council was offering him as an unpleasant but very important task at a critical time in the nation's history. So he took the job. He dove in and led the first wave of persecution against Christians, starting with the stoning of Stephen. Then, as Christians fled Jerusalem and scattered throughout the region, Saul zealously searched after them in order to imprison and perhaps execute them.

Saul's plan, according to Acts 9:1-2, was to build a firewall around the spread of Christianity, especially in the next concentric circle beyond Jerusalem and Judea/Samaria (cf. Acts 1:8). Saul knew that Stephen the Martyr's strategy had been to spread Christianity through the Greek-speaking synagogue network. Saul was a brilliant strategist, and he was thinking strategically about how to get out in front of Christianity and quench the fire. So he asked the Jewish high priest for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, the next global city on the Via Maris, the main highway to the northeast.

In Acts 9:2, Luke for the first time uses an important and descriptive nickname for Christianity. He calls it ἡ ὁδός, which can be translated as *the path* or *the road* or *the way*. So often today people conceive of Christianity as something rather static, i.e. a philosophy, or an assortment of timeless truths and ideas. It wasn't so in the early days of the church, nor should it be so today. When you become a Christian, you're not pledging allegiance primarily to a list of ideas or beliefs but rather to a new King. Becoming a Christian means choosing to follow a living person named Jesus *in his way*. So it's a very important nickname and a good reminder to us of what this was all about.

Meanwhile, in 9:3, Saul was *on his way*. Given his excellent education and experience and network, he sincerely believed that *his way* was also *God's way*. By the world's standards, Saul was very bright. He was one of the most enlightened people alive. He was the kind of person you might seek out for advice, to help you chart your own career path. He was a bright light in

Judaism. And he was on *his way* to Damascus, believing it was also *God's way*, when (9:3) “suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’”

Moments before he had been at the top of his game, believing that he was walking in the light, walking in the way of the Lord. But as he fell to the ground everything changed, and he began to realize that his own light was dim, and his own way was not the Lord's. Suddenly, in the light of Christ, Saul way looked dim.

JESUS' WAY

“Why are you persecuting me?” Saul's response in v 5 is telling, as he asks, “Who are you, *Lord?*” From the moment the encounter began, he knew that it was God. Jesus said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”

Had Saul really persecuted Jesus? Saul wasn't part of the Jerusalem Council. He hadn't been there during Jesus' trial and crucifixion. So he hadn't persecuted Jesus, *per se*. However, Saul certainly had been persecuting Jesus' followers, people *on the way*. Jesus so identified with them that he said, “You're persecuting *me*.”

Take note of this moment, when I suspect seeds were planted for a theology that would revolutionize the way people think about their relationship with God. To this day, whenever and wherever Christians are suffering persecution around the world, we believe that Jesus is there, feeling it too. He isn't aloof from the suffering. If you're a believer, and you're being mistreated because of your faith, Jesus is right there in it with you. And we know this because of what Jesus said to Saul that day. Saul had been persecuting Christians, but Jesus so identified with them that he said, “You're persecuting *me*.” Later he would write extensively about believers being united with Christ. He likened the connection between Jesus and his followers to that of a man and woman united in marriage. Becoming one flesh in marriage, he said, is a shadow of the intimacy between Jesus and his people. All of this rich theology likely can be traced back to this moment, when Jesus confronted him on the road to Damascus and said, “You're persecuting *me*.”

Therefore, because Saul was persecuting people on Jesus' way, Jesus intervened. He came to the rescue of his people. As a result, this impressive, high-achieving, upcoming leader was brought down to the dust. He who once thought he saw everything so clearly now had open eyes, but was blind (Acts 9:8). He who once believed he was walking in the light now had fallen on his face because of the light of Christ. He who had arrested Jesus' people was now arrested by Jesus himself.

What would become of Saul? Jesus had every right to avenge Stephen and the other martyrs by putting Saul to death. Alternatively, he could have “sent him to the salt mines,” to waste away as a murderer beyond redemption. But instead, Jesus' way was rather surprising. He told Saul (v 6) to get up and go on to his original destination in Damascus, the very place he had intended to go. Though we don't yet know what will happen, there's an important clue here about what it means

to give your life to Jesus. When you become a Christian, Jesus may not change the direction in which you're headed. Nevertheless, you'll go under a different light, following a different leader, according to a Jesus' bright way.

DANGER ALONG THE WAY

Meanwhile, the "Way of Jesus" had already spread to Damascus where there was a new believer named Ananias. Through a vision, God called Ananias to follow Jesus on an important and dangerous mission. He said (v 11), "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight."

From Jesus' perspective (and Luke's and ours, given what we already know about Jesus' arrest of Saul), Ananias had been given a plum assignment. It would be an easy task, completely safe, and a tremendous honor. Jesus had already done all of the work in arresting Saul. Ananias was merely the closer.

From Ananias' perspective, however, he had been called to a suicide mission. He didn't know what had happened on the road to Damascus. That's why he asked very reasonable questions (vv 13-14): Are you sure, Lord? Isn't Saul our enemy? Won't he lock me up and throw away the key?

Ananias' questions don't come from a lack of faith, but rather a lack of information—and perhaps an underdeveloped Christian imagination. Few could have imagined at the time that the man so murderously intent on maintaining Jewish purity would go on to become Christianity's greatest international missionary. But today, looking back on two millennia of Christian history, there are many similar stories of enemies becoming disciples. Think, for example, of John Newton, the notorious slave trader, whom Jesus called to follow him on the way. As a Christian minister, Newton had a profound impact on William Wilberforce, whose tireless efforts led to England's abolition of the slave trade. Newton's hymn, "Amazing Grace," has an enduring legacy today.¹

Stories like these nurture a Christian imagination, which in turn empowers us to pray boldly. For example, how might we pray about the murders of three men associated with International Justice Mission (IJM) who were working for police reform in Kenya? The police officers who committed the murders have been arrested, but the corruption continues. What if the Kenyan chief of police had his own "road to Damascus" experience with Jesus? What if that man, whose power and authority has led to so much injustice, were to follow Jesus on the way, and go on to become a great advocate for the work of IJM? We can pray.

¹ Two more recent examples: Norma McCorvey, aka "Jane Roe" of the 1973 Supreme Court abortion decision. McCorvey was an outspoken opponent of Christianity for many years until she met Jesus, and then she began to follow him on his way. Today she is an advocate for adoption instead of abortion. There's also Tom Tarrants, who was a notorious Ku Klux Klan terrorist in Mississippi and Alabama. After escaping from prison, Tarrants was recaptured and placed in solitary confinement, and that's where he met Jesus and began to follow him on his way. Tarrants was eventually released and became an advocate for racial reconciliation and president of the CS Lewis Institute.

Likewise, how might we pray for politicians here in our country, especially those who make us shudder with approbation? Wouldn't it be wonderful if they met the Lord on their own "roads to Damascus," following Jesus on his way? We can pray. I believe that prayer for strategic heart-changes such as these is an important take-home message from the account of Saul's conversion. Through this story, God calls us to pray outside the box, with confidence in our his miraculous power.

In vv 15-16, Jesus spoke to Ananias' fears with these reassuring words: "Go, for [Saul] is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." Consider what Jesus was asking Ananias to do here. Ananias sensed danger along the way ahead, but Jesus told him not to fear, so Ananias had to decide whether to follow or turn away. Despite his legitimate fears of arrest and persecution, Ananias had to trust and obey. Centuries earlier, God gave similar instructions to the Old Testament prophet Jonah, who turned and ran the other way. But unlike Jonah, Ananias obeyed Jesus' call. He took a leap of faith and did as the Lord commanded.

We can see the fruit of Ananias' obedience in vv 17-19, where Luke recounts the evidence of Saul's conversion. Ananias laid hands on Saul, prayed for him, and then "something like scales fell from his eyes"—a sign that he who once was blind could now see, this time in the light of Christ. Ananias also addressed Saul as his brother and baptized him—signs that Saul had become another member of Jesus' people on the way. And after Saul's baptism, he ate and was strengthened, in communion fellowship with both Jesus his new Lord and also Ananias his new brother. All these signs are proof that the unimaginable had become real. Saul the persecutor was now a Christian. The world would never be the same.

THE WAY WE'VE ALWAYS LONGED FOR

The remainder of this passage (vv 20-31) describes two cycles in which Saul preached in Jesus' name, then there was a Jewish plot against him, and then he escaped. The first cycle happened there in Damascus (vv 20-25) and the second in Jerusalem (vv 26-31). In both cities, Saul picked up right where the martyr Stephen had left off, namely, preaching in the Greek-speaking synagogues. And from the beginning of Saul's ministry as a Christian, there's no doubt that he had finally come into the role that he had been born to play. In the light of Christ, Saul's education and experience and network came together in a way that he never could have imagined. Jesus was the answer key that unlocked everything from the Old Testament that Saul had committed to memory since childhood. It all made perfect sense now. So Saul found his sweet spot sharing the way of Jesus with Greek-speakers in both Damascus and Jerusalem. He "increased all the more in strength" (9:22), enjoying greater success as a Christian than he had as a Pharisee, all because he was playing the role that he had been born to play.

It's the same when we come to faith in Jesus. We all have within us what Blaise Pascal described as a God-shaped vacuum, a homing beacon pointing us back to our Father. Not only so, but we also all share a deeply embedded creative impulse. We were made in the image of the Creator. We long to make and build and nurture and steward (Gen 1:28) in ways that imitate God, though our specific vocations vary according to God's designs within us. When Jesus calls us to follow

him on the way, he fills the God-shaped hole within *and he* calls us back to God's original purposes for us, such that we follow him in ways our hearts have always longed for.

There's nothing wasteful about giving your life to Jesus. If a voice within tells you that you'll waste your life by becoming a Christian, that voice is neither your own, nor from God. It's a lie, coming from the Father of lies. Following Jesus won't waste your life. In fact, it's the best (and only) way to make the most of your life.

On the other hand, even though following Jesus means making the most of your life, it doesn't mean that it will be without difficulty. In these two episodes of Saul's narrow escapes from both Damascus and Jerusalem, we see a little of what Jesus hinted at when he told Ananias (v 16), "I will show Saul how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." In both Damascus and Jerusalem, Saul faced the same kind of deadly opposition that he once led. To one degree or another, it will always be this way for Christians until Christ comes again. There will always be opposition in one form or another. But the good news is that for Christians, suffering and persecution along the way aren't meaningless. In Saul's case, it ended up driving him further out into Gentile territory where he would do the most good over the course of his lifetime. In Kenya, we trust that the recent murders of Willie and Josephat and Joseph will lead to the end of corruption and a more just society. And in our own stories, we trust that God is using these momentary afflictions for our good and for the life of the world.

Katherine Leary Alsdorf was still a young Christian when the tech bubble burst, and the company she led as CEO began a downward spiral towards bankruptcy. But she kept following Jesus on his way, and this made quite an impression on her employees. When an eleventh hour effort to find new investors fell apart, the company went bankrupt, and Katherine quite naturally felt like a failure. But when she met with the employees and gave them the bad news of their layoffs, they responded by giving her a standing ovation! At the time, she hadn't followed Jesus long enough to understand what was happening: she was right where Jesus wanted her. Through her employees Jesus was telling her, "Well done, good and faithful servant." God was pleased with what he considered to be her successful leadership, despite her failure in the eyes of the world. One of her co-workers said, "Pay attention. You'll want to remember this later." Indeed, she did later remember and understand that even in the momentary affliction of bankruptcy, she was right in her sweet spot, right where Jesus had called her to be.

Likewise, after his conversion, Saul found his sweet spot following Jesus on the way. Saul's story gives us hope that Jesus will use us too, no matter how far gone we may be. No one could have imagined that Saul would become Jesus' light to the Gentiles, but it turned out to be the most strategic personnel decision in the history of the church. Saul suffered persecution most everywhere he went, but he counted it as nothing in comparison with the joy of finally becoming the person God had created him to be. In the same way, our lives will find their greatest fulfillment and meaning as we turn to Jesus and follow him on his way.

On the night before he was crucified, Jesus spoke of his imminent departure and encouraged his disciples to keep following him on the way. One of the disciples then said, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus replied, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:5-6 ESV) In making this

claim, Jesus was simultaneously at his most exclusive and most inclusive. He was being exclusive, in that there is no other way to the Father except through him. He is the exclusive and only way to God. Yet Jesus was also being radically inclusive, through inviting anyone and everyone to follow him in this way.

Apart from Jesus, we may think that we walk in the light. We may think that our purposes are noble. Yet even if we are somewhat enlightened and noble in our purposes, there's still that God-shaped vacuum and that nagging sense of being made for something more. In our deepest longings, Jesus meets us and says, "I am the way, the truth and the life." It's the role you were born to play. Join him on the way—the way you've always longed for.