“Blinded by the Light”

We left the apostle Paul in a situation where everyone around him wanted to kill him because a small group of Jews accused him of four things. They accused him of teaching against the Jews; teaching against the law; teaching against the temple; and bringing Greeks into the temple, thereby defiling it. And so the chief captain of the Roman garrison who was guarding Jerusalem rushed in with around 300 men to rescue Paul from the mob.

And we watch up with Luke’s report of Paul’s actions in Acts 21:37-40 “As the soldiers were about to take Paul into the barracks, he asked the commander, "May I say something to you?" "Do you speak Greek?" he replied. "Aren't you the Egyptian who started a revolt and led four thousand terrorists out into the desert some time ago?" Paul answered, "I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no ordinary city. Please let me speak to the people." Having received the commander's permission, Paul stood on the steps and motioned to the crowd. When they were all silent, he said to them in Aramaic.”

There is an old story of a man in the north of Scotland who had a reputation for being wise and for giving sound advice. A young person went to him one day and asked, "Uncle Jimmy, how come you have such good judgment?" "Well, I have good judgment because I have had a lot of experience," he replied. And the boy said, "Yes, but how did you get all that experience?" "Well," the man laughed, "I got it by making a lot of bad judgments."

Now you would think that Paul asking the chief captain, who had taken him prisoner, if he could speak would be a bad judgment on Paul’s behalf. Especially after having his life threatened by the very people who are trying to kill him. And I’m pretty sure if that was you or I we would be longing just to get out of there to be safe and away from the mob.

But Paul doesn’t do that, he asks to speak to them and when the captain heard Paul speak to him fluently in Greek, he was surprised. And the reason he was surprised was because he had assumed that Paul was an Egyptian criminal. The captain thought that Paul was an Egyptian criminal who had led a band of some 4,000 men in a rebellion.

And so Paul explained to the captain that he was a Jew from Tarsus in Cilicia. Now just a few years ago there were many coins excavated from Tarsus which had the following inscription engraved on them, 'Metropolis Autonomous.' Now the reason I shared that information with you is because this tells us that Tarsus at some point of time must have been granted autonomy by the Romans. The excavations also tell us that Tarsus was an important metropolis noted for its educational facilities, as well as for trade, shipbuilding, and commerce.

Anyway Paul went on to ask the captain for permission to speak to the very multitude that only moments before had sought to kill him. And when permission was granted, Paul gestured with his hand to gain the attention of the audience and a hush fell over the crowd. And so Paul then began to speak to them in Aramaic.

And so Paul begins his first defense and he says in Acts 22:1-5 "Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense." When they heard him speak to them in Aramaic, they became very quiet. Then Paul said: "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, as also the high priest and all the Council can testify. I even obtained letters from them to their brothers in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished."

Now remember that most of Paul’s audience was primarily Jewish, that’s why he addresses them as "Brethren and fathers."
And also remember what we said at the beginning of this lesson, according to Acts 21:28, Paul's accusers had said he taught against the Jews, the Law of Moses, the temple and brought Greeks into the temple, defiling the holy place.

And so Paul's response to their first accusation was that Paul himself was a Jew. He was born in Tarsus, but he was reared in the city of Jerusalem as a pupil of the highly respected Jewish teacher, Gamaliel. He had been taught the law, which was handed down from the Jewish fathers, in a most precise way. In fact, he had become a zealot for God, just as had his accusers. His zeal had reached the point where he persecuted those following Christ's way by binding, imprisoning and ultimately assisting in their deaths.

And so what Paul does next is what any good lawyer would do in a courtroom situation and that is call in the witnesses. As witnesses to his zeal, Paul mentioned the high priest and council of the elders.

And he tells the angry mob that he had personally received letters from the high priest and elders to give him authority to go to Damascus to bring Christians from that city in chains to Jerusalem to be punished.

You see loved ones it's much easier to talk to people when you have been in their shoes. Now we can sometimes sympathize with a lot of people about things they have or are going through in their lives but we do not always understand what they are going through unless we have been there.

And please don’t take this the wrong way, but unless you’ve been addicted to alcohol you cannot fully understand an alcoholic. Unless you’ve been addicted to drugs you cannot fully understand what a drug addict is going through. Unless your husband of wife has walked out on you, you cannot fully understand what that person who is left on their own or with the kids are going through.

Unless you have fallen away from the Lord you cannot fully understand just how difficult it is to come back. Unless you have lost someone close to you in death, you can’t fully understand what it’s like to lose someone close to you in death. Paul understood these people because he was just as zealot about their beliefs as they were. He had walked in their shoes and fully understood where they were coming from.

You see loved ones many times when we meet people and they share their problems with us, if we can relate to them, this will very often open up a door for us to share with them how we understand what they are going through.

But more importantly it will open a door for us to share with them how we got help with our problems. Now you may think that Paul didn’t have any problems, well loved ones, Paul had a serious problem, its called sin. And it’s a problem that everyone suffers from.

A number of years ago an old newspaper editor wrote to the famous writer G. K. Chesterton and asked him the question, "What's wrong with the world?" G. K. Chesterton wrote back and said, "I am." You see loved ones people will never become Christians until they see themselves as sinners. As Paul himself reminds us in Romans 3:23 “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

Now because Paul sees himself as a sinner in need of salvation, and because he could relate to his Jewish audience because he’s been where they are. Paul goes on to share his testimony about his encounter with the risen Lord Jesus.
“Blinded by the Light”

Now we’re not going to spend too much time on the next few verses because we already dealt with most of this in Acts 9. But Paul goes on and says to them in Acts 22:6-11 "About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, 'Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?' "Who are you, Lord?" I asked. "I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,' he replied. My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me. "What shall I do, Lord?' I asked. "'Get up,' the Lord said, 'and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.' My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me.”

Paul began to share with them about the unique conversation with the voice from heaven which he had while on the Damascus road. Now remember that Luke had already reported this to Theophilus in Acts 9 like we said, but here Paul adds the fact that the bright light was seen at noon, when it outshined the sun at its brightest.

And so Paul fell to the ground, and the voice asked why he was persecuting Him. And to accurately answer the question, Saul as he was known at that time, had to know who was speaking. And Jesus then clearly identified himself to him.

And remember that the only sense in which Saul, or Paul, persecuted Jesus was in that he persecuted the church, or Jesus' body. Paul continues and tells them that his travelling companions were afraid, and did not hear the voice of our Lord in the sense that they did not understand it nor obey it.

But Saul fully understood and asked what the Lord would have him to do. And so Jesus tells him to go into the city to be told what was planned for him, both in reference to his own salvation and that of many others. And so off they went, with Paul's companions leading him to Damascus because he was blind.

And when he arrives at Damascus Paul tells them in Acts 22:12-21 "A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. He stood beside me and said, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight!' And at that very moment I was able to see him. "Then he said: 'The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard. And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.' "When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple, I fell into a trance and saw the Lord speaking.‘Quick!’ he said to me. ‘Leave Jerusalem immediately, because they will not accept your testimony about me.’ "'Lord,' I replied, 'these men know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you. And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.' "Then the Lord said to me, 'Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'"

In Damascus, a devout, God-fearing man named Ananias came to Paul, restored his sight and told him that God had appointed him to know His will, see the Righteous One and hear His voice. He further said God planned for him to be a witness to all men and told Paul to be baptized in order to have his sins washed away.

Paul then told the multitude that he returned to Jerusalem and was praying when the Lord told him to leave quickly because they would not receive his testimony. And even though Paul argued with the Lord, telling Him the Jews knew of his zeal, the Lord told Paul to depart because He would send him to the Gentiles.
“Blinded by the Light”

Now loved ones as I said we have already dealt with the conversion of the apostle Paul in Acts 9. But since this is the last conversion account recorded in the Book of Acts, I thought it would be useful for us to spend just a few moments looking back at all the conversions we have recorded in this beautiful book. Let’s have a close examination of all the conversions in the Book of Acts.

Now we’re not going to read all the scripture references but what we are going to do is quickly highlight some important truths that you will discover if you take the time to read through them yourself.

What I’ve done is just broke it down to the five categories to help me get the point across. If you take a moment when you get home to read Acts 2:38-41 you will find references to the fact that on the Day of Pentecost the people, heard the word of God, repented of their sins and were baptised.

In Acts 8:5-13 where we find Philip in Samaria you will read references to the fact that the people heard the word of God, believed it and were baptised. In Acts 8:26-40 where we find that account of Philip and the Eunuch, if you take a moment to read through it you will find references to the fact that the Eunuch, heard the word of God, believed it, confessed Jesus as Lord and was baptised.

In Acts 9:18 where we find the account of Saul’s conversion you will find references to Paul, hearing the word of God and being baptised. In Acts 10:47+48 where we find the first Gentile converts to Christianity, if you take a moment to read through that account you will find references to them, hearing the word of God and being baptised.

In Acts 16:15 where we find the first European Christians, we find Lydia and her household, heard the word of God and were baptised. The very next few verses in Acts 16:16-33 we find the account of the Philippian jailor, we find references to him and his household, hearing the word of God, believing it and being baptised.

In Acts 18:8 we find the account of Crispus and others in his home, hearing the word of God, believing it and being baptised. In Acts 19:3-5 we find references to other people, hearing the word of God, believing it and being baptised. And finally here in Acts 22:16 where we find Paul’s story, we find references to him, hearing the word of God, believing it and being baptised.

Now there are a couple points of interest here and the first one is this, you cannot become a Christian unless you first heard from the Bible how to do just that. Paul says in Romans 10:14-15 “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

Paul is basically saying no one can come to the conclusion that Jesus is Lord and wants to save people from their sins if they have never been told. Every single person in our conversion chart heard the good news concerning Jesus before they became a Christian. And notice their responses in our chart, every single person was baptised into Christ for the forgiveness of their sins.

This simple chart tells us that if a person wants to become a Christian they need to be told how to because a person cannot die to self if they haven’t died for Christ first. Salvation doesn’t come before baptism, it comes during.

They say that a picture says a thousand words and how true that is. Look at this next chart.
“Blinded by the Light”

It has references to John 3:3-5 where we find Jesus speaking to Nicodemus and Jesus says to him, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit."

It also has references to Romans 6:3-6 where Paul tells us that, "Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin."

It also has a reference to 1 Peter 3:21 where Peters tells us that, “This water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

Now loved ones I hope you found those charts useful and I know that I’m preaching mostly to the converted here but there is a whole host of people out there who believe that they are right with God but they have never been immersed into Christ for the forgiveness of their sins.

Because like our chart’s other reference says according to Acts 2:36-41 you’re sins are forgiven and the gift of the Holy Spirit is given only at your baptism. And notice also we don’t find one single person in the Book of Acts saying, “Oh do I have to be baptised? Must I be baptised?”

Listen loved ones Jesus Himself said in Mark 16:16 “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.” Every single conversion we read about in the Bible has people submitting to Christ in humble obedience in the waters of baptism.

Now someone once said to me, "Mike, Jesus doesn’t say if you are not baptised you will be condemned, He says, 'if you do not believe you will be condemned'.” Well if we were to think about that question logically, we could also say that Jesus didn’t mention repentance either. And are we going to teach that a person may be saved without sorrow for sin and a corresponding improvement of life? Surely not.

Listen when Jesus affirmed that one who disbelieves will be condemned, it was entirely unnecessary to add further acts of rebellion in order to make the case. The unbeliever is condemned at that point so it wasn’t necessary for Jesus to add more acts of disobedience.

Listen loved ones, suppose we were to say, “He who eats and digests his food shall live, but he who eats not shall die.” Would it be sensible to say, “He who eats and digests his food shall live, but he who eats not, and does not digest, shall die”? Can a person digest something he hasn’t eaten? In other words, is it even necessary to discuss baptism with a person who is in a state of disbelief?

Of course not, logic and common sense tells us that Jesus didn’t need to mention baptism the second time because anyone who doesn’t believe won’t be baptised. And people need to know that salvation does not occur until the believer has been baptized.

Now I believe that’s an important point for us to remember because when God opens a door up for us to share our testimonies with unbelievers. We need to make it clear to them that at our baptism, that was the point where we received not only the forgiveness of our sins, not only did...
“Blinded by the Light”

we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, but also our baptism was the point in which we received our salvation.

A number of years ago Manfred Mann had a one hit wonder song called “Blinded by the light.” Well loved ones in many ways not only was Paul blinded by the light, we were all blinded by that same light. And we all need to be able to talk about our road to Damascus to unbelievers because we’ve all been there.

When we were merrily walking along life’s road when all of a sudden we heard someone speak about God. And then we were blinded by the bold truth that we are sinners and in need of rescuing from our sins.

Blinded by the truth that we can’t make it to heaven on our own, we need Jesus to help us. Blinded by the truth that our lives were in a mess and no one could help except God Himself. Blinded by the bold truth that no one would forgive us for the things we had done in the past except God Himself.

No wonder John Newton penned the words to that famous hymn, Amazing Grace. And listen to the words of first stanza, “Amazing grace! How sweet the sound, that sav’d a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.”

So let me ask you before we finish, how is your eyesight this morning? Can you still see God clearly? Can you still see God’s purpose for your life clearly? Or is living in this sin cursed planet beginning to make your eyesight a little hazy?

Maybe there is some sin or problem in your life which is beginning to cloud your vision. Maybe it’s time to stop looking at the faults in your brother or sister’s eyes and remove the plank from your own.

Luke 6:41-42 "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take the speck out of your eye,' when you yourself fail to see the plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.”

Whatever the problem or sin is loved ones God can heal it. God helped you see that light clearly before and He can do the same again. And just like with our physical bodies our eyes need some care and attention from the opticians sometimes to maintain good eyesight. God is always on hand as the great physician, our spiritual optician to help restore our spiritual eyesight back to their full glory. Where we can see clearly the hope that lies ahead of us, the purpose for our lives, and glory of heaven which waits for each and every one of us.

If after reading this you want to know more about salvation or if this sermon has raised other questions in your thoughts then please just contact me and I will get back to you as soon as possible.

God bless and thanks for taking the time to grow in your understanding of God’s Word.