

Bing Videos¹

When Helen Keller was 18 months old, she went both deaf and blind as a result of an illness.

- Because she lost all means of learning about her world, she was wild, like a feral cat.
- She just grabbed what she needed and was unconcerned about the rest of the world.

When she was seven years old, Anne Sullivan a teacher from Boston's Perkin's School for the Blind arrived at their home in Alabama.

- Helen mimicked the finger signs that Anne was teaching her.
- She said, 'I did not know that I was spelling a word or even that words existed. I was simply making my fingers go in monkey-like imitation.' – Helen Keller
- She could not imagine that everything had a name.

But there was a breakthrough, when Helen had cold water running over her hands, she remembered a sound from her childhood. She wrote, 'I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that w-a-t-e-r meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. The living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, set it free!' – Helen Keller (Stop video, go to still photo).

Helen was a ravenous learner and would become the first deafblind person to graduate from college.

- She became proficient in braille, and after a lot of work, was able to speak.
- She became an advocate for people with disabilities.
- She travelled to twenty-five countries and wrote 12 books and several articles.



¹ Anne Bancroft as Anne Sullivan & Patty Duke as Helen Keller.

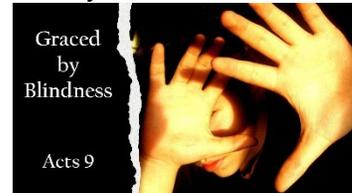
- She became a Christian saying: 'I always knew He was there, but I didn't know His name!'

Today's message focuses in on that 'a ha' moment when revelation changes our worldview.

- I don't know if Helen was ever thankful for her blindness, but the apostle Paul was; it changed everything.
- For Paul, blindness was God extending grace, he was graced by blindness.

Graced by Blindness

Acts 9



We have been looking at how joy that runs throughout Luke-Acts. The way our country is right now, we need to be people who have an attractational joy all over us.

- Though joy is not mentioned in Saul's 'a ha' moment, but joy was foundational for his life and ministry.
- A revelation of Jesus can radically change our worldview. God's grace - expressed even in blindness – can reorient our identity, our calling, and our future.

1. Background.

Specifically, we have been looking at joy in literary segments within Luke-Acts. Today's story segment is the true story about Saul's transformational moment.

Our initial picture of Saul reveals a passionate hatred for Christians.

- We first meet Saul at the Stephen's stoning. He was not a member of the Sanhedrin, but he was there giving approval (Acts 8:1).
- In a later testimony, Saul says, 'I cast my vote against them (Acts 26:10 NIV).' The ancient means of voting was to drop a pebble into a bucket.² He was probably making a self-incriminating pun. He remembered the weight of the stones he hurled at Stephen.

² He was not a member of the Sanhedrin, though he was from a wealthy family, it was a Hellenist family, Craig Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, Vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 3506-08.

Today's story segment starts with, 'Saul was uttering threats with every breath and was eager to kill the Lord's followers. So he went to the high priest. ²He requested letters addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, asking for their cooperation in the arrest of any followers of the Way he found there. He wanted to bring them—both men and women—back to Jerusalem in chains (Acts 9:1-2 NLT).'

- Saul 'was committed to the written Torah and ancestral traditions in an objective and rational manner.'³
- The Torah says that 'anyone who is hung is cursed in the sight of God (Dt 21:23 NLT).' For Saul, 'the crucifixion was the clearest proof ... that Jesus had been a deceiver.'⁴

He was passionate to kill Christians! He was Jesus' staunchest opponent.

2. Jesus & Saul, Acts 9:3-9.

'As he was approaching Damascus on this mission, a light from heaven suddenly shone down around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me (Acts 9:3-4 NLT)?"'

- Remember, Stephen also saw the 'glory of God (Acts 7:55).'
- Paul writes that God lives 'in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see (1Ti 6:16 NIV).'
- Sometimes only the blind can really see.

"Who are you, lord?" Saul asked. And the voice replied, "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting! ⁶Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." ⁷The men with Saul stood speechless, for they heard the sound of someone's voice but saw no one! ⁸Saul picked himself up off the ground, but when he opened his eyes he was blind. So his companions led him by the hand to Damascus. ⁹He remained there blind for three days and did not eat or drink (Acts 9:5-9 NLT).'

- Because his companions heard the voice but could not see anyone meant this was a real encounter, not a subjective dream. It was verified by others, but its meaning was for Saul alone.
- Can you hear the sorrow in Jesus' voice, 'I am the one you are persecuting?' We are Jesus' body here on earth and he fully identifies with us and our suffering.

This is a key moment for Saul.

- Up until this moment, spiritual matters were academic exercises, thoughts to be examined.
- But with one blinding revelation, Saul calls Jesus 'Lord (v. 5).'

³ J. Lyle Story, *Joyous Encounters: Discovering the Happy Affections in Luke-Acts* (New York: NY: Herder & Herder Book, 2018), 188.

⁴ Story, *Joyous Encounters*, 189.

- Jesus is not an abstract thought that can be defeated with Torah-based logic.
- This was The Living God whose existence radically changed his worldview with one revelation.
- This revelation demanded a reprioritizing of his life.

This revelation and blindness were acts of grace.

- God could have dealt with Saul in a harsh manner, instead, God saw value in Saul's training and passion.
- Similarly, God deals with us in a gentle, grace-filled way. His kindness leads us to repentance (Ro 2:4).
- Paul writes, 'The grace of God has appeared that offers salvation (Titus 2:11 NIV).'

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Saul isn't the only one who needed his assumptions challenged.

3. Jesus & Ananias, Acts 9:10-16.

'Now there was a believer in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord spoke to him in a vision, calling, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord!" he replied. ¹¹ The Lord said, "Go over to Straight Street, to the house of Judas. When you get there, ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. He is praying to me right now. ¹² I have shown him a vision of a man named Ananias coming in and laying hands on him so he can see again (Acts 9:10-12 NLT).'"

As a believer, Ananias was terrified of Saul. He was not just Saul, he was 'Saul, the destroyer of Christians.'

"But Lord," exclaimed Ananias, "I've heard many people talk about the terrible things this man has done to the believers in Jerusalem! ¹⁴ And he is authorized by the leading priests to arrest everyone who calls upon your name." ¹⁵ But the Lord said, "Go, for Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel. ¹⁶ And I will show him how much he must suffer for my name's sake (Acts 9:10-16 NLT)."

Ananias' fear was turned around by a God-given vision.

This section is about calling.

- Ananias is called to minister to a dangerous person and Saul is called to the Gentiles and to suffer. Both are obedient.
- There is great joy in fulfilling your call. God created you with gifts, talents, and opportunities that are for His good plan and pleasure.

- Not just ministry inside the church, but everything that is done in Jesus' name – even a cup of cold water passed out (Mt 10:42).

4. Saul & Ananias, Acts 9:17-19.

'So Ananias went and found Saul. He laid his hands on him and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road, has sent me so that you might regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."¹⁸ Instantly something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he got up and was baptized.¹⁹ Afterward he ate some food and regained his strength (Acts 9:17-19a NLT).'

'Brother Saul,' implies a full welcome into God's family.

After prayer, Saul's sight is restored, he is filled with the Holy Spirit and is baptized.

'Luke makes no explicit mention of joy,' but Luke's 'readers would imagine a joyous affection accompanying Saul's vibrant experience.'⁵ Remember, Saul would ...

- Sing while in a Philippian jail with Silas.
- It takes a great deal of trust in God to sing in prison.

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Saul's passion to kill is retooled into a passion to preach Jesus.

5. A Changed Saul, Acts 9:19-31.

'Saul stayed with the believers in Damascus for a few days.²⁰ And 'Immediately he began preaching about Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is indeed the Son of God!"²¹ All who heard him were amazed ...²² Saul's preaching became more and more powerful (Acts 9:19b-22 NLT).'

Paul's initial response to grace was to share it.

- The Good News is God's grace to us.
- 'For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith ... it is a gift of God (Ep 2:8 NIV).'
- His transformation did not please everyone.

'The Jews in Damascus couldn't refute his proofs that Jesus was indeed the Messiah.²³ After a while some of the Jews plotted together to kill him (Acts 9:23 NLT).'

- The Christians lowered Paul out of a window in a basket at night so he could escape.

⁵ Story, *Joyous Encounters*, 192.

It went a little better in Jerusalem.

'When Saul arrived in Jerusalem, he tried to meet with the believers, but they were all afraid of him. They did not believe he had truly become a believer! ²⁷ Then Barnabas brought him to the apostles and told them how Saul had seen the Lord on the way to Damascus and how the Lord had spoken to Saul. He also told them that Saul had preached boldly in the name of Jesus in Damascus. ²⁸ So Saul stayed with the apostles and went all around Jerusalem with them, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord (Acts 9:26-28 NLT).'

They were afraid of him, but Barnabus' telling of God's vision and Saul's preaching the Good News changed their minds.

'He debated with some Greek-speaking Jews, but they tried to murder him. ³⁰ When the believers heard about this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus, his hometown (Acts 9:29-30 NLT).'

- Saul was a Greek-speaking Jew, a Hellenist, but his encounter with Jesus was so strong that he was a danger to Judaism.

'The church then had peace throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria, and it became stronger as the believers lived in the fear of the Lord. And with the encouragement of the Holy Spirit, it also grew in numbers (Acts 9:31 NLT).'

For years I read that as an indictment against Saul: there was no peace until they shipped Saul off to his hometown.

But scholars say it is a positive conclusion to this story:

- The leaders wanted to protect Saul, like they did in Damascus.
- There was peace because 'God converts the persecutor.'⁶
- These sentences transition the Good News going to the Gentiles.
- The church scattered when Stephen was stoned, then we have Paul's story, and then the Good News goes to the Samaritans.
- The church explodes out of Jerusalem.

Look at the state of the church:

- Peace.
- Stronger.
- In fear of the Lord (alone).
- Encouraged.
- Numerical growth.

Let's apply Saul's story to us.

⁶ Craig Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 1695.

6. Changing a Worldview.

Changing one's worldview is difficult.

Worldviews are deep, foundational assumptions we make of the world around us.

For example, I was a student of architecture. I expected buildings to not move, to be fixed firmly in the ground. Having walked the streets of Kobe after the earthquake, I now can envision tall buildings swaying and constantly moving. I have seen the ground move like water. Structures are no longer immovable in my mind, they flow with the moving ground.

Process of changing a worldview:

1. Disruption of a firmly held belief. A life event, suffering, contradiction, or new information creates tension with the existing worldview.
2. Inconsistency grows. The person knows that, 'My current framework can't explain this.'
3. Emotional response intensifies. Confusion, fear, curiosity, or longing pushes the person to pay attention.
4. Exposure to an alternative worldview. A new worldview appears that better explains reality.
5. Evaluation and comparison.
6. Decision and commitment. The person chooses to adopt the new worldview.
7. Integration and reconstruction. They reinterpret past experiences through the new lens.
8. Community reinforcement. They now belong to a group that shares their new worldview.
9. Identity shift. The new worldview becomes part of the person's identity.

Can you see that process playing out for Saul?

- The bright light of Jesus disrupted his belief and offered an alternative – Jesus really was the Messiah.
- Instantly, Saul decides and commits to a new way of looking at Jesus.
- He now identifies with the community of believers, and he immediately shifts to preaching the Good News.

Conclusion.

A revelation of Jesus can radically change our worldview. God's grace - expressed even in blindness – can reorient our identity, our calling, and our future.

Connie and I were hosting a Tea & Talk in our apartment and John was one of our English students. John's English level was quite low. He was an elderly man who worked on the development team for the atomic bomb for his country. He was a senior scientist and there were about 5 or 6 other atomic researchers in the room. He casually asked me, 'Why is science so good in America and so bad in my country?' He was merely practicing his English and making conversation. I thought, 'Really? How can I possibly judge good or bad science in these two countries?'

Nevertheless, it was a conversation, so I was obligated to reply. I decided to talk about what I did know. I said, 'Many American scientists, especially in astrophysics, believe that God created an orderly world. Science can expect order not chaos because God created an orderly world for us to live in.' I had to repeat it slowly. When he understood, he practically dropped his teacup and bolted upright. Even though they were not a part of our conversation, he gathered all the nuke-guys and began to inform them of my answer. He sat back down and was a little teary-eyed. 'That was a very important answer,' he repeated several times. I was humbled to have shaken my atheist friend's worldview.

- Many today have a worldview that minimizes the importance of God. You might believe Jesus died for your sins, but the effect of that belief is only academic idea or a hobby. You have not had a Damascus Road experience. Revelation has not changed your worldview or caused you to reprioritize your life.
- Jesus reveal yourself now ... PRAY

Paul would write two things to his friends in Philippi, both flow out of his radically changed worldview.

1. The stuff of this world is of little value. 'Everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ⁹ and become one with him (Phil 3:8-9a NLT).' The stuff of this world is not that important.
2. Joy flows out of knowing Jesus and our future. Two Christian women at Philippi were not getting along, so he told them to settle their disagreement and 'Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again—rejoice! ⁵Let everyone see that you are considerate in all you do.'

Remember, the Lord is coming soon (Phil 4:4-5 NLT). We should rejoice because the return of Jesus changes everything.

Will you allow Jesus to reshape your worldview today?

Will you allow a revelation of Jesus that changes your identity, calling, and future?

You will say, 'I was blind, but now I see (Jn 9:25).'

Pray.