

Miracle on Straight Street



Acts 9:1-22

Bro Ricky Cunningham

Have you ever heard someone describe something that happened on a road or a street and after they described the event, they made this statement? "It is a miracle they are alive." Or, "It is a miracle I am alive." What you and I quickly realize is that the event they are talking about is generally a collision of vehicles on a street or a road. When you look at the circumstances of that collision and see the damage done to the vehicle, you can attribute one or all the people being alive to a miracle. Miracles are things that happen that we cannot explain naturally. We have to bring in the supernatural in order to explain it. That is why we call it a miracle.

As we open our Bibles to Acts chapter 9, we will see a miracle that happened on a street, Straight Street. Notice the first word in verse 1...but. It says, "But, Saul..." Normally, when we use 'but' in a sentence or the Bible is describing something and we read that three letter word, we know there is going to be a contrast. We know the story is continuing. We are

continuing from the 8th chapter where we read about a persecution that has come upon the church and the church is being scattered. Then we heard about one of the first deacons, Philip, who went down to Samaria to preach the Word of God and hundreds were saved. And then God led him out of the city, to Gaza, on the main road going to Egypt. He met an Ethiopian man sitting in a gold-plated chariot reading his Bible. He had been to Jerusalem to worship and did not know who the person was in Isaiah chapter 53. Philip took Isaiah and other scriptures to preach Jesus to him. The next thing we read was that water appeared and the Ethiopian wanted to be baptized. They went down into the water and Philip dunked him. Philip was raptured and the Ethiopian went on his way rejoicing. And now, Luke says, "But Saul..."

Now, back in the beginning of the 8th chapter, our attention was on Saul, as Saul was ravaging the church. The word, ravage, is used of wild beasts who devour their prey. So when Luke records this narrative under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he paints Saul as a wild man, a beast, a beastly man, a deranged man, who was going after the church. He was doing acts that, basically, only animals would do in devouring their prey. What was Saul doing? He was going into houses and dragging husbands, wives, and fathers, out of their homes and placing them in prison for the purpose of them no longer being able to fellowship with the church because they were following Jesus as their Lord and Savior. He was trying to prevent the church from doing what the church was supposed to do, preach the good news of Jesus.

We first met Saul in Acts chapter 7 in the life of another deacon, Stephen. After Stephen addressed the religious leaders, they took such offense at his message that they stoned him to death. The witnesses laid their garments at the feet of Saul, meaning Saul was the one who gave them the authority to do what they were preparing to do, take this deacon's life. Can you imagine being a follower of Christ, serving your church as a deacon, telling people about Jesus, and now you find yourself outside the city being stoned to death? It would be one thing to take a shot through the heart. It would be one thing to have something put in your vein that immediately causes you to go to sleep and die. Can you imagine stone after stone

pounding you until life is gone from your body? And some of us think we have it bad.

Can I ask you a question? (This is part of the story. That is why this 'but' in chapter 9 verse 1 is here.) If you are following Christ and there is a group of people throwing stones at you, what would be on your mind? Would you be wishing something would happen to these people? Would you be wishing they would get what they deserve? Stephen saw the heavens open and Jesus standing at God's right-hand side, he is on his knees with hardly any life left in his body, and he had two thoughts. The first was about himself — *Father, please receive my spirit*. The second was this — *Father, do not lay this sin to their charge*. Do any of you feel at that moment you would be justified to say, "God, I hope you give them what they deserve?" Not Stephen. He asked God to not put this sin into their account. He asked God not to let this sin cause them to spend eternity separated from Him. From that day forward, a great persecution arose. During the persecution while having their normal lives disrupted and interrupted, they take the gospel to people. The focus was not on themselves and what was happening to them; the focus was on others who did not know Jesus. And so, Samaria came to know Christ, the Ethiopian eunuch came to know Christ, and the gospel was going south through Ethiopia.

Saul Travels to Damascus to Arrest Christians

Luke brings us back to what Saul was doing during the time Philip was in Samaria in the desert witnessing to the Ethiopian. In Acts 9:1, Luke wants us to know what Saul has been doing, except he doesn't say he was ravaging the church, it says, "But Saul, still breathing..." He is still alive! God answered Stephen's prayer and did not lay this sin to Saul's charge. God let him live, being merciful to him, and he is still breathing. But he was not breathing air; he was breathing threats and murders! I think Luke is telling us that Stephen was not the only one who lost his life because of Saul. We can't imagine this. We can't imagine anyone feeling this way about the church, but Saul did.

Then Luke says Saul had been to the high priest and gotten letters because he wants to go Damascus because there were folks in Damascus who were

following the Way. In other words, there were Jews who were outside the boundary of Israel. They were over in another country now, in the city of Damascus in Syria. There were synagogues there, and there were believers among the Jews. And Saul had arrest warrants. I want you to see what Luke was doing. This is so vital. (I told Celica when we started the book of Acts that I dreaded it. I don't like preaching the book of Acts. I don't like preaching historical books of the Bible. The reason is it is sometimes so hard to see the meat of the passage. We get so caught up in the story that we don't see the intent of what the writer is trying to say in the historical narrative.) All throughout Acts whenever the Bible gives directional statements, Luke tells us where the gospel is going. He has just told us the gospel has gone as far south as Ethiopia, and it was also going north out of Israel to Syria. That is what is supposed to be happening in the book of Acts. The church is supposed to be taking the gospel, not just to Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, but to the utter most parts of the earth. The church was accomplishing that, but we also know Saul was trying to prevent the gospel from going north among Jewish people. He was trying to stop it, so he was going after "the Way." Jesus, during His earthly ministry, identified Himself to His disciples saying, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes to the father but by me." That expression, the way (Jesus being the way), became a description — a term that the early church used — and they started calling themselves "the Way." They knew the way, so they were the Way. They knew they would be going to the Father because of Jesus, and this was a description they were known by. Luke is telling us that Saul was going to Damascus to find those who belong to the Way, and he tells us Saul goes his way to Damascus. In other words, Saul was going 'his way' trying to find those who 'belonged to the Way,' but before he gets to Damascus, he found 'The Way.' He didn't find those who belonged to the Way; he found the one who is the Way, and that is Jesus. That is what Luke is trying to tell us.

Let me pause to say this. It is really wrong to say that Saul found Jesus. What we will find in this passage is that Jesus found Saul. He knew where he was the whole time. Here is what will happen. On a road and on a street, Saul will experience a miracle. We will call it the miracle on Straight Street. I want you to see how this miracle started. It started with Saul on

the way to Damascus with arrest warrants to take people from Damascus back to Jerusalem because the Jewish religious authorities had authority over all Jews, no matter where they lived in the world. Because they considered themselves God's covenant people, even when a Jew lived in another nation they were still under the religious authority of the chief priest. Remember that. Saul was planning to go into the synagogue at Damascus.

Jesus Speaks to Saul on the Road to Damascus

Now, it is about 130 to 140 miles from Jerusalem to Damascus, a journey that takes about seven days of walking. Imagine you are Saul and you are on the seventh day, you have walked 130 miles. You get to the top of Mount Hermon where you can see the city of Damascus in the plain below, which was literally an oasis in the desert. Then you walk down the other side of the mountain and start to enter Damascus. All of a sudden, a bright light shines from Heaven. Imagine a light shining so brightly that it is brighter than the noon day sun, and you are 'in the spotlight.' The light is shining around you. Then you hear a voice that says, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Using my sanctified imagination, I do not believe the voice said, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me. I think his name was spoken once, "Saul!" — He heard that voice and would have looked around, but he saw no one, just the light — and then the voice once again said the second time, "Saul!" He still didn't see anyone, but he knew someone was present in his life even though there was no physical evidence, other than the light. At that point, he was asked the question "Why are you persecuting me?"

We don't have time to go into this but I want to stop here for just a moment. Notice that Jesus did not ask Saul why he was persecuting His church; He asked Saul why he was persecuting Him. Jesus does not see a difference between His church and Himself. He sees us as Him. I would be really, really careful about what I say about Christ's church, because when you speak about Christ's church, He takes it personally. If I were going to persecute someone in the church, I would be careful, because Jesus takes that personally.

- **Saul is Blinded**

The voice had Saul's attention. He wanted to know who he was talking to so he said, "Who are you, (and then I think there was a pause) Lord?" The answer came back, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." Saul thought he was persecuting disciples. Saul thought he was persecuting the Way. Saul believed Jesus was dead. He thought the disciples had done something with His body so that the authorities couldn't find Him anywhere. Now, the risen Lord was talking to him. Jesus identified Himself not just by His name, not just I am Jesus, but as the one Saul was persecuting. You know where Saul is now, right? He is on his knees. All the people with him had seen the light and had heard the voice, but they couldn't recognize what was being said. They were totally confused. Now, Saul is blind. He can't see. This one who had come from Jerusalem to Damascus to bind people and take them back to Jerusalem can't see where he is or where he is supposed to go or what he is supposed to do. So those with him have to take him by the hand and lead him into the city.

Now, we are about to see a miracle. The miracle has already begun. Let's pause for a moment to make sure we understand what Luke is doing. Luke is trying to tell us that this miracle that is getting ready to take place in Saul's life is not a result of Saul but totally the result of God. Saul did not initiate a meeting with Jesus. Jesus did. What is happening here will be consistent with what we will learn from other places in scriptures, which is that man never initiates a relationship with God; God does the initiating. Salvation is never man seeking God; salvation starts with God seeking man. That is clear here. Saul was minding his own business, going his way, when he met the Way. The only reason he met Jesus was because Jesus initiated the meeting. I pray that as you and I read this story and we make practical application, we begin to understand why this story is in the Bible. One of the reasons is that it confirms what you should believe in your own life — and that is the only reason you are spiritually alive is because there has been a collision that took place between you and God, and you are blessed to be alive. The only reason you and I are spiritually alive is because God took the initiative to shine His divine light into our lives and speak to us through His Word. You and I may not have had a physical light

or an audible voice from Jesus, but God, through divine revelation, did what He needed to do in our lives to get our attention and ultimately bring us to the place to know who He is. God initiated your salvation. God initiated my salvation. On March 24, 1974, there was a miracle at Ledbetter Baptist Church. Ricky Cunningham was brought from death to life. It wasn't because I was seeking God. It was because God sought me. It wasn't that God didn't know who I was or where I was; He knew the whole time. It took Him stepping into my life and Him stepping into your life through the gospel to bring us to the place to understand what was going on in our lives. We were being sought by God. But who was God after in the story? He was after Saul, the persecutor of the church, and we will see Stephen's prayer that God not lay that sin to Saul's charge answered.

Ananias Receives a Vision

Now, we meet the second person in this story, Ananias. The voice of Jesus had spoken to Saul, and now Ananias has God speak to him in a vision. Remember, we are in that transitional time between the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament, many times God spoke to people through visions, and Ananias got a vision. God no longer speaks to us in visions. He speaks to us through His Word - the living Word of God, which is Jesus, and from what is in the written Word of God. That is how He speaks to us, but God spoke to Ananias in a vision. Notice that God doesn't ask him a question, He just says "Ananias," one time. Ananias immediately answered, "Here I am, Lord." Do you see the contrast? When God spoke to Saul, an unbeliever, a persecutor of the church, a blasphemer, He had to call to him twice. Then to get him to zone in, He had to ask him a question, "...why are you persecuting me?" When God stepped into Ananias's life and just called his name, Ananias said here am I, Lord.

- **God Sends Ananias to Saul**

That is a picture of you and me. When God reveals Himself to you through His Word and you know He is speaking to you — do you say, here am I Lord? God should never have to keep calling to you. He should only have to call to you one time. Don't we wish that was true of us? How many of us have caused God to ask us again and again and again, just to get our

attention because our fellowship with Him was not where it was supposed to be? So when He was trying to get our attention, we didn't really know it was Him. But Ananias said, "Here I am, Lord." And God said this is what I want you to do. I want you to go into the city to Straight Street to the house of Judas and look for the man from Tarsus named Saul. Ananias knew where Straight Street was. (Did you know that Straight Street is still there today?) Straight Street was what we would call Main Street that runs east to west through Damascus. It was a street people traveled, and on each side, homes and commercial buildings were built. It was the main street through the city. He was to locate Judas because in this man's house was Saul of Tarsus. Ananias says, *Saul, of Tarsus? — You want me to go to the house of the man who is persecuting the saints in Jerusalem? You want me to go to the house of the man who has letters that, once he discovers I am your disciple and I follow the Way, he can have me bound and taken to Jerusalem? You want me to go to his house?*

See, in some ways Ananias is no different than us. When God gets our attention through His Word and we realize God wants us to speak to someone or do something, how many times do we make excuses? We remind God how this could turn out, how it looks. If everything follows science, if everything follows the laws of nature, here is what that person will do and here is what will happen to me. None of us expects God, at that moment, to intervene with a miracle. That is why we don't talk to people. We don't really expect God to intervene. Yet, He is the one initiating, in the life of Saul, and He was initiating in the life of Ananias.

Can I just say this? No matter how things look, God is already at work. Let me tell you how I know that. Two other times Luke records Saul's conversion — Acts 22 and Acts 26. In Acts 26, God said, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads." A goad was a stick with prongs on it. The cattle farmer would use the goad to prod cattle. On our farm, we have cattle sticks, prods. Sometimes we use those prods to prod the cows to go where they do not want to go.

Now, if help us work the cattle on our farm, you do not work the cattle by waving your arms, and you do not raise your voice to our cattle. Instead, Celica will give you a stick, called a prod. She would expect you to take

that stick and move the cattle. If she gives you that stick, she will show you how to use it — you get in front of the cow and when the cow starts to move, you hit that stick on the ground. The cow realizes that if it comes to where the stick is hitting the ground, it could possibly be hit. So by backing up while hitting the ground, you get the cow's attention and it turns and goes the way you want it to go. You have used the stick to prod the cow into going where it didn't want to go. Normally when we work cattle, Celica doesn't prod the cows. She works the head catcher. Celica is at the head catcher and I am having to prod the cattle with the stick she has given me. Now, I am probably going to get in trouble here, but Celica knows this about me. Every once in a while when I am prodding the cows and they aren't listening, instead of hitting the stick on the ground, I hit the cow on the nose with the stick, but I only do this when Celica is not looking! When I hit the cow on the nose with the stick, I have the cow's attention. But the cow still wants to go where it wants to go...so I... (We will stop the story there). Once I have prodded the cow where I want it to go, not where it wants to go, I can't help myself, I have to whack it one more time (if Celica is not looking) to make sure the cow continues in the right direction. The cow has a choice to continue to be prodded or to go the way I want it to go.

What Jesus is saying to Saul is that it isn't easy kicking back against His prodding. Do you know what I think happened? I think from the moment that Saul stood over the execution of Stephen, and the more times he ravished the church, and the more lives he took, God's Holy Spirit began to move upon him, convicting him that what he was doing was wrong. God was giving him the choice to repent of his way and go the right way.

Do you remember that in your life? Remember how easy it was at first to deny the Holy Spirit was moving in your heart. Remember day after day, Sunday after Sunday, sitting under preaching or hearing someone witness to you. It began to bother you, right? You knew God's plan was not to let you continue in sin. He wanted you to go the way He wanted you to go...now! Ananias didn't know that, but God did. I promise you this. There are people who do not look like they are being moved by God's Holy Spirit, but if God is moving in your heart, revealing His will to you and it involves

someone else, please believe. If it takes a miracle, God can work that miracle. Here is the joy — to work that miracle, God uses you and God uses me.

Saul's Conversion

Normally, God does not save people without a witness, and Ananias gets to be the witness. Here is what God reveals to him in verse 15, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel." Can you imagine being the person who got to be used by God to lead Saul to Christ? It is amazing that God allows us to get in on what He is in on, and that is saving people. Can you imagine what it would have been like if Ananias had not done what God called upon him to do and God had used, let's say, a Thomas? A couple days later Thomas goes and does what God wanted Ananias to do. Now, months later it is known that Saul came to Christ and Ananias realizes he has missed out on the blessing of God. We don't want to miss out on God's blessings! God chooses people (and He chooses us) to be the people to go tell others what God's will is for them. And that is to be made right with Jesus so that they can do what God wants them to do, go share Christ with others. Do you believe that about yourself? Do you believe that God saved you for a purpose? Are you striving for that purpose? Are you trying to lay your hands on that purpose? God may have a group of people you work with, a group of people you recreate with, a group of people in your circle of influence that He wants you to witness to. Within that circle, God may have individuals for whom He has ordained their salvation and for their salvation to come through you being the witness to them. This is glorious.

- **Saul is Healed, Filled, and Baptized**

Ananias goes to the house and sees Saul, and he lays his hands on him and says, "Brother Saul." This is significant. Ananias already acknowledges Saul as a brother. Saul has been in this house for three days with no food nor drink. He has been praying for three days. He has been fasting and praying. He has been told by God that he would send somebody by the name of Ananias who would lay hands upon him and restore his sight and he would be filled with the Spirit. Now Ananias puts his hands on Saul. Saul

can't see who it is so Ananias introduces himself and addresses him as Brother Saul. He acknowledges him as a brother! Ananias believes the work of God has already been done in the heart of Saul and he has been changed. He is now a brother. He is part of the family. He is no longer the persecutor. He is no longer the blasphemer. He has been made right with God! He is a brother! When Ananias laid his hands on Saul, the scales fell from his eyes, and he is filled with the Spirit, immediately, Luke says, and Saul immediately gets up and he gets baptized. I don't know if they went out to the wadi or the lake, or to a cattle trough, but Ananias dunked Saul under the water, and he was filled with the Spirit.

Saul Joins the Church and Proclaims Jesus

For a few days, Saul joined himself with the disciples in Damascus. He goes into Damascus and joins himself with the church. The church backs up a little, questioning — *Isn't this Saul, the guy with arrest warrants?* They questioned why he was there, even though he was preaching Jesus. The people are believing he is just waiting for the first amen, making a note of it, and when the synagogue service is over, they probably are going to be arrested. They doubt if he is really who he says he is.

That is where some of us are. I will be totally honest with some of you. Yes, we did doubt you a while because we knew who you were. We knew what you used to do. We knew that the only way you could break from what you used to do and come here and be who we are is if you, like us, had experienced the miracle. Yes, we had to keep you at a little distance to make sure you weren't trying to do this on your own. If you were doing this on your own, it wasn't going to last. But if you had experienced the same miracle we had experienced, you can't go back to the old person you were. You will continue to be the new man you are in Christ Jesus. I want you to understand. Those of us who have walked with Christ for a long time have seen a lot of people claim the name of Christ, start the walk, but have not experienced the miracle of the new birth. Before you knew it, God had designed life to put a person at a certain place, at a certain time, and they revealed they had never really experienced the new birth because they went back to being who they used to be. Praise God that because you had experienced that miracle, you stuck with it. Now we know. There is no

explanation, naturally, for the change in your life except you have experienced the sovereign grace of God. See, when God initiates salvation in our lives and He brings someone into our lives to tell us about Christ and that miracle happens, that new person wants to be a part of God's church.

That is what Saul did. Saul, immediately, started to proclaim Jesus as the Son of God. The next thing you know, here is what he is doing in the synagogue in Damascus. He is confounding the Jews and proving that Jesus is the Christ. I personally believe that the only way Saul could prove to the Jews that Jesus was the Son of God was by opening up their scriptures and showing them in the Scripture who Jesus was. They were a people of the book. That is the same thing that Philip did with the Ethiopian who was a proselyte. He was reading Isaiah in his Bible and Philip pointed him to Jesus, and beginning with other scriptures, he preached Jesus. I believe that is what Saul did here. The reason he could do this is because he was a Jew, a Pharisee, who had memorized most of the Old Testament. Now his eyes had been opened to the truth of who Jesus was, so when he opened his Bible and began to read, he saw Jesus in places he had never seen him before.

Jesus in the Old Testament

Last week, I said it was possible that Philip opened to the book of Genesis and showed that Jesus was the Promised Seed. I think Saul started in Genesis. Then he went to Exodus and showed Him as the Passover Lamb. Then he went to Leviticus and showed Him as the Offering made on the Day of Atonement. Then he went to Numbers and showed Him as the Brazen Serpent. Then he went to Deuteronomy and showed Him as the Prophet greater than Moses. Then he went to Joshua and showed Him as the Captain of our Salvation. Then he went to Judges and showed Him as Judge of the whole earth, not just the nation of Israel. Then he went to Ruth and showed Him as our Kinsman Redeemer. Then he went to Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles and showed Him as King of kings and Lord of lords. He went to Ezra and showed Him as the Temple, Nehemiah as the Gate that leads into the city, and Ester as the Provider of our Salvation. Then he went through the wisdom books starting with Job showing He was our Living Redeemer. In Psalms, He is our Shepherd...Proverbs, He is a Friend

that is closer than a brother...Ecclesiastes, He is the Creator remembered in the days of our youth...Song of Solomon, He is the Lover of our soul. Then he came to the prophets. In Isaiah, he showed Him as the virgin born Suffering Servant...Jeremiah, He is the Righteous Branch...Lamentations, He is the One whose compassions are renewed each and every morning...Ezekiel, He is the Son of Man...Daniel, He is the Son of God, that fourth one in the fiery furnace...Hosea, He is the Son called out of Egypt...Joel, He is the One who pours out His Spirit on all flesh...Amos, He is the reconstructed Tabernacle of David...Obadiah, He ushers in the Day of the Lord...Jonah, He is prefigured in His death, burial, and resurrection...Micah, He is born in Bethlehem of Judea...Nahum, He is my Stronghold and my Refuge in the day of trouble! In Habakkuk, He is the Holy One of Israel! In Zephaniah, He brings in the Kingdom's blessings! In Haggai, He is the Chosen Servant of Yahweh! In Zechariah, He stands on the Mount of Olives! In Malachi, the last book, he shows Him as the Son of Righteousness who rises with healing in His wings! Saul took Scripture and opened the eyes of the Jews to who Jesus was.

Jesus in the New Testament

This is why God has called you and me. That is why God saved you and me, to open people's eyes to the truth of who Jesus is. We don't do that just by living our lives. We must take Scripture and show people who Jesus is. I want to ask this serious question. Can you do what Saul did? Can you start in Genesis and go to Malachi telling someone who Jesus is? Can you at least start with Matthew and show someone that Jesus is the Son of David? Can you take Mark and show that He is the Servant who came to give His life as a ransom for me? In Luke, He is a virgin born Friend of Sinners...John, He is the Lamb who was slain to take away the sins of the whole world...Acts, He is the Risen Lord...Romans, He is the Justification of the Sinner...Corinthians as the First Fruit of the resurrection...Galatians, He is the End of the Law...Ephesians, He is our Peace...Philippians, He humbled Himself and was obedient even to death on the cross...Colossians, He contains the Fullness of the Godhead bodily...Thessalonians, He is the Returning Lord...Timothy, He is the Mediator between God and man...Titus, He is our Blessed Hope...Philemon, He is our Forgiveness. Hebrews, He is

the High Priest of God, our high priest! Can you take James and show Him as the Lord of Hosts...Peter, He is our Inheritance...John, He is the Propitiation for our sins, not for ours only, but for the sins of the whole world! In Jude, He is the Master! In Revelation, can you show Him as the One who holds the church in His hand? — and in His hand He takes the scroll from the Father as the Lion of the tribe of Judah, knowing once He took that scroll, His purpose was to commission His church to take the gospel to the ends of the world because His death was to redeem people out of every tribe, nation and people group! Can you show someone that He has already come once, but according to the book of Revelation, He will come again? When He comes again, it will not be in the womb of a woman, He will come on the clouds of heaven, sitting on a white horse! When He comes, it will be to bring salvation to those of us who know Him! But for those who do not know Him, He will bring eternal judgment. Can you share with someone that the whole world will stand before Him? And if your name is not in that Lamb's Book of Life that was written before the foundation of the world, you will be separated from Him forever and ever. You will spend eternity in an eternal lake of fire where you will burn forever and the fire will never be quenched. But for those who know Him, there will be a new heaven and a new earth and we will reign with Him forever and ever.

Why? Because of a miracle — the miracle of the collision between a holy God and sinful man that resulted in you being alive, spiritually. You owe it to the grace of God. Why did He make you alive? He has a purpose. Do you know what that purpose is?