

Lesson 6: *The Risen Lord Appears to Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9:1-30)*

## Telling the Story (Evangelism in the Early Church)

The significance of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus is major in the development of Christianity. If Saul had not been confronted with the risen Christ the persecution of the Christians would have continued unabated for who knows how long. Paul's hatred for the disciples of Jesus was deep and his pursuit tenacious. Further, thirteen of the writings of the NT would never have been written. Out of the twenty-seven books of the NT, Paul is the earliest writer and the most prolific. The concept of "divine reversal," which was essential to the redemption of the human race, would not have developed from the pen of Paul. Further, the concept of "new creation," one of the most important concepts of Christianity, comes from the writings of Paul. Finally, the "christology of Paul" (i.e. his teaching concerning the identity of Jesus of Nazareth), along with that of the Apostle John, is the highest christology of the NT. To Paul God was here in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, he was the Son of God in a way this title was never understood before, he was the second Adam who came to reverse the curse of the first Adam's disobedience to God, and he was for the human race the paradigm or exemplar of what a being created in the image of God is to be. All of this has come to us from the Apostle Paul and would not be in our possession if not for the event recorded in Acts 9:1-9.

*But Saul, still breathing threats, even murder, against the disciples of the Lord, went to the High Priest 2: and requested from him letters to the synagogues at Damascus, that if he should find certain ones of "the Way," both men and women, he may bring them bound to Jerusalem. 3: Now as he going, he came near Damascus, and suddenly there shone around him (periestrapsen - surrounding) a light out of heaven. 4: And falling on the ground he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" 5: And he said, "Who are you, lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting; 6:*

*but rise and enter into the city, and it will be told you what you must do." 7: And the men traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. 8: Saul arose from the ground; and having opened his eyes, he saw nothing and they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. 9:and for three days he was not able to see nor did he eat or drink (Acts 9:1-9, my translation, MWLIII).*

### Saul's Vision of the Risen Lord

Essentially, what Paul says happened to him was that the risen and glorified Jesus was revealed to him. He saw Jesus alive in the form of a luminous presence or otherworldly being. In 1 Cor 9:1 Paul says, "Have I not *seen the Lord?*" and 1 Cor 15:8, he says that, "last of all *he was seen by me;*" then Acts 9:17 Ananias tells to Paul that is was, "Jesus *who appeared to you;*" and 26:16 Jesus says to Paul, "*I have appeared* to appoint you a witness of *what you have seen.*"

In each of these references the Greek word used to describe what happened is a form of the verb *horao*, which means, "to visually or actually see something." Paul saw something in the midst of that brilliant illumination or great light on the road to Damascus and that something was of another existence; i.e., an otherworldly "someone," who identified himself as "Jesus of Nazareth" (Acts 22:8). This one who was believed by Saul to be a crucified messianic pretender was revealed to Paul as "a risen Lord." Here is, in all probability, the origin of Paul's doctrine of divine reversal. God's response to the death of his Son was to reverse it by means of resurrection; this is divine reversal and it appears in all of Paul's writings.

How would one interpret such an experience as Paul had? The interpretation would depend on what one believed about the reality of supernatural phenomena; i.e., did he believe that otherworldly beings revealed themselves to beings of the thisworldly realm of existence? The Hebrew Scriptures are filled with examples of such supernatural manifestations.

## Theophanies – Manifestations of God

There are numerous accounts in Scripture of divine manifestations known as theophanies (i.e. manifestations of God): Exodus 3:1-9 (the burning bush); 19:16-25 (the appearance of God on Mount Sinai); 33:17-23 (where Moses asked God to show him his glory and what he saw was the afterglow of his glory). Then, in 34:4-7 (the second giving of the two tables of the commandments); 2 Chron 6:40 through 7:3 (the manifestation of God in the Temple built by Solomon); Ezekiel 1:1, 4-8, 28 (the vision of God to Ezekiel at the time of his calling as a prophet); 43:1-5 (Ezekiel's vision of God returning to the Temple of Jerusalem following the Babylonian exile); and Daniel 7:9-10 (Daniel's vision of the appearance of the Ancient of Days in his coming in judgment upon the nations), and 7:13-14 (the night vision of the Son of Man coming on the clouds to appear before the Ancient of Days).

All of these are depicted as physical and/or visionary manifestations of God to man and in each occurrence God's glory is seen as a resplendent illumination and is a divine movement within the physical phenomena of the natural world or this dimension of existence we experience as space, time, matter, and energy.

### The *Malach Yahweh* Tradition (The Angel of *Yahweh*)

In the Hebrew Scriptures we see the appearance of heavenly messengers or "angels of the Lord." In Genesis 18:1-2, *Yahweh* appears to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, and this event is described as Abraham beholding "three men" standing before him, two of whom later leave and proceed toward Sodom, while verse 22 says, "Abraham stood yet before *Yahweh*," and reasoned with him concerning the destruction of the whole population of Sodom. Then in Exodus 3:2, at the theophany of the burning bush, we are told that an angel of *Yahweh* appeared to Moses in the flame, but in verses 4-22 we see that it was *Yahweh* who was in the flame revealing his resolve to redeem the children of Israel from Egypt.

It is noteworthy that the angelic beings who appear to men are sometimes seen as luminous manifestations who are heavenly beings sent as messengers of God, but at other times they appear in the form of men, as was the case with the three "men" who appeared to Abraham. God chooses to mode of being assumed in these visitations.

### The NT Portrayal of Heavenly Beings

There is also a significant portrayal of heavenly beings called angels in the NT. In Luke 1:11-20, we are told of the appearance of the angel Gabriel to a priest named Zachariah to announce the birth of his son John, the forerunner of the Messiah. In Luke 1:26-38, we read of the appearance of the angel Gabriel to Mary to tell her of the miraculous conception of a son who would be the fulfillment of the messianic expectation of Israel. Then in Matt 1:20-25, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph, the husband of Mary, in a dream to reassure him that Mary's conception was indeed of the Holy Spirit. At the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:8-14), an angel of the Lord appeared to a group of shepherds in a field to announce the birth of the Messiah. In Luke 24:1-7, angels of the Lord appear to the women who had come to the tomb of Jesus and tell them of Jesus' resurrection; and in Acts 1:10, two angels, in the form of men, appeared to the eleven disciples of Jesus at the time of his ascension to tell them that he would return again.

The interpretation Paul the apostle later gives to what he saw on the road to Damascus is consistent with what we see in these manifestations of God in this earthly environment. In addition to Luke's narrative of Paul's experience outside Damascus, there are two other accounts of this event given by Paul himself. The first is found in Acts 22 and the second in Acts 26.

In Acts 22:6-11, where Paul, speaking to a gathering of Jewish worshippers in the Temple in Jerusalem, says:

*About noon as I came near Damascus, **suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me.** 7 I fell to the ground and heard a voice*

say to me, 'Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?' 8 'Who are you, Lord?' I asked. 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,' he replied. 9 My companions **saw the light**, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me. 10 '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.' 11 My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because **the brilliance of the light had blinded me.**

Then in Acts 26:12-19, in his account of what happened to him given in Caesarea to Festus and Agrippa, Paul says:

*On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. 13 About noon, O king, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. 14 We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Hebrew (Aramaic?), 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' 15 Then I asked, 'Who are you, lord?' 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' the Lord replied. 16 'Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared (ophthen [aorist passive of horao] - to behold, to see, to look at; in the passive, to appear or reveal oneself) to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you. 17 I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them 18 to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.' 19 "So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to **the vision from heaven.***

In his epistles Paul makes a number of references to what happened to him on the road to Damascus. In 1 Cor 15:5-8, in a presentation of evidence for the resurrection of Christ, he writes that Jesus,

*. . . appeared (horao) to Peter, and then to the Twelve. 6 After that, he appeared (horao) to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same*

*time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. 7 Then he appeared (horao) to James, then to all the apostles, 8 and last of all **he appeared (horao)** to me also, as to one untimely born.*

The word "appeared" (*horao*), as used by Paul here in 1 Cor 15, is the same word he uses in other places to describe what he experienced in Acts 9:1-9; he believed that he had actually seen Jesus alive in a state of glorification. In 1 Cor 9:1, he writes, "Am I not an apostle? Have I not **seen** (*heopaka* - perfect tense of *horao*) Jesus our Lord?" In Phil 3:10-12, he uses a very curious word to describe what had happened to him, "I press on to lay hold of (*katalambano* - an intensive form of the word meaning "to receive" or "to take hold of") that for which Christ Jesus took hold (*katalambano*) of me."

In **Gal 1:15-16**, he writes, "*But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased 16 **to reveal (apokalupsai) his Son in me (en emoi)** so that I might preach him among the Gentiles.*"

And then, in **Eph 3:2-5**, he writes:

*Surely you have heard about the stewardship (oikonomian) of God's grace that was given to me for you, 3 that **according to revelation (kata apokalupsin) was made known to me the mystery (musterion)**, as I have already written briefly. 4 In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.*

What was this "mystery"? It was the mystery of new creation existence, which was being offered to the gentiles as well as the Jews.

It is also of no little significance that Paul's vision of the risen and glorified Jesus is similar to the visions of Jesus as seen by John in the last writing of the NT era - Revelation 1:17-18; 5:12-14; and 21:10-11.

## The Revelation of His Glory

In Hebrews 1:3, this writer gives us a revealing insight concerning the identity of Jesus, "The Son is **the radiance of God's glory** (*apaugasma* - brightness, to radiate or reflect; of a light beaming from a luminous body; radiance, effulgence - Abbott-Smith, *Lexicon*). Is this what Paul saw as well, the exact representation [*charakter*] of his being?

There is clearly a connection between the term "glory" or "glorification" and the resplendent presence of God and of Christ following his ascension. The physical manifestation of God is often identified with the word "glory" (Hebrew *tiperet/tiparah*, Greek *doxa*) which may be understood as a resplendent and wondrous manifestation of light. In 2 Peter 1:16-18, Peter recounts this experience the night they witnessed the transfiguration:

*For we have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty. 17For he received from God the Father honor and glory, when there came such a voice to him from the excellent glory, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. 18And this voice which came from heaven we heard, when we were with him in the holy mount (1 Peter 1:16-18)*

This even is described in Luke (:29-32, So also at the transfiguration of Christ in Luke 9:29-32,

*As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. 30 Two men, Moses and Elijah, 31 appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. 32 Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him.*

The Apostle John tells us in John 1:14, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. **We have seen his glory**, the glory

of the Only Begotten, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." In John 12:16, John speaks of Jesus' state of being following his ascension and enthronement with God, "At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him." In Jesus' prayer in John 17:5, he refers to his pre-existence as a state of glory, "And now, Father, **glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you** before the world began," (i.e., receive me back into your presence).

In **Acts 3:13**, Peter speaks of Jesus' state of being following his ascension as the glorification of the suffering servant, "The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, **has glorified his servant Jesus**. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go." And Stephen, just before his death, saw a vision of Christ as a glorified being, "But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and **saw the glory of God**, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God."

The appearance of the risen Jesus to Paul is also described by him as a manifestation of divine glory. In 2 Cor 4:4-6, he writes,

*The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. 5For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. 6For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.*

### The Effect of Seeing the Risen Jesus

One of the greatest questions of the human race has to do with what happens to a person when their life on earth ends. This question can make for one of the most effective discussion starters we can use to open up an evangelistic conversation. Of great significance to this discussion is Paul's belief that the resurrection existence of Jesus, which he beheld on the road to Damascus, was a revelation of Jesus

in glory, the firstfruit of new creation existence, which, Paul teaches, is something that all those in Christ will share with him in their resurrection into new existence. In Rom 8:17, he writes, "Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory;" and in 1 Cor 2:7, he says concerning the mystery of new creation in Christ, "... we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God determined for our glory before time began." All of this comes out of what happened to Paul on the road to Damascus. Paul's contrast of the nature of the first Adam (the earthly man) and the second Adam (the man from heaven) is rooted in what Paul experienced on the road to Damascus.

This contrast is masterfully presented by Paul in 1 Cor 15, Paul's *Opus Magnum* on the resurrection. In verse 47 he writes:

*The first man was of the dust of the earth, the second man from heaven. 48 As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the man from heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. 49 And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven, (1 Cor 15:47-49).*

This person Paul identifies as "the man from heaven" was the one he saw on the road to Damascus; and this heavenly man had revealed to Paul that through new creation we can have this same existence. In 2 Thess 2:14, Paul writes, "He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ, (2 Thess 2:14). What Saul of Tarsus saw on the road to Damascus was the resurrected Jesus in new creation existence, and we will become what he became in our resurrection. This was the experience of Paul that drove his passion for telling the story of having seen the resurrected Jesus and the experience that informed is thinking in all of his letters.

As mentioned earlier, the theme of divine reversal is one of the most unique to Paul. From the concept of divine reversal as manifested in the resurrection of Jesus the whole of Paul's theology flows. Everything prior to the resurrection of Christ flows toward it

and everything following flows from it; and how his resurrection transfers a new state of being to the whole of mankind is what he calls the mystery of the gospel (Eph 6:9; cf. Rom 11:25; 16:25; Eph 1:9; 3:4, 9; Col 1:26-27; 2:2; 4:3; 1 Tim 3:9, 16).

It is from this event that Paul develops his doctrine of conversion and regeneration, justification, his concept of the divine reversal of the curse of Adam by the appearance of the second Adam, Jesus. New existence in Christ is the major theme of his synagogue teaching, his street preaching, and his two years of debate with the scholars of the synagogue of Ephesus.

### Truth and Reality

Saul of Tarsus had believed Jesus to be a crucified messianic pretender, seeing him alive, risen from death, and appearing in resplendent light, was a transforming event for him. What he was sure was not true he now knew was true; Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah and he was risen from the dead. Saul of Tarsus was immediately seen in the synagogue of Damascus claiming that he had seen Jesus risen from death and concluded from that fact that he was indeed the Son of God in a sense beyond anything conceived in the Judaism of which he was a part.

Perhaps, the ten-year period following this event gave Paul the time to work out in his mind what had happened and what it all meant to the human race. Of course, this time to work things out was no doubt filled with divine insights provided by the risen Jesus. I often wondered why Paul never got the same insight from the Scriptures that the apostles did as reported in Luke 24:44-49. But, we learn from Paul in his letter to the churches of Galatia that after an immediate attempt to tell others what he had seen, in was ten years after the event that he began to fulfill the apostolic commission given to him by the risen Jesus, as recorded in Acts 26:15-23.

### That Which is True and That Which is Not

The whole concept of a crucified and risen redeemer is

unbelievable to a large portion of the human race. How can so many people be so wrong about all this? Perhaps the problem is the presupposition with which one begins in the study of this matter. The dogma of the Enlightenment of the 17<sup>th</sup> through the 19<sup>th</sup> century is at the heart of the problem. The so-called scientific method of determining whether a thing could or could not exist or occur in this world began with the rejection of the idea of divine causation. The Enlightenment presupposition was that there was no such thing as divine causation. Nothing occurs within our world of “natural law” that is not governed by the laws of nature as determined by scientific methods of verification. The presupposition that seems to be suspect here is that “our world of natural law” is the sum of all things that exist. Our dimension of space, time, matter, and energy is the sum and substance of the universe in which exists.

This is a presupposition that cannot be scientifically verified by proven the scientific community; in fact, the whole presupposition is rooted in the logical fallacy called, *argumentum silento* (the law of silence). In the thinking of Enlightenment dogma, if we can't verify a thing by empirical observation, hands on experimentation, and visual demonstration, then it doesn't exist. Such a line of reasoning is scientific arrogance at its best.

### Scientific “Facts”

In 1905 Albert Einstein introduced a theory that challenged Isaac Newton's theory of gravity. He had demonstrated mathematically that the pull of gravity was relative to the space-time influences on the mass effected by the pull of gravity. Space tells matter and energy where to go, matter and energy tell space how to look. The whole of the scientific community rejected his theory. It was as Newton said and that was that; any scientists, whether mathematician or physicists, who did not see the universe (nature) the way Newton said it was, as endorsed by the scientific community, was simply wrong. Einstein was a theoretical physicists had his “theory” was not a scientific fact. It took Einstein and a small number of colleagues, particularly two Englishmen, Arthur Eddington and Wallace Campbell, over a period of 15 years to

establish Einstein's theory of General Relativity ( $E=MC^2$ , Energy equals Mass multiplied by the speed of light [Celeritas] squared) as a scientific fact.

In 1919 Eddington photographed an eclipse (a second attempt) of the sun by the moon with the light rays of the sun's illumination of the stars closest to the sun and demonstrated by the different locations of the stars that space-time around the sun was curving. However, another astronomer, Wallace Campbell, challenged this finding. In 1922 Campbell took a second set of photographs, under better conditions, that proved unconditionally that space-time around the sun was curved; light could be bent by other influences; the laws of nature must be interpreted relative to these other influences. This applied to space, matter, energy, and time. The physical laws of the universe, as determined by the greater scientific community, were not absolute.

This discovery turned the whole of the scientific world upside down. Newton was wrong and this little Jewish theoretical physicist, Albert Einstein, who had challenged the whole of what was affirmed by the scientific community, was right. In reality, he was right all along; in spite of the fact that the greater scientific community said he was wrong. His theory of relativity changed the interpretation of the greater body of the "laws of nature." Today the formula  $E=MC^2$  stands as a reminder that the greater scientific community does not know what it thinks it knows. What it says is true is not necessarily true at all, and what it denies as reality may be very real.

Today reputable scientists are entertaining such ideas as a parallel universe, wormholes through which travel may be experienced in light years, black holes that large portions of space and matter may be sucked into and disappear, and multiple galaxies, some of which may dwarf our own Milky Way galaxy. The whole concept of the universe and reality as it has been defined by "science," is being challenged by scientists almost daily.

But one of the most fascinating concepts entertained by scientists is the view that there are other dimensions of existence in

addition to the one we know consisting of space, matter, energy, and time. What would another dimension of existence be? Of what would it consist? Where would be and how would it relate to our own dimension of space, matter, energy, and time? These are questions that are being seriously entertained by highly reputable and recognized figures of the scientific community of the present day.

If the possibility of other dimensions of existence is being conjectured by reputable members of the scientific community, why is it not possible that what man has believed through the centuries concerning otherworldly realms of existence, otherworldly beings, and otherworldly activity is something that has come from another dimension of existence? Why is it not possible that at death the spirit of man enters into another dimension of existence where he or she experiences the presence of God and a reality beyond the reality he or she has known in the dimension of space, matter, energy, and time we know as "our world?" Is there any good reason why it is not possible that there exists another dimension where the particulars of space, matter, energy, and time are completely redefined or don't even exist at all? Such would be a reality completely beyond our comprehension; it would be as finite beings trying to grasp that which is infinite.

## Conclusion

In terms of our present study, why is it not possible that what Paul experienced on the road to Damascus was a reality of another dimension of existence? Could the one who appeared to Saul of Tarsus have been a being of another dimension of existence, who once existed in our dimension of existence as Jesus of Nazareth? Is it not possible that what makes up our world is not the totality of all that exists? Is it not the height of arrogance to assume that what man defines as "natural" is all that can exist, that nothing beyond that is possible? If there was another dimension of existence and that which is a part of that realm could step into this world and then back out again, why would that not be a possible explanation of what was happening with reference to all the supernatural phenomena we have

been discussing throughout this lesson? See if you can get your mind around that!

MWLIII