



# THE PRINCETON SEMINARY BULLETIN

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## Deliverance

(Acts 9:1-21)

Sally A. Brown

*Dr. Sally A. Brown is the Elizabeth M. Engle Associate Professor of Preaching and Worship at Princeton Theological Seminary. She delivered this sermon in Miller Chapel on Wednesday, January 27, 2016, at the opening communion service for the spring semester.*

*Holy One, we pray that by your Spirit your Word would become for us light and truth upon our way. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.*

W

e know this story. It is a key turning point in the book of Acts. Saul the brilliant young Pharisee who guarded the coats of the executioners at Stephen's grisly stoning has now become a key player in an all out campaign centered in Jerusalem to stamp out this sect called "The Way." Extreme situations call for extreme methods, Saul believes, so he uses imprisonment and death. I imagine if these things ever kept Saul up late at night he had only to turn to Psalm 139 where he might have read one of the lesser-known verses of that psalm. Not, "O Lord, thou hast searched and known me (v. 1)," but, "Do I not I hate those who hate you, O Lord? I hate them with a perfect hatred (vv. 21-22)."

On a mission to arrest members of The Way in Damascus, Saul's rampage comes to a very sudden stop. Witnesses later disagreed about what exactly happened on the Damascus Road. Did Saul's henchmen hear the voice but see nothing? Or did they see nothing and hear no voice? Or did they see the light but they heard nothing? It depends on where you read in the book of Acts. But that does not matter. What matters is that for the rest of his life Saul, known later as Paul in Hellenistic regions, would tell anybody who would listen that Jesus, the one in whom he had dis-believed with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength, confronted him person-

ally on the Damascus Road.

Well, Saul does end up in Damascus, but he is not handing out arrest warrants. He is huddled in somebody's house: sightless, probably in shock, plates of untouched food piling up beside him on the floor. And he prays; prayers shot up like flares in the dark. That is just Act I...

Act II takes us to another house in Damascus where we meet another man. His name is Ananias. He is praying too. I know I would be if there were rumors that somebody like Saul was on the way up Mercer Street. Now it is Ananias who hears the Lord call his name. "Ananias..." There is a message, a commission. The first part of it reminds me of N.C.I.S: "Straight Street, house of Judas." And then comes the bone-chilling part, "When you get there, ask for a man named Saul. Saul of Tarsus." The text makes it sound as if Ananias is just having a chat over the back fence with the Lord. But note here that of all the people that the Lord has called and sent on a mission so far, Ananias is the only one who talks back. "Maybe, Lord, you have not been reading your e-mail lately . . . about this Saul person..." But the Lord will have none of it. "No, I know about him. You leave that to me. But right now he cannot see and the only thing that is going to change that is when you get there."

So Ananias goes. It must have seemed like the longest trip across Damascus of his life. "Here is the turn... Is that the house?..." Heart pounding. Rap on the door. Take a deep breath. "Saul of Tarsus, please." And then they are face to face. Saul and Ananias; the predator and the prey. What did Ananias see? Did he see a threatening man? Did he see a confident, converted man "aglow with the joy of the Lord," like my Sunday school teachers used to say? (Maybe they just did not want to frighten the eight-year-olds?)

Luke tells us that after the epiphany on the road Saul could see nothing. And I suspect that describes more than Saul's physical situation. I think that Ananias saw a broken man, a man groping in the dark in more ways than one. Because when the theological scaffolding you have counted on all your life splinters apart, getting to a new normal is not a thirty-minute make over. While not many seminary students have met the living Jesus in a burst of otherworldly light, there may be a few of you here who know what it's like to see your theological scaffolding shaken. In seminary, of all places. Mine was.

I began theological study with very fixed ideas. One was that the Bible is a seamless story of God. Another was that the teachings of the Bible floated above the shifting tides of culture, which meant that women did not belong in a pulpit. And I believed that these things (this is humorous) would become more clear as I studied obscure ancient languages. That is a recipe for disaster, isn't it?

Dismay begins in Introduction to Old Testament: "What do you mean Moses did not write this?" And then you read the text, all of it, including Bible stories your teachers skipped in third grade Sunday school. Some of them paint very troubling portraits of God. You think you are on firmer ground in New Testament class, until you get to the exam question: "How does the Gospel of Mark end? Defend your answer." And then the day comes—maybe you've known that day?—when you can no longer push away the thought that is banging on the doors of your previously made-up mind: the thought that the Bible has the fingerprints of humanity all over it. It's deeply embedded in culture. And the canon is a whole lot more like an energetic debate than voices singing in harmony.

I am happy to say that for me there did come a day when I figured out that the seamlessness of the text and the reliability of God are not the same thing. But there is a time in there when that theological framework that you

were counting on shakes and trembles and falls apart like cheap furniture. And like Saul, you spend some time stumbling around in the dark.

Which brings us back to that house in Damascus, where Saul and Ananias are face to face. Now couldn't God have just fixed Saul's vision problem? What did God need Ananias for? But God does not do it that way. Instead, God has delivered Saul and his sight problem into the hands of the very community that he has feared and fought.

And maybe Saul is not the only one in that room and who is struggling to see. Ananias too struggles to see this man with the blood of the Church all over his hands as anything but an enemy. But could it be that God delivers us, too, into the company of those profoundly different from ourselves, asks us to be vulnerable one to the other, vulnerable enough to be changed and have our sight corrected?

Princeton Theological Seminary becomes a more diverse place every year. Diversity is a good word; it's a very "P.C." word. But scratch diversity, and you will sniff tension. Yes, our differences can make for tension in the lecture hall, in precepts, in our worship space, and at the committee meeting. We are different. We are so different theologically, denominationally, in worship preference. We do not all like to sing the same songs! (Yikes, talk about a divide!) And we have different ways of reading history—the Church's history, our history, and American history.

You know it can feel like work to be here. Intellectually and emotionally taxing work. (Can I get a witness on this?) It is work! We get tired. We get tired *with* each other, and we get tired *of* each other. And on those days—and you know this—on those days, it is a powerful temptation to run for the comfort of the tribe. To hunker down with the folks that speak, think, talk, worship, eat, vote, and dance like us. It is easy to run for the company of those who see "It" our way. (Whatever "It" is)

But what if the only way we will ever have vision broad enough, acute enough, deep enough to make any redemptive difference in this world is if we are delivered by God, our names called one by one as were Saul's and Ananias'? Delivered like they were into each other's company, delivered into one another's hands, and so delivered from our blindnesses, some of which we recognize and others of which only someone very different will ever help us see.

Who but the one theologically different from me can deliver me from blind fear of theological views other than my own? Who but someone who rejects binaries can help me to cease fearing ambiguity? And who but persons of color can deliver those of us who grew up white, up to our ears in white privilege, from the notion that because we believe in Jesus we're the grand exception and somehow we're unsullied by racism and xenophobia, that we have escaped those toxins that affect all the others? God deliver us.

And who but a company of others that we might never choose for company can deliver us from too small a vision of God, too safe a notion of redemption, and too narrow a vision of human wholeness? Face to face with Saul, Ananias does not extort a confession and does not demand restitution. I would have. Instead, he embraces his call. He has been sent to heal and not to judge, so leaving judgment to God he lays his hands on Saul and says with a grace only the Spirit could give him, "Brother Saul, receive your sight..."

Today the God who called their names calls ours. God has called us here one by one to a common table. Now the fact that we share one bread and one cup will not make us all agree. Not by a long shot. But there is grace on this table. Grace enough to help us remember that, at the best of times, we see as Paul himself would say, "as if in a mirror and dimly." Grace enough on this table that we can turn to one another in the lecture hall, in the precept, in the committee meeting, at the dinner table, and we can say, "My brother..." "My sister...", "My companion on this Way..."

And every time we do, God will grant us the grace to see that there is no hostility, no divide, and no division that the redemptive love of Jesus does not cross. Thanks be to God.