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ACTS 9:1-31

Last week, we saw the stoning of Stephen and we saw that after Stephen was stoned, very harsh persecution came upon the believers in Jerusalem. This persecution was so harsh that all the believers except the apostles scattered.

Some went to Samaria, and we talked about that last Sunday. However, Samaria wasn't the only place to which the believers fled. Some went to Damascus. Those who fled to Damascus must have believed they were safe...

There was a man who wanted to go even to Damascus to persecute these folks some more. This man was not content that these folks had been forced to leave their jobs and their families and their homes and their country. He wanted to go after them and inflict even more pain and death and suffering upon them.

Of course, we know this man as Saul of Tarsus. We saw him last week as he watched the stoning of Stephen. We saw him as the robes of those who stoned Stephen were laid at his feet. We saw Saul giving hearty agreement and approval to the stoning of Stephen.

Saul may have played a larger part in the stoning of Stephen than merely approving it and guarding the robes of those who did it...

You see, Saul was born in Tarsus. Tarsus was a city in the Roman province of Cilicia (**Acts 21:39**). **Acts 6:9** tells us that those who rose up and argued with Stephen were from Cyrene, Alexandria, Asia and **Cilicia**.

Whatever Saul's role against the Jewish believers **before** the stoning of Stephen, his role against the Jewish believer **after** the stoning of Stephen was well known...

Acts 8:3 tells us that *Saul began ravaging the church and he entered house after house and he dragged off men and women and he put them in prison.*

Acts 9:1-3a...

We need to understand that no one sent Saul on this mission...oh no...Saul went to the high priest himself, and asked for letters that would give him the authority under the Judaic Law to bring Jewish believers back from Damascus. He sought to bind them and bring them to Jerusalem.

What drove Saul of Tarsus to be so aggressive in his efforts to persecute the church of the Lord Jesus?

Do you think it was simply because he was bloodthirsty and loved to see the pain of others?

Or do you think it was blind ambition?

Or do you believe Saul had such a deep and abiding love and loyalty for Judaism that he couldn't stand to see it threatened?

I believe Saul deeply believed that he was doing the right thing. I mean, either Judaism is right and Christianity is wrong, or Christianity is right and Judaism is obsolete. I don't believe for a minute that Saul thought Christianity was right! Saul had been educated at the feet of the most famous rabbi of that time, Gamaliel.

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Saul would later write to the Philippians... that he was
circumcised the eighth day,
of the nation of Israel,
of the tribe of Benjamin,
a Hebrew of Hebrews.
Saul would go to tell them that
as to the Law, he was a Pharisee,
as to zeal, a persecutor of the church,
as to the Law and the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.

Saul was an intellectual giant and he believed there could be no peaceful coexistence between Judaism and Christianity. He viewed the Jewish believers as traitors to Jewish tradition. He viewed Christ as a blasphemer and Christianity as a cult, and he believed Christianity must not be allowed to spread and thrive...it must be stopped! ***Saul was sincere, but he was sincerely wrong!!***

So, we see Saul "breathing out threats and murder" and even going to the high priest to get permission to follow the believers into Damascus and bind them and bring them back to Jerusalem.

The Damascus Road from Jerusalem stretched for about 200 miles. Saul had plenty of time to nurse his hatred against the Christians...yet,

Don't you wonder if, while he was traveling down that road if Saul remembered how Stephen's face had shown like an angel when he appeared before the Sanhedrin?

Don't you wonder if he remembered the solid defense Stephen gave the religious leaders?

Don't you wonder if Saul remembered Stephen's words of forgiveness for those who were stoning him?

Don't you wonder if Saul remembered when Stephen said he saw the heavens open and the Lord Jesus standing at the right hand of God?

Surely Saul remembered all this on his way to Damascus!!

But, none of this deterred Saul...he was bent on going to Damascus! No man could have reasoned with Saul at that time! No man on earth, that is! But there was a Man...with nail prints in His hands about to stand in Saul's way, and this Man would bring about a miracle greater than raising Lazarus from the dead!

Verses 3b-5...

Let me ask you...how many men do you know who have been converted this way? No, I don't know any either...

The conversion of Saul of Tarsus was no case for a man like Philip...even as faithful an evangelist as Philip was, because you see, Saul was made out of different stuff than the Ethiopian eunuch.

Next week we'll see how God sent Peter to convert Cornelius, but the conversion of Saul of Tarsus was no case for a man like Peter, even as zealous as the Apostle Peter was, because Saul was no Cornelius.

The conversion of Saul of Tarsus was undertaken by the Lord Jesus Christ, Himself!!

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We don't know if Saul ever met Jesus when Jesus lived on earth. He could have, but in all his writings, he certainly never says he did.

Saul's first encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ most likely was here and now! And you know what? Saul never forgot it! On over in the **Book of Acts**, at least two more times, Saul relates this incident as he testifies of his own conversion experience!

Saul also would never forget the truth he learned that day about the church being the Body of Christ!

Jesus didn't say, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting **the church?**", did He?

He didn't say, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting **them?**", did He?

WHY?

Well, Jesus taught Saul in that very moment a profound kingdom truth! Jesus taught Saul that there is a supernatural link between the Head of the church in heaven and the Body of the church on earth. The link is so strong that for Saul to put his hand upon a Christian was equivalent to putting his hand on the Lord Jesus Christ. And Saul never ever forgot that!

He would later write about this truth of the Body of Christ in his epistles, especially **Ephesians**.

So...one moment Saul of Tarsus was riding high...on a mission to destroy the church...and the next moment, he was on the ground...blinded by the glory of the Lord Jesus! **Acts 9** doesn't tell us this, but **Acts 26** tells us that Jesus said to Paul... **"It is hard for you to kick against the goads..."**

A goad was a stick used to poke an ox to get him moving.
Sometimes the ox would kick up its heels at the stick.

I believe this tells us that the dear Holy Spirit had been dealing with Saul. But Saul had been resisting Him.

I want to ask you...do you ever kick against the goads?

For those of us who are saved, and I hope that's ALL of us, we might say, "Well, I'm already saved...that means I've already yielded to the Holy Spirit, doesn't it?" Yes, as far as salvation goes, it does.

But, what about your sanctification?

What about your spiritual growth?

What about your time with Lord each day?

Is the Holy Spirit leading you in one direction and you're kicking against Him and trying to go in another?

You better watch out! He just might knock you off that high horse you're riding...just to get your attention!

Our "Damascus Roads" are generally less dramatic than Saul's, but Beloved, they're meant to have the very same effect...they're meant to break our independence and arrogance and apathy and to bring us to Christ for our salvation and sanctification. You know, God has already predestined us to be conformed to the image of His Son, it WILL

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happen one way or the other, but what He wants us to do is to yield to Him and not kick against the goads!!

Verses 5-7...

I believe the moment Saul called Jesus "Lord", he knew! I believe Saul knew that indeed he had been persecuting the Messiah of Israel, the Son of David, the Son of God!! He had laid hurtful hands upon Israel's own Messiah every time he laid hurtful hands on the members of the Body of Christ!! IT WAS ALL TRUE!!

Jesus of Nazareth was and is God the Son...born of a virgin, unique in His person, marvelous in His life, falsely accused and cruelly crucified, buried and raised to sit at the Father's right hand!

We don't see it in this passage, but **Acts 22:10** tells us that Saul said, "**What shall I do, Lord?**"

From now on, Jesus was Lord in Saul's heart and mind and soul and will. The old Saul died. The old Saul was crucified with Christ. The new Saul didn't know that the future held at this moment.

**Saul who was by birth a Jew,
by citizenship a Roman,
by education a Greek,
was now purely by the grace of God a Christian.**

Saul of Tarsus would become a **missionary**, a **theologian**, an **evangelist**, a **church planter**, a **pastor**, a **defender of the faith**, a **lover of souls** and a **martyr for the cause of Christ**.

But, before he could accomplish great things for Jesus, he was led by his companions into Damascus. These men who were with him had heard a voice but had seen no one. They had **heard** Jesus, but they hadn't **seen** Jesus. I believe had they recognized the voice as Saul did, Jesus would have revealed Himself to them, too, don't you?

How often we see this. In fact, we saw this a couple of weeks ago in our revival.

The message is given...some hearts are deeply touched...touched to the point of seeing Jesus with their hearts, but some folks just walk out. They've heard the same songs. They've heard the same message, but they leave never having seen Jesus. **These looked and saw nothing! Saul was blinded, yet saw everything!**

Verse 9 tells us Saul was in Damascus three days without sight, without food and without water. Can you imagine? Saul's whole world has been turned upside down! How he must have been there all alone in the dark and how he must have thought about what had happened to him...

A new world was opening up before him. He would have to rethink his Bible in the light of Calvary.

So he waited for the Lord to tell him what would come next!

Verses 10-12...

God has His servants everywhere! Here in Damascus was a man who was at the right place at the right time! He was very likely a leader in the church at Damascus and would have been one of Saul's targets! Ananias was there in Damascus and except for this one incident, we would never have ever known the man existed, let alone that he was God's servant.

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But the Lord knew all about him. He knew his **name** and **address** and **his faith** and **his fears**. The Lord spoke to Ananias in a vision and He also spoke to Saul in a vision, and told him to expect a visit from Ananias.

Verses 13-16...

Now, we can certainly understand Ananias' fear, can't we? But, the Lord very gently puts Ananias at ease...He told him that Saul had been chosen by Him! God had brought Saul to this place for such a time as this.

All Saul's previous life had been in preparation for this!

Think about it! The fact that Saul was a Roman citizen.

The fact that his family had lived abroad from Israel gave him a knowledge of others cultures...

The fact that he was brought up in a Hebrew home with a sure knowledge of Hebrew Scriptures gave him a sure knowledge of Judaism...

I believe God was able to use even Saul's hatred of Christ and the church and his savage persecutions to work all that together for good...

Saul had been chosen by God to take the Gospel to the Gentiles! Saul was a chosen vessel...**and so are we all.**

Each of us has special talents, training, temperaments, special background and upbringing, special culture and characteristics. God makes no two people alike. God had a special job for Paul and He has a special job for you and me! No matter what our past...God can use it for our good and His glory!

And not only that, but the Lord told him on the front end that he would suffer for the sake of Jesus' name. From now on Saul would not make the saints suffer...Saul would be doing the suffering.

Verses 17-18... "Brother Saul..."

These were the first words Saul heard from a believer **as** a believer. Can't you imagine how sweet these words sounded to Saul's ears?

Then, he received his sight, and he was filled with the Holy Spirit and was baptized. We need to understand that for a Jew, baptism was and is a major step. Relatives may tolerate a member of a Jewish family who "professes" to be a believer in the Lord Jesus, but baptism often severs all Jewish family ties. Often persecution follows. Baptism is the very first thing God expects us to be obedient in after salvation, and here we see Saul being baptized.

Verses 19-22...

Folks who have been truly transformed by the saving power of the Lord Jesus Christ have a hard time being silent about it. I have a problem when folks say, "Well, my relationship with God is a very private matter; I don't like to talk about it..." Can you imagine the shock of the Christians but also the shock of the Jews? Both expected Saul to take Christians prisoner, not preach Jesus in their synagogues.

Like Stephen before him, Saul met the Jews in open debate about the deity and messiahship of Jesus. Saving faith "comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ."

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We've mentioned before how prepared Saul was for the task that lay ahead, but as educated as Saul was, he still needed to be taught. He still needed time alone with the Lord Jesus. Let's look at **Galatians 1:11-18...**

Paul would later identify himself as an apostle! In doing so, Paul identified himself on the same par as the twelve disciples. The disciples had spent three years under the teaching of the Lord Jesus and Paul spent three years being taught by the Lord Jesus!

Verses 23-25 tell us how the Jews plotted to kill Saul and Saul had to be rescued by his followers' letting him down in a basket through an opening in the city wall.

Verses 26-31 tell us that Saul finally went to Jerusalem and tried to become friendly with the other apostles...and guess what? Instead of being welcomed into their midst, the apostles were afraid of him...they were suspicious of him.

Verse 27... "But Barnabas..."

We all need a Barnabas in our lives, don't we?

Barnabas believed Saul's conversion was real!

Barnabas came alongside Saul and brought him to the apostles and vouched for him.

Barnabas told them about Saul's conversion experience.

Barnabas told them how Saul had seen Jesus and how Jesus had spoken to Saul.

Barnabas told them how Saul had spoken out boldly at Damascus.

Verses 28-29 tell us that again the Jews – this time the Hellenistic Jews, of whom Saul was one – were plotting to kill Saul because of his preaching and he was sent away to Tarsus. **Remember Tarsus was his hometown.**

Don't you wonder what he did there? Do you think he had relatives still living there? Maybe a mother and a father, sisters and brothers? I believe if he had relatives there, Saul witnessed to them, don't you?

Maybe his witness to his friends and family at Tarsus cost Saul his relationship with them. Over in **Philippians 3:8**, Paul tells us he suffered "the loss of all things..." Maybe he suffered the loss of his family because of his witness to them of what Jesus meant to him and what He could mean to them.

The Holy Spirit has chosen to reveal more to us of the life of the Apostle Paul than any other person in the **New Testament**, with the exception of the Lord Jesus.

The story of Paul's conversion is dramatic. The story of ours may not be dramatic, but I guarantee you it has at least one element that is exactly like Paul's, and that is this...

Jesus found you, you didn't find Him! Jesus told His disciples, "You didn't choose Me, I chose you." And may I say to you, you and I didn't choose Him either...He chose us!

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We won't see Paul again until **chapter 13**, but his life was dramatically and totally transformed that day on the road to Damascus, wasn't it? And from that moment on, so was the history of the church...and we shall see this in the weeks and months ahead!