

“THAT OLD TIME RELIGION”

“The Damascus Road”

Scripture Reading – Acts, 9:1-19

Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting”, he replied. “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do”.

The men travelling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, “Ananias!” “Yes, Lord”, he answered. The Lord told him, “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight”.

“Lord”, Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name”.

But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name”.

Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord – Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here – has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptised, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

‘You have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of

my fathers. But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles.’

Galatians, 1:13-16a, NIV

This series, based on THE BOOK OF ACTS, is entitled ‘THAT OLD TIME RELIGION’.

The reason I want to call this series ‘THAT OLD TIME RELIGION’ is that we need to look back in order that we might really look to the future. The OLD TIME RELIGION needs to become the NEW TIME RELIGION because it is the ALL TIME RELIGION. If we get back to the basics of life in the Christian Church, we might better understand what the Holy Spirit can do through us today.

THE BOOK OF ACTS is the story of success; the story of a church triumphant.

It is the story of a small group of uncultured and generally unlearned people with meagre resources – very little money, no prestige, and no church buildings. This small group of people went out to tell the story of a publicly executed Jew. They went out against three obstacles – the imperial might of the Romans, the intellectual sophistication of the Greeks, and the religious bigotry of the Jews. They turned the world inside out and upside down for Jesus Christ.

The Acts of the Apostles is the story of a church on fire with evangelism and growth...

“THE DAMASCUS ROAD”

No person, apart from Jesus, shaped the history of Christianity like the apostle Paul.

Even before he was a believer, his actions were significant. His frenzied persecution of Christians following the death of Stephen finally got the church started in obeying Christ’s command to take the gospel worldwide and make disciples of every nation. Paul’s personal encounter with Jesus changed his life. He never lost his fierce intensity, but from then on it was channelled for the gospel.

Paul was very religious.

His training under the Pharisee Gamaliel was the finest available at the time. His intentions and efforts were sincere. Paul was a good Pharisee who knew Scripture and sincerely believed that this new Christian movement was dangerous to Judaism. So, Paul hated the Christian faith and persecuted Christians without mercy. Paul got permission to travel to Damascus to capture Christians and bring them back to Jerusalem. But God stopped him in his hurried tracks on the Damascus Road. Paul personally met with Jesus Christ, and his life was never the same again.

The traveller on THE DAMASCUSROAD seems to have a passion for the wrong thing.

Saul was a man filled with bitterness and hatred. He was breathing threats of violence and death to those who followed Jesus. He was a man on a mission – a mission not of mercy but of punishment and pain. Here was a man who was extremely passionate in his own way.

Saul’s attitude was that of an angry animal whose very breath was dangerous!

Like many other rabbis, he sincerely believed that the Law had to be obeyed before the Messiah could come; and yet these ‘heretics’ were preaching against the Law, the Temple, and

the traditions of the fathers. Saul destroyed the churches in Judea and then got authority from the High Priest to go as far as Damascus in order to hunt down the disciples of Jesus. This was no insignificant enterprise, for the authority of the highest Jewish Council was behind him.

With official permission in hand he was ready to confront and rid Israel of those who were of 'THE WAY'. With his mind unwilling to change and his heart filled with the challenge set before him, Saul travelled out onto the Damascus Road. Little did he know that on this day he would not confront, but be confronted. He would not change others, but be changed himself. He would not challenge those of 'THE WAY', but Jesus, "I AM THE WAY", would challenge him.

1. A ROAD OF CONFRONTATION

'As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting", he replied.'

Acts, 9:3-5, NIV

Some people like and look for confrontations, whilst others shy away and hide from them...

SAUL WAS CONFRONTED BY THE SUPERNATURAL

Saul had expected the confrontation to take place in Damascus.

But as he approached the city, he was confronted by a light from heaven that caused him to fall to the ground.

'Paul was a great man, and I have no doubt that on the way to Damascus he rode a very high horse. But a few seconds sufficed to alter the man. How soon God brought him down!'

Charles H Spurgeon

What was this 'LIGHT FROM HEAVEN'?

Was it heat stroke that caused Saul to become light-headed and fall?

Was it lightning that caused Saul to become dazed?

Was it an epileptic fit that caused Saul to fall violently to the ground?

William Barclay notes that this region had frequent violent and electrical storms and wonders if Jesus spoke to Saul during such a storm.

Charles H Spurgeon remarked that if Saul had epilepsy, he wished that all men in London would have such a similar experience during an epileptic fit.

Saul suddenly found himself on the ground.

It was not a heat stroke or an attack of epilepsy that put him there, but a personal meeting with Jesus Christ. At midday, he saw a bright light from heaven and heard a voice speaking his name. The men with him also fell to the earth and heard the sound, but they could not understand the words spoken from heaven. They stood to their feet in bewilderment, hearing Saul address someone, but not knowing what was happening.

Too often, we explain away the supernatural power of God with a natural event.

Many prefer to live by sight and not by faith. But the Christian is called to live by faith and not by sight. There is no simple explanation for what happened on the Damascus Road.

Jesus is 'THE LIGHT' and 'THE LIGHT OF MEN'.

'In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.'

John, 1:4-5, NIV

'Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.'

John, 3:19, NIV



SAUL WAS CONFRONTED BY THE SON OF GOD

Saul discovered to his surprise that Jesus of Nazareth was actually alive!

Of course, the Believers had been constantly reaffirming this, but Saul had refused to accept their testimony. If Jesus was alive, then Saul had to change his mind about Christ and his message. He had to repent, a difficult thing for a self-righteous Pharisee to do.

"I AM JESUS" echoed the words of God to Moses on Mount Horeb.

'God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM".'

Exodus, 3:14a, NIV

In John's Gospel, Jesus used the phrase "I AM..." on many occasions.

"I AM... THE BREAD OF LIFE... THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD... THE DOOR FOR MY SHEEP... THE GOOD SHEPHERD... THE WAY, TRUTH & LIFE... THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE... THE VINE."

Saul lying afraid upon the ground was now face to face with the Risen Lord Jesus.

When Jesus revealed who he was, Saul did not say, "WELL HI THERE, I AM SAUL!"

We need to stop emphasising who we are and start emphasising who Jesus really is!



SAUL WAS CONFRONTED BY HIS SINFUL ACTIONS

Jesus asked him, "SAUL, SAUL, WHY DO YOU PERSECUTE ME?"

Saul discovered that he was a lost sinner who was in danger of judgment...

"I AM JESUS, WHOM YOU ARE PERSECUTING" (see Acts 9:5, NKJV).

Saul thought he had been serving God, when in reality he had been persecuting the Messiah! When measured against the holiness of Jesus Christ, Saul's good works and legalistic self-righteousness looked like nothing more than filthy rags. All of his values had to change. He needed to become a new person through Jesus Christ.

Saul was confronted about his hand in persecutions.

Jesus states that when a Christian is persecuted, Jesus himself suffers. Saul thought he was pursuing heretics, but he was persecuting Jesus himself. Anyone who persecutes believers today is also guilty of persecuting Jesus, because believers are the Body of Christ on earth.

I wonder what effect the stoning of Stephen had on Saul.

Some have noted that 'THE CHURCH OWES PAUL TO THE PRAYER OF STEPHEN'.

'While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit". Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them". When he had said this, he fell asleep.'

Acts, 7:59-60, NIV

Many today kick against the urging and prompting of the Holy Spirit.

We need to be confronted again with who Jesus is. We need to have the blindfold removed from our eyes and see the works of God, the word of Christ and the weakness of our own soul.

2. A ROAD OF CHANGE

'Jesus said to Saul, "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do".'

Acts, 9:6, NIV

A CONFRONTATION with Christ is designed to bring about one thing... CHANGE!

'Saul entered Damascus a changed man – and how changed! He who intended to enter Damascus like an avenging fury was led by the hand, blind and helpless.'

William Barclay

His travelling companions led Saul into the city.

The angry bull had now become a docile lamb! The leader had to be led because the vision of Jesus had left him blind. His spiritual eyes had been opened, but his physical eyes were closed. God was thoroughly humbling Saul and preparing him for the ministry of Ananias. He fasted and prayed for three days, during which time he no doubt started to sort out what he believed. He had been saved by grace, not by Law, but through faith in the living Christ. God began to instruct Saul and show him the relationship between the Gospel of the grace of God and the traditional religion of Moses that he had practiced all his life.

SAUL CHANGED FROM THREATENING TO TREMBLING

What Saul had passionately believed was a lie was being proved to be true before his very eyes. Saul thought he had been zealously serving the Lord but instead he had been dangerously persecuting Jesus. It does not take much thought to wonder why Saul was down on his knees and why his first words were, "WHO ARE YOU LORD?".

SAUL CHANGED FROM LEADING TO BEING LED

'Up to this moment Saul had been doing what he liked, what he thought best, what his will dictated. From this time forward he would be told what to do. The Christian is a man who has ceased to do what he wants to do and who has begun to do what Christ wants him to do.'

William Barclay

SAUL CHANGED FROM PERSECUTOR TO PROCLAIMER

'IMMEDIATELY HE PREACHED THE CHRIST' (see Acts, 9:20-22).

Saul immediately began to proclaim the Christ.

The very One Saul had persecuted, he now declares boldly that 'JESUS IS THE CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD'. This is the only place in THE BOOK OF ACTS that you find this title, but Paul used it in his letters at least fifteen times. It was a major emphasis in his ministry. The dramatic change in Saul's life was a source of wonder to the Jews at Damascus. Every new convert's witness for Christ ought to begin right where he is, so Saul began his ministry first in Damascus.

The Jesus he sought to present as false was the true Messiah he now proclaimed.

This was the fire-breathing dragon from Jerusalem! No wonder people were amazed!

SAUL WAS CONFRONTED, CHANGED, AND CONVERTED

There is great significance in the blindness of Saul.

He was leading persecution against the Church, now he is led blind by the Church.

He once turned a blind eye to the Spirit, now he is blinded with the revelation of Jesus.

Led into the city by human hands, he was led from the city by the hand of God.

Paul refers to this experience as the start of his new life in Christ.

At the centre of this wonderful experience was Jesus Christ. Paul did not see a vision; he saw the risen Christ himself. Paul acknowledged Jesus as Lord, confessed his own sin, surrendered his life to Christ, and resolved to obey him. True conversion comes from a personal encounter with Jesus Christ and leads to a new life in relationship with him.

3. A ROAD OF CHALLENGE

Someone has said: 'THE LIFE OF CHRIST IS A CHALLENGE'.

The challenge of THE DAMASCUS ROAD was made to Ananias, the Christian Church and Saul..

THE CHALLENGE TO ANANIAS

"Lord", Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name".'

Acts, 9:13-14, NIV

"Not him, Lord; that's impossible. He could never become a Christian!"

In essence, that is what Ananias said when God told him of Saul's conversion. After all, Saul had pursued believers to their deaths. Despite these understandable feelings, Ananias obeyed God and ministered to Saul. We must not limit God; He can do anything. We must obey God's leading, even when He leads us to difficult people and places.

Ananias was available to do God's will, but he was certainly not anxious to obey!

The fact that Saul was 'PRAYING' instead of 'PREYING' should have encouraged Ananias. 'PRAYER IS THE AUTOGRAPH OF THE HOLY GHOST UPON THE RENEWED HEART', said **Charles H Spurgeon**. Instead of trusting himself, Saul was now trusting the Lord and waiting for Him to show him what to do. In fact, Saul had already seen a vision of a man named Ananias (The name 'HANANIAH' literally means 'THE LORD IS GRACIOUS') coming to minister to him. How could Ananias refuse to obey?

ANANIAS WAS CHALLENGED TO GREATER SERVICE

Ananias, when called upon by God simply said, "Here I am Lord".

How close are we to God that if He were to call our name out right now we would respond as Ananias did? He had already been serving God, but now he would be challenged to serve God in a greater capacity. After all, surely that is what God wants of you and me... Greater service to Him today than that of yesterday?

ANANIAS WAS CHALLENGED TO SEE DIFFERENTLY

Ananias had been a faithful disciple for some time and no doubt he would have been one of the targets of Saul had he not had the encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road. Therefore, there was every reason for Ananias to make sure he was hearing right in this vision. In his vision, God challenged him to see Saul not as the enemy, but as a 'BROTHER'.

I sense here something of the unity God desires within 'The Body of Christ'.

When Ananias walked into the room, seeing this man who once was so bad, he reached out to him, touched him and called him **"BROTHER SAUL"**.

Beyond doubt Ananias is one of the forgotten heroes of the Christian Church.

In a very real way, the Church owes Paul to the brotherly act of Ananias. When God's message came to Ananias it must have sounded mad to him. He might well have approached Saul with suspicion, as one doing an unpleasant task. Ananias might well have begun with recriminations; but no, his first words were, **"BROTHER SAUL"**.

'Ananias found Saul, as he had been instructed, and greeted him as "BROTHER SAUL". Ananias feared this meeting because Saul had come to Damascus to capture the believers and take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. But in obedience to the Holy Spirit, Ananias greeted Saul lovingly. It is not always easy to show love to others, especially when we are afraid of them or doubt their motives. Nevertheless we must follow Jesus' command and Ananias' example, showing loving acceptance to other believers.'

"LIFE APPLICATION BIBLE", Study Notes



THE CHALLENGE TO SAUL

'But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name". Then Ananias

went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord – Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here – has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit".

Acts, 9:15-17, NIV



THE CHALLENGE TO THE CHURCH

There are at least four practical lessons that all believers ought to learn...

God can use even the most obscure saint.

Were it not for the conversion of Saul, we would never have heard of Ananias; and yet Ananias had an important part to play in the ongoing work of the church. Behind many well-known servants of God are lesser-known believers who have influenced them. God keeps the books and will see to it that each servant will get a just reward. The important thing is not fame but faithfulness.

We should never be afraid to obey God's will.

Ananias at first argued with the Lord and gave some good reasons why he should not visit Saul. But the Lord had everything under control, and Ananias obeyed by faith. When God commands, we must remember that He is working 'at both ends of the line', and that his perfect will is always the best.

God's works are always balanced.

God balanced a great public miracle with a quiet meeting in the house of Judas. The bright light and the voice from heaven were dramatic events, but the visit of Ananias was somewhat ordinary. The hand of God pushed Saul from his 'high horse', but God used the hand of a man to bring Saul what he most needed. God spoke from heaven, but he also spoke through an obedient disciple who gave the message to Saul. The 'ordinary' events were just as much a part of the miracle as were the extraordinary.

Never underestimate the value of one person brought to Christ.

Peter was ministering to thousands in Jerusalem, and Philip had seen a great harvest among the Samaritan people, but Ananias was sent to only one man. Yet what a man! Saul of Tarsus became Paul the Apostle, and his life and ministry have influenced people and nations ever since. Even secular historians confess that Paul is one of the significant figures in world history.

Do you desire an encounter with the Risen Lord Jesus Christ today?

Lord, I pray that I may know thee, Risen One, enthroned on high.

Empty hands I'm stretching to thee, show thyself to me, I cry.

Show thyself to me, show thyself to me,

That I may reveal thy beauty; show thyself to me.

Ruth Tracy, SASB 435:1

"AS YOU GO ON YOUR WAY, WILL YOU MEET JESUS ON THE ROAD?"