

Paul's change and ours

Littlebourne - 5th February 2023 - Acts 9:20-31

Last week's passage saw the conversion of Saul. We all know the story that he was persecuting the Christians, the church, and then his life was turned around. He stopped persecuting and became the persecuted. He went from despising and denigrating the truths of Jesus Christ, and went to believing them and preaching them. In fact, he becomes the most prominent writer of the New Testament, and one of the most important people in the whole of Christian thought.

But maybe what we don't realise is just how quick this was. Yes, we understand that the road to Damascus experience made for a very quick conversion. But the way Saul becomes not just a mere convert, but a highly effective evangelist so quickly is I think clearly supernatural - Saul was certainly, as the Holy Spirit said in verse 15, "God's chosen instrument".

v19b - 22

For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus. 20 And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." 21 And all who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?" 22 But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.

Saul spends some days in Damascus, but it says that 'immediately' he goes to the synagogue, where it seems that he is known from his exploits in Jerusalem. Verse 2 says that Saul asked for letters to the synagogues of Damascus - were these sent ahead, or did Saul bring them with him, we don't know. But in any case, it's clear to the people at the synagogue that Saul was coming for the purpose of arresting Christians, and when he turns up, he's supporting the Christians.

They were all amazed - how can this be the same person? The person who comes to the synagogue is really the opposite of their expectations.

Saul would have known that what he did in the synagogue, supporting what was still a small, albeit rapidly growing, group of Christians, was putting a target on his back. He would have known he was in for the same persecution that he once intended to dish out. Indeed, his actions invite this.

But not only does Saul support the Christians, he doesn't just proclaim the same things as the Christians in Damascus, but he confounds the unbelievers, and sets about proving the Jesus was the Messiah. I think it looks like Saul was able to speak in the synagogue in a way that is far more powerful than if he'd just quickly learnt some things from Ananias and the other believers in Damascus. The reaction of the people in the synagogue - amazement, being confounded - suggests he speaks with more authority and power than the other Christians that were there in Damascus.

Now Saul was a Pharisee, very well read in the scriptures, which might be a reason why he was able to speak so clearly about these matters. An interesting question would be what exactly was the difference in Saul's knowledge before and after his conversion. How much more scripture did he know and understand these days after his conversion than he did prior?

Maybe once those last key aspects were filled in, his view of the scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, would have all fallen into place and clarity about their descriptions of Jesus would have been found. But Saul is able to *prove* Jesus was the Christ. From finding Jesus and His followers so repugnant as to seek their death, to being able to prove Jesus and His followers correct and all in the space of days.

Two points then on Saul's transformation: first, Saul's transformation is so extreme as to be supernatural. Second, that Saul's transformation was not primarily one of knowledge. I don't think it's the case that Saul just got the last piece of the puzzle and 'knew' more. Rather, what accounts for his actions, is that his heart disposition was changed.

This I think informs us as to what is happening with those that oppose Saul in Damascus too.

v23 - 25

23 When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, 24 but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him, 25 but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.

Saul's opponents cannot let him go on forever (we'll see in a little while roughly how long they let him go on before getting to this stage). From amazement that he was even the same person, to Saul proving that Jesus is the Christ, I don't think it's the case that they didn't hear Saul's arguments. Surely they couldn't ignore what he was saying. Yet they remain unconvinced and instead seek to shut him down completely - they seek his death.

Just as with Saul, it's not that knowledge and argument is the decisive factor for them - they have heard all the arguments. There are many today that have heard all the arguments and yet don't believe. Faith is not an issue of the head as much as it is an issue of the heart. They don't want to believe what Saul is saying, and so they reject it.

Not content to merely disagree, they seek his death - they want him silenced. It sounds like they can't argue against him with any success, so they try to shut him up. Permanently.

Opposition to the gospel can be very fierce. The people seeking Saul's life might have viewed him as if he had some sort of infectious disease. There are plenty of examples in history of those that have professed their faith in Jesus Christ and have gone to their deaths over it - we looked at Stephen in chapter 7, the first martyr, but we could think of many others through history. Today, to profess Christ in some places, such as Afghanistan or North Korea, is typically a death sentence.

I think Saul's example shows us the right attitude - he won't stop preaching and professing Christ. It comes across as if that's his new purpose and it's nonnegotiable. But martyrdom is not required. We don't have to lie down and take whatever comes at us - Christianity doesn't mean unyielding passivity. He escapes and goes to preach Christ elsewhere instead.

v26 - 27

26 And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. 27 But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus.

Saul arrives at Jerusalem and has another problem with the people he meets.

In Galatians 1 (v15-19) we get a bit more information about what happened:

15 But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, 16 was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; 17 nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus.

18 Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days. 19 But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother.

So in Galatians Saul - Paul as he would have been when writing it - says that it was three years before he went to Jerusalem. So what Luke records as 'many days', that he was in Damascus before his death was sought, is roughly three years according to Saul himself.

Remember that this is not a time of instantaneous communication like today. There wasn't a way to send a recording of Saul's preaching back to Jerusalem in order to validate his claims of transformation. Saul just turns up, and possibly the last thing that the Apostles knew of him was when he was sent off to persecute.

Barnabas steps in and bridges the gap between Saul and the Apostles. We first saw Barnabas in chapter 4, when he sold a field and brought the money to the Apostles for use in the church. Acts 4 tells us the Apostles named him Barnabas which means "son of encouragement". So he's trusted by the Apostles.

Maybe Barnabas had met Saul before if he travelled to Damascus at some point. Maybe Barnabas just took a chance and went to see whether Saul was really changed like he said. Whatever the circumstance, we'll see later in Acts how Barnabas and Saul become partners travelling huge distances taking the gospel to new places.

Saul says that when he gets to Jerusalem he is only able to meet with Peter and James, two of the Apostles. Maybe the others were afraid, or maybe they were off elsewhere. Apostle literally means 'sent one', so it's no surprise they went to the reaches of their known world, taking the gospel with them.

Saul gets to join the church in Jerusalem and meet a couple of Apostles and of course he starts preaching in Jerusalem too.

v28-30

28 So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. 29 And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him. 30 And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

Much as we saw in Damascus, when Saul gets to Jerusalem, he can't help but preach. He again gets into hot water, this time with the Hellenists, who you'll remember are the Jews that are culturally Greek, living in Greek speaking areas, typically just visiting Jerusalem. These presumably aren't the Hellenist brothers of chapter 6, but Hellenists that have not become Christians.

And again, once he faces the immanent possibility of death, because of what he is saying, he is whisked off elsewhere to continue to preach.

So we see that Saul really thinks there is something worth dying for - his faith in Christ and the proclamation of it. But he also realises that God does not require us to die for our faith. Jesus *already* died for our faith, nothing more is required.

Saul's brothers in Christ take him to Caesarea, by the coast and send him off, possibly by sea, to Tarsus. Tarsus was Saul's home town.

We meet Saul again at the end of chapter 11 (v25) when Barnabas who gets sent to Antioch, goes to Tarsus to fetch Saul and bring him to help him at the church in Antioch.

v31

31 So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.

All in all, despite the opposition, the church grows. What started in Acts 1 as around 120 people, in the upper room, has spread to far distant cities, reaching thousands of people. Through Acts so far we've seen Christians on trial, put in prison, stoned to death, yet they keep going.

What's the key? The key is that they walked in the fear of the Lord, rather than in the fear of men. In the face of opposition they had the comfort of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

In Acts we see lots of people transformed from being enemies of Christ to friends of Christ. We also see people that reject Christ and are hardened in their rejection. It seems that there are no neutral reactions to the gospel.

1 Corinthians 1:18:

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Whilst faith comes by hearing, as Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans, not everyone who hears has the same reaction. The underlying desires of the heart are at play.

In Jerusalem, the opposition to the church was at first questioning, then arresting, then went as far as stoning Stephen to death.

In Damascus, Saul was at first preaching and his opponents were amazed. But in time, his opponents were hardened to the extent that they tried to murder him.

God has two ways to deal with sinners. On the one hand he exercises his justice and destroys his enemies. He leaves them to their self-destructive sin, takes away his blessings and gives them what they want - a life apart from Him. In Acts we see this as those that oppose the gospel become more and more opposed to it and less and less restrained in their opposition. They heard the evidence, and rejected it. In eternity, they'll continue down this destructive path.

On the other hand, he transforms. In His mercy, He turns the hearts of sinners from love of their sin and selfishness and towards Him. He unites those that rejected Him with Himself, clothing us with righteousness and satisfying His justice on the cross, taking the wrath on Himself that we rightly deserve.

But we all start from the same place. The difference between us and Saul is one of degree rather than principle. What I mean, is that we were all opposed to God before He transformed us. The fact that we didn't go about trying to kill Christians is a difference of how much we had travelled down the road of sin - but the principle, the heart attitude toward God was of the same substance. We were those that rejected God.

Likewise, the difference between us and Saul after his Damascus road experience is one of degree - none of us can preach and teach like Saul could. We struggle with the things he says in his letters often, because we're not as transformed as he was yet. He seems to have so much faith, so much more sanctified than we are. But at the heart of it, we have been

transformed in the same way he was - our hearts are changed to desire Christ, our sins are paid for, we are given the Holy Spirit, awakened to new life, just like Paul was.

Everything about Paul seems to be dramatic and extreme, but even if we have a comparatively dull testimony, the same underlying transformation is at work, and fundamentally, the work that God has done in us is as glorious and amazing and gracious as it is for him. The same Holy Spirit that gave Paul the ability to face the danger of death and yet preach still, is the Holy Spirit living in us.