

WHO ARE YOU LORD?**Acts 9:1-30****(Read Acts 9:1-30 ESV)**

Intro: Today is Ascension Sunday – four days after the actual Ascension Day which was on Thursday and also 40 days after Resurrection Day. We are one week from Pentecost Sunday and we covered the passages where these are recorded in Acts 1 and 2, way back in February, so we will not be preaching from them today. But last week we talked about how the Church was dispersed into the world to finally do what Jesus had told them to do, back on Ascension Day. His words were that they were to go into all the world and make disciples in Matthew, and in Acts 1, his words were for them to leave Jerusalem and go into Judea, and Samaria, and to (as the KJV puts it) *the uttermost part of the earth* Acts 1:8 KJV. They hadn't done that but persecution finally pushed them out.

As I said, that's what we looked at last week. Now, as I told you in a Friday email, and as you just read, today we're talking about a Pharisee by the name of Saul who was persecuting Christians with fanatical intensity and how he met, face to face, with the ascended Lord. So, today, on this Ascension Sunday, we will be looking at how Saul the persecutor became Saul the disciple of that same risen and ascended Jesus Christ.

I don't like to disappoint people. My temptation when I get a scribble from a little one that is supposed to be a picture of me, is, "How beautiful!" And that's a lie. I lied in a similar way, almost daily, on my first paint job when I began my painting business at 16 years old. My first customer was Mrs. French, a mercurial and moody old lady from whom the farmer, I also worked, rented land. I painted her entire house in the summer of 1973. Generally she liked me and treated me well. Every day she would bring out some iced mint tea. It was supposed to be made from mint, but it was bitter and I decided almost right away that it was actually a weed, and frankly, I thought it was poisonous. She would bring me a glass and I'd thank her for it and tell her how good it was. But as soon as she left I would throw it into the ground cover nearby and go thirsty. Well, since I'd said I'd like it seemingly drank it so fast she just kept making me more. She gave it to me all summer long, just because I wasn't honest enough to tell her that it was dreadfully awful. I was being kind, I guess, but mostly I was being dishonest.

Queen Gertrude, Hamlet's mother in Shakespeare's play, Hamlet, described a similar kind of deception in an interchange with her son that has become quite famous for the expression that comes out of it. In the play, Hamlet has staged a play to try to flush out the murderer of his father. During the play, Hamlet turns to his mother, Queen Gertrude, and asks, "Madam, how like you this play?"

To which his mother replies, "*The lady doth protest too much, methinks.*"

The lady that Gertrude is referring to is also a queen, like herself, who is defending her virtue because her faithfulness has been questioned. Gertrude obviously thought that the queen was going a little bit overboard with her protestations of innocence, which showed that most likely she was being just as unfaithful as suspected. She protested too much.

This fanatical Pharisee in our passage today, Saul, had been the keeper of the coats when Stephen was murdered for preaching the Gospel. From that point on his attacks against the Church had only gotten more virulent. Our text says that Saul was . . . *still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord* Acts 9:1. as he went to the high priest and asked him for letters which were, essentially warrants, for the arrest of anyone who was teaching about Jesus. He was so fanatical that many think that he was actually being driven by a guilty conscience. Essentially it was . . .

Saul protests too much, methinks

- F. B. Meyer is one of many, along with myself, who feel that it could be that Saul was working under conviction. In other words, his guilty conscience about the murder of an innocent Stephen was driving him to turn up the pressure on what he thought was the proper course of action. Meyer also points out, and we've seen this in the pro-life movement, that the biggest opponent often becomes the most ardent proponent, that Saul had been the greatest persecutor, now he will eventually become the most energetic evangelist for the way of Jesus Christ.
- This could be. This is how the Holy Spirit begins stirring the souls of men and women. Regardless, it was time for an introduction . . .

Saul, meet Jesus

- Saul's calling and his subsequent conversion was nothing less than extraordinary. That is, not many people come to faith in Jesus this way. But some people, like Saul, are tough nuts to crack and they need to be rocked to their very core. Let me ask, who do you know, that, in your estimation, would take a lightning strike from heaven to actually listen to the call of God? Yep – you know someone like that and it was Saul for sure.
- On top of that, Saul's theology was influenced by the rabbinical teaching of the past several centuries which held that God no longer spoke directly to human beings as he did in the days of the prophets. In fact F. F. Bruce points out that they believed they only heard the echo of God's voice. It seemed it even had little to do with scripture. They just hoped that what they heard was from God.
- Well, for Saul this was pretty unmistakably God the Son when a bright blinding light came in the middle of the day. Now think about this: This is the desert of Syria where the most common day is a cloudless one with the sun blazing mercilessly and bright. So to have an even brighter light blast through the mid-day Sun, well, you'd fall down too.
- Here's a quick aside: Many paintings of this incident in Acts 9 have Paul falling from a horse. The truth is he almost certainly was not mounted. He was probably just walking along on what was a six-day journey from Jerusalem to Damascus. Adam Clark comments that Renaissance painters often portrayed Saul as a well-dressed patrician falling from a beautiful steed like in this painting by Caravaggio from 1601. He then points out, and this makes me smile, that artists are notoriously bad commentators. Regardless, Paul was no doubt walking with a crowd of people, as he was struck to the ground by a mighty bright light.
- And through the glare he heard, "*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?!*" Acts 9:4. Our text tells us that everyone were speechless at what had happened. The men with him (and they were almost certainly all men) had heard something but obviously they couldn't quite tell what had happened. However, it was as plain as day to Saul.
- Paul's response was "*Who are you, Lord?*" and the immediate answer was, "*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.*" Acts 9:5b. For Saul it was . . .

Mission changed!

- Get up, Saul, and continue into Damascus and I will give you your marching orders. Now, physically, Saul was blind as a bat. The ones who were with him needed to lead him by the hand into the city.
- Our text then tells us that he took neither food nor drink for 3 days. The beginning Saul's journey with Jesus began with sensory obstruction – that is blindness and also fasting. His mind and his heart were changing already.
- One of the neatest things about this account it that we even have the address of where Saul was staying in Damascus. He was in *the house of Judas on the Street called Straight* (Acts 9:11). This is still something you can look up in the city of Damascus – it's that amazingly specific as were the details of Saul's mission realignment – it was the main street to be exact.
- Our text tells us . . . *a disciple at Damascus named Ananias* Acts 9:10. Some translations say *a certain disciple* (KJV, NASB, etc) was sent to him at the house of Judas on the Street called Straight. We don't know anything about Ananias other than the fact that he was very obedient.
- When God called him to go meet Saul he, no doubt, gulped and replied . . .

Who? Me?!

- And the answer was, my paraphrase, "*Yes you Ananias!*"
- Here's the beauty of it all that we can learn from this: God uses anyone and everyone he chooses. F. B. Meyer writes "*How graciously God makes use of prepared souls as partners in the work of salvation! It would have been easy for the Risen Lord to have, himself, completed what he had begun; or he might have brought a Philip or an apostle upon the scene. But, instead of this, he called a comparatively obscure man who was to give Saul the help and counseling he needed. See to it that you are such a temper that Jesus may commission you to heal the wounds with which he brings his predestined servants to the ground. A little taper (that is, a candle) may be used to kindle a gray light. Though not a great man, Ananias was*

preeminently a good man, and he had his suspicions about Saul, but laid them aside at the bidding of Christ. Be mobile to Christ's touch, while you are strong against all others."

- Here's my point: GET READY! What happened to Ananias could happen to you. Be ready to advocate for the one that others are afraid of. Be ready to stand up when others are cowering.
- Because of the prayer of this willing disciple, Saul's sight was restored. The text says that something like scales fell off his eyes. Saul now could see clearly because his physical vision was back, but in those 3 days the Risen Lord had completely given him . . .

New spiritual sight

- Bruce Bickel and Stan Jantz, in their Christianity 101 Bible Study of Acts, write this, "*The man who once held the coats of those who killed Stephen is going to take the message of Christ to Gentiles, Kings, and the people of Israel.*" It was a completely new day.
- Saul had new friends. Our text is clear that Christ Followers were reluctant to get close to him for sure. His reputation had preceded him and the entire region knew about this man who had been so wildly intent upon wiping out the Followers of Jesus Christ. They were justifiably concerned about what kind of trick this might be. But Saul won them over through the encouragement of his first friend, Ananias, and then later Barnabas who took him and brought him to the apostles when Saul returned to Jerusalem. When you have somebody like Barnabas vouching for you it certainly gives you great entree. He slowly won over the Church as he wore down their misgivings.
- In addition to new friends, he had new enemies. His former colleagues now plotted to kill him. Verse 24 says that they were watching the city gates around the clock in order to waylay him and murder him. This account brings a fond memory of a picture that comes to mind from my Bible Story Book when I was a child: of the disciples of Christ lowering their newly acquired fellow disciple down the wall of the city in a basket. Saul's life went from being a killer to avoiding being killed.
- Saul's new sight brought a new message. Whereas before his message had been one of hate and breathing threats and accusations against the people of God, he was now one of them and he was preaching boldly the Good News of a resurrected Savior. Verses 26 to the end of our passage record how Saul went out among the people in Jerusalem as he was preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. He was so effective and knowledgeable as he debated the religious leaders and they didn't like it – the problem was – he knew their tactics and turned it right back on them. Now they were seeking to kill him, so his new brothers and sisters in Christ evacuated him to Caesarea and then shipped him off to his hometown of Tarsus.

Conclusion: Saul's question, "*Who are you Lord?*" brought about everything he needed. He received the Holy Spirit, and this same man who was formally full of hate and anger and murderous thoughts, was now filled with the love of Jesus Christ. Saul was a new creation.

Next week is Pentecost Sunday when we celebrate the arrival of the Holy Spirit in a new way for the Church. Saul was experiencing this, and he was experiencing the transformation that the Holy Spirit brings. Joshua Luke Smith, writing in a devotional I was reading a couple of weeks ago, said this "*The Holy Spirit does not discard broken people he restores and commissions them.*" The Lord Jesus Christ, the very one Saul had been persecuting, now restored and commissioned Saul for a new work. He still does that – have you experienced it? Amen