

The Hunter Was Hunted

Turning the World Right Side Up . . . The Apostle Paul – Part I

Acts 9:1-9

Introduction

Dwight Moody was a famous evangelist in the 1800's whose ministry founded everything from schools to publishing houses to churches. However, those who knew him best as a younger man, had every reason to be amazed when he became a Christian.

A man who would later lead D. L. Moody to the Lord, wrote these words on May of 1855,

I can truly say that I have seen few persons whose minds were spiritually darker than was his when he came into my Sunday School class. And I think the committee of the church seldom met an applicant for membership who seemed more unlikely to become a Christian of clear and decided views of Gospel truth, still less to fill any space of public or extended usefulness.

As a result of Moody's failed interview for membership, he was placed by the church on a year long study – the next year he applied again and barely passed.

Perhaps you can remember the surprise of your friends or maybe even your family, when they learned that you had become a Christian.

You may have had people say to you, "I can't believe it – you've become a Christian? Not you!"

Perhaps you were voted by your classmates, "Most likely to be pagan" or "Most likely to end up in jail!" But not, "Most likely to become a Christian."

I remember reading the biographical account of Corrie ten Boom, the Christian woman who helped Jewish people during World War II and suffered at the hands of brutal German guards in a concentration camp. Years later, while speaking to a group of believers, she recognized a man in her audience as one of those guards. When they met after the service, she was able to verbalize to him her forgiveness, yet she was overwhelmed with the surprise that this man could have ever become a Christian.

In the "book of action" or Acts, chapter 9, the camera lens of scripture focuses on a zealous young Pharisee named Saul. As a young boy, he had been sent to Jerusalem to live with his married sister. While there, Saul had experienced the rare privilege of being tutored by the greatest Jewish mind of his generation – the brilliant Pharisee scholar Gamaliel.

If you turn to chapter 5 of Acts, you will hear Saul's teacher sway the Sanhedrin with his logic. The apostles are standing before the high court, guilty of promoting their new-found faith. Notice verses 38 through 40a.

So in the present case, I say to you, stay away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or action is of men, it will be overthrown; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be found fighting against God." They took his advice . . .

Evidently, between this verse and the passage we are about to study, Saul and Gamaliel parted ways. Gamaliel was convinced that the apostles and the early

church should be left alone. Paul was convinced that Christianity could not be tolerated; that it was a threat to Judaism; that it was blasphemy against the God of Abraham. To Paul, Christians must be exterminated and Christianity stamped out!

Then, if you turn to chapter 8, you may remember that we were introduced to Saul for the first time. As Stephen is being stoned to death for his faith in Christ, notice in verse 1 that,

Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death. And on that day, a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem; and they were scattered throughout . . .

This verse in chapter 8 implies something that chapter 9 will confirm – Paul is the leader of the Jerusalem holocaust; the dreaded hunter of Christians.

I do not believe anyone in the history of the church shocked more people with his conversion to Christ than Saul. He was the man guilty of the deaths and imprisonments of hundreds, if not thousands of believers.

Sent!

Before Luke tells us that part of the story, he opens the first paragraph of our study in chapter 9, with dramatic, edge of your seat vocabulary. Look at verse 1.

Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest,

The word in this verse that is translated “breathing” was a word that in the Greek, was commonly used to describe battle stallions snorting breath from their nostrils as they prepared to charge.

A. T. Robertson, in his *Word Pictures of the New Testament*, wrote, “Threatening and slaughter had come to be the very breath that Saul breathed, like a war horse who sniffed the smell of battle.”

To Saul, the battle was for the sake of God. He was defending the honor of Judaism; the Jewish distinctives of sacrifice and temple worship. He was guarding the nation against the followers of an executed imposter.

John Pollock writes,

Saul charged like an animal tearing its prey. This was not the sad efficiency of an officer obeying distasteful orders; his heart was

engaged . . . every suspect, man or woman, had to stand before the elders while Saul, as the High Priest’s representative, put to them the demand that they should curse Jesus. He threw them into dungeons. The majority were punished by public flogging . . . it was not a sight for the squeamish. . . Saul remained unmoved as men and women staggered away with backs a mass of blood.

Continue to verse 2.

. . . [he] went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

“The Way” was the earliest designation for Christians. It was coined by the believers who followed the Teacher who claimed to be “. . . the way, the truth, and the life . . .”. It will not be until we reach chapter 11 of Acts that we will hear them called “Christians” for the first time.

The hunter of wayward Jews has been sent with direct approval and commendation from Caiaphas. Paul is to capture as many as he can and bring them back to Jerusalem to face torture, interrogation, and possibly even death.

If you were a Christian living in that day, you would be feeling a mixture of courage to share the gospel, as they faithfully did, and fear of being captured and tortured.

I read with sadness this past week, reports that are now becoming more and more numerous of the many Christians in the Sudan interior who are being sold into slavery. The Muslim government is closing their eyes to this unique form of persecution. As a result, for fifteen dollars, you can buy someone who has forfeited their personal rights because they will not recant and turn from their faith in Jesus Christ. I would imagine there are slave hunters in the regions of this African country who are known and feared by the believers.

In Judea, the name of the hunter was Saul. That name filled them with fear to the point that, later in this chapter, even after they have heard that Saul has come to faith in Christ, the believers in Jerusalem will not go near him.

Shocked!

We are about to discover that the hunter was in the process of being hunted. As Francis Thompson once penned, "Hunted by the Hound of Heaven." The man who thought he was going to Damascus to capture the scattered Christians, was about to be captured himself by Christ!

Notice verse 3.

As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him;

We are told in Acts, chapter 22, verse 6, that this occurred at noontime, so this blinding light outshines the light of the sun.

I Corinthians, chapter 15, verse 8, informs us that Paul actually saw the resurrected Christ in brilliant display. This was a glorious sight for him that he would never forget.

For now, however, it was the shock of his life! Look at verses 3b through 4.

. . . suddenly, a light from heaven flashed around him; and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

Can you imagine this? Saul's mind is racing, "Persecuting God? I thought I was serving God – by persecuting and capturing and killing these blasphemers. Surely I was not persecuting the God of heaven!"

What encouraging words these are to all the Christians of the first century and of this century! When you are persecuted for righteousness sake, the enemy whispers in your ear, "You are all alone. God doesn't care. He's too far removed; He might not even see!"

Yet these words in verse 4, have for the last two thousand years, been a source of deep encouragement. Can you imagine the early Christians in Rome reading this and knowing that they are not alone? Jesus Christ says to them, "When you are persecuted, I am persecuted; I am with you; I am touched by the feelings of your infirmities; I see every act of evil against you. And I want you to know that ultimately, they are not persecuting you – those lashes and insults and murders – they are all meant for Me."

Look at verse 4b again.

"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

Saul's mind is reeling with shock! And now, in verse 5, comes the startling insight,

And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" . . .

It is as if he is saying, "Surely, You are not related to these runaway Jews?! Let me know for certain, Lord, clearly identify Yourself."

Continue to verse 5b.

And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting,"

No! It was all true! This Jesus of Nazareth who was beaten and crucified and buried, He really was the Messiah, the Son of the Living God! He really did come back to life! He really was the way, and the truth, and the life!

Imagine the dawning revelation to Saul, "This means Stephen, whose death I approved, and all the others like him – those in the homes I have ripped apart, those whom I have caused grief – these people were innocent! The Sanhedrin was guilty! No, I am guilty!"

Saved!

Turn to the account in Acts, chapter 22, where Saul, now Paul personally tells the story. It is in chapter 22 that we are given an added, interesting piece to the account. Notice verses 9 and 10.

And those who were with me saw the light, to be sure, but did not understand the voice of the One who was speaking to me. And I said, "What shall I do, Lord?"

Notice the phrase, "What shall I do, Lord?" Paul did not say, "What shall I do, Jesus of Nazareth?" Instead, as an act of acceptance and, I believe, in the moment of salvation for him, he addressed Jesus as Lord.

The hunter had been captured by the divine Hunter of Heaven.

And by the way, Paul will rarely ever refer to Jesus Christ as just Jesus. In fact, I want to encourage you to work on your vocabulary. While using the name Jesus alone is certainly not wrong, it is rarely done in the epistles.

Peter's epistles, in fact, never refer to Jesus alone. It is always our God and Savior, or Jesus Christ, or the Lord Jesus, or simply, the Lord. James never uses Jesus alone either. He never refers to Him without adding titles of deity and Messiahship and Sovereignty. John, in his three epistles, also never uses the name Jesus alone. The apostle Paul, who wrote thirteen New Testament epistles and refers to

Him more than two hundred times, uses the name Jesus alone on the average of one time per book.

What is going on? What should we learn? Jesus is a special name. It was ordered by the angel. It was a common name though, “Yeshua”. Jews named their sons in honor of Joshua, in hopes that their sons would be leaders in Israel. It literally means “Savior”. But this Jesus was not a hope, He was the Christ (anointed Messiah); He was the Lord (sovereign Master); He was, as Peter wrote, “Our God”.

Saul never got over that experience – the moment when he realized that Jesus was the Lord of heaven. The classic passage where Paul stresses this is in Philippians, chapter 2. Look at verses 10 and 11.

so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow . . . and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord . . .

So, “Lord, what do you want me to do now?”

Surrendered!

Now turn to chapter 26 of Acts. In this chapter, Paul is giving his testimony once more to King Agrippa. In it, we discover more details concerning what Christ told Paul on that Damascus road. Look at verses 15 through 19.

And I said, “Who art Thou, Lord?” And the Lord said, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But get up and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you; rescuing you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.”

What a commission! The one who hunted for Christians is now to hunt for those who do not believe; to capture them for the dominion of God.

Now for the next three days, Saul will be unable to see. Turn back to chapter 9 and notice verse 8.

Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus.

Now, imagine this scene. The great and terrible Saul; the feared hunter of Christians had planned to ride into Damascus with authority and power – let all who claim this Nazarene tremble. But now, he is led by the hand. They come into Damascus under the curious stares of all the city’s inhabitants . . . especially the Christians.

Continue to verse 9.

And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

We do not read anywhere that Saul was commanded not to eat. However, if you were him, could you?

He was in some room, with no one there to help him, and was perhaps wondering if he would ever be able to see again. The last blinding sight was the resurrected Christ. There in that room where food and drink were distasteful, he waited. We learn from Acts, chapter 22, verse 10, that Christ told him to wait in Damascus and that he would be told what to do next. And so, he waited – and while he waited in the dark, how he must have mourned his past; how his sightless eyes must have wept. The life and career of this proud, brilliant, zealous man had tumbled down around him. Everything he had believed was wrong; everything he had stood for was a lie. Everyone he had wronged had been right.

One author writes,

God crushed Saul, bringing him to the point of total consecration. From the ashes of Saul’s old life would arise the noblest and most useful man of God the church has ever known.

Learning From the Damascus Encounter

So, what can we personally apply from this Damascus encounter?

Do not ever underestimate the power of simple truth

1. First, do not ever underestimate the power of simple truth.

Perhaps you are intimidated. You would never speak to that person at work who swears; who jeers at the foolishness of Christians; who mocks the Bible. Perhaps you think you need a degree in biblical apologetics before you could ever approach him.

Perhaps you think you need profound reasoning ability and a thorough understanding of all the deep doctrinal truths. You might think to yourself, “That person will never be won to Christ.”

The thing that God uses to win a person; to convict a person is not the brilliance of your argument, but the simplicity of the gospel. The simple truth about Jesus Christ transformed the apostle Paul.

Indeed, the apostle Paul had an incredible experience, yet he will talk in his epistles of salvation as an encounter with the truth of the gospel, not a miraculous vision. He writes, in Romans, chapter 1, verse 16,

For I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes . . .

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the oratorical pastor in London a century ago, is said to have told some of his students near the end of his life, “The older I become the more simple the truth of the Bible has become, until it is simply this, ‘Jesus Christ died for me.’”

Do not ever underestimate the power of the simple truth that this magnificent resurrected Lord, died to save sinners. And sinners who admit they are, and come to Him for salvation, find in Him their Savior.

Do not ever underestimate the reach of God’s grace

2. Do not ever underestimate the reach of God’s grace.

To the church, Paul would never have been considered a potential candidate for salvation. He was their feared enemy; he was the “hound of hell”. I doubt Paul was ever on anyone’s prayer list. Not Paul!

God’s grace would reach even Paul!

John Newton, the slave trader who later confessed Christ as his personal Savior, would write the well known hymn, *Amazing Grace*. He wrote,

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now I’m found.*

Was blind, but now I see.

Newton lived and served the Lord for many years. Once, as an aged man, he was speaking about heaven and said,

There are three wonders about heaven to me:

- *The first wonder will be the number of people who are there that I did not expect to see.*
- *The second wonder will be the number of people who aren’t there that I expected to see.*
- *The third and greatest wonder of all will be to find myself there!*

I want you to just listen as the aged apostle Paul writes to Timothy, his young disciple. Paul was near the finish line and writes a personal testimony that revealed he had never completely forgotten the early years when he was known and feared as Saul. Look at I Timothy, chapter 1, verses 13 through 16, where he writes,

even though I was a formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief; and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus. It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life.

That is another way of saying, “Timothy, if God can save me, I know He can save anyone.”

He closes his paragraph, in verse 17, by saying of his Lord Christ,

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 3/2/1997 by Stephen Davey.

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