

## Letters From Paul – Session Six

### Dear Saul: Who Used To Be Paul, What's Your Story?

#### Acts 9:1-9

“Well, I was on my way to Damascus for work and BOOM!” The writer of Acts tells the story like this:

*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?’ Saul asked, ‘Who are you Lord?’ ‘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’ (Acts 9: 3-6).*

If you've been around scripture study for several years you likely know this story by rote memory. That said, has it grown too familiar and lost its *amazingness*? I'm not sure if 'amazingness' is an actual word, but you get the idea. Saul was a bad man who felt he was serving God by eradicating the new movement who followed Jesus of Nazareth as both Hebrew Messiah and Lord. In his eyes such a thought would be blasphemous at best. There was one God, G-d, Yahweh, Most High God of Israel, and while there would be a Messiah one day (at God's selected time) it would not be a lower middle-class carpenter's son from the boonies. The Messiah would come from the high and holy confines of Judaism and would be a zealot who would save Judaism from Rome and restore the faith to its original glory. Again, *not this Jesus guy*.

#### **Who was Saul?**

Saul of Tarsus was a well-connected and highly educated Jewish leader, a second-generation Pharisee, and a Roman citizen (which would come in handy later). He was born in approximately AD 5 in Tarsus, modern-day Turkey, but his family moved to Jerusalem when Saul was approximately ten years of age. He began a serious study of Hebrew scriptures five or so years later with the Rabbi Gamaliel. It is noteworthy that Saul studied with Gamaliel but took on a much harder stance

against the early followers of Jesus than his teacher held. In fact, it is Gamaliel who famously cautioned the Sanhedrin to tread lightly with John and Peter after they were brought up on charges that could have involved a death sentence. Gamaliel insists that John and Peter be removed from the assembly area before he addresses the august body of the Sanhedrin about being cautious in dealing with the followers of Jesus:

*In the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God (Acts 5:38-39).*

Gamaliel's address to the Sanhedrin successfully saved the lives of two pivotal apostles and early church founders. It also kept the movement alive and made it possible for Saul to make the turn from persecuting the early followers of Jesus Christ to being one of those followers. *Ah, it's fun to take the rearview mirror approach and look back on how God moved the chess pieces around to allow for the church to survive, then thrive, against all but impossible odds.*

Saul grew in his understanding and mastery of the Hebrew Law, as well as the full scope of Jewish history. While this propelled him to the top of the *Young Guns* list of up and coming Rabbis, it also prepared him to present Jesus as the Christ citing the Law, tradition and history. Again, God placing people in positions of service long before they realized (or could possibly understand) how they would one day serve God and his messianic plans.

Saul became powerful and influential and as such had the attention of the Chief Priests. Several writers call Saul "a Pharisee of Pharisees." The Chief Priests were the elite religious leaders of the day, the small but powerful group who held complete authority of the Temple and as such, Judaism. Saul would do their bidding as he/they sought to eradicate all facets of this cult who followed the very common and would-be-Messiah Jesus of Nazareth. At this point Saul would not have believed that the crucified imposter could have lived through his capital execution, much less resurrected and ascended to heaven.

The writer of Acts mentions Saul three times before chapter nine. In each instance Saul is portrayed as a bitter opponent of Jesus Christ and the new movement (deemed *The Way* rather than Christianity). Saul had condoned (some say influenced) the murder of Stephen, solidifying his reputation as an enforcer for the Sanhedrin.

*When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and say the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see heaven open up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.' At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul (Acts 8:54-58).*

A couple of verses later it reads, *'And Saul was there, giving approval to his death.'* His nefarious resume extended with the writer of Acts words: *On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church, making a house-to-house search for Christians, dragging men and women off to prison (Acts 8:1-3).*

Saul was said to be in full attack mode when he requested letters of permission to travel to Damascus to round up Christ-followers who had moved there from Jerusalem due to his actions: *He was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples (9:1).* Damascus was located in Syria, 150 or so miles Northeast of Jerusalem. Damascus is still one of the oldest intact cities in the history of the world and in the days of Saul/Paul was a commercial and transportation hub for the entire Middle East. In the days of Saul this journey would have taken six days on foot. With the various diaspora-fueled movements of Jews moving away from Jerusalem Damascus was home to approximately 10,000 displaced Jews, and as such many synagogues. The synagogues were to be Saul's main ally in finding and imprisoning followers of Jesus. But, and this is a big

however, Saul did not make it to Damascus in the same state he left Jerusalem. Saul was on a collision course with the entire Holy Trinity, a course that changed the course of the world.

### **Saul to Paul: What Happened on the Road to Damascus?**

I'm guessing Paul felt travel insurance would've been a good idea for his 150 mile trek from Jerusalem to Damascus. Intent on making this trip count and optimizing his power against the new movement, Saul was nearing his destination when, well, let's allow scripture to inform us on what happened next, and next and next.

*(So he obtained authorization and left for Damascus). Just outside the city, a brilliant light flashing from heaven suddenly exploded all around him. Falling to the ground he heard a booming voice say to him, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? The men accompanying Saul were stunned and speechless, for they heard a heavenly voice but could see no one. Saul replied, 'Who are you Lord?' 'I am Jesus, the Victorious, the one you are persecuting. Now, get up and go into the city, where you will be told what you are to do.'* (Acts 9:3-7).

John R.W. Stott writes "He was in no mood to consider the claims of Christ. His heart was filled with hatred and his mind was poisoned with prejudice." Stott is a legend and he's one of my go-to theologians but in this case we disagree. Saul was laser-focused on serving extradition orders to followers of Jesus living in Damascus. He was functioning as the Sanhedrin enforcer. The possibility of Jesus as Messiah was not even percolating as he was in sight of Damascus.

Saul's encounter with the risen Christ was so fantastic and dramatic he was forced to deal with the possibility, especially after the sheer power of the encounter knocked him to his knees and caused him to go blind. *Do I have your attention, Saul?*

The voice addressed Saul personally.

**Question:** Did Saul know the voice was Jesus? The narrative states Saul responded by saying, "Who are you Lord?" This suggests Saul figured it out quickly, but Lord

in Aramaic also meant Sir. It could have been Saul was being polite and respectful, and if that's the case it's understandable. If a blinding light and booming voice came from the sky and called my name...I'd be Boy Scout polite.

I am Jesus, the victorious, the one you are persecuting. Jesus and the young gun of the Sanhedrin face to face, well sort of face to face. At least they are talking. It may have been his face or his body language but that moment was the end of Saul. In short order he would be called Paul and he would emerge as the leading church planter and evangelist of the New Testament era. Oh, and he would go on to pen the bulk of our scripture.

**Question:** Was this a conversion?

Saul did not recite the sinner's prayer; he was not taken down the Roman Road; he did not walk down the aisle of a church and pray with a pastor. Nope, he was knocked to his knees, blinded by a Divine light and confronted by Jesus. He would end up in Damascus, but not in the way he had planned. He entered as a humbled man who had experienced a dramatic encounter with the Risen Messiah. He was changing with every blind step. His was a radical transformation. He didn't stop being Jewish so there was not a conversion in the way we define it. He became a complete Jew.

**Question:** What did Jesus command him to do?

*Go wash in the Jordan River and present yourself to a priest.* No, that was the game plan for healed lepers. In fact, Saul was not allowed to discuss the finer points of salvation outside the Law. He didn't get to say what was undoubtedly swirling around his brain: *You're alive? You came back from that crucifixion? You weren't lying about being the Messiah?*

Jesus told Saul to *get up and go into the city*. Saul got up, and with help, went into the city. And the rest is history.

Takeaway:

1. Saul/Paul is a great example of prevenient grace. Prevenient grace holds that no one can pursue God without God first pursuing them. Saul/Paul's

Damascus Road encounter with Jesus is evidence of God pursuing him long before that day.

God had designs on Saul. Plans for his life. Kingdom plans.

God pursued each of us before we were in sight of him.

2. Salvation is not about how righteous one can be – it has nothing to do with any acts or works or effort on our part – It is God pursuing us until we are ready to make our biggest life's decision – and, obviously, some are more dramatic than others.
3. Remembering our initial salvation experience is a way to combat doubt. Everyone has, at one point or another, doubted their faith or their salvation. Even if you were 8 and accepted Jesus into your life/heart/soul you have a moment or a series of moments to fall back upon.
4. After we do accept salvation and become a professed follower of Jesus, we are expected to *do something*. Get up and go is a concise way to begin our new life as a believer. It's a verb faith *after* salvation. Will we rise to the Saul/Paul level? I haven't but hey, that's a very high bar. So I think I'll just get up and go!

Amen and Amen

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