

Installment 5

A Climate of Hate or Joy

The events recorded in Acts 9:1 through 9:31 about Saul of Tarsus may have occurred anywhere in a span from two weeks to two years. Dating events in this chapter is very difficult. Nonetheless, chapter 9 tells us that Saul's powerful conversion was stunning to Christians as well as Jews. The very idea of Saul going about preaching that Jesus is the Son of God was at one time totally foreign to Saul's thinking. He had been denying Christ's divinity and taking pleasure in killing those who believed it. Paul wore himself out slapping the chains on Christians and hauling them to Jerusalem for trial. Following his conversion, I imagine Paul had many hours of repentance for his attempts to rip the lives of Christians apart. No wonder he later said he was the worst of sinners.

Acts 9:17-28

¹⁷ *So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."*

¹⁸ *And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, ¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength.*

For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, ²⁰ and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." ²¹ All who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked this name? And has he not come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?" ²² Saul became increasingly more powerful and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah.

²³ *After some time had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, ²⁴ but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night so that they might 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.*

²⁶ *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, brought him to the apostles, and described for them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus. ²⁸ So he went in and out among them in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name*

of the Lord.¹

It is not surprising that Jewish Christians would draw back from Saul. But it is strange that seemingly everyone, friend and foe alike, were suspicious of Saul's intentions. Everyone was uncertain. It was almost too much to think that this dreaded enemy had suddenly become a friend of Christians. As though to reinforce the reality of Paul's conversion, his change of heart is mentioned many times in just a few verses.

Reread the scripture verses above, observe the words that are underlined. Note: the Jews did not trust Saul; his former friends were now plotting to kill him, Saul seemed to walk on a tightrope wherever he was. I should say that only a personal appearance would convince Saul that Jesus was who Christians were saying He was. In Saul's personal life, as well as in the life of the Jewish nation, it would take a welcoming of the Savior. [Note that only selected verses are treated for study below.]

In the Name of the Lord

1 ^{9:1} *Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.*

The early Christians lived in a climate of intimidation and fear. Of course, studies show now that the more death is discussed as an option for one's life, the more prisoners are conditioned to expect death at any moment. One can hardly blame Christians for laying low or trying to escape to remote areas. And, when a group is named, "the Way," the more likely that group will be blamed falsely for whatever the dominant group wants to charge it with. Tiberius, Emperor of the Roman Empire when Saul met the Lord, was for the most part a generous man, yet he had his bad days and the Christians paid for them. With Rome on one side, suspicious Jews on the other, Christians had little chance for a "normal" life.

2 ⁵ *[Saul] asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.*

¹ Acts 9:17-28, NIV.

Saul made a common mistake when he was rounding up men and women to persecute. Some think that if you want to get rid of a movement, all you need do is kill off all the believers, or scare them off. If you do this your basic problem is solved. However, Christianity, properly speaking, is not a movement or a building, it is Christ Himself in His people. And, besides, how can one kill off a person who has already been killed and raised from death? The Lord Jesus made this clear when He responded to Saul by saying that the zealous young man failed to grasp the facts of the case! If one kills off all the people professing Christ, the Christ will simply raise up a new generation of believers, a new period of the church.

There is another dimension to this teaching that the church is principally the Christ *in* His people. In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul writes of the church that it is *the Body of Christ*. Perhaps you would want to read the entire chapter from which the following excerpt comes.

If one part of the body suffers, all the other parts share its suffering. If one part is praised, all the others share in its happiness. You are Christ's body and each of you is an individual part of it.²

3¹³ *But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; ¹⁴ and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name."*

An interesting short dialogue begins at vs. 10 between God and Ananias. The Lord God tells Ananias to go to Judas' house and there he will find Saul. Instructions follow, instructions that make Ananias wary. For a brief moment Ananias forgets that God is doing what is best for all concerned. There was a reason why the Lord chose Ananias for this task. At least this, in the Lord's eyes Ananias was a worthy man for the job. However, Ananias proved unworthy by questioning what the Lord wanted him to do. There is a lesson here for all Christians: God always has our best interests in mind and we do well by doing immediately what the Lord asks of us. It's a waste of time to say, "But Lord...."

² 1 Corinthians 12:26-27, God's Word Translation.

4 ¹⁶ *I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.*"

Keeping in mind that the following is not a translation, I really like the way The Message³ puts Acts 9:15-16. You remember that Ananias is hesitant to go to the stricken Saul with the message of God's converting and calling grace.

¹⁵⁻¹⁶ But the Master said, "Don't argue. Go! I have picked him as my personal representative to non-Jews and kings and Jews. And now I'm about to show him what he's in for—the hard suffering that goes with this job."

5 ¹⁷ *So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."*

Hopefully Ananias was more confident by the time he got to Saul. Fear can be communicated through one's voice as well as one's demeanor and facial expressions. As we have already seen, Ananias was apprehensive about meeting with Saul as it was. Would Saul revert to his old ways of taking prisoners to Rome for punishment? Would Saul be filled with the devil rather than the Spirit? Not if God said so! It was time for Ananias to take God at His word. The Lord promised that Saul would be filled with the Spirit, which is the Spirit of Peace, the Holy Spirit.

6 ²⁰ *and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."*

We do not know what went through Saul's mind as he sat out three difficult days totally blind. What do you think Saul was experiencing during those days? I think Saul was being taught some basic spiritual truths. I also think Saul experienced a sense of his sins being forgiven. And most of all, I believe Saul was convinced that the name of Jesus was powerful and that He was indeed the expected Messiah of Israel. It is impossible for us to grasp just how Saul felt, when it was said that He was actually punishing the Messiah!

7 ²² *Saul became increasingly more powerful and confounded the Jews who lived in Da-*

³ Acts 9:15-16, Paraphrase by Eugene Petersen, The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language, 2002.

mascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah.

What would Paul have to do to “prove” that Jesus is the Messiah? The answer to this requires more space than I have here. In essence, the Messiah is the “anointed One” of God, He who fulfills the promises of the prophets. In the New Testament Luke, author of Acts, shows that God takes on this task of identifying Jesus as “My Beloved Son” (see also Luke 2:8-14, 25-32, 36-40, 41-52; 3:21-22, in a genealogy :23-37; 4:1-11; through Jesus’ ministry and miracles. The heart of Biblical preaching is found repeatedly in Acts: **Jesus is the Son of God who secures our salvation** through death on the cross and being resurrected from the grave, and whom we accept by faith as the revelation of the living God. The Holy Spirit enabled Paul to communicate this faith.

8 ²³ *After some time had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, ²⁴ but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night so that they might kill him...*

Some scholars think Saul was informed by a young man who was a relative of the apostle⁴. How the young man got such information is pure speculation. Some think Saul used this opportunity to go to Arabia, owned at the time by North Africa. For my purposes, this verse and the following references are used to show the dilemmas Saul found himself in because of his commitment to the Lord. Such a murder would hardly be a private affair. Don’t you think this episode also shows the intensity of hate?.

9 ²⁶ *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.*

This trip by Paul to Jerusalem was *three years* after his experiences in Damascus! Still Paul was considered a trick or a threat, certainly not a Christian evangelist⁵. Then God acted again by using Barnabas to speak on Saul’s behalf. It is obvious that Barnabas was held in high esteem by the Christian community in Jerusalem. Think about how God was moving in Asia before Paul’s ministry began to take effect. The Lord is infinitely patient. Can you think of places in the world where God may be at work today although on the surface the situation seems God-forsaken?

⁴ Acts 23:16.

⁵ Cf. Gal. 1:18.

10 ²⁹ *He spoke and argued with the Hellenists; but they were attempting to kill him.* ³⁰ *When the believers learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.*

The “Hellenists” were Jews influenced significantly by Greek culture. We are learning that there were different groups of Jews then as now. Note the word “believers.” Some Christians were spiritual enough to see the hand of God at work in the life of this persecutor.⁶ It is useless to speculate how far these Christians were prepared to go in protecting Paul since the teachings of Jesus forbid the use of force in His Name. However, that might make a good question to probe in a group setting.

11 ³¹ *Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.*

Ananias’ availability to God tells us there was a vital Christian church in Asia. Ananias’ name in Greek, a common name, means “God has been gracious.” Certainly God was gracious to Saul in Damascus on that lonely evening. Tradition tells us Ananias remained a faithful Christian and that he eventually died a martyr’s death.

Did you notice the flow of events concerning Saul in Acts 9:1-31? At the beginning, he was breathing “murderous threats” and doing all he could to make them come true. But by the end of vs. 31, Saul has been converted and is preaching Christ with all the energy he has. Vs. 31 is a kind of summary verse, reflecting on the state of the church, which was very good.

Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

The churches throughout these areas were living in peace and being “built up,” growing in an atmosphere of tranquility. There was “fear” alright, “fear of the Lord.” The fear of the Lord meant to stand in awe of God, that is, to recognize the terror of the Lord, to know that God helps us even when we cannot utter any words but “help me.” Finally, the church, instead of cowering before Saul and others like him, rests in the comfort of the Holy Spirit. Mix all this together and we know God is with us in trouble.

⁶ The word “hand” here is metaphorical.

Something to Think About

1. What is “Christian” suffering? It seems to have been part of a Christian’s call in the first century to suffer. Those who follow Christ seriously, we are told, will suffer persecution...period! Do you agree with this? Have you *suffered* for Christ? Have you lived in a climate of suspicion? Know anybody who has?

2. In the early years of my ministry I was an Assistant to the Pastor at a church in Houston, Texas. It so happened that the organist for the church, Ruth B., babysat for our first child. Occasionally Ruth would give me piano lessons. She did this at noon and therefore we could discuss the church while we ate. One day I went to the back door and knocked as usual. I waited but did not hear anything even though only the screen door was open. Then I heard a sort of muffled “Come in.” I stepped in the room and smelled something cooking in the kitchen. “Ruth,” I said again. “In here,” she said. I entered the kitchen and saw Ruth stirring something on the stove. She was crying. Instantly I thought she had received news that her ailing mother had died. “What’s wrong, Ruth,” I asked as I approached the stove. “He really did it!” she said. “He really did it!... Look, its on the table.” Then I recalled seeing a Sunday lesson book opened on the table and it dawned on me what she was talking about. “Yes, Ruth, He really did it.” I said. I have never eaten chili with such a sense of joy. I think there were times when Paul also thought: “He really did it!”⁷

For the Next Installment: Who is Paul of Tarsus?

1. Read carefully Romans 15:7-16. What is Paul saying? How does Paul’s insight relate to your life?
2. Read John 15:18-16:4. How does Jesus teaching on the relationship between the world and His Disciples relate to Paul’s teaching in Romans 15:7-16?

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⁷ That Christ died on the cross for our sins. Ruth B. had that great truth dawn on her in a new way.