

The U-turn in Saul's Journey

[Acts 9:1-31]

READ Acts 9:1-31

We've got lots of annoying dogs in our neighbourhood – does that sound familiar??! But there are 2 that are particularly nasty – do you know what I mean?? I can be quietly cycling round our Soi's with our little children - when suddenly these 2 black beasts come rushing straight at us – barking, growling, lips curled and gnashing their bared teeth.

Last week we read that after Stephen gave his message before the Sanhedrin "they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him" [Acts 7:54] I have often wondered that would have looked like...the respected council of Jewish leaders with contorted faces and all gnashing their teeth. Maybe looking at those black dogs gives me some idea!

Well, Saul was one of those Jewish leaders, and today's passage opens by saying that Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the followers of Jesus when he went to the High Priest in Jerusalem. He went asking for written authority to pursue, capture and take prisoner anyone he found who belonged to "The Way" in Damascus...but he didn't arrive in Damascus filled with violent religious persecution –

- because of what happened on the way;
- because he was stopped and dramatically changed on the way.
- because of a U-turn experience that happened on the way.

A "Damascus Road experience" is synonymous with a dramatic conversion...and it is often used almost apologetically, in a negative sense..."I didn't had a Damascus Road experience". "When I became a Christian it wasn't "A Damascus Road experience". For that reason alone I think it's important that we correctly understand Saul's conversion experience – to understand the working of God's grace in Saul's life so that we can identify the working of God's grace in our own lives too.

→ How did Saul change so dramatically from being like a rabid wolf ready to tear apart God's flock, to being changed, not only to become one of Jesus' sheep, but a shepherd of the flock?

→ Given such an extraordinary vision, complete with being blinded and being given instructions to follow, did he have no option but to obey?

What is very clear is that Saul was converted through the sovereign grace of God through Jesus Christ.

GRACE = God's blessing freely given – not earned, not merited, not deserved;

GRACE = God's favour freely given because Jesus death on the cross paid the price for our rescue, redemption and restoration to relationship with God.

...but what does that grace look like? How does that grace work?

We can use scripture to explain scripture to answer these questions, because this story of Saul's conversion is given 3 times in Acts: here in Ch. 9 & twice later from the lips of Paul himself in chapters 22 & 26; and through Paul's own accounts of what happened we can see that, although it doesn't appear this way in chapter 9: GOD'S SOVERIGN GRACE

- *is neither sudden (as if there was no previous moving of God's spirit in his life to prepare him for this moment)*
- *Nor is it compulsive (as if he had no personal choice)*

God's grace was not sudden – like a fisherman landing a fish; like a cat stalking a lizard, or like one person's set of chess pieces closing in on another's until it is checkmate, so God's grace had pursued Saul – until this moment on the Damascus Road. Admitted God's final intervention was very dramatic and sudden, but listen to what Paul says when retelling his story to King Agrippa in Chapter 26:

“About noon, O King, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. We all fell to the ground, and I heard in a loud voice saying to me in Aramaic, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.” [Acts 26:14]

The picture here is of Jesus as a farmer and Saul as a lively stubborn young bullock – because a “goad” is a sharp pointed stick used to discipline and direct a young animal in training. Paul has been hurting himself by “kicking against the goads”. What were these goads in Saul's life?

- 1. His questions and doubts**
- 2. Stephen**
- 3. His bad conscience.**

1. His questions and doubts

Jesus and Saul were contemporaries. It is highly likely that the young Pharisee from Tarsus would have encountered the young teacher from Nazareth; it is very probable that Saul would have heard Jesus teach in the temple courts in Jerusalem, and it is quite possible that they would have looked into each others eyes!

Maybe Saul had heard Jesus' question that the other religious leaders hadn't been able to answer: *How is it that you say that the Christ is the son of David and yet David himself calls him LORD = if David knew that the Messiah would be both human and divine, what about you?...*

Then there was the day he died

- When the curtain in the temple tearing from the top to the bottom,
- Joseph, one of the council, giving his tomb for his burial; &
- Then, after the Sabbath, the empty tomb, and reports that Jesus had been seen alive

All questions about the enigma of Jesus - who was he? It may well be that the ferocity with which Saul was attacking the church was indicative of the challenge

he felt from Jesus. Jung wrote, "Fanaticism is only found in individuals who are compensating secret doubts."

Questions and doubts: Saul had been kicking against this pricking and prodding of God's grace in his life. What about you? Have you been hiding behind your questions and doubts so that you don't need to respond to God, or do you honestly bring your inner wrestling to God for his answer?

2. Stephen

- a. **Stephen's face** – shining like an angel's. God giving the same radiant face that he gave to Moses when he came down from the mountain with the law = Stephen received divine approval of his message and testimony!
- b. **Stephen's message** - "God has never been restricted to a place. He's always been on the move, calling his people to move out into fresh adventures and accompanying them and directing them as they go."
- c. **Stephen's vision** – of Jesus standing at God's right hand praying for him;
- d. **Stephen's death** – full of God's grace and power, in which just like Jesus he commits his spirit to God and with his last breath he prays forgiveness for his killers.

In Ch 22:3 Paul says that Gamaliel was his teacher. Yes, but how much had **Stephen** taught him?!

Testimony timelines...drawing a line from the past to the present. ABOVE – who has influenced you?; BELOW – what has influenced you? What would that have looked like for Saul?

Stephen's testimony: Saul had been kicking against the pricking and prodding of God's grace in his life. Who is God using in your life? How are you responding?

3. His bad conscience.

His search for peace; his striving for personal betterment; his efforts to earn God's favour. God had been pricking his bad conscience...

Romans 7:7; 7:19 – "I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "Do not covet"." "For what I do is not the good I want to do: no, the evil I do not want to do, this I keep on doing."

His bad conscience: In his struggle for inner peace and freedom Saul had been kicking against the pricking and prodding of God's grace in his life – what about you? Have you found your peace in God?

God's sovereign grace had gradually, gently and finally dramatically broken through to this stubborn stiff-necked Pharisee and like an untrained bullock, he'd finally been broken in. God's grace frees us from the bondage of self-centredness and prejudice to enable us to make the great U-turn (repent) and to believe.

God's grace was not compulsive

- Jesus didn't crush him – he humbled him
 - “Why do you persecute me?” – he appealed to his reason and conscience.
- Jesus didn't overwhelm him so that he couldn't respond – because we read that Saul did respond!:-
 - “Who are you Lord?” (9:5)
 - “What do you want me to do?” (22:10)
- Admittedly it appears that Saul has been pinned to the ground and left with no options, but that was not the case...listen to what Paul says when retelling his story to King Agrippa in Chapter 26:
 - *So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven.” = He could have been disobedient! But he **chose** to obey and to proclaim JESUS.*

He was obedient to the vision:

I am Jesus

I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness to what you have seen of me;

I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles

I am sending you:

- to open their eyes
- to turn them from darkness to light
- from the power of Satan to God
- so that they might receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.

An extract from Muslims, Christians, and Jesus

The pitch black night seemed to smother us as we went to meet with the top Leadership of the Salafi Muslim sect. The Salafis are like the Taliban of Afghanistan...inside I was shocked by the sight of about 50 men who looked exactly like Osama bin Laden.

The meeting was to discuss the differences between Christianity and Islam. I'm not big on starting with our differences but rather prefer to begin with the things we share in common – namely Jesus. So we talked about Jesus Christ, his life, his death, and resurrection, for nearly three hours. I finished by telling them that I loved them and that we know that God loves them. They showered us with hugs, kisses and well wishes. It was another potentially scary situation that God turned into something powerful.

Their leader walked us out to the curb of the main street with these words: “You have broken down our stereotypes of what a Christian looks like and how they think. We so appreciate you taking the time to come here. I know it must have been hard. Would you please come back so we can talk some more about Isa al Masih? We love you and what you stand for.

Isn't it amazing that negative stereotypes go both ways! They have judged us and we have judged them. They are afraid of us and we are afraid of them. It's the love of Christ that breaks this barrier down so we can see and hear the Good News that's available to all.

Jesus is his own witness! We do not need to protect him, or to defend him but to proclaim him! We need to be confident that the Jesus who appeared to Saul, changing him from a rabid persecutor of the church into Paul the great apostle of

the church, is big enough to handle anyone! No-one is too hard or too fanatical or too difficult to be beyond the sovereign grace of God! Our job is to be obedient to the truth of Jesus and to proclaim him.

There are two people who demonstrated this grace of God to Saul, whose arms and hands, whose voice and embrace communicated that grace to a humbled broken man.

1. I expect it took as much courage for **Ananias** to embrace Saul as a brother as it took Carl Medearis to walk into a room of 50 Osama bin Ladens! But that is what he did – obedient to the call of God, learning the leveling lesson of the grace of God, Ananias greeted Saul as a brother, laid hands on him to receive the Holy Spirit, and baptized him into the faith he had come to Damascus to destroy!
2. When Paul eventually made it back to Jerusalem he was cold shouldered by God's people, encountering skepticism and fear instead of welcome and fellowship from the disciples, and it was **Barnabas** who became his spokesperson - a bridge over which Paul found acceptance and his place in the family of believers.

On this Pentecost Sunday, let's pause and recognise that Paul was filled with the Holy Spirit no more and no less than you and I. The Spirit filled apostle was the grace filled apostle and God used him as his chosen instrument for the building of his church, and filled with his Spirit, you and I are no less God's chosen instruments.

→ Just as the Spirit didn't eradicate Saul's purpose driven personality, but rather filled it and used it for the building of his kingdom, in the same way, God will take you as his chosen instrument in His kingdom's work...

→ just as he used "the disciple Ananias" to embrace Saul with His heart,

7 → just as he used Barnabas, the son of encouragement, to see Paul welcomed into fellowship [and thereby embraced with the heart of God.]

Like Ananias and Barbabas

- We need to overcome our fears
- We need those who will befriend the newcomer, because:
 - i. Converts need to join a church community
 - ii. The church community needs to welcome the convert

What a U-turn! Paul's story starts with him leaving Jerusalem with an official mandate to arrest fugitive Christians - and ends with him leaving Jerusalem as a fugitive Christian himself!

One of the messages that Luke has for us in this story is to expect more from God concerning the unconverted - and the newly converted.

No-one is beyond God's sovereign grace

May God give us more faith, and more holy expectation,

For his name's sake, AMEN.