



Leaders Note

Acts 9: 1-19 Fighting the Power!

Thought

Suddenly Saul's world turned upside down and inside out. Terror, ruin, shame, awe, horror, glory and terror again swept over him. Years later he would write of seeing "the glory of God in the face of Jesus the Messiah"... it confirmed everything Saul had been taught; it overturned everything Saul had been taught. The law and the prophets had come true; the law and the prophets had been torn to pieces and put back together in a totally new way. It was a new world; it was the old world made explicit. It showed him that the God he had loved from childhood, the God for whose glory he had been so righteously indignant, the God in whose name and for whose honour he was busy rounding up those who were declaring that Jesus of Nazareth was Israel's Messiah, that he was risen from the dead, that he was the Lord of the world...it showed him that the God he had been right to serve, right to study, right to seek in prayer, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, had done what he had always said he would, but done it in a shocking, scandalous, horrifying way. The God who had always promised to come and rescue his people had done so in person. In the person of Jesus.

And Saul sank to the ground, blinded by the light, with the words ringing in his head. "I am Jesus, and you are persecuting me." Me? Somehow these men and women Saul was dragging off to prison were Jesus' people; his family; his own extended self. It was all too much. They led him by the hand and brought him to Damascus. It was three days before he could do anything except recoil from the horror of what had happened and gasp at its glory. We call this event a "conversion," but it was more like a volcanic eruption, thunderstorm and tidal wave all coming together. If the death and resurrection of Jesus is the hinge on which the great door of history swung open at last, the conversion of Saul of Tarsus was the moment when all the ancient promises of God gathered themselves up, rolled themselves into a ball, and came hurtling through the open door and out into the wide world beyond.

NT Wright, Acts for Everyone

Context

Breathing out threats and murder: In days when the rabbis viewed the keeping of the Mosaic law as the vitally important prerequisite for the coming of the Messianic Age, Paul could validate his actions against the Christians by reference to such godly precedents as:

- (1) Moses' slaying of the immoral Israelites at Baal Peor (cf. Nu 25:1-5);
- (2) Phinehas's slaying of the Israelite man and Midianite woman in the plains of Moab (cf. Nu 25:6-15); and
- (3) the actions of the Maccabees and the Hasidim in rooting out apostasy among the people.

With such precedents and parallels, coupled with the rising tide of messianic expectation within Israel, Saul could very well have felt justified in mounting a further persecution against the Christians.

Damascus: Damascus was a large and thriving commercial centre at the foot of the Anti-Lebanon mountain range. Since 64 B.C. it had been part of the Roman province of Syria and was granted certain civic rights by Rome as one of the ten cities of eastern Syria and the Transjordan called the Decapolis. It had a large Jewish population.

Saul, Saul: It was common in antiquity for a person in a formal setting to be addressed by the repetition of his name. Saul understood the voice to be a message from God himself, for to the rabbis to hear a voice from heaven connoted a rebuke or a word of instruction from God. Therefore when the voice went on to ask the question "Why do you persecute me?" Saul was without doubt thoroughly confused. He was not persecuting God! Rather, he was defending God and his laws!

Street called "Straight": Straight Street was an east-west street and is still one of the main thoroughfares of Damascus.

Inside the Mind of Saul of Tarsus: The past generation of commentators, particularly those of the English-speaking world, often read...a mental and spiritual struggle on the part of Saul that was, either consciously or unconsciously, fighting fervently against the logic of the early Christians' preaching, the dynamic quality of their lives, and their fortitude under oppression. Therefore his "breathing out murderous threats" was taken as his attempt to slay externally the dragons of doubt he could not silence within his own heart.

It is, of course, impossible to speak with certainty about what was going on in Saul's subconscious mind at the time, for psychoanalysis two millennia later is hardly a fruitful exercise. His own references as a Christian to this earlier time in his life do not require us to view him as struggling with uncertainty, doubt, and guilt before becoming a Christian. They rather suggest that humanly speaking, he was immune to the Christian proclamation and immensely satisfied with his own ancestral faith. While he looked forward to the full realization of the hope of Israel, Paul seems from his reminiscences of those earlier days to have been thoroughly satisfied with the revelation of God that was given through Moses and to have counted it his chief delight to worship God through those revealed forms. Nor need we suppose that the logic of the early Christian preachers greatly affected Paul. His later references to "the offence of the cross" show that for him the cross was the great stumbling block to any acknowledgement of Jesus of Nazareth as Israel's Messiah--a stumbling block no amount of logic or verbal gymnastics could remove.



Learning Session

Read the above passage, share some of the context information above and then share a time when you had a major “wake up call” in life. What happened? You can open it up for other people to share if you like and then move into smaller groups to discuss the following questions:

- What do you think was driving Saul’s obsession to obliterate Christianity?
- What do you think was going Saul's mind at this moment of sudden revelation?
- How would you have felt if you were Ananias?
- Are you struggling against God in anything or is He leading you to do something that scares you? What does this story teach you about it?

Gather together for some feedback and see what folk have come up with. There are a number of lessons that we can take out of this passage. It shows us that God is Great and His ways mysterious. He is Great in that He can turn even the worst of sinners, and mysterious in that He often draws near to us in suffering rather than delivering us from it. He also lets us take part in His great acts. It would have been easy for God to speak to Saul personally and to give him his sight back, but He doesn't do it that way. He sends in Ananias, who no doubt was terrified, just like we are whenever God asks us to join Him in His work. The challenge? Well, the challenge is to listen to Him, to resist our fears, to trust in His Greatness and ultimately to take to the street and do what He asks us to do. Encourage your group to take time out of their busy lives and to listen, you never know what adventure might be lying around the corner.

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